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NEWS: Protecting sources means protecting the public

Ed. note: Reporters must do a lot of digging in an effort to keep the public informed. Oftentimes, neither public nor private entities want publicity about certain activities. Big businesses often sue whistleblowers. Governments have even more clout and reporters must sometimes be willing to go to jail in order to protect their sources. Without people willing to keep the public informed, governments may hide information simply to protect the people involved, not in order to protect the nation. This column explains why a "shield" law is needed.

By Kevin Z. Smith
President, Society of Professional Journalists

During the course of its investigation into the current Gulf of Mexico oil spill, The Associated Press was given information from the then-office of Mineral Management Services that was not making a lot of sense.

As millions of gallons of crude spewed into the gulf waters and the oversight by MMS officials on BP's well was being called into question, an anonymous source in that office told reporters far different stories than what they had been initially told. This anonymous source set the record straight by coming forward and speaking out, and suddenly the world knew that this was more than a mechanical failure; it was a full system failure. The people hired to keep these events from occurring were ignoring their responsibilities.

At times, anonymous sources provide crucial information to the press. Stories of oil disasters may be the latest, but without citizens coming forward and sharing vital information, Americans would not know about steroids in sports, excessive military spending, or food and drug hazards. We would never have been told about Watergate.

A bill currently in the U.S. Senate will help assure such stories continue to reach the public. S. 448, The Free Flow of Information Act, will protect the sources on whom journalists rely from having their identities exposed in all but a few circumstances including where national security concerns are raised. Five years in the making, the current version of this bill is supported by more than 50 journalism organizations, the White House, the Justice Department and most of your Congressional delegation.

Most states have laws that can protect a source's identity from overzealous prosecutors and judges, but there is no such protection yet at the federal level. S. 448 would change that and extend the same protections offered through statute or common law in 49 states to the national government. Without it, stories focusing on the federal government will not be told because reporters are faced with threats of jail time and fines if they do not turn on their sources.

Subpoenas against the press numbered more than 3,000 nationwide in 2006 with 335 issued by federal prosecutors seeking the identities of news sources, according to a survey conducted by a Brigham Young University law professor. More than a few journalists have spent time in jail, and some have been forced out of the profession all together by heavy fines that crippled them financially. These are all heavy-handed tactics to illicit the names of

people who can then be identified and retaliated against. Media companies large and small faced with the enormous expenses of fighting such legal battles to protect sources are turning their backs on compelling stories.

As S. 448 awaits permission from key senate leadership to come to the floor for a full vote, all senators, representing the interests of American citizens, need to hear from their constituents. Citizens who value the importance of transparency in governance and think the American press needs to continue to serve as the watchdog on the federal government should tell their senators to support this measure.

The clock is ticking as Congress will recess in August. Tell your senator to have the bill moved to a full Senate vote as soon as possible and support its passage.

Without this bill, stories that affect lives, like the oil spill in the Gulf, will never get the detailed attention they need to bring about change. Without this bill, your government has a better chance of operating in darkness or lying its way out of trouble. Help bring this to an end by voicing support for S. 448.

Only when there is a free flow of information from the government to its people can we truly appreciate the beauty and power of a democracy.

Kevin Z. Smith is the 2009-2010 national president of the Society of Professional Journalists. Reach him at ksmith@spj.org. For more on SPJ's work to improve and protect journalism, see www.spj.org.

Letters

Well-deserved thanks to another volunteer

To the Editor:

On the 4th of July opening of the "Squeaky Wheels" skate park, the Vernonia Lions Club overlooked thanking one of the most helpful and important people of the building project.

The Lions Club would like to give a big "Thank You!!" to Tom Ramsey. Thanks for all your hard work, effort and long hours that you put into the proj-

ect. It is very much appreciated.

George Tice
Vernonia Lions Club

Policy on Letters

The INDEPENDENT will not publish letters with personal attacks on private citizens. Preference will be given to brief letters, 300 words or less.

All letters must be signed and include a verifiable address or phone number.

Ike Says

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refuges. Stream temperatures, as many of us have feared, are indeed limiting the production of salmonids in the Nehalem River water shed.

It is purely a fluke of nature that we will be able to see extremes of both high and low stream temperatures in back-to-back years (last year, stream temperatures exceeded 80 degrees locally). The evidence will be compelling regarding what is needed in the Nehalem basin if we are to expand salmonid production and the resulting fisheries.

Many of you have probably noticed the northwest winds that have been blowing in July,

this also is adding to the good fortunes of the salmon that are in the ocean or about to enter it as smolts. Reports are that there is a good supply of bait-fish and the adult salmon are big and fat.

Hope everybody has a safe and fun Jamboree. Don't forget to bring the kids down to the fishing derby at Lake Vernonia on Friday the 6th. Registration is 4-5 pm and fishing is between 5-6 pm. Lots of prizes too!

Izaak Walton League, Nehalem Valley Chapter

meets monthly on the 3rd Thursday at 7:00 p.m. Call 503-429-7193 for location.

We are not afraid to entrust the American people with unpleasant facts, foreign ideas, alien philosophies, and competitive values. For a nation that is afraid to let its people judge the truth and falsehood in an open market is a nation that is afraid of its people.

— John F. Kennedy

In any event, the proper question isn't what a journalist thinks is relevant but what his or her audience thinks is relevant. Denying people information they would find useful because you think they shouldn't find it useful is censorship, not journalism.

— Michael Kinsley