



Who's raking the muck?

Harper's editor Ken Silverstein lays out his brutal vision of modern-day journalism

BY JOANNE ZUHL
STAFF WRITER

Like many people these days, Ken Silverstein has offered up more than a few biting words against America's corporate media. But Silverstein, unlike a lot of armchair press pundits, has the credentials to know intimately the machinations behind the rise and fall of modern media.

As a former investigative reporter for the Los Angeles Times, Silverstein — who also worked for the Associated Press in Brazil — covered the top echelons of political and corporate manipulation and corruption in the United States and abroad. He has investigated the foreign dealings of U.S. oil companies, prompting a federal grand jury and an investigation by the House Ethics Committee.

A few years ago, Silverstein went undercover to see just how far lobbyists would go for their clients, in his case a fake company looking to bolster the image of Turkmenistan. The result is laid out in his book, "Turkmeniscam," in which lobbyists vie for making the oppressive Stalinist regime palatable to the press, politicians and investors.

Today, Ken Silverstein is the Washington D.C. editor for Harper's Magazine and writes Washington Babylon for Harper's online. He is an ardent observer of the newspaper industry and the state of investigative journalism today, which is where we began our conversation.

Ken Silverstein: First of all, I want to say that there is excellent investigative journalism taking place today in the mainstream press. Because I think frequently there's too much criticism. It's ironic that often you go to blogs of both the left and right complaining so much about the mainstream press, and yet they're linking almost exclusively to mainstream news items. That said, there is great reporting taking place and I think every day you can find it, but it's not nearly as vibrant as it should be or used to be.

Of course, newspapers and the media in general are in crisis. Everybody is losing money. Nobody can figure out how to make money. Investigative reporting is very expensive and so it's the easiest thing to cut.

I used to work at the L.A. Times, which, of course, has been decimated. I would be able to spend my time pretty freely on investigative reporting. I was on the investigative unit in D.C. and I remember once finding a very good story that involved traveling to Sudan. Well, I went to my boss and I didn't even have to write her a memo. I laid out the story in a minute, and she said just start planning your trip. That's becoming less and less frequent because there's just not that much money and everybody's cutting back.

Secondly, I do think the press is becoming worse. The Washington press corps in particular is far too close to the

people it is supposed to be covering. And you have a very cozy situation where everybody knows each other — members of Congress and the lobbyists and the public relations consultants and journalists. And I think it's taken a lot of the bite out of journalism. I don't want to be romantic, because newspapers have always been pretty much a vehicle of propagating elite opinion. There's no question that that's always been the role of the newspaper. But even so, there's been terrific hard-edge reporting from the beginning of the American newspaper industry.

J.Z.: But there was a time when that kind of investigative reporting was a sell. You look at Woodward and Bernstein, Pentagon Papers, even Iran/Contra, those issues and those stories and the investment in the reporting made those newspapers valuable and sought-after.

K.S.: I think you're right, and even now investigative reporting can be a sell. You still win prizes for investigative reporting, which newspapers covet. They love the Pulitzer and other assorted prizes, which is another long story and sort of a racket in itself. But still, there's a lot of cachet to good investigative reporting still. It's just that as newspapers become more and more squeezed for money, it's the easiest thing to

*"A journalist is a grumbler, a censurer, a giver of advice, a regent of sovereigns, a tutor of nations. Four hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets."
— Napoleon Bonaparte*

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