INVESTIGATING AT THE WASHINGTON POST

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Chapter One: When I grow up, I want to be...

When I came to the Missouri School of Journalism, I had only the vaguest notion of where journalism would take me. I knew that I had an affinity for longer-form journalism, but that was the extent of my plan. Little did I know what was in store for me as to that point I had only written a few small features for a bureau of the Roanoke Times. I think that every course I’ve taken at the University of Missouri has had some impact in shaping my view of journalism, but there are three classes that I think have truly influenced my career choices and prepared me to do the project I will describe below.

The first course that prepared me for my project was the Controls of Information class with Charles Davis. In the class, I learned the ins and outs of First Amendment law and how to use federal, state and local sunshine laws to acquire the information needed to write stories in the public interest. With a big, semester-long reporting project, I was also able to utilize my programming skills to build an interactive using Python and JavaScript, something I had not previously been able to do in any other class.

Another course that has proven beneficial to my project was the Computer-Assisted Reporting (CAR) course with David Herzog. In the class, I learned how to properly mine data for stories as well as where to find data that I might need to give my stories more depth. With that knowledge, I am now able to take large datasets and extract some meaning quickly and communicate it to an audience.

The final course that has prepared me for the rigors of this project was my Quantitative Research Methods class with Maria Len-Rios. The class prepared me in ways beyond the research component of this project. It taught me how to find significance in data points and how to properly find correlation within a set of data.
While the CAR class helped me to find stories in data, this class went a step beyond and helped me to learn how to ensure that any findings from data analysis are significant.

The skills that I acquired from these classes, as well as many other classes, have pointed me in the direction of being an investigative data reporter. My experiences to date include doing research for investigative reporter Ian Urbina at the New York Times and performing database editing at USA TODAY. Ideally, my future career lies somewhere in between, allowing me to do long-form investigative pieces with a data-driven plotline, something that many journalists do not have the skills to do themselves. Ideally, I hope to end up at a major national publication, but I acknowledge that it may take some time to get there.

This project, which will be performed on the investigations team at the Washington Post in Washington, D.C., will help me show that my skills are viable in a competitive atmosphere and that I provide a set of skills that editors will create positions for, even when the budget is tight. I’m not saying this project will make me the next Nate Silver, but I think that my skill set is rather unique and this project will help illustrate that.
Chapter Two: Working at the Washington Post

Weeks 1+2 (January 7-22)

On January 7, 2013, I began my time as the first reporting intern ever to work in the Washington Post's investigative unit. This is certainly a daunting task with their outstanding reputation, but I can't say that I wasn't thrilled at the opportunity to show them what I can do. Though my primary boss is Jeff Leen, I have more day-to-day interaction with the reporters I work with, mainly Debbie Cenziper and Mike Sallah.

This is going to be a shorter weekly report, as I intend to get started on my professional research this week and we have yet to begin the weekly seminars. That being said, I'd like to address the professional challenges I encountered over the last two weeks, and how I overcame them.

The biggest challenge I encountered was actually a sickness that swept its way through the office last week. I managed to avoid it (knock on wood), but I was left on my own for the better part of last week by both my editor and most of the reporters I work with on projects. I'm a guy that likes structure, so it was a little tough to handle at first, but I decided to create a schedule of things I should get done and that helped a ton. My skills are also very useful to the team. When asked how we could compile data from a secure website where each individual entry would be on a different page, I volunteered to create a web-scraper and scraped over 100,000 pages for data that will help greatly improve on of our projects.

An area that I struggled in slightly is still one of my weaknesses in journalism in general: talking to strangers. I won't get into the long and boring psychological issues I have to overcome, but suffice it to say the best remedy has basically been forcing myself
to talk to strangers. I'm certainly nowhere near the best at it, but I think I'm making strides to greatly improve. That's it and that's all. I'm looking forward to what promises to be another interesting week here in our nation's capitol.

