Blown Coverage

What lessons did media outlets learn after they reported incorrect details about a brutal sexual assault that made national headlines?
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Back to school. The theme of this edition is learning, as we are taken behind the scenes of some major stories. By David McKie

Staying ahead of the curve is easier if you use Web sites that have helped good reporters become smarter. By Julian Sher

Some polls might possess a seductive charm. But before publishing the results, it’s important to ask some key questions. By Kelly Toughill

The Toronto Star’s Robert Cribb began wondering about the safety of daycare centres. Two years later, he uncovered some answers that prompted the province of Ontario to react — immediately!

The Ottawa Citizen’s Glen McGregor was in the midst of building a database to track federal election expenses when he came across a startling discovery that now has the Conservative party reeling.

Covering sexual assault. When a perpetrator sexually assaulted a student at Carleton University in Ottawa, the incident became a national story with graphic details, including the fact that she was raped. The problem is she says she wasn’t. Media outlets got it wrong. But what did they learn from the experience, if anything? Media magazine sent Kimberly Shearon to find some answers.

The Atlanta-based Centers for Disease Control considers sexual assault to be an epidemic. So why is it that so few media organizations have strategies for covering the issue? Media sat down with Kelly McBride of the Poynter Institute and listened to some sage advice.

The fall of an icon: When Quebec cyclist Geneviève Jeanson was forced to admit that drugs helped her win races, the story hit like a bomb in that province. Investigative journalist Alain Gravel had the biggest story in his 30-year career. Naila Jinnah spoke with Gravel about the effort it took to finally get the story that uncovered the dark side of Jeanson’s meteoric rise to the top of the cycling world.

Few people have heard the term "crowdsourcing." But this is a new way of doing journalism that could either be a boon to a profession struggling for ways to stay relevant and profitable, or another in the long line of failed experiments. By Sheila Dabu

Case studies in investigative journalism. A new book features some of the best investigative stories and hears from the journalists behind the work. By Fred Vallance-Jones

Last rites for publication bans. The days of non-discretionary publication bans might be numbered. By Dean Jobb

Story ideas. They rarely just materialize. Instead, you must develop a plan to find and nurture them. By Don Gibb

Two Ontario court rulings could be bad news for gaining access to electronic records. By Fred Vallance-Jones

Facebook is emerging into a valuable social networking site for journalists tracking down sources for their stories. By Natalie Johnson

Hip radio and the decline of public broadcasting. Ottawa playwright and theatre director Arthur Milner argues that CBC Radio is abandoning the formula that created a Canadian appetite for public broadcasting.

The winners of the 2007 Canadian Association of Journalists awards explain how they got their stories and offer tips for journalists considering similar investigations.

Paul Watson, a foreign correspondent with The Los Angeles Times, has written a book about the photo that led to his Pulitzer Prize. In an interview with Media magazine, he talks about the story that took him to the brink of madness.

Ellin Bessner shares her thoughts about the plagiarism bedeviling Centennial College and other journalism schools.
The learning edition

It’s back to school with lessons in covering crime, working sources and perseverance

If there is a theme for this edition of Media it is one of learning. To this end, journalism students have taken the lead in writing our major stories on lessons learned — or not learned, as it turns out — from coverage of a sexual assault on a university campus; to the latest on crowdsourcing — a new trend that may force media outlets to think outside the box as they struggle to remain relevant with their audiences — to the startling admission of one of Quebec’s most storied athletes, who also happened to be THE world’s best female cyclist.

So let’s take them in order. Though sexual assaults have become regular staples of news stories, this one seemed to grab the spotlight like no other. The assault happened late at night, in a science lab at Carleton University. The young woman was alone. The assailant brutally assaulted her. She ended up in the hospital. The police description of the event was graphic. The stories were filled with a detailed description of the assault, along with the public safety aspect (as of this writing, the perpetrator has yet to be caught, and many university and college campuses across the country are now looking for ways to beef up their security). All this lifted this story off the local pages of the Ottawa Citizen and onto the national spotlight.

And then something unexpected happened: The young woman at Carleton came forward through an intermediary to proclaim that she wasn’t “raped.” She was concerned that her reputation would be tarnished in her Muslim community. To their credit, media outlets gave this development prime coverage. What was missing, however, was any admission on the part of media outlets that they got it wrong; presumably the references to her being raped prompted the young woman to come forward to set the record straight. Newspapers and broadcasters get things wrong all the time. Many university and college campuses across the country are now looking for ways to beef up their security. All this lifted this story off the local pages of the Ottawa Citizen and into the national spotlight.

And then something unexpected happened: The young woman at Carleton came forward through an intermediary to proclaim that she wasn’t “raped.” She was concerned that her reputation would be tarnished in her Muslim community. To their credit, media outlets gave this development prime coverage. What was missing, however, was any admission on the part of media outlets that they got it wrong; presumably the references to her being raped prompted the young woman to come forward to set the record straight. Newspapers and broadcasters get things wrong all the time. Many times they print corrections. But this goes far beyond a simple mea culpa. It speaks to our misconceptions about sexual assault, our lax ways of covering the events and our lack of introspection. It is for this reason that we asked Kimberley Shearon to talk to journalists and editors to find out about the assumptions they made and steps they might take in the future to avoid making similar mistakes.

When Polish immigrant Robert Dziekanski died after he was Tasered and restrained by four RCMP officers at Vancouver International Airport on Oct. 14, 2007, the incident resonated world wide, as people were able to see how the event played out to its fatal conclusion. If it had not been for Paul Pritchard, we would have been left with the word of the RCMP, who described the event very differently from the horrifying scene that unfolded in real time. So who is Paul Pritchard, you ask? Just an ordinary citizen who accomplished what journalists attempt to do every day: record major events for their respective audiences. Pritchard did what comes naturally to an increasing number of people; he videotaped the event. The videotaping also makes Pritchard an example of a citizen journalist; someone who is quick-witted enough to record an event he or she considers to be significant. Once the video of the Dziekanski Taserblog became public, journalists took over, writing stories and follow-ups; demanding answers from the RCMP, the Canadian Border Services Agency, the Vancouver Airport Authority and federal Public Safety Minister Stockwell Day. But what if Pritchard and the other witnesses at the airport became active participants in the coverage, helping journalists write the stories and shaping the coverage? Welcome to the world of crowdsourcing. Sheila Dabu waded into the issue to explore some of the strengths and weaknesses and ponder this question: is it just a fad, or a trend that could influence the way journalists do their jobs?

She was the darling of the cycling world and the province of Quebec: blonde, cute, flamboyant and a ferocious competitor who conquered the cycling world while still in her teens. Genevieve Jeanson seemed to have it all. RONA became her official sponsor, catapulting her into the million-dollar club. Jeanson transcended the world of sports and became a home-grown celebrity. She was so popular that a Quebec town “adopted” her. Journalists seemed to run out of the strengths and weaknesses and ponder this question: is it just a fad, or a trend that could influence the way journalists do their jobs?

The other winners of the 2007 CAJ awards will also be featured in our regular online awards edition. And we will be posting other stories online as value-added editions to Media. Read about the exploits of Los Angeles Times Canadian-born photojournalist Paul Watson and read Ellin Bessner’s primer and Powerpoint presentation on a problem that is bedevilling many schools of journalism: plagiarism.

Of course, our columnists have been using their space to provide sage advice, tips and observations for years now. We have the pleasure of adding one more columnist to our list, Kelly Toughill, who will use her page in Media called "Inside the Numbers" to demystify those many facts and figures that journalists — many of whom are self-confessed math-phobes — take at face value far too frequently. Kelly teaches journalism at the University of King’s College, has worked at the Toronto Star and has an MBA. So she spends a lot of time thinking about numbers and how we can do a better job explaining them. In her first column, Kelly delves into the questions we should always be asking before publishing or broadcasting the results of polls.

And we give the Last Word to playwright and theatre director Arthur Milner who has been pondering the fate of CBC Radio.

We hope you enjoy the content of this edition. As usual, if you have any feedback or suggestions of stories and issues we should be covering, please feel free to contact me at: david_mckie@cbc.ca.
Ten years ago I set up a small Web page called JournalismNet to help me and some of my colleagues handle the fledgling new tool that was called the Internet. CNN and the New York Times were about the only media that had a steady electronic presence. Pictures were slow to download. There was little video and the biggest race for search engine supremacy was between Hotbot and AltaVista. Remember them?

Today, the Web has revolutionized the way we do our business. It gives freelance writers access to research libraries and resources once the preserve of major media organizations. It allows journalists from the poorest or most repressive countries to reach out and hunt for story ideas around the globe.

But mastering the web as an investigative tool is not as easy as most people think. The Internet has also created a generation of lazy journalists who think they’ve done their homework by punching in a few words into a search engine. As I wrote in Media magazine almost a decade ago, the Web doesn’t make stupid journalists smarter, but it can make smart journalists smarter.

Picking the top 10 Web sites for journalists after 10 years on the Web beat is a bit of a crapshoot. What Web sites are best for you vary if you’re covering international wars or local stories, science or sports. But here — in no particular order — are some of the best tools and tricks for almost anyone who wants to stay ahead of the curve:

1. FIND NEWS

Google News Alerts (www.google.com/newsalerts): The best way to keep abreast of any breaking stories. Put in any keywords on the topic you’re covering and you’ll get regular e-mail correspondence. Plus make full use of all the other tools and tricks at Google News (www.news.google.com). For similar resources, see JNet’s News Search pages at www.journalismnet.com/news.

2. FIND ANYTHING

Advanced Google Search Domain searches (www.google.com/advanced_search):

Don’t waste your time with regular Google. Go to Advanced Google and do a domain search — allowing you to search by country or, better still, search just one massive Web site. For more Google tools, see www.journalismnet.com/search/google.htm.

3. FIND PEOPLE

Ixquick International Phone Books (http://us.ixquick.com/eng/phone.html): An easy drop-down menu gives you access to phone books around the world. For more ways to find people, see www.journalismnet.com/people.

What Web sites are best for you vary if you’re covering international wars or local stories, science or sports.

4. FIND NEWSPAPERS

ABYZ Newslinks (www.abyznewslinks.com): A directory of newspapers across Canada, sorted by province, and also for publications in every country around the world. For other tools to find newspapers, see www.journalismnet.com/papers.

5. FIND THINGS FAST

Cyberjournalist Quick Search (www.cyberjournalist.net/supersearch.php): A single page that offers you not just the top search engines, but also phone searches, references, experts and databases.

6. FIND FACTS YOU CAN TRUST

Librarians Index (http://lii.org/): Billed as "Web sites you can trust" these American librarians have found some of the best and most reliable resources on everything from art to science. For more librarian resources, see www.journalismnet.com/search/librarians.htm.

7. FIND THE BBC’S TREASURES

BBC Advanced Search (http://news.bbc.co.uk/shared/bsp/search2/advanced/news_ifs.stm): The world’s largest and most-respected news organization offers you access to more than a decade of news, video and audio. You can search by keyword, world region and date.

8. FIND YOUR LOST DATA

XDrive (www.xdrive.com): The worst thing that can happen to a journalist is to lose your files — a computer theft, a meltdown or an accidental delete. This free Web site from AOL allows you to back up your files and folders. Plus you’ll have them handy on the road wherever you log on.

9. FIND YOUR OWN STUFF

Google Desktop (http://desktop.google.com/): The single best piece of software you should install on your hard drive. It constantly archives your hard drive — all your e-mails, memos, story notes. You can then find any scrap of files, a snippet of a name or a fact that you saved but you can’t remember where.

