

NEWS WAR

SECRETS, SPIN AND THE FUTURE OF THE NEWS



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POST-9/11 SECRETS, CONFIDENTIALITY, CONTROL:
IN A FOUR-PART SPECIAL, FRONTLINE INVESTIGATES
THE FUTURE OF THE NEWS

FRONTLINE presents
NEWS WAR

Tuesdays, February 13, 20, 27, and
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"The battle between the White House and the national media is the battle over who controls the national agenda," commentator Patrick Buchanan tells FRONTLINE. Mark McKinnon, former media adviser to President George W. Bush, agrees: "The Washington press corps for years thought that unless you talked to *The New York Times* and CBS, that you weren't talking to the American public. Well, that's just not the case anymore." McKinnon feels that it is a White House prerogative to choose its own communications strategy: "Presidents ... ought to determine who they want to talk to and when they want to talk to them," he says. But William Safire, author and former *New York Times* political columnist, fears that hostilities between the administration and the press could threaten the media's ability to hold government accountable. "The great check and balance that was built into the Constitution is under challenge," he says. "You've got to have a relationship between the government and the press that's adversarial, but not an enemy."

In more than 80 interviews with key figures in the print, broadcast and electronic media, and with unequaled, behind-the-scenes access to some of today's most important news organizations, FRONTLINE correspondent Lowell Bergman examines the challenges facing the mainstream news media and the media's reaction in *News War*, airing Tuesdays, February 13, 20 and 27, and March 27, 2007, at 9 P.M. ET on PBS (check local listings). In this four-part special, Bergman traces the recent history of American journalism, from the Nixon administration's attacks on the media to the post-Watergate popularity of the press, to new obstacles presented by the war on terror to changing economics in the media business and the Internet.

The topic has special resonance for Bergman, whose career as a journalist for FRONTLINE, *The New York Times*, ABC News and 60 Minutes has included reporting on the issues that are critical to the current controversies. "There has been a perfect storm brewing in the world of news," says Bergman. "Not since the Nixon administration has there been this level of hostility leveled at news organizations. ... [But] unlike the confrontations of 35 or more years ago, today's news war sees the very economic foundations of the business shifting."



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In the first two parts of the series, titled *Secrets, Sources & Spin*, airing Feb. 13 and 20, Bergman talks to the major players in the debates over the role of media in U.S. society. Bergman examines the relationship between the Bush administration and the press, the use of anonymous sources, and the consequences of the Valerie Plame leak investigation.

“This is something the American people should know about,” says *New York Times* reporter James Risen, referring to the controversial story he co-authored on National Security Agency wiretapping. “That’s our role. Our role is not to say ... to the government: ‘Don’t do this.’ Our role is: ‘This is happening; you decide.’” But John McLaughlin, former deputy director of the CIA, feels that Risen’s story hurt U.S. interests. “Today the secrets we want most are probably held by a few dozen people in remote areas, so getting to those secrets is extraordinarily difficult,” he says. “All of these tools in the counterterrorist tool kit are essential, and that tool kit is now diminished.” The wiretapping story received condemnation from the Bush administration—and the Pulitzer Prize.

In part two of *Secrets, Sources & Spin*, on Feb. 20, Bergman interviews journalists facing jail for refusing to reveal their sources. In 2004, while covering the investigation of the Bay Area Laboratory Co-Operative, or BALCO, *San Francisco Chronicle* reporters Mark Fainaru-Wada and Lance Williams made national headlines exposing steroid abuse in professional baseball. Their story included an admission of steroid use by Yankees’ slugger Jason Giambi and raised new questions about San Francisco Giants’ home-run king Barry Bonds’ alleged use of steroids. The reporters’ source was the athletes’ own grand jury testimony—which had been leaked to the *Chronicle*. President Bush praised their stories and commended the reporters for their public service, but in May of 2006, his own Justice Department authorized the issuance of subpoenas which would compel the reporters to appear in court and to identify the source of the leak. To date, the reporters have fought the subpoenas.

“The courts take violations of grand jury secrecy very, very seriously,” says Stephen Bates, a former prosecutor in the Whitewater investigation. “There is very little limit on what a grand jury can subpoena, and therefore, strictly as an issue of personal or corporate privacy, grand jury secrecy is ... very strongly protected.” But Bob Woodward, who reported the Watergate scandal and who has authored three books on the Bush administration, feels there has been a change in approach at the Justice Department. “There has been ... a truce for a good number of decades on this,” Woodward tells FRONTLINE. “I think it is contrary to the public interest to go after reporters this way.”

To see how these conflicts are taking shape in the new digital news landscape, Bergman interviews blogger Josh Wolf, who was jailed for refusing to turn over a videotape of a San Francisco protest to the FBI. According to police, during the protest, some of the protesters tried to set a police car on fire, and federal prosecutors subpoenaed Wolf’s video footage. But Wolf refused. “There was a trust established between people involved in the organization that I was covering and myself into the fact that what I chose to release was what I chose to release,” he says, “and that I wasn’t an investigator for the state.” If Wolf remains in jail for the duration of the grand jury proceedings, it will be the longest term ever served by an American journalist.

William Safire sums up the conflict by comparing the news media's ability to gather information to that of the government. "The government has all kinds of ways to get information. It can eavesdrop. It can wiretap legally. It can offer immunity to criminals. ... What is the essential route to get information by the press? And that is to offer a confidentiality."