*Week 3 (January 21-25)*

My third week in Washington was an interesting one, to say the least. My schedule was as weird as it could be. On Monday, I had off to watch the second inauguration of our nation's first black president. On Tuesday and Friday, I attended Missouri seminars and only actually worked at the Post for Wednesday and Thursday.

Professional challenges were few this week as I only had two days in work. The two days that I was in, however, seemed to be full of triumphs and successes. Swedish investigative journalists came and visited our outfit this week (for what reason, I'm not exactly sure) and in my introductions to these folks, my boss and fellow reporters introduced me in ways that highlighted my data skills as being “advanced despite my young age.” This is encouraging to hear from people I hope to work with as long as possible, if you catch my drift.

My other success on the week was starting a weekly web scraping class with Kimbriell Kelly, an investigative reporter I've started working with on a project with and the former editor and publisher at the Chicago Reporter. It provides me the opportunity to help make an already outstanding team better by helping other reporters gain some of the skills I already possess.

As far as my research project is concerned, I sent out emails to potential interview participants and am awaiting replies so I can (hopefully) schedule these out sooner than later. I'll let you know next week what kind of replies I receive.
Finally, this week focused a lot on the actual seminar, seeing as we had two full days this week rather than the standard one. A lot was sort of a reporting refresher, as I had expected, but I did learn a bunch this week that will undoubtedly help me here in Washington and well into the future. Given the word limit on this report, I'll limit myself to telling you the three biggest things I learned in seminar this week:

1. **Being a student journalist in Washington, DC, is something to use to one's advantage.** Learned from the new president of the National Press Club and Missouri graduate Angela Keane, this is unconventional wisdom. She told us that being a student allows us to email those we admire in the field and ask to pick their brain. Something I will definitely use to my advantage.

2. **There are more shades of interview than just “on-the-record” and “off-the-record.”** Maybe I'm just new to reporting, but I had never heard of “background” and “deep background.” Regardless, knowing those two terms will help immensely for my investigative reporting.

3. **There were more mistakes in that Chicago Tribune with the “Dewey Defeats Truman” headline.** The trip to the Newseum was a pretty awesome glimpse into the history of our profession. At the least, we saw that part of a paragraph in that story was printed upside down. Our tour guide was informational as well.

*Week 4 (January 28-February 1)*

It was another interesting week for Steven here in our nation’s capitol. The first two days of this past week were amazing and the last three days, plus the weekend and Monday were miserable. I came down with a nasty case of Pharyngitis that required me to check myself into the Emergency Room one night with a fever of 102 degrees. Though
I’m sure he didn’t put it into his weekly report, I’d like to greatly thank and commend Kip Hill in this report for accompanying me to and from the hospital, despite the fact that he was still reporting at that hour.

Getting back to the beginning of the week, I made quite a splash at work, and in a good way (to some). The two guys that handle data for the entirety of the newsroom can often be spread quite thin and not get done data work at the pace that everyone wants it done. When one of the data guys told my team of reporters that he could get the work we wanted done in about two weeks, I was asked directly by my reporters how quickly I could get it done. When I told them it would be done the next day, they were flabbergasted. They got a blessing from Jeff Leen and I went on my merry way scraping and analyzing hundreds of thousands of documents. When I finished it the next day, everyone was ecstatic and I felt on top of the world. It was a great couple days in the newsroom last week before I got sick.

In spite of getting sick, I still attended the weekly seminar where we spoke with both the director of communications for Claire McCaskill and John Cochran, a longtime broadcaster at several major networks. Both had fascinating “war stories” that I wish everyone could hear and I was glad to have gotten the opportunity to listen to them speak, even if I couldn’t ask any questions due to the nature of my illness. Alas, if you all don’t mind, I’m going to head back for more rest so I can get back to work as soon as possible.

Week 5 (February 4-9)

I was out sick the entire week and thus no work was done.
Week 6 (February 11-15)

This report is my first in two weeks, largely because the week of Feb. 4-8, I was out the entire week with Pharyngitis and so my report would have been one sentence saying such. As for my first week back after illness, it was a busy one.