10. FIND YOUR BEST FRIEND ON THE WEB

JournalismNet (www.journalismnet.com): Alright, it’s a bit of shameless self-promotion. But my Web site is listed by Google among the Top 10 journalism sites in the world. All the sites listed above are there at www.journalismnet.com/tips — plus an explanation of how to use them.

Julian Sher, the creator and webmaster of JournalismNet, does Internet training in newsrooms around the world. He can be reached by e-mail at jsher@journalismnet.com. A version of this article first appeared in Masthead Magazine. This article and other columns are available online with hot links on the JournalismNet Tips page at www.journalismnet.com/tips.
The poll told me so

There are many reasons to be skeptical of polls. In her inaugural column for Media magazine, Kelly Toughill gives us a checklist of factors to consider when determining a poll's news value.

Cheating on a spouse is worse than having sex with a child, according to people in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Most Canadians want their boss to give money to charity instead of handing out holiday gifts to employees, and only four in 10 Americans believe professional athletes are good role models for their children.

How do I know these things? Polls told me so.

Polls are important to journalists. A good poll is a powerful tool for uncovering trends and putting facts in context. A bad poll, or a bad section of a good poll, can twist the truth or create an outright lie. So, how do you tell the difference?

This simple checklist will help you spot bad polls, and unwind the spin that often wraps even the best polls.

Did the pollster talk to the right people? A good poll reveals the opinion of a broad group of people by asking questions of a small portion of that group. But it has to ask the right group. If the poll purports to reveal the opinion of students, it must have queried students; if it claims to reveal the opinion of a nation, it must include a broad cross-section of the population.

Fox News routinely polls only registered voters — even when the subject has nothing to do with politics — and claims the results represent the opinion of America. Since only 72 per cent of adult Americans are registered to vote, and registered voters are wealthier and better educated than the national average, that skews its poll results.

So, when Fox reported last August that “a majority of Americans” don’t think pro athletes are good role models, it left out the opinion of America’s underclass, which might have a different view of athletes than the rest of the nation.

Did the pollster randomly select who was questioned? Good pollsters go to a lot of trouble to get a random sample of the chosen group. A valid poll never relies on volunteers who have offered to answer questions about a topic in response to an ad.

Were the questions neutral? Journalists know the power of leading questions. Beware of double-barreled questions or questions that include assumptions. My favorite example is a poll that found 60 per cent of Canadians support the seal hunt. The question stipulated that the seal hunt was humane, did not kill nursing seals and did not endanger the species. Sixty per cent of Canadians might support the seal hunt if they believed all those assumptions, but there is no proof that they do.

Questions can also be arranged to lead to certain conclusions. For example, a poll conducted for World Vision asked eight questions about charitable giving during Christmas before asking if Canadians would rather receive a holiday gift from their employer, or have a gift given to a needy child in their name. No surprise that 76 per cent said give their bonus to charity.

Are answer categories balanced? Polls should give people an equal chance to agree or disagree with a question. Most will offer two positive and two negative options, such as strongly agree/strongly disagree and somewhat agree/somewhat disagree. Throw out a poll that offers two chances to agree and only one to disagree.

Is the poll recent? Opinions change. A week-old poll is out-of-date in many election campaigns, but opinions on stable topics also shift. The World Vision poll was released just as Christmas shopping began in 2006, but it was conducted in late May, when many Canadians were struggling to pay off old Christmas bills.

What is the confidence interval? No poll can guarantee that it is 100 per cent accurate. The chance that it is accurate is expressed by the confidence interval. A poll with a 95 per cent confidence interval will be right 19 times out of 20, or 95 per cent of the time. Of course, that also means that five percent of the time, it will be wrong. Most won’t report polls with a confidence interval below 90 per cent.

What is the margin of error and how does it affect the result? Margin of error is a fancy statistical way of saying “more or less.” This little number is very important.

If the margin of error is plus or minus three per cent, that means the true result could fall anywhere in a six-point range. So, if a poll with a margin of error of plus or minus three per cent reports that candidate A has the support of 51 per cent of the electorate and candidate B has the support of 48 per cent, the two candidates are actually in a dead heat. What the poll really shows is that support for candidate A is somewhere between 48 and 54 per cent and support for candidate B is somewhere between 45 and 51 per cent.

The margin of error within a poll is higher for smaller groups. Unfortunately, pollsters don’t always give the margin of error for those smaller groups, even though those are often the results that bear the real news.

Consider a 2006 poll that asked Canadians about immoral behaviour. Predictably, pedophilia topped the list of immoral acts — except in the prairie provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba. In that region, 80 per cent thought extra-marital affairs were immoral, but only 75 per cent thought pedophilia was immoral.

The poll had a confidence interval of 95 per cent and a margin of error of plus or minus 2.6 per cent for the nation. The result looked valid, until you looked at the margin of error for that specific region, which was plus or minus 8.8 per cent. So, no, prairie folks don’t really think adultery is worse than pedophilia.

The online journalism training site www.newsu.org has an excellent section on polling with interactive exercises. Two books, Math Tools for Journalists, by Kathleen Woodruff Wickham, and Numbers in the Newsroom, by Sarah Cohen, also have good sections on polling.

To read the Fox News poll about pro athletes, go to: http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,294762,00.html
To read the morality barometer poll of 2006, go to: legermarketing.com/documents/spclm/060612eng.pdf
To read the Canadian government poll on the seal hunt, go to: http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/misc/3p_858_seal_e.htm

Kelly Toughill is an assistant professor of Journalism at the University of King’s College in Halifax, and is a former writer and editor at the Toronto Star.
Your newswire is getting rewired.


CCN Matthews is now called Marketwire
Sometimes investigative ideas come from the most personal of places.

Shortly after my daughter Ally was born three years ago, I started looking into daycare options in my Toronto neighbourhood. The central question was simple enough: Who could be trusted to offer quality care to the most precious person in the world?

Considering the choice is one of the most important any parent makes, I was amazed by the startling lack of information upon which to make a decision. Turns out it's far easier to research your next stereo purchase than the place where you plan to leave your child in the care of strangers.

The problem isn't a lack of documentation. A mountain of records sits in government filing cabinets and computers. All three levels are involved in the regulation and funding of childcare. Inspectors visit on our behalf to ensure standards are met relating to physical environments of the centres, the quality of their educational programming, food safety, emergency response plans and their overall treatment of children.

Each of those visits is carefully documented and filed either on paper or into electronic databases. But ask for that information and you'll likely be told, as I was, that it isn't for public viewing.

Remarkably, government records created by public officials with public money for the protection of some of the most vulnerable members of society were not, I was repeatedly and vigorously informed, a matter for public release.

So, I began what turned into a two-year process of filing more than a dozen large freedom-of-information requests to municipal and provincial government offices requesting data on inspections, serious occurrences, infection control, food safety, licensing (including centres that had been placed under so called "conditional" licences as a result of infractions) and enforcement actions by the ministry.

I also filed a large request for copies of every public complaint against daycares in the province for a three year period. Those records were not kept in data format by the province.

There were some astonishing delays, exorbitant fee estimates and many dubious arguments by ministry staff. When I requested detailed fee breakdowns documenting high fee estimates, ministry officials produced what we believed to be dramatically inflated estimates. We argued or negotiated some fees down dramatically.

In some cases, reasoned negotiation didn't work. I ultimately had to appeal the ministry's fee estimates for the public complaint records which officials insisted would cost tens of thousands of dollars. After a lengthy appeal process, the provincial Information and Privacy Commissioner ordered the records released with no fees beyond photocopying. It was a significant victory that adds to the growing body of evidence to suggest fighting unreasonable denials and fees is ultimately worth the hassle and time.

In the end, the records we obtained — which filled a dozen boxes spread out across the small, dark office where myself and investigative reporter Dale Brazao worked together for months — allowed us to do some exhaustive analysis of the daycare picture in Ontario.

The investigation was based on five streams of documents and data relating to the last three to four years, including nearly 6,000 serious occurrence reports made by licensed daycares in a two year period; three years' worth of city and provincial inspection records for food safety, infection control; four years of complaints; four years worth of city and provincial licensing and enforcement records; and several years worth of court records documenting legal cases in which daycares were sued for quality of care issues.

Together, the records painted a portrait of licensed childcare never before seen by parents in this province or anywhere else in Canada. What we found was disturbing. In some cases, it was shocking.

The top on our first day story read:

Children in provincially licensed daycares have been hit, kicked, allowed to play in filthy conditions and fed allergy triggering food that nearly claimed their lives.

A Star investigation based on thousands of never before released daycare incidents and inspection reports has uncovered a myriad of serious problems including children wandering off unattended, being forcibly confined in closets and storage rooms as punishment, and served meals prepared in mice infested kitchens.

But even in the most egregious cases, the provincial Ministry of Children and Youth Services is often slow to act.

PHOTO CREDIT: Jim Ross for The Toronto Star

Karen Krawec and her son Adam, three, found a day care centre in Newmarket. She researched day care centres for six months.

**HOW THEY GOT THE STORY**

**Daycare nightmare**

When the Toronto Star's Robert Cribb began wondering about daycares and how safe they were, he was surprised by some of the answers he uncovered — and so was the Province of Ontario.
The story triggered a firestorm of protest. Opposition politicians screamed questions at the provincial Liberals the next day at Queen’s Park, asking why such records are not made public and why it took the Star two years to access what are clearly public interest records.

The same day — only 24 hours after the story was published — the Liberals committed for the first time to publish the results of all daycare inspections on a public website. It was the swiftest public policy change triggered by anything I had ever worked on. That website (http://www.ontario.ca/ONT/portal51/licensedchildcare) is now up and running, allowing parents to see what inspectors have found on their visits. It’s a tremendous resource that, for the first time, allows parents to know what ministry staffers once quietly kept to themselves. The ministry has committed to adding more information in coming months.

From there, we took a close look at illegal daycares — home based operations caring for more than five children without a licence or any form of government oversight. We found them everywhere across Toronto — a city where a shortage of licensed spaces can leave parents on waiting lists for years before a spot for their child comes up.

Again, public records were the key to the story. The challenge, however, was unique. Illegal daycares don’t officially exist. They aren’t on the radar of government inspectors because they operate in an underground market. As a result, no public records exist to document where they are.

Or so I thought. By chance one day I noticed that building inspection records from the City of Toronto, which I’d obtained for a previous unrelated story, occasionally referenced “illegal child care centre found onsite.” I learned that inspectors visiting buildings would often stumble across illegal daycares during the course of their duties and make note.

We started looking at some of those locations and ended up focusing on a home in north Toronto where a Russian woman was caring for between eight and 12 preschoolers who played near an open swimming pool in the backyard. Neighbours had complained to the city and the province. But nothing had been done.

We staked out the home for several days, gathered the necessary evidence and confronted Klara Solodar, the homeowner and caregiver. When I explained why we wanted to speak with her, Solodar ripped camera equipment from Dale and bit me on the wrist to get my digital recorder. It’s the only interview I recall doing that resulted in drawn blood, a tetanus shot and the involvement of police to get our gear back.

Following the story, the province stepped up inspections and oversight of illegal daycares.

More recently, we’ve broken several stories on the arrival of big box daycare in Canada, an issue that has triggered a national debate in Parliament and in the media about for-profit childcare.

Australian based ABC Learning Centres, the biggest chain of for-profit childcare centres in the world, has arrived in Ontario, Alberta and B.C. through a related company offering to buy existing daycare operations for its chain.