In the third part of *News War, What's Happening to the News*, airing Feb. 27, FRONTLINE examines the mounting pressure for profits faced by America's network news divisions and daily newspapers, as well as growing challenges from cable television and the Internet. Bergman talks to network executives, newspaper editors and publishers, bloggers, Wall Street analysts and key players at Google and Yahoo! about the battle for market dominance in a rapidly changing world.

In *What's Happening to the News*, Bergman examines one of the biggest challenges facing the traditional news media: As their core audience grows older, the number of viewers and readers who want their news in a conventional format is shrinking. According to a study by New York University, a majority of Americans under age 25 get their news online or from programs like Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*. "To the extent that people look to us as a source of news," says David Javerbaum, the show's head writer, "that is 100 percent indicative of other people's failure and not our success." While the broadcast news networks still command the largest share of the market, they are losing viewers and advertising revenue to cable.

To stop this slide in ratings, network executives are making changes that have rankled some top news anchors. When ABC executives proposed bringing in *Late Show with David Letterman* from CBS to replace *Nightline* on ABC, host Ted Koppel decided not to renew his contract. "To the extent that we are now judging journalism by the same standards that we apply to entertainment," says Koppel, "that may prove to be one of the greatest tragedies in the history of American journalism."

What's Happening to the News also goes inside the embattled newsroom of the *Los Angeles Times*, one of the few U.S. newspapers still covering major national stories. After his newsroom had already lost hundreds of jobs, managing editor Dean Baquet was told to lay off more reporters by the paper's owner, the Tribune Company. He refused and was fired. "The people who own newspapers ... are beholden to shareholders," Baquet tells FRONTLINE. "They want for the paper to be highly profitable, and sometimes that view of what a newspaper is supposed to be and my view, which is that a newspaper is a public trust, sometimes they come into conflict." Charles Bobrinskoy, vice chairman at top Tribune investor Ariel Capital Management in Chicago, says the *L.A. Times* needs to rethink its mission. "There is a role for probably three national newspapers: *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times* and *USA Today*. Each has its own niche; all three are national newspapers. We don't think there's any demand for a fourth."

An even greater challenge to both newspapers and broadcast networks is the growing power of the Internet as a news distribution platform, pulling consumers and advertisers away from more traditional media. Jeff Fager, executive producer of *60 Minutes*, tells FRONTLINE about CBS's partnership with Yahoo! News. "I know we haven't seen the model for how broadcast journalism is going to end up on the Internet," he says. "But ... it has to go there. It has to. I mean, you don't see anybody between 20 and 30 getting their news from the evening news; you see them getting it online."

But Internet news providers like Yahoo! and Google say that they are not in the business of creating content, relying instead on traditional news-gathering organizations. “We’re in fact critically dependent upon the success of these newspapers,” says Google CEO Eric Schmidt, referring to the *Los Angeles Times* and others. “We don’t write the content. We’re not in the content business. So anything that screws up their economics, that causes them to get rid of reporters, is a really bad thing.”

If not newspapers, who will create content for the Internet news aggregators? Markos Moulitsas writes Daily Kos, one of the country’s most popular blogs, which reportedly receives 3 to 5 million visitors per week. “People want to be part of the media,” Moulitsas tells FRONTLINE. “They don’t want to sit there and listen anymore. They’re too educated. They’re taught ... to be go-getters and not to sit back and be passive consumers. And the traditional media is still predicated on the passive consumer model—you sit there and watch.”

But is this journalism? Former *Los Angeles Times* editor John Carroll worries that without the investigative skills of newspaper reporters, an important element of news gathering may be lost. “I estimate ... that 85 percent of the original reporting that’s done in the United States is done by newspapers. They’re the people who are going out and knocking on doors and rummaging through records and covering events and so on. And most of the other media that provide news to people are really recycling news that’s gathered by newspapers.”

The fourth part of *News War, Stories from a Small Planet*, airing March 27, is produced by FRONTLINE/World and looks at media around the globe to reveal the international forces that influence journalism and politics in the United States. The lead story investigates the new Arab media and its role in both mitigating and exacerbating the clash between the West and Islam. Focusing on Al Jazeera and its impact on the parochial and tightly controlled Arab media, this report explores the network’s growing influence, from Muslim communities in Europe to the pending launch of a new English-language broadcast in the United States.

The *News War* series is a FRONTLINE co-production in association with the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. *Secrets, Sources & Spin* is a FRONTLINE co-production with A Little Rain Productions. The producers are Raney Aronson and Arun Rath, and the director is Raney Aronson. The co-producer is Seth Bomse. *What’s Happening to the News* is a FRONTLINE co-production with Cam Bay Productions and is produced by Stephen Talbot. The FRONTLINE senior producer is Ken Dornstein. The series correspondent is Lowell Bergman. The FRONTLINE/World series executive director is Sharon Tiller.

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Editor's note: "FRONTLINE takes its responsibility to deliver a fair and transparent report about the current state of mainstream media very seriously," says FRONTLINE executive editor Louis Wiley. "In reporting on a subject, which in part is our own business, veteran journalist Lowell Bergman's experience at reporting on highly sensitive topics such as national security, his involvement in public clashes over editorial responsibility, and his personal relationships with many prominent individuals in the media provide perspective and depth to this project."

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