This week was largely a data sprint to catch up on all of the analysis I’d not been able to do while I was at home sick. The vast majority of my work was on my main project with Debbie Cenziper and Mike Sallah. I’ve been collecting data throughout the project using web scraping, Freedom of Information requests and the good, old-fashioned method of just asking someone for it. Part of the difficulty in the analysis process of this project is how dirty the data is. I’ve been using all the resources at my disposal to clean the data as best I can, but with any large dataset, this can often be an arduous but necessary project to get the analysis right. I also started up my weekly scraper session with Kimbrell Kelly again, which was a nice return to normalcy for the two of us.

This week also saw Barbara Cochran come in to speak to my boss, Jeff Leen, for a “progress report” of sorts to discuss how I’ve done in my internship. Jeff invited Debbie and Mike in to lend perspective to the conversation and the outcome was very positive. The reporters have taken a shining to the work I’ve been doing for them and seem to be advocating for my hiring at the Post when my internship is complete. You won’t find me complaining about this revelation. If I haven’t made it clear, working in this newsroom on this team is, unequivocally, my dream job.

In this week’s seminar, we spoke to two men: Mike McCurry, former White House Press Secretary during the Clinton administration, and Tom Korologos, a former
U.S. ambassador to Belgium and current lobbyist. Both the chats were very different but for one common strain: both men argued that what they were doing was not “bad.” McCurry argued that press secretaries do the same job as journalists, collecting and disseminating verified information, which was a revelation to me. I always assumed that press secretaries were in the pocket of the president, but from McCurry’s testimony, it just seems like they’re privy to more information and it’s their jobs to tell journalists what they can verify. Korologos argued that lobbyists were just following the first amendment with the freedom to petition the government for a redress of grievances. It’s an interesting argument, but I wasn’t sure that he understood the true rationale for disdain that people have for lobbyists. It’s a question, in hindsight, I would have liked to have asked.

Finally, steam is finally picking up under my project as folks get back to me and I schedule interviews. I have two of my heavy hitters, Bill Allison and Sheila Krumholz scheduled for the coming weeks, which should serve as a nice base for the project.

Week 7 (February 18-22)

The past week was an interesting one for a few reasons that I’ll get to later, but more importantly, this past week was a very productive one at the Post. While my main focus has been, and will continue to be, on the project with Mike Sallah and Debbie Cenziper, I’ve begun work on a faster-turn project with Kimbriell Kelly which is exciting for one main reason: we’re not reporting on something that is currently a huge problem; we’re working on something that will be a huge problem for people five or ten years from now. While I cannot divulge specifics yet, it’s a story that if we break it will spawn countless follow-up stories by our outlet and others.
This week was full of successes on the main project too, though. For the first time, I’ve been asked to assist with the reporting process (though we’re currently working more on crafting a memo than the story). I’ve been making calls to folks to help not only inform our reporting but enhance my data analysis by finding trends to look for through my interviewees direct knowledge of the story. So amongst the data analysis I’ve been doing for weeks, I’m getting to mix it up, which is a lot of fun.

I did, however, run into a bit of a wall with a scraper I’m working on for Kimbriell. The scraper involves going into a court’s website and going through a lot of cases seemingly without the ability to search by anything but name. The problem is, we want to scrape the site for names we don’t know yet. So I’m trying to figure out some sort of work around and am having difficulties. I’m working with a few folks outside the Post to figure out how I’d do it, but the trick is not showing my hand. I’ll get it eventually, but it’s just frustrating right now.

Not much to report on the weekly seminar front as I was unable to attend due to obligations elsewhere. However, my project is picking up some steam as I finally had my first interview, with David Donald at the Center for Public Integrity. He provided insight into my research from a data perspective and really helped to solidify my questions for other interviews as well as provide new avenues of discussion with future interview subjects. In that way, he was the best first interview I could have expected.