With a spotty history of childcare quality in Australia and concerns about massive profits built on public daycare subsidies to parents, unions and childcare advocates are mobilizing against a move that they say could spell the end of the dream for a national childcare system.

It’s been an incredibly rewarding series, both because of what we were able to share with readers and because of the overwhelming importance of the subject matter. Predictably, the public response has been extraordinary. We’ve received hundreds of calls and letters. I haven’t met a parent in the city who hasn’t followed the series with keen interest. It’s one of the rare issues that touches almost everyone in a meaningful way.

Among them is Ally, who enjoys top-notch care in a loving environment a long way away from some of the horror stories that leaped from the pages of the reports and data we collected.

I owe her a great debt for prompting us to ask a simple question.

Robert Cribb is an investigative reporter at the Toronto Star. His investigations include reports on serious food safety problems in restaurants, illegal slaughterhouses, fraudulent telemarketing boiler rooms, dangerous doctors, slum landlords, government corruption and airline safety. Cribb is past president of the Canadian Association of Journalists, co-author of Digging Deeper: A Canadian Reporter’s Research Guide (Oxford University Press) and a lecturer at Ryerson University’s School of Journalism.
In the midst of a deadly slow August morning in the press gallery on Parliament Hill, reporter Tim Naumetz was looking over a few candidate spending returns from the 2006 federal election.

Every candidate is required by law to file an expense report with Elections Canada. Usually, the reports are a dull accounting of the costs incurred in running a local campaign — yard signs, phone rentals, pizza parties and the like.

But in this sea of numbers, one line item jumped out at Tim. An unsuccessful Conservative candidate's campaign had incurred more than $30,000 for "radio/TV" advertising.

Most candidates spend a few thousand dollars for ads in their local papers and some even shell out more for radio spots in their local market. But $30,000 for a single ad buy was highly unusual.

And in this case, the supplier of the ad was listed as the Conservative Party of Canada, not a newspaper or radio station.

Why, Tim wondered, would a candidate pay his own party that much money for ads?

At the same time, one row of desks over from Tim in the Press Gallery "Hot Room," I was creating a database of election financing records. The Conservative government's Federal Accountability Act had changed the rules for political donations, and I was curious to see which parties were benefiting from the tighter contribution limits. I had been to several Canadian Association of Journalists seminars on computer-assisted reporting (CAR) and had just finished two long-term projects using electronic records. I was interested in using CAR techniques with political financing records.

Tim brought over a copy of the expense report he was looking at. Was it possible, we wondered, that some parties were trying to bypass the federal limit on campaign spending by getting their candidates to pay for national campaign ads?

We realized that it would be an exhausting task to check every return for the more than 1,000 candidates who ran in 2006. Instead, I suggested we create a database of all candidate election returns to find out who else was spending large amounts on advertising.

In most CAR projects, getting data from government involves making an access-to-information request and, often, fighting with bureaucrats for the records. In this case, all the data we needed was sitting on Elections Canada's Web site.

We downloaded the records in text format, imported them into the open source MySQL database manager, and began crunching the numbers. The data showed that dozens of others Conservative candidates had posted large expense claims for broadcast advertising. We sorted the list of candidates based on their broadcast advertising spending and started calling the names at the top of the list.

The first candidate we reached was a lawyer named Sam Goldstein, who had run unsuccessfully in downtown Toronto. He described a scheme in which the Conservative party transferred large amounts to their candidates, who then paid the party for advertising. The ads were not for the candidates, but rather, for national advertising, he explained.

Why would candidates agree to these financial transactions? Because the money flowing through their campaigns boosted their spending and qualified them for a larger rebate from Elections Canada, Mr. Goldstein said. Candidates who get more than 10 per cent of the vote in their riding are eligible for taxpayer funded reimbursement of 60 per cent of their allowable expenses. It was, Mr. Goldstein said, all legal.

We went back to our database and began looking at transfers of money from the party to the candidates. Using MySQL, we were able to quickly compare the transfers the candidates received against the expenses they claimed for radio or TV advertising.

**How they got the story**

"In-and-out": A loophole, or an attempt to skirt the law?

Nearly a third of all Conservative candidate campaigns in the 2006 federal election received substantial transfers from the party, and then used the money to buy ads from the party. The Ottawa Citizen's Glen McGregor discovered that these candidates bought more than $1.2 million in broadcast advertising in a scheme that raised concerns — especially from Elections Canada.
The results were striking. Nearly a third of all Conservative candidate campaigns had received substantial transfers from the party, then turned around and bought ads from the party. The numbers showed a distinct pattern. Many paid in advertising exactly the same amount they received in transfers, the data showed. Together, these candidates had bought more than $1.2 million in broadcast advertising from the Conservative party. Had the party incurred these costs directly, it would have exceeded its $18.3 million limit on spending for the 2006 campaign and put the party in serious violation of the Elections Act.

Not only would the transfers and expenses qualify the candidates for larger rebates, they also appeared to allow the party to spend money on crucial broadcast ads outside its national budget. At the very least, it seemed we'd found a loophole in the elections law. At worst, it might be an attempt to skate around the rules.

We spent several more days calling other candidates on our list to confirm what Mr. Goldstein had told us. We also ran the same data analysis on Liberal, NDP and Bloc Quebecois candidates. Although the other parties all made transfers to their candidates, there was no indication of the same coordinated effort to return money in advertising costs to the federal parties, the data showed.

The afternoon before we were to publish our first story, we made a surprising discovery. A Conservative party official told us that the transactions we were interested in were the subject of a case before the Federal Court of Canada. The court records showed that auditors for Elections Canada had also detected the unusual pattern of transfers and expenses. Like us, the auditors followed up with the candidates and their official agents. These officials had also described the same system to boost candidate expenses. One official quoted in court papers gave it a name an “in-and-out.”

The court documents showed that Chief Electoral Officer Marc Mayrand had refused to allow the candidates to claim the expenses. The official agents for 34 Conservatives had taken Mr. Mayrand to court over that decision, saying the claims for “regional media buys” were proper and legal.

In subsequent stories, we reported that Commissioner of Elections William Corbett had launched his own investigation and could, if warranted, refer the matter for prosecution. We also found e-mails that showed the financial transactions had been orchestrated by a senior party official.

Other reporters began advancing the story, too. Hélène Buzzetti at Le Devoir did some excellent work tracking down former Conservative candidates in Quebec who were dismayed by the scheme.

In response to our stories, a House of Commons committee began its own probe of Conservative election financing, but the committee was dissolved when Prime Minister Stephen Harper prorogued Parliament in the fall. The committee is expected to resume its hearings. The federal court case is ongoing but is unlikely to conclude any time soon. Mr. Corbett has yet to report on his investigation and, at this writing, the political fallout of the story is still unresolved.

Glen McGregor is a national affairs reporter with the Ottawa Citizen.
Covering sexual assault cases is fraught with peril

When media outlets reported the case of a brutal assault of a student at Carleton University, they assumed she was raped. The assumption was wrong. But what did journalists learn from the mistake?

The Globe and Mail was one of several news outlets to claim a rape took place during a vicious sexual assault at Carleton University Sept. 1, 2007.

But according to the victim, no rape, meaning no penetration, took place.

Weeks after the attack, the victim — a young Muslim woman — came forward, and through an intermediary, asked that the record be set straight to spare her further suffering and scrutiny in the Muslim community.

"There should have been more accountability for sure because we should not be publishing things that are not right in the paper," says Unnati Gandhi, the Globe and Mail reporter who covered the assault and the victim's ensuing desire to correct the record.

"I should have checked my own story, but I didn't. I guess I didn't know our paper was also one of the ones that got it wrong," she says.

Her editors also missed this fact.

"No one goes back and checks past stories, I think, because there are just so many stories they are handling."

Unlike the Post and the Globe, the Citizen acknowledged the mistake in a later story, which explained the victim's desire to clarify the media reports.

Though the Globe and the Post ran similar stories, both failed to note they were among the media outlets to report the attack as a rape in earlier coverage.

In its initial report on the attack, the Post called the incident a "sexual assault." But another story about a pair of sexual assaults at York University, which took place days after the Carleton incident, included a passing reference to the attack and called it a rape.

When the victim came forward, Scott Stinson, night news editor at the Post, went back to check if the paper had used the term "rape" in its coverage of the Carleton assault.

He found one story, which identified the attack as a sexual assault, and left it at that. He did not realize the paper called the incident a rape in a separate story.

"If I had realized we had specifically said she was raped, and now she was saying she was not, I
“Exactly how we would have done it differently next time, I don’t think that’s clear.”

But there are some factors that journalists should consider. When selecting which details to include and which to leave out, the media have to find a balance between informing the public and respecting the victim’s privacy — especially when covering sex crimes, says Barbara Freeman, a Carleton journalism professor who specializes in gender issues.

“I think you have to report it from the perspective of whether or not a detail is really necessary to release,” she says. “And I think social responsibility does come with some consideration of the victim and the family.”

If the media had simply used the Criminal Code’s language and characterized the attack as a “sexual assault” and nothing else, they might have spared the victim the urge to come forward, says Sandy Onyalo, executive director of the Ottawa Rape Crisis Centre.

“We in the community don’t necessarily know the specifics of what happened, but there could be a whole host of reasons why she wants to be very clear she wasn’t raped,” says Onyalo. “It doesn’t matter whether she was raped. She was sexually assaulted and that’s the issue here.”

“We get into this habit of trying to put things into normal language, and sometimes you run the risk of losing some accuracy if you don’t think of it carefully before you do it,” says Kate Heartfield, a member of the Citizen’s editorial board. The board penned three editorials about the Carleton sex assault, one of which called the attacker a “rapist.”

Reporters might have read between the lines unconsciously and assumed, based on the information available, that a rape had taken place.

“I don’t think I thought about it consciously, but definitely in my mind it was a rape,” says Onyalo. “We in the community don’t necessarily know the specifics of what happened, but there could be a whole host of reasons why she wants to be very clear she wasn’t raped,” she says. “We don’t encourage some of the language they use sometimes, but we can’t prevent anything they put in the newspapers.”

Sandy Onyalo says the only language the media should use is that of the Criminal Code.

“When the media use “rape” rather than “sexual assault,” she says, they help establish a hierarchy of sexual violence, in which rape is more serious than other sex offences.

“There needs to be some responsible journalism. There is no hierarchy among sexual assault. It’s all the same and it needs to be treated equally,” says Onyalo.

Kimberly Shearon is a fourth-year journalism student, and editor-in-chief of The Charlatan, Carleton University’s newspaper. She can be reached at: editor@charlatan.ca.
Time to give more thought to how we cover sexual assault

The Centers for Disease Control considers "sexual violence," its term for sexual assault, an epidemic. And if anything "available data greatly underestimate the true magnitude of the problem." The Poynter Institute, a Florida-based journalism think tank, has given a lot of thought to the way media outlets cover this issue and has produced guidelines for newsrooms as well as an online course entitled "Covering Sexual Assault: A Poynter Webinar."

Kelly McBride, who teaches the course, says media outlets have done a poor job of reporting the story accurately.

Her background as a police and then religion reporter for the Spokesman Review in Spokane, Washington, prepared her to teach full time at Poynter.

She recently sat down with Media magazine to talk about the case involving the Carleton student, its aftermath, and what journalists should take away from the incident. The following is an edited version of our conversation. She begins by talking about the danger of using passive verbs when describing sexual assault.

Often times the verb tenses that we use when we describe sexual assault victims place the action on the victim. And we do it in this way that we don’t even question why we do that. Or because the victim is not being named, or the suspect is not being named, in fairness we want to allow for some sort of due process. There is still this inclination because we are not naming the victim, there’s a certain unfairness to the suspect, and so we tend to use a lot of passive verbs in describing what happened. So we may say the victim was assaulted. We put the victim at the beginning of the sentence and we take the actor out of the description.

How would you characterize sexual assault?

It’s an epidemic in our society. I liken this to when we tried to figure out how to cover AIDS in the late ’80s and early ’90s. We got hung up with who has AIDS and how they got it. But then pretty quickly we realized that this is an epidemic, and so the need in the public goes way beyond who has AIDS and how they got it. And it goes into how you prevent it and what the trends are, and what the real impact is on health and family.

What I argue is that we are always going to encounter these problems that lead us to imprecise reporting when we start with a news event. Now that doesn’t mean we ignore the news event. But I think the mandate to journalists is to figure out how to cover the rest of the story. So that the news events are then placed in context.

So in the case of the Carleton student, what should media outlets have done differently, other than refrain from using the term “rape?”

As a journalist, you can aggressively pursue information when it comes to the legal, medical details of a sexual assault. So you can ask what did the doctor say about this? What about bruising, the presence of DNA and semen, tearing, or ligature marks? How long was she unconscious? All of those questions are important to ask so that you can assess whether it’s even accurate to say whether it’s a sexual assault (see "Covering sexual assault cases is fraught with peril" pg. 12 for an explanation of the Canadian law on this point). And you can hold the police accountable for what they say to make sure your language is accurately reflecting what they think happened, but is also acknowledging that this is a case that’s still developing. The problem is that most journalists are like the general public; they just aren’t educated about sexual assault.

So how do journalists educate themselves short of taking your course online?

They go knock on the door of the local rape crisis office and say, "hey, let me take somebody out to lunch here. Tell me what you see." You read up on trends. You understand sexual assault trends and why they vary. You read really good journalism. You get smarter. In the same way that when it came time to cover AIDS or other epidemics, journalists had to become a little smarter than the average lay person if they were going to do a good job finding and telling stories.

You have made another reference to sexual assault being an epidemic. How is this fact reflected in the statistics?

Depending on how you define sexual assault, and how you measure it, some researchers will say anywhere between one in four, and one in seven women will be sexually assaulted over their lifetime. Other researchers will say that among children one in six is sexually assaulted by the time they get to age 18. There are all these different ways to measure the predictability of being assaulted. So in addition to being precise about the language they use to describe sexual assault, journalists need to get a lot smarter about the research in order to describe it in a way that is accurate and that conveys the gravity of the situation. The Centers for Disease Control in the United States considers it an epidemic. And that’s why they fund a lot of prevention.

In guidelines that you have written for reporters, you emphasize that there are important elements that elevate a specific crime to newsworthy status: "1) When there are clear concerns about public safety, or 2) When a breach of trust suggests the possibility of more victims." Is this the thinking that led to the creation of the course at the Poynter Institute?

We needed to give people understanding, tools, knowledge and we needed to help them connect reporting on sexual assault to the deeper journalistic purpose that underpins those stories. Because once you start realizing that this story about sexual assault is really meant to hold the court system accountable, and this story about sexual assault is meant to provide some insight into what happens to victims and how devastating it is, and this story is about children and how systems fail to protect children, and this story is about public safety … once you start learning how to figure out the journalistic purpose of individual stories and types of stories, then you can start to apply different tools in different ways. So you become much more precise in your approach.
Recognition for journalism that makes an impact

The 2006 Michener Award went to the Prince George Citizen for a series that significantly improved the safety of logging-truck drivers.

The Michener Award is presented annually for journalism that makes a significant impact on the public good. To be selected as a finalist, a news organization must be able to demonstrate that its entry achieved identifiable results. The results may include improvements in public policy, ethical standards, corporate governance or the lives of Canadians.

Winning subjects have ranged from the Citizen's reporting on logging truck safety to misuse of public or private funds and irregularities in the justice and police systems.

The award is presented to an organization rather than an individual. It is open to print, radio and television stations and online journalism. Size is no barrier to success. Previous winners have ranged from national networks and daily newspapers to weeklies and periodicals. The judges are required to take into account the resources available to support the entry.

The contributions of individual journalists to the entries selected as finalists are recognized by invitations to, and participation in, the prestigious annual Awards Ceremony at Rideau Hall in Ottawa.

A senior editor or executive must submit the entry on behalf of a news organization.

All candidates must include five (5) copies of a full written explanation of the entry, including a description of the public service performed and the results that the entry generated. It is helpful to describe the resources that were available to the entry.

All entries must include a registration fee of $50. Payment may be by cheque or money order (no GST required). Credit cards are not accepted.

Entries should be submitted during January 2008 and up to the February 8 deadline. For full details on entry rules please visit our website: www.michenerawards.ca

Entries should be sent to:
Michener Awards Foundation
The Ottawa Citizen,
1101 Baxter Road, Box 5020, Ottawa, Ontario, K2C 3M4

The Michener-Deacon Fellowship is Canada's premier award to encourage excellence in investigative print, broadcast, and online journalism that serves the public interest.

The Fellowship is granted annually to a mature journalist for four months’ leave. It provides $25,000 and accountable expenses of up to $5,000 to allow the winner time to complete a project that serves the public interest and enhances the journalist's competence.

Canadian citizens or residents of Canada who are active in Canadian journalism are eligible to apply. Proposals of direct Canadian interest are preferred.

Applicants are expected to submit five copies of a written outline with supporting documentation for a proposed project. The judges will take into consideration the candidate's enthusiasm for the project and the quality of the presentation.

Applicants must provide copies of academic records and relevant work history. They should include a written authorization for leave and disclose any additional means of financial support that may be available such as continuing salary and travel expenses.

Study at a Canadian university may be part of a successful application but it is not a requirement. University approval must accompany applications whose projects include such study.

Fellowship projects have included inquiries into the relationship between pharmaceutical companies and research funding at universities, the future of public broadcasting, threats to privacy, and issues arising from Canada's diversified racial mix.

Applications must include an expression of interest or, preferably, a commitment to publish or air the completed project. The project or a summary must be made available for posting on the website of the Michener Awards Foundation.

Entries for the 2008 Michener-Deacon Fellowship (five copies) should be sent to:
Michener Awards Foundation
130 Albert Street, Suite 1620
Ottawa, Ontario, K1P 5G4
Deadline for receipt of entries: Friday, February 22, 2008
Visit our website: www.michenerawards.ca
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Lies, lies and more lies:
the downfall of a Quebec sports hero

It's an opportunity that comes along perhaps once in a journalist’s career: A story of illegal drugs, alleged abuse, and cover-up, all involving a high-profile celebrity who has evaded public scrutiny. Naila Jinnah interviewed Quebec investigative journalist Alain Gravel about the story that had everyone talking — including its subject, superstar cyclist Geneviève Jeanson.

It's the scandal that rippled through Quebec this fall. Local media darling and world cycling champion Geneviève Jeanson admitted for the first time that she used performance-enhancing drugs not just once or twice, but throughout her career.

It took four interviews, multiple denials and a bit of gamesmanship before Jeanson was forced to come clean. After all the prodding and pushing, host Alain Gravel of Radio-Canada’s newly minted investigative journalism program “Enquête” had a real scoop on his hands, four months before the show was set to air. Needless to say, he spent every morning combing through the local newspapers for any hint that Jeanson was talking to the competition.

Gravel finally broke the story on Sept. 20, 2007, scoop intact. The following is an edited version of the conversation Gravel had with Naila Jinnah about how he got the biggest story of his career.

Q: Geneviève Jeanson’s love affair with Quebec started at a fairly young age. How important is she to Quebecers?

It really is a fairy tale story. Jeanson is a girl from Lachine who is cute and blonde, very outspoken and blunt. She imposed herself on the international scene very quickly. In appearance and in cycling, she's flamboyant. She's a rocket.

Q: Why contact Jeanson now?

In the summer 2006, there was the Floyd Landis affair at the Tour de France. At that time, “Enquête” didn’t exist yet, but “Zone Libre” asked me to do a doping story. I love cycling, so I didn’t mind, even though it wasn’t my show. It was a very vague topic, so we focused on the blood-doping trade. But there were no real revelations, and I kept telling my team that we would have to dig into the Jeanson affair, because that’s the story in Quebec.

I knew that she had to go in front of the USADA (U.S. Anti-Doping Agency) arbitration council in Montreal to contest her doping charge (from an earlier race). I race with people in my age group and that helped me make a few contacts. We were turning in circles until she signed an out-of-court agreement admitting to failing a test. Still, she did not admit to taking drugs. I found that a bit schizophrenic. That was in December 2006.

Q: Jeepson spent years denying doping rumours, starting with the world championships in Hamilton.

Before Hamilton, there were rumours, but there are always rumours of doping in cycling. Nothing came out of it, until there was that hematocrit (HCT) test, which is not a doping test, but can indicate serious drug use. She would look people right in the eyes and say, "No, I didn’t use drugs," and she would repeat it. Normally, she would have had a much tougher career if it wouldn’t have been for some journalists defending her. That allowed her to keep racing.

Q: Geneviève Jeanson’s love affair with Quebec started at a fairly young age. How important is she to Quebecers?

It really is a fairy tale story. Jeanson is a girl from Lachine who is cute and blonde, very outspoken and blunt. She imposed herself on the international scene very quickly. In appearance and in cycling, she's flamboyant. She's a rocket.
Geneviève picked up. She hung up after I introduced myself, swearing, saying that she didn’t talk to media. A few minutes later, I was telling the producers that our story was dead when her PR representative called and said she would meet me off camera in Phoenix (Arizona).

Jeanson said, “If you’re not interested in getting to the bottom of things, and using all your means to get to the very bottom and prove that I’m clean, then I’m not interested.” We dug into her past, talking to people she had been associated with during her career. She was challenging us, and we thought that was a fair deal. She invited us over at the end of February.

Q: And that got the ball rolling. But you discovered more than just a doping story.

We had no idea where this story would end. I saw plenty of articles on (coach André) Aubut that said he was a “toughie” and a “sicko,” but it was all rumours. She was defending him, essentially telling me that,”he’s not a very social person, but he’s still got qualities.” She was working with him, and she said it was tough, but manageable.

One month later, we wanted to film her in action at the restaurant and she said that she got herself out of there, that Aubut is an “asshole,” and that she never wanted to go back.

And it was a tiny spark, the first time she criticized him. I started slowly asking about her relationship with Aubut, if he was violent with her verbally or physically. She said that he was aggressive. I find that was the biggest thing she revealed in the first interview.

That and the 54 per cent rate on the hematocrit test. The limit established by the Union Cyclist International is 47 per cent in women, and 54 per cent is much higher, and a huge indication of doping. A rate of 54 per cent is so high that Jeanson said she was afraid she was going to die.

We stayed two to three days that time. My producer asked me to bring my bike along so we could cycle together off camera. The morning of our departure, I went cycling with her around Phoenix for two and a half hours. She told me stories about her relationship with Aubut, the punch in the face. She kept giving me more and more background. It was all off camera.

One time we were cycling and talking about doping, and she said, "You know, people’s expectations are so high, it’s normal that they take drugs.” So I asked, "Are you telling me that you were taking drugs with the general excuse that...” "No, no, no...” she interrupted.