The reason this past week was exciting, and this stays private for now, is that I sat down with Jeff Leen last Thursday who told me of his intention to keep me on for the summer as a paid intern and hopefully, should all go well, hire me at the end of it. I couldn’t be happier. Now it’s time to gear up for another fun week in Washington.
Week 9 (March 4-8)

Every week I go to work and I ask myself how, if it’s even possible, this week could be any better than last week. Every week I get my answer.

The past week was full of a ton of data analysis on data that had finally begun pouring in from any number of open records requests we had for our story. We still have a bunch more open so I’m sure the coming weeks will be chock full of exciting data analysis that will help shape our series.

The most exciting thing that happened this week, however, was not any analysis surrounding new data, but with long-running analysis with some of the core data with this project. Without getting too much into specifics, the project largely focuses on people taking advantage of dumb laws and the government not doing its job to prevent these folks from doing bad things. Not exactly a new template for investigative reporting. However, my analysis has led us to believe that we’ve found undocumented violations of the Sherman Antitrust Act going on for years in the district. Without this information, the series will still be a compelling one. The amount of dirt we have on the city as well as folks involved just seems to keep piling up.

Better yet, I proved that some of these violations happened in cities like Baltimore where our actors had been previously convicted of the exact same thing only a year before. My findings add another dimension to the story we were never sure we could get and for one day I felt like an equal to the investigative reporters around me as they heaped praise on me for what I’d found. It was a feeling I hope to have more and more as I continue in this position through at least the summer. That’s right: I’ll be working in DC
this summer at both the Post and News21, sharing my time between the two, pleasing both Len Downie and Jeff Leen, which is a win-win scenario in my book.

With no seminar this week, I had a little extra time to focus on my research, which has taken off a bunch in recent weeks. I finally got the opportunity to sit down with Sheila Krumholz from the Center for Responsive Politics. She provided a lot of deep insight into my project from a non-journalist’s perspective, one that is very needed in this project. We had a candid conversation on what she does and the limitations. We also discussed what journalists could do to improve reporting of campaign finance. The interview helped me shape large chunks of my writing and will be a good groundwork for future interviews.

This week will be very fun with a Freedom of Information Day at the Newseum and I can’t wait to see what’s in store.

Week 10 (March 11-15)

Another exciting week is in the books as the semester rolls through the halfway point. My time gets more filled as the weeks drone on, with News21 work starting to pick up and the writing and reporting of my research coming to a head.

That being said, it’s not too much for me to handle (though a reprieve would certainly be welcome). At the Post this week, the data analysis started to slow down. It’s slowed down not because there’s not plenty to do, but more because my other skills are beginning to be required. Not only have I been told that I’ll receive bylines on all main pieces of our three-part series, but I’ve also been asked to be the lead reporter on at least one of our sidebar stories, the biggest one we’ve got outside the main stories. Needless to say, I’m excited.
The work that I’ll do for this story will include plenty of data analysis, but it will also provide me the opportunity to get out of the office and get my hands dirty. This will include trips to various courts to dig out cases, finding victims and interviewing them, among other things. It will definitely allow me to put my investigative skills to the test and show the folks around here the breadth of my skillset.

For News21, I met with Len Downie and discussed my FOIA efforts for our veterans project. Things are going well there, but I figured that would be a nice segue into our seminar for the week, which was a trip to the Newseum for their Freedom of Information day program which featured panels of government workers, lawyers and journalists talking about various FOIA experiences as well as the future of transparency in government. The slate was fairly interesting and I feel like I learned a lot about Federal FOIA, something I haven’t dealt much with being mostly a local reporter and not a national one until recently. Though the question and answer sessions turned more into lectures from the audience on random things and pitches for commercial software, it was still a fun and informative time.