We went back for a third time in early June. I called her to confirm before we left, and she said, "If you want to talk about Aubut, I’m ready to talk. I’m in therapy,” So she starts telling us about her relationship with Aubut on camera, the punch and the whole unhealthy atmosphere. As for the doping, she’s still as stubborn, but I didn’t let her off easily because we were very well informed. We had seen blood doping specialists in Europe. I kept pushing, until she gave me that quote, "The doping, I don’t give a flying fuck. Validate your job, dammit!”

After I confronted her former PR rep, he was floored. So he gave Jeanson a call, then called me back, saying that she had admitted to using drugs and that she was waiting for my call. So I found our camera guy in the cafeteria, and squished him in the corner of my office as I called Geneviève. We filmed and taped the confession. And I was watching the lines go up and down on my machine, and I just couldn’t believe it. I was so blown over by the confession. She didn’t know we were taping it. She couldn’t go back anymore. No one could go back; it was there. I didn’t know if I could use it on air, legally but I could talk about it. I had proof! We eventually got her on camera for the final interview.

It’s a passionate story. And there’s so much more than what was broadcast. There are a lot of reporters who do investigative journalism, but this happens once in a lifetime.

Q: What sort of reaction did this report get when it aired?

It was a bomb. We were sitting on a scoop for three months: June, July, August. A scoop doesn’t have a shelf life. Usually, it’s 24 hours before it gets stolen. I was sure that it was going to come out before then. I was absolutely certain that someone was going to convince her to talk. So I would call her, in a paternal way, checking that she wasn’t talking to anyone. But we were also lucky because she went out of town, so no one could reach her, even after the first broadcast.

The rumours were circulating. Foglia wrote two sentences in La Presse in early September, saying a Canadian cyclist had written about a marriage certificate. I was sure it would come out elsewhere because it was public three weeks before the broadcast, but no one talked about it. Every morning, I’d wake up and check La Presse, always surprised that Jeanson wasn’t on the front page.

We leaked the news a few hours earlier on the radio and it just took off. For two weeks, it was sheer madness. And that’s when I realized that it was because there was the doping aspect, but also her relationship with Aubut, the little girl, her parents. Her story went beyond sports, beyond doping.

Q: What advice can you offer journalism students or other reporters who want to interview high-profile people on tough issues?

There’s no small fact. All the information you collect is good. Fundamentally, the quality of the information that you put out rests on the quantity of work you put in. And quantity is the multiplication of sources. Off-camera meetings give you a huge amount and allow you to open doors and follow trails. All these informal meetings with her and with others created the backdrop for the story. All the tiny details we accumulated came together at one point.

We were also lucky that we weren’t sports reporters. She lied for 10 years, but she didn’t lie to us. 

Naila Finnah is a third-year journalism student at Concordia University in Montreal.

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1 Medline Plus defines the test as: "a blood test that measures the number of red blood cells and the size of red blood cells. It gives a percentage of red blood cells found in whole blood. This test is almost always ordered as part of a complete blood count.” The more oxygen in the blood, the farther and harder a cyclist can ride, so the test is used to detect instances of blood doping, which have become rampant in professional cycling. http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/003646.htm

2 Floyd Landis is the American cyclist who won the 2006 Tour de France, only to lose his crown the following year when it was discovered that he cheated. Landis still denies the charge. The result of Landis’ failed ordeal to clear his name is the face of doping charges made news the same time that Gravel broke his story about Jeanson.

3 You can see the program by going to: http://www.radio-canada.ca/sports/cyclisme/2007/09/20/008-jeanson22h.shtml

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THE JEANSON CHRONOLOGY

• In 1998, Jeanson started cycling professionally, winning her first title at the Canadian Junior Championships. She was 16 years old.
• In 2000, she became the world junior champion and qualified for the Sydney Olympics. She signed a contract with RONA that would earn her about $1 million in sponsorship and winnings by the time she turned 23.
• In 2001, she had the best year of her career, establishing time records in three races and sending doping rumours flying.
• In 2003, Jeanson was first officially accused of taking drugs after being temporarily suspended for failing a blood test at the world championships in Hamilton. That same year, her doctor, Dr. Maurice Duquette was accused of injecting a Quebec-born international cycling athlete with the EPO (erythropoietin) drug, but Jeanson was never officially named as the cyclist in question.
• In 2004, Jeanson forgets to show up for a random doping test following the La Flèche Wallone race in Belgium. It’s an automatic fail.
• Then in 2005, a positive EPO test at the Tour de ‘Toona in Pennsylvania leads to a two-year suspension that Jeanson

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Crowdsourcing: The next wave?
Is this new form of journalism an antidote to the "newspaper deathwatch" or just a passing fad?

What's being touted by some as the coming "revolution" in journalism goes by at least three names. Call it "crowdsourcing," "pro-am" or "open source" journalism: no longer are the mainstream media and "citizen journalists" at each other's throats, so the theory goes.

They're now working side by side, virtually speaking, to deliver news from the grassroots. But whatever the label, some wonder if this is just free labour, a mere fad, or truly innovative journalism.

What is crowdsourcing?

"Remember outsourcing? Sending jobs to India and China is so 2003," Howe wrote. Well, this is "the new pool of cheap labour: everyday people using their spare cycles to create content, solve problems, even do corporate R & D."

Within the journalistic context, this pro-am approach is a hybrid form of the profession.

Robert Miles, editor of the Online Journalism Review, has defined crowdsourcing as "the use of a large group of readers to report a news story."

And New York University professor Jay Rosen called it "(e)ditorial discipline within a climate of radical openness."

It's different from conventional reporting, Miles wrote, because information is gathered "through some automated agent" such as a Web site, as opposed to being collected manually by a reporter.

To put it succinctly, Rosen said it's news that's "reported by the many and edited by a few, who have to be constantly open to new contributions."

Examples of crowdsourcing

So far most of the examples have occurred in the United States, with mixed results.

A stellar example can be found in The News-Press, a Florida newspaper that is part of the Gannett newspaper chain.

In 2006, the News-Press launched an investigation into a billion-dollar public utility project.

The paper put out an open call to readers to help them investigate. It also posted hundreds of pages of documents on its site. Readers then started launching their own investigations which soon involved retired engineers, accountants and even a whistle-blower who leaked evidence. The experiment was a stunning success, thanks to the help of thousands of volunteer "citizen journalists." The paper experienced record traffic for six weeks and prompted local government action: the project was halted and when it resumed, the city cut utility charges by more than 30 per cent, saving homeowners several thousands of dollars. A city official subsequently resigned and the issue was front and centre during city council elections, reports Howe in Wired magazine.

Another prominent example is Assignment Zero, an experimental project initiated by Jay Rosen last year between Wired magazine and NewAssignment.net. It brought "citizen journalists" and professionals together.

In July 2007, however, when some of its content was published in the magazine, the project didn't quite live up to expectations.

A key problem, Howe observed, was technological: building a site large enough to facilitate such collaboration. Engaging volunteer contributors was another.

He says, "In the 12 weeks the project was open to the public, it suffered from haphazard planning, technological glitches and a general sense of confusion among participants."

He also observed that "Crucial staff members were either forced out or resigned in mid-stream, and its ambitious goal — to produce 'the most comprehensive knowledge base to date on the scope, limits and best practices of crowdsourcing' — had to be dramatically curtailed in order to yield some tangible results when Assignment Zero ended on June 5."

Even so, Howe notes that it was still a worthwhile experiment the failure of which provided important lessons.

According to Alfred Hermida, assistant professor of journalism at the University of British Columbia, while this project didn't work, journalists should take notice.

"The mainstream media have just woken up to this. This is here to stay," said Hermida, a former BBC journalist who helped establish the news organization's Web site in 1997 and had been one of the pioneers in encouraging "citizen journalists" to contribute their opinions, photos and videos online.

In Canada, this trend is still in its infancy. Orato.com is one of a few websites that practises a variant of pro-am journalism involving citizen and professional journalists, calling itself a "pioneering grassroots citizen journalism Web site."

Hermida said economic sustainability is a key factor in the survival of these new experiments. The Vancouver-based NowPublic.com, which also practises a variant of open source journalism, appears to have adopted a feasible business model, he said. In July of 2007, NowPublic.com received close to $11 million in venture financing. The Globe and Mail called this "one of the largest such deals involving a citizen-journalism service."

The history of crowdsourcing

This new movement is being called a "fork" in the citizen journalism movement whose own roots have been linked to the advent of personal homepages and "zines in the mid-1980s, and "Indymedia" in 1999 which positioned itself as an anti-corporate mouthpiece (the first Indymedia was launched in Seattle, broadcasting images from the WTO protest).

On crowdsourcing, Howe traces its roots to iStockPhoto (now owned by Getty Images) which began in 2000. Originally a site where designers...
could exchange images for free, it morphed into a credit system where members could pay as little as $1 per image.

In his essay "The rise of crowdsourcing," Howe also points to the VH1 hit show "Web Junk 20," which debuted in January 2006. It’s a program featuring the 20 most popular videos online each week.

These examples illustrate the basic idea of crowdsourcing: producing user-generated content.

Yet experts argue that crowdsourcing isn’t the same as citizen journalism, although they share similar traits such as a grassroots-minded approach and engaging the local community in the news and its production.

CROWDSOURCING AS A VARIANT OF PUBLIC OR CITIZEN JOURNALISM

Crowdsourcing is another form of the participatory journalism that has already taken hold in Canada and the United States. In that vein, crowdsourcing’s practitioners borrow from the idealism of public or participatory journalism, a movement that was introduced by American journalists in 1989. Public journalism sought to integrate citizen viewpoints into the reporting and construction of news stories, and touted a proactive role for journalists in the community. Some would argue that this journalism has morphed into something more recent: citizen-based journalism, where ordinary people provide content that is used by media outlets. Ordinary citizens become the journalists’ eyes and ears, witnesses to newsworthy events.

A prominent example in Canada is the coverage of the RCMP controversy involving the use of stun guns.

An amateur video taken by Paul Pritchard — which captured the events leading to the death of Robert Dziekanski, a Polish immigrant who died after he was Tasered and restrained by four RCMP officers at Vancouver International Airport on Oct. 14, 2007 — has been heavily relied upon by major news outlets since it was released weeks after the incident.

This, along with the RCMP’s contradictory account, have sparked public outrage over the issue. "Without the video … it would have been the word of four Mounties against those of a few civilian witnesses," according to a Globe and Mail editorial published a month after the incident.

The fact that this amateur video has ignited world wide attention to the use of Tasers could be seen as a boost for citizen journalism in which ordinary people become witnesses to key events (interestingly, back in 1991, it was amateur video taping of the beating of Los Angeles black cab driver, Rodney King, that sparked outrage and a public discussion about police brutality). But in order for this to fit into the category of crowdsourcing, other "citizen journalists" who were witnesses to the incident and who might have tried to help the man and warn police would have had to collaborate with professional journalists in producing the final story.

According to Robert Miles of the Online Journalism Review, "Unlike more traditional notions of ‘citizen journalism,’ crowdsourcing does not ask readers to become anything more than what they’ve always been: eyewitnesses to their daily lives. They need not learn advanced reporting skills, journalism ethics or how to be a better writer."

Crowdsourcing and citizen journalism also face questions surrounding their credibility and sustainability. Some experts argue that the credibility of “citizen journalists” boils down to this question: does uploading content on the Internet instantly make you a journalist?

Mary McGuire, a journalism professor at Carleton University doesn’t think so.

“If you were somebody who happened to pass by a car accident and take a picture with your cell phone, you aren’t a journalist. You aren’t providing layers of content that a journalist might,” said McGuire, who teaches an online journalism course at Carleton (Paul Pritchard, the man who shot the Taser video at the Vancouver airport, might understand this distinction as he is reportedly "considering a career in journalism").

So is crowdsourcing the long-awaited antidote to the "newspaper deathwatch"? Will it bring more readers and revenue to struggling newspapers competing in an Internet age?

The verdict is still out.

Crowdsourcing expert Howe says the trend isn’t about turning readers into journalists.

“They want to contribute to the paper, but they want to do it on their terms. I’m confident that leaves a lot of need for news professionals,” he told the American Journalism Review.

Some former journalists such as the University of British Columbia’s Alfred Hermida agree.

"The traditional role of the journalist is evolving and changing and journalists have to be essentially far more humble and accept the fact that it’s no longer a one-way street where you as a journalist write a story, it gets printed and it’s almost like, that’s it. It’s the word of God. Nobody questions it,” Hermida said. "That sort of model doesn’t exist anymore. Being accountable, being more transparent is actually a good thing for journalists because you can be better journalists."

Sheila Dabu is finishing her Master of Journalism degree at Carleton University. She previously interned at the Toronto Star and Canadian Press, and before that worked in the Middle East for the Jordan Times and IRIN News (the UN news agency) for close to a year.

*http://www.nowpublic.com/crime/taser-death-video-can-we-trust-citizen-journalists*
Case studies in investigative journalism

A new book features the work of some of the country’s top investigative journalists

When Toronto Star reporter Robert Cribb went undercover to expose Toronto’s sleazy telemarketing industry, he quite literally took his life into his hands.

He and Star colleague Christian Cotroneo got a series of jobs in shady telemarketing “boiler rooms,” which operated with impunity on the upstairs floors of dingy downtown commercial buildings.

Together they witnessed unscrupulous salespeople scamming seniors of their life savings. Under the guise of taking smoke breaks, they managed to sneak out the scripts that guided the scammers in making upwards of $2000 a week. Their work led to the landmark 2002 series on the sleazy telemarketing industry and forced most of the scammers to yank the phone lines and flee town.

Dialing for Dollars

The pair was at constant risk of a shakedown from hired muscle, and after their two-part series ran in the Star, Cribb’s phone started to ring.

“They never talked to me directly but they’d leave messages...‘we’re going to break your arms and legs’ — stuff like that.”

A police officer friend advised Cribb to start checking his rear-view mirror and changing his route to work. “His basic message was ‘it’s extremely serious... these are pretty nasty guys.’”

Cribb’s tale of intrigue is just one of 13 case studies in Maxine Ruvinsky’s new book Investigative Reporting in Canada, just published by Oxford University Press Canada.

Ruvinsky’s book is a worthy addition to the still tiny body of work on investigative journalism in Canada (in the interests of full disclosure, two of my own stories are included in the book).

Ruvinsky is an assistant journalism professor at Thompson Rivers University in the B.C. interior and prior to this work was best known for a handbook on grammar.

Her approach is different from that in many journalism texts in that her own prose is shaved to a minimum. She begins each chapter with a short introduction that describes the story and puts it into context. But most of the book is devoted to edited interview transcripts with the journalists who did the stories, strung together with bits of her own commentary.

The biggest strength of her approach is that the reader gets a sense of what makes each journalist tick, and why she or he engages in investigations. The reader also gets a vivid picture of how the stories came together, and the particular frustrations and dangers that were inherent in that. It is probably the closest you can come to meeting these talented journalists without actually doing so.

Ruvinsky also spends considerable time talking to the journalists about their philosophical take on investigative work, and how they came to engage in it.

If there’s something to criticize about her work it’s not what is there, but what is missing.

The author acknowledges that the book is hardly comprehensive, saying she has “sacrificed breadth for depth.”

But some of the omissions are puzzling, particularly the near absence of any mention of broadcast journalism. Apart from interviews with several journalists whose stories are not included in the case studies, the book ignores TV and radio work altogether.

This is a significant omission, particularly given the important contribution of organizations such as the CBC to the development of the investigative craft in Canada.

At times, the book also feels a little loose. The text occasionally wanders, with perhaps a little less discipline than one might hope for in the way the material is presented.

This is maybe an inevitable by-product of the interview format, but one that might have been remedied by more aggressive pruning.

Because of its case study format, this book is most likely to find its best market in the country’s schools of journalism and communication. It will make a nice companion to skills-based texts and lectures, and provide excellent teaching and discussion material for those teaching the craft.

There will probably also be limited take-up by “news junkies” and those interested in pursuing a career in investigative work, for whom there is plenty of inspiration in the book’s nearly 400 pages.

Investigative Reporting in Canada is recommended reading for anyone who wants to share the passion, toil, and bravery that goes into some of the country’s best reporting. It will have a prominent place on my bookshelf.

Fred Vallance-Jones is an assistant professor of journalism at the University of King’s College in Halifax. He is co-author of Digging Deeper, A Canadian Reporter’s Research Guide, also published by Oxford University Press Canada.
More than a dozen Ontario men are accused of plotting bombings and other terrorist attacks, including a threat to behead the prime minister. An Edmonton man who pleaded for the safe return of his missing, pregnant wife is charged with her murder.

Both stories made headlines across the country — for a few days, at least. Reporters and editors knew that the moment each case reached the courts news about it would all but vanish.

A judge would ban publication of information presented at the suspects’ bail hearings. A similar ban would shield evidence tendered at the preliminary hearing stage of the prosecutions. Journalists could attend and report that the hearings were held, but little else. Years later, at trial, the rest of the world would be let in on the secret.

Our criminal justice system is premised on the belief that, while the courts are open, publication bans to suppress pre-trial proceedings are justified. Revealing evidence early on in a prosecution, so the argument goes, could prejudice the accused’s right to a fair trial and taint the jury’s verdict.

But it’s time judges and legislators admitted some inconvenient truths: there’s little evidence that pre-trial reporting influences verdicts; jury trials have become less common in criminal cases, even for serious offences such as murder; and the outdated "you-can’t-handle-the-truth" approach undermines public confidence in the justice system.

The guarantee of freedom of the press in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms has been used to rein in discretionary bans.

The judge was also troubled that the ban applies to all bail hearings, even when a judge will preside at the trial and concerns about media reports influencing jurors are moot.

Edmonton lawyer Fred Kozak, who represented the CBC, the Globe and Mail and the Edmonton Journal in the White case, sees the ruling as an important victory for access to the courts. "In a case where someone will not be tried by a judge and jury, there can be no rational reason to ban evidence from a bail hearing," he says. The same can be said for the mandatory ban on evidence presented at a preliminary hearing, which Kozak also considers "constitutionally suspect."

Brooker was faced with expert evidence that pre-trial publicity is unlikely to influence jurors, unless it’s damning evidence such as a confession or the fact the defendant was found with the murder weapon. A ban on publishing details such as these, which clearly have the potential to prejudice a case, should suffice. "You can’t speculate that harm will follow pre-trial publicity," Kozak argues. "Only in the rarest of circumstances might pre-trial publicity prejudice an accused’s right to a fair trial."

Brooker reworded the provision to apply only when a jury trial is possible but gave the federal government a year to remove the mandatory ban on bail hearings.

In the meantime, the fight is far from over. Brooker’s ruling is under appeal and, in Ontario, media outlets are appealing a judge’s refusal last March to strike down the ban on the bail hearings of a dozen men jailed on terrorism charges (Toronto Star Newspapers Ltd. v. R., 84 O.R. (3d) 766). That judge was following a 1980s Ontario precedent, and media lawyers warn Ontario’s Court of Appeal to revisit the issue in light of recent charter rulings expanding media access to the courts.

One or both of the cases is likely to wind up before the Supreme Court of Canada for a final ruling, one that should open pre-trial hearings to greater public scrutiny.

Dean Jobb, an assistant professor of journalism at University of King’s College in Halifax, is author of Media Law for Canadian Journalists (Emond Montgomery Publications, 2006) and co-author of Digging Deeper: A Canadian Reporter’s Research Guide (Oxford University Press, 2006).
Talk about pressure. Story ideas don’t just explode from the brain the moment you need one or the moment you’re asked for. And any writer or editor who has had to think of an idea on the spot at a brainstorming meeting will know the anxiety of waiting your turn to present something … anything.

But, as desperately as we wish it were so, story ideas just don’t come on demand. Still, newsrooms rely on reporters to ferret out story ideas in the course of covering other assignments, working a beat, through observation or keeping in touch with contacts.

The key is to always think of story ideas as a natural function of being a writer or editor. If you’re lucky, some ideas smack you right in the face. Others need to be nurtured; they need to percolate before they’re ready.

American journalist and author Adrian Nicole LeBlanc once told a conference on narrative journalism that she reads everything she can — lots of newspapers, magazines, literary journals, trade publications. “My ideas files are full of things that interest me, in ways that often aren’t clear to me. Some story ideas hit me immediately … other ideas take years to develop in my mind. Major stories come to me through my straying curiosity.”

So rather than turn the search for ideas into a chore to be dreaded, LeBlanc is always thinking of story ideas. Don’t beat yourself up, but get in the habit of thinking beyond today’s story and story ideas question even the most basic and routine information — never assuming it is basic and routine. Instead, they show curiosity and initiative. They think about what makes a story different or how to approach a story from a different vantage point.

Ideas can come from a variety of general sources. News itself generates ideas. We can follow an initial news story with an update, a reaction story, an explanatory piece, or a slice of the story that didn’t get much attention the first day. People, of course, help show the impact of a piece of legislation or a natural disaster. In the right instance, they add flesh to numbers, surveys and government data.

Then there are reports, studies, audits and budgets containing nuggets of information that can lead to an exciting story. A beat reporter once found a few lines in his second read of a government report that made a vague reference to suicides in farm communities. He and another reporter wrote an award-winning story on a topic rarely discussed in close-knit rural communities.

Because of deadlines, we tend to rush through mounds of material to produce that all-encompassing first-day story on an issue. We are less inclined to return to the documents when we have time to read them more closely. Take a closer look at the mountain of paper produced on your beat.

Steve Buttry, director of tailored programming at the American Press Institute, says if you encounter a single issue again and again in different stories, maybe you need to take a broader look at that issue and its widespread importance or impact.

Here are some examples of how good reporters operate:

1) A city hall reporter noticed that a council member has a habit of being present at the start of a meeting for roll call (and thereby achieving, on paper, an almost perfect attendance record), but then he would disappear for hours. The reporter decided to document — for almost a year — when he showed up, when he left and when he returned. He dutifully kept notes until he was ready to conduct interviews and write his story.

2) A reporter who borrowed a book from the library noticed that it had been vandalized. Curious about the extent of the problem, he asked a few questions. He discovered that the library was to be the site of a major study to assess vandalism damage — a research effort that could lead to new security measures to protect books. Not only did he have a good local story, but one with national impact as well.

3) A reporter watching a baseball game was intrigued by the yakety-yak of the players, so he decided to capture the flavour of baseball talk. He did the same with grunting tennis players to produce a couple of whimsical stories.

4) A newspaper columnist took a ride through his favourite cemetery with plans to do a column on an upcoming election (based on visiting the grave of the late prime minister Mackenzie King). As he was leaving, he found a note beside a small gravestone that led him to a compelling story about a woman adopted at childbirth searching for her roots. The grave was that of her birth mother.

Get out of the office. Pay attention to your surroundings. Here’s what Toronto Star columnist Jim Coyle said about his experience:

I often think the best columns I’ve done are those I never had in mind, that I just
stumbled on by going somewhere, by paying attention.

I was trying to do phone interviews from home (during a massive snowstorm) when I had to run an errand. I started walking south on Yonge Street through midtown when I noticed how cheerful everyone was to each other. People who would have normally bustled by each other, eyes down, shared a few words, a smile, stopped to chat, even if only to complain. People shovelled each other’s sidewalks, helped elders across the snowdrifts, helped push stuck cars.

So I started making notes on all the exchanges I noticed and did something on how snowstorms make people (pedestrians at least) more human.

It got lots of great response. And had I not gone out I would never have been struck by the idea.

Go someplace. Pay attention. It’s pretty simple advice. But like lots that’s simple, it seems to work … and it’s often forgotten.

5) A reporter was doing a profile on a woman who had been laid off after 25 years as a nurse. He interviewed her several times as she struggled to cope with the shock and tried to find another job. As part of the story, he had her keep a diary of her thoughts and activities. If your story is to be done over a longer period of time, think of ways to have the interview subject do some of the work. The diary allowed the writer to keep track of the woman’s emotions and what she was going through when he wasn’t with her.

Here’s a brief glimpse into the diary. There are enough key moments to prompt questions from the writer.

**Saturday and Sunday:** Went to my mom’s. Phone conversation overhead — "no, no, Julie is still idle." Although my sister and I laughed at my mother’s Scottish subconscious credo, "Idle hands are the devil's work," it was still mortifying to be referred to as idle.

(Husband) Don and I discussed our finances and this was truly demoralizing … Very depressed most of the night (a very bad few days). Don and I argued more than usual about money … I’ve never been extremely comfortable, but comfortable enough not to worry about having enough money to pay for (daughter) Jessie’s soccer league this summer, which Don feels is a luxury and I feel is a necessity.

**Monday:** Had a great day. Lots of pep and optimism … I will be starting some computer courses and we decided to rent a cottage for two weeks in the summer, which cheered me up considerably.

6) An anti-smoking bylaw prompted a reporter to do a story on matchbooks. Many bars and restaurants once had their own customized matchbooks showing the establishment’s name, address and logo. People collected matchbooks. So what role would they play in a non-smoking environment? Well … some establishments intended to keep them for old times sake. Don’t be afraid to suggest an off-the-wall idea. Perhaps someone simply threw out a question or two: What about those matchbooks now that we have such a stringent anti-smoking bylaw? Will this kill the matchbook business? Some people might have laughed, but after the laughter died down, a risky soul might have said, "Hey, maybe it’s worth checking out." Those aren’t bad words to live by — maybe it is worth checking out.

7) A simple pin prompted a story about poppies on Remembrance Day. The pin that keeps the poppy attached to a jacket has a remarkable knack for squirming loose and running off with the poppy. Who hasn’t had a poppy fall off a coat? Such a simple part of the Remembrance Day story. Like Jimmy Breslin’s piece on the gravedigger, learn to think in smaller, precise chunks. Covering one aspect of a story well is better than tackling too much and writing it in a superficial way. When someone says, "I can never keep a poppy on my coat. Why doesn’t the pin stay in?" a reporter with an eye to a possible story has to say, "Good question. What’s with the pin?"

Good story ideas, however, only flourish when editors allow their reporters time to develop them. And time to write them.

While touring a newsroom one weekend, a reporter told me a story idea she was working on as she monitored the police scanner. I asked what her editor thought of it and she replied: "I haven’t told him yet."

She was afraid he’d want the story "tomorrow" rather than give her the time to do it right. This is not an uncommon refrain.

Editors need to create an atmosphere in which story ideas are encouraged and the rush to print or air is not necessarily always the priority. Let writers have some breathing space when they’re not dealing with the urgency of a next-edition or next-broadcast deadline. Allowing reporters to show their passion for an idea — to sink their teeth into a story — is a nice reward for having done their shares yet meeting the urgent deadlines.

Don Gibb is a news reporting instructor at Ryerson University’s School of Journalism. You can reach him at dgibb@ryerson.ca

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**Finding Ideas**

1) Read your own publication for follow-up stories. Often we only get part of the story because of time constraints, the inability to reach key contacts, or the reluctance of some people to talk. Follow-up with another story, but be careful not to repeat the same information through different people.

2) Keep a daybook or journal to follow your own stories. Make regular checks for new developments and record important dates relevant to a story: when new legislation takes effect; first anniversary of a tornado that damaged a nearby community; a person’s trial date; when a report will be released …

3) Subscribe to and read publications related to your field, beat or areas of interest. This can be great for story tips or stories professional groups are talking about internally, but not yet in public. Try to get access to company newsletters or house organs.

4) Read local and provincial newspapers. They can provide good story ideas or contacts.

5) Read bulletin boards -- everywhere. When you are killing time waiting for an interview in someone’s office, read the information board.

6) Read and re-read government reports or other documents for hidden stories beyond the obvious. After the big picture story, go back and look for the little (or big) things you might have missed in the first round.

7) Talk to your contacts on a regular basis. Find out what’s new, what’s being talked about in their office or area of expertise.

8) Take time to make new contacts. Often too, we rely on the same old experts and talking heads. New ones might offer different perspectives.

9) Look for stories when you are doing stories. Sometimes a diversion in the conversation on one story can produce ideas for other stories.

10) Look beyond the obvious. Think about how a story affects those for whom you are writing.

11) Observe. Look around for changes in your environment.

12) Work with a number of ideas at the same time. This gives you a chance to compare them and see which ones are worth pursuing.

13) Localize provincial, national and world stories. Almost every major international story — from a tsunami to political conflicts — has echoes locally with those who left various homelands for here.

14) Think of things that affect your life (or those around you), things that interest you.

15) Get out of the office.

Here are other sites worth checking for more on story ideas:

Gregg McLachlan’s newscollege: www.newscollege.ca

Steve Buttry and others: www.notrain-nogain.com
The courts in Ontario have dealt two setbacks to the cause of computer-assisted reporting in the province. One decision from the Divisional Court essentially says if an institution has to write a small computer program to extract data for a request, the institution can refuse to do so. A second could snuff out access to more policy records.

The Star requested access to two databases used by the Toronto Police Service. To protect privacy and yet still be able to make sense of the data, the Star asked the ministry to replace unique identifiers for individuals with randomly generated numbers. That would allow the paper to see what happened to individuals, without knowing who they were.

The Toronto Police Board refused to release the databases, saying doing so would constitute creating a new record, which it maintained it did not need to do.

Ontario’s information commissioner disagreed and ordered the board to respond to the requests. In turn, the board took the case to judicial review before the Divisional Court, and won.

The decision centred around the definition of a record in Ontario’s Freedom of Information Act. Using language similar to that found in several other access statutes across Canada, Ontario’s provincial and municipal acts allow for the “production of a record from a machine readable record,” if this can be done using hardware, software or expertise “normally used by the institution.”

The practice laid down over many years of requests in Ontario is that this includes writing a small routine to extract or sever fields from records. Usually that means writing a query, but sometimes a simple computer program is required to run a more complicated extraction. For actual programming, there is even a provision in the fee regulations that allows institutions to charge $60 an hour for the task.

The Divisional Court decision has the potential to turn that whole body of accepted practice — backed by orders from the information commissioner — on its head.

As the court put it, if something not normally used by the institution is required, “that is the end of the matter.”

This has disturbing implications for access to electronic records. The decision invites institutions to throw up this barrier whenever they would rather not release a database.

The decision completely misses the distinction between software and the small routines that are sometimes required to extract data.

As I see it, the requirement that hardware, software and technical expertise be normally used by an institution has a reasonable purpose. The statute is saying an institution shouldn’t have to go out and buy new computers or computer programs, or hire expensive outside technical assistance, to respond to a request for data (or paper printouts, which would be equally affected by this ruling).

In my view, it is unreasonable to suggest this means an institution doesn’t have to use the software it already possesses to write a simple routine to extract data, or that it doesn’t have to use the technical expertise it already has to do so. Yet this is exactly what the court seems to be saying, that an electronic record ceases to be a record simply because a small amount of programming or query-writing is needed to copy it or sever portions of it.

The Star is taking the case to the Court of Appeal, and as of this writing there has been no decision.

Another decision from the Divisional Court, again involving the Star, could make it nearly impossible to obtain any data from police.

The newspaper sought access to two firearms databases maintained by Ontario’s Provincial Weapons Enforcement Unit. Again, the matter ended up before the Information and Privacy Commissioner, which ruled in favour of the Star on one database and against the paper on the other.

The Star and the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services both applied for judicial review, and the end result was that the Divisional Court ruled both databases should be kept from the public.

Again, the reasoning rested on a narrow interpretation of words in the act.

One of the exemptions allows records to be withheld if release would interfere with a "law enforcement matter."

The court ruled that "the plain and ordinary meaning of 'matter' is very broad" and concluded that since the database was used in policing it therefore fell within the ambit of a law enforcement matter.

And that was enough to block its release.

That would appear to make it possible to withhold almost any record that relates to policing. In both of these cases, access to electronic records was denied not on the basis of broad principles, or clear threats to the public good, but on the basis of lawyers fighting over the meaning of poorly-defined phrases. That’s par for the course in the courts, but the reason we have information and privacy commissioners is because the drafters of these acts knew that there needed to be appeal bodies with the specialized expertise needed to make finely-balanced decisions. The balance I am speaking of is that between the public’s right to know, and the need to protect specific private interests.

Ontario’s office has built up an impressive body of jurisprudence, generally doing well to strike a balance. The problem when the cases end up in the courts is that too often carefully-crafted decisions are overturned on the basis of interpretations of language by judges who deal with such matters only occasionally. The law, as written, seems clear enough to them, so they rule accordingly.

Fred Vallance-Jones is an assistant professor of journalism at the University of King’s College in Halifax and co-author of Digging Deeper: A Canadian Reporter’s Research Guide. You can reach him at Fvjones@dal.ca
n today’s age of online social networking, interactive applications are no longer simply coupling singles. Now more than ever, the made-in-heaven matches enabled by the Internet involve journalists — and their sources.

At the fore of this trend is Facebook, a social networking site exploding around the globe and becoming a fruitful tool for any journalist willing to navigate it. Unlike in newsgroups, where reporters are often forced to make general posts regarding their calls for sources, Facebook allows them to pinpoint the most relevant individuals and send them for-their-eyes-only messages.

The catch to using Facebook as means of finding a source is that you can only do so if you have an account. Like other social networking sites, part of the reason Facebook membership continues to expand is because the site can't be viewed without one. As a result, anyone who wants to see photographs of a friend’s wedding, learn the details of an upcoming posted event or locate a case study for a story must sign up. Fortunately this can be done quickly and easily by following the steps listed on www.facebook.com.

Once you have set up your own profile, the best way to begin your search is by using the site's "groups" application. A Facebook group is a virtual community that users can join to discuss a given topic or cause; within each group, members can write on the "wall" (the lingo term for placing a comment on the group's main page); start individual discussion topics; and post items, pictures, and videos. The goal, of course, is that the content of each submission is related to the group, although this is bound to not always be the case — random thoughts and personal advertising can proliferate. Anyone can create a group, and the administrators can control the content by deleting posts and updating the description section, which is often used to post relevant news.