My project is advancing nicely, as I have started to draft my paper. Though I’ve not talked to everyone I hope to just yet, I feel I have enough to begin writing and leave spaces that match the expertise of my future interview subjects. I hope to have a draft finished before the end of the month, which is an encouraging step for me as I felt I started a bit slow this semester due to my illness and I’m finally back on track.

That’s it and that’s all from our nation’s capitol. We’re visiting the Supreme Court this week, right before their hearing of arguments on California’s Proposition 8, which should prove to be very, very interesting.
Week 11 (March 18-22)

As the semester speeds toward its inevitable conclusion, I must admit to feelings of both happiness and dread. While finishing my Master's degree is a top priority, my work at the Post has really consumed me. This is a good thing, because I find myself involved in a deep investigative project, but it has admittedly left little time for my professional project. Luckily, I have friends who've been good motivators, but more on that in a bit.

This week at work was chock full of traditional investigative reporting. I talked to sources on the phone and in person. I went to the courthouse in an attempt to pull documents and evidence submitted in a variety of cases pertaining to the subject matter. I filed requests for documents and other matters and got documents from other requests. It was a very productive week at work in this way. While I felt like a true shoe-leather journalist this week, I still performed a lot of data analysis, which is getting more sophisticated as the project wears on. I have to say, the limits of my knowledge were tested this week, but not with my analysis skills. Instead, attempting to get my office phone to do a four-way conference call slipped me up. As one of my fellow reporters said, “if the first thing to stump you at the Post in three months is the telephone, you're doing a pretty good job.” It made me feel pretty good about myself. As for that pesky phone, I got it figured out and am unfortunately now the guy in charge of starting all conference calls. I suppose it's nice they trust me with things, but it finally feels like I'm an intern, but only in this regard I suppose.

As for this week's seminar, we did the most touristy thing we've done all semester and visited the Supreme Court. That being said, it was neat to sit in our nation's highest
court and learn about the Supreme Court and how the public information office works with journalists in a way not many other PIOs do. Their office actually works to facilitate journalists with most anything they'd need because it's not their jobs to spin what anyone says, but rather to ensure accurate information reaches citizens across the country. It was quite fascinating and not a trip I'll soon forget.

As for my professional project research, it's coming along well. I have what I imagine will be the last of my interviews this week and should have a draft completed by this time two weeks from now. Thanks to Alexandria Baca, I now have a library card for the Library of Congress, where the two of us shall write up our research, serving as each other's motivators. It's probably a better deal for me, but don't tell her I said that. I'm finally excited to get to writing so I can get my Master's in a little over a month. Boy has time flown this semester.

**Week 12 (March 25-29)**

I’ve given this a lot of thought and I’m dropping out of Mizzou. Instead, I’m going to use my true talents and join the circus. OK, with that April Fools’ buffoonery behind me, allow me to tell you that it was another very good and productive week.

After spending the weekend at home with my family for Passover festivities, I came back and was immediately put to work, going to the DC Office of Tax and Revenue after getting off my train to go listen to some cassette tapes. It was an interesting experience as it was me and one other reporter listening to tapes with five officials from the office. It’s clear that we’ve gotten under their skin as I was told that they’d only answer questions pertaining to the tapes and nothing else. What’s unclear is if they realize
the depth with which we’re reporting on issues. Either way, it was kind of neat to see people freaked out that we may report on their numerous mistakes.

Other than that, I’ve begun to go headlong into another story with a reporter on the team that should be published before I graduate (but probably not before I defend) on an interesting topic that no one has reported on yet that will be a huge issue up the line. It’s like a trend before a trend and it’s a huge problem because it may affect people in five years for things they’ve already done now. It’s an important story to tell and it’s my job to find the data. I’m excited to get into it deeper.

Because this was spring break for the University of Missouri, no seminar was held and so there’s nothing to report on the issue. This week was, however, very productive for my professional project. Not only did I have interviews with both Ed Bender of the National Institute on Money in State Politics as well as Bill Allison at the Sunlight Foundation (who sort of informally inquired if I’d like to work there), but I scheduled the last two interviews for the middle of this week. I’m thinking of taking a day or two off this week, and focusing on finishing a draft of the research as well as formatting the rest of the project, especially because my weekends tend to be entirely unproductive as I try to take in the full District of Columbia experience.

That’s it and that’s all. I’m hoping that this time next week I’ll have a rough draft (emphasis on the rough) of the research component that I can begin to mold into what will be defended in less than a month. Have a great week, y’all!

Week 13 (April 1-5)

I usually try to keep things pretty light in these weekly reports, but I must say that the sheer amount of work this past week, from the Post to News21 to thesis work, seemed
to pile on me so high and really burnt me out quickly. After a weekend of mostly relaxing and clearing my mind, I’m geared up to tackle the challenges in the coming weeks.

The big excitement of the week came on Thursday when I ventured up to Baltimore for some field reporting. I got an opportunity to see what happens when bad people foreclose on homes of the poor in bad neighborhoods, with many homes I looked at in no condition for anyone to live in. There were collapsed roofs, broken windows with curtains blowing outside and much worse. It was an interesting experience. It also gave me the chance to sit down with a Baltimore attorney and talk about illegal activities that he saw first-hand. We also discussed the possibility of those illegal activities continuing into the present day and various analyses I’ve done looking at just that. It was great for our reporting and will prove to be central to one of our stories on Sherman Antitrust violations.

Last week, I also got a web scraper working for the other story I’m working on with Kimbriell Kelly. It’s allowed me to pull in data from every county in Maryland on an issue that no one, including analysts at the state level, even knows about or have the capabilities of compiling themselves. The story will break a lot of ground and the data is critical toward proving that the phenomenon is happening right under everyone’s noses.

For the class seminar this week, we met with two media lawyers. Admittedly, I went in thinking that it would be a bit boring and sort of the basics from a communication law class. I was not looking forward to it. After about two hours with these two lawyers, I came out feeling like I wish it went twice as long. We talked about practical applications of laws that affect journalists and I got to ask my nerdy questions about the rights of someone who “hacks” sites; something I do frequently. While I don’t hack maliciously or
for private information, the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act has been used to prosecute people doing things similar to what I do. It was great and I hope the groups in future semesters keep getting this seminar.

On the project front, things are going well. I took Tuesday off and went over to the Library of Congress for some solitude to write up my research. I’m happy to report that my draft is almost finished and will be done this week for Charles to look at and tear apart. I’ll be happy to have it done.

*Week 14 (April 8-12)*

As the semester comes to a climax, my productivity has been soaring. Of course, now that I type this, it’s probably going down the toilet. Anywho, this last week was one of my most productive on record between my two jobs and my research.

At the Post, I dove headlong into data entry for the secondary project I’m working on with investigative reporter Kimbriell Kelly. I scraped as much as was humanly possible from the data, but due to inconsistencies in how the data was compiled, I had to input hundreds of records by hand. It was very tedious, to say the least, and there are still a couple hundred records that still need to be entered. While the tedium is overwhelming at times, I know that the final product will be a database that no one has ever compiled, including at the government level. The data won’t be as complete as we’d hoped, but the incompleteness helps us make the point that the data that exists is wholly inadequate.

Also at the Post, we started writing a draft of the major stories I’ve been mainly focused on throughout the semester. Even though the stories are probably still about three or four months away from being publication ready, it’s kind of exciting to see how we’re beginning to shape main stories and sidebars after several months of just pure research.
and reporting. Now that we feel that we truly have our arms around the majority of the issues, it’s apparently time to write. I’m OK with this.

Also, another investigative reporter, Scott Higham, and I were invited to test out a revolutionary new public data tool that, while still being improved upon, holds unimaginable potential for the journalism world. Though confidential until an announcement is made, I feel honored to be a tester for a product that I think could be as pervasive in major newsrooms as Google Search.

This past week’s seminar was less of a seminar and more of a symposium. It was