The administrators can also determine whether the group is considered open, closed, or secret. If they select one of the two latter, users must be invited to join. However, if the administrators would like the group to be "open," anyone can become a member or invite others to do so. Any user can be active within the group.

Where you as a reporter will find sources are in groups that are considered open; these are the only groups in which you can see the wall, discussion board, and posted items.

If the keyword search reveals so many hits that you must narrow it down, you can limit your request. This is often required when your keywords trigger a myriad of groups that are simply parodies. By using the "filter results" function, you can taper your search on the basis of type (such as "common interest," "organizations," or "student groups") and subtype.

Once you’ve found an open group that looks like it might be suitable, check out the wall posts and discussion board. The latter could prove to be easier to navigate, since the discussions are organized by topic. If your subject matter is hot at the time of your search, you’re almost sure to find active dialogue about it. Based on the users’ remarks, you can decide who might make for worthy sources.

You won’t be able to see the profiles of individual users unless you happen to belong to the same networks and they haven’t restricted their privacy settings. This means that you can’t write on their walls, but as a journalist looking to scoop a story and not call a lot of attention to yourself, it’s best to send a private message anyhow. You can do so by simply clicking on the link next to each user’s profile listing; the beauty of this function is that you need not be that person’s official Facebook "friend" in order to contact them this way. Moreover, it’s an easy way to avoid prolonged and unsuccessful searches for e-mail addresses or phone numbers.

Be aware that sending another user a message will reveal some of your own personal information; your profile will be visible to him or her for one month. If you as a journalist are not willing to divulge that information, be sure to adjust your privacy settings accordingly. Either that, or consider creating a separate, less revealing account. That said, be sure to maintain a photo, profile, and even a friends list; one Facebook policy forbids users from employing the site for strictly business purposes, and there is no exception for journalists. At least one accredited journalist has had her profile — which she used solely for finding and contacting sources — inexplicably disabled without warning. She later discovered that she had been reprimanded for sending what Facebook deemed "unsolicited" messages. And although upon appeal a public relations representative reinstated her account, she was given a warning: Facebook is designed for private networking and must be at least in part used for such.

Keep in mind that some sources will be more likely to be found on Facebook than others. Facebook began as a students-only site, where users had to join school-based networks by supplying their school-assigned e-mail addresses. Although the site has since expanded to include city-based networks and encouraged non-students and people of all ages to join, students remain its primary users. This is certainly changing, but it is nonetheless necessary to remember that the number of sources you can effectively locate via Facebook is largely dependent on the demographic you are willing to consult.

Natalie Johnson is finishing her fourth and final year at Carleton University's School of Journalism.
Judith Steed has won the 2007 Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy for her project entitled Growing Old: Hidden Poverty, Looming Crises, New Solutions.

Steed asks the question: Where are the best places in the world to grow old, and why? Her focus is on the transformative models in Canada and in Northern Europe, where she'll travel to Denmark, Sweden and Great Britain to examine their leading-edge approaches to caring for senior citizens in the community.

Judith Steed is the recipient of four National Newspaper Award citations for feature writing, and author of five books ranging from Ed Broadbent: The Pursuit of Power, to Our Little Secret: Confronting Child Sexual Abuse in Canada, which was based on articles that first appeared in the Star.

As part of the terms of the Fellowship, Steed will receive a stipend of $75,000 plus an expense budget of up to $25,000.

The Fellowship, sponsored by the Atkinson Charitable Foundation, the Toronto Star and the Honderich Family, is open to all senior Canadian print and broadcast journalists.

IMPORTANT CHANGE: Please note the simplified two-step application process for 2008.

1. To be considered, all that is required is a THREE PAGE maximum LETTER of INTENT, along with your curriculum vitae, that summarizes your topic, its importance, brief outline of proposed articles, and treatment/approach to be received by Monday, January 14, 2008.

2. The Fellowship Committee will choose three to five Finalists who will be invited to submit a full application and proposal for consideration for the 2008 Fellowship award. Each finalist will receive an honorarium for submitting a proposal.

Send 4 copies of your Letter of Intent and CV to:

Elizabeth Chan
Coordinator, Atkinson Fellowship Committee
The Atkinson Charitable Foundation
1 Yonge Street, Suite 1508
Toronto, ON M5E 1E5

416 869 4034 telephone
416 865 3619 fax
echan@atkinsonfoundation.ca
The 2008 Canadian Association of Journalists national conference will be held in Edmonton, Alberta on Friday, May 23 to Sunday, May 25 at the downtown Westin Hotel.

Here are a few updated highlights — with more to come.

• KEYNOTE - Kathy Gannon. Between 1986 and 2005, she was a correspondent for the Associated Press in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Timmins, Ont.-born journalist is currently the Iran Bureau Chief-designate. Her work has been published in Foreign Affairs and The New Yorker. Her first book was "I is for Infidel" - on the history and politics of Afghanistan during her years working in the region.

SEMINARS/PANELS

• INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING SEMINAR by award-winning Toronto Star reporter Robert Cribb.

• TALK RADIO PANEL - Is talk radio entertainment or journalism? John Gormley, a popular Saskatchewan-wide news talk radio host and former member of Parliament will join Corus radio's Dave Rutherford on a panel of three broadcasters.

• DEATH OF EDITORIAL CARTOONING - Ex-Toronto Star cartoonist Victor Roschkov, who also worked for the Edmonton Sun, has agreed to be one of three people who will spark a lively panel discussion on this topic. He'll be joined by award-winning Calgary Herald cartoonist Vance Rodewalt and a third artist.

• BLOGGING - David Newland, Assistant Managing Editor of Canoe.ca, will present a seminar on the key ways to create a wildly successful blog.

• A Dream Job? - How to be a successful travel writer. Seminar put on by Sun Media travel columnist Doug English, the former travel editor of the London Free Press.

• INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING TOO - Sessions (beginner and advanced) by award-winning computer-assisted-reporting (CAR) experts Fred Vallance-Jones and CBC News Investigative Unit's David McKie.

• EFFECTIVE STORY TELLING USING INVESTIGATIVE TECHNIQUES - A session by CBC's David McKie.


• TIME GO PRO? - A panel discussion of the pros and cons of pushing to see journalism become a profession in the same way as accounting or law. It will feature author and journalist Nick Russell and journalism professor Alan Bass.
The last word
BY ARTHUR MILNER

The trivially hip
Is CBC Radio being drawn into a decline of public broadcasting?

Someday, 20 years ago, a number of us in Ottawa formed a committee to defend the CBC, then “under attack” by the Mulroney Tories. We soon realized that it wasn’t the CBC as a whole we wanted to save: it was CBC Radio. Of course, we supported CBC television, because we believed in public broadcasting. The problem was that CBC Television was public broadcasting in theory. CBC Radio, on the other hand, was public broadcasting in practice.

At a public meeting some months later, a few labour activists argued that our committee should defend CBC radio and television equally. Their motion passed easily, but people stopped coming to the meetings.

In those days, I lived in a four-room apartment, and most of the time a radio was tuned to CBC AM, as it was called, in each room, so that as I wandered about I was rarely without the CBC. Some shows were dull, but even these formed a pleasant background to my day. The odd one — Basic Black, for example — I found irritating enough to turn off. But there were a great many shows that I found reliably worthwhile: Sunday Morning, Peter Gzowski’s various morning shows, Ideas, Quirks and Quarks, The House, This Native Land. I bought a cassette recorder that I could preset to record shows I didn’t want to miss. And every night I went to sleep comforted by my set to record shows I didn’t want to miss. And every night I went to sleep comforted by my citizens in Vacuum Land.

In those days, no doubt I watched CBC television, but who pays attention to which TV channel you’re watching? I was a strong supporter of CBC Television drama, but again, in theory. With a few notable exceptions — early Street Legal and This Hour Has 22 Minutes, and, more recently, This Is Wonderland — I didn’t actually watch the stuff. I have no doubt that CBC Television’s news and current affairs programming was better than the competition’s, but it couldn’t hold a candle to CBC Radio news. Television news is just too slow. Endowed with visual capability, television news has to use it, but pictures take up valuable time and one battle scene looks pretty much like another (the attack on the World Trade Towers being a notable exception). Train crashes always make for better visuals than political analysis.

The most serious accusation one can make about a television current affairs show is that there are too many talking heads. But that’s exactly what radio is.

Things have changed now. I try to listen to The Current and As It Happens, but the list of annoying shows has mushroomed so that most of the time I prefer silence. Shelagh Rogers Sounds Like Canada, or “Death and Recipes” as my friends call it, features interviews about what it feels like to find out you have cancer. Then there’s Vinyl Café with Stuart McLean, rock star for seniors.

But that kind of banal sentimentality is on its way out. Ascendant is the trivially hip: all that talk about the wired universe; a weekly half-hour show devoted to the kumquat in contemporary cuisine; documentaries on potentially interesting subjects so overproduced you think you were listening to a technopop rock video; and Out Front, where amateurs are encouraged to explore the use of sound effects as they tell stories of interest only to close relatives. Finally, there’s the violence. Violent crime is, according to statistics, not increasing. But you’d never know it from local CBC programming, which, besides its endless chatting, seems committed to reporting every accidental or criminal death within 500 kilometres.

Google “CBC mandate” and you will find that it’s filled with admonitions about how the CBC should do things: be Canadian, be in English and French, connect the regions, reflect Canada’s multicultural and multiracial nature. But there’s little about what it should do, except at the top: inform, enlighten (as in The Enlightenment?) and entertain; and, further down, promote cultural expression. Clearly the CBC is living up to its mandate. But what kind of informing is going on? Well, you can learn a lot about the kumquat. Is that enlightenment? Is that entertainment? If you say so.

Many of us who support public broadcasting believe it contributes to “civic literacy,” to borrow Henry Milner’s phrase. We believe informed discussion is a precondition to successful democracy, and we were loyal to CBC Radio, then, because there was a great deal of informed discussion. The weekly debate between Eric Kiersans, Dalton Camp and Stephen Lewis was the model (although those who complained that it and the CBC in general were too left-wing had a point). CBC radio fulfilled the mission we gave it. Now it doesn’t. The World at Six, The Current, As It Happens, Quirks and Quarks do their best. But that stuff just isn’t hip enough to survive the new CBC. One of The House’s correspondents complained that electoral reform was boring. Compared to what?

What CBC management clearly believes is hip is the new media: Web sites and blogs, YouTube and Wikipedia. Their ubiquity does force us to ask serious questions: What role will radio and television play in the future in this multimedia, million-channel world? Will all the distinct media converge into a few submedia, all delivered by Google? Will YouTube and Wikipedia replace CBC radio? Will it matter?

The future of technology might well make radio, television and newspapers dead or irrelevant. On the other hand, Wikipedia, YouTube and Facebook might turn out to be fads, or at least not harbingers of catalytic change. Either way, why should CBC be out at the vanguard, hastening its own demise?

But it seems determined to do so. Recently, the CBC announced the appointment of John Cruickshank to its “top CBC news post.” According to a CBC spokesperson, Cruickshank’s areas of interest include “the use of multimedia and digital applications,” and the “different ways how news has to transform to serve better and provide a relationship with people” [sic].

Of course the CBC has to change with the times and attract a new audience as the old one dies. But the CBC’s strongest support has come from supporters of traditional public broadcasting — CBC radio listeners — and the CBC is doing its best to send them to U.S. National Public Radio. The future will be rocky. The next time CBC comes under attack, who will come to its defence?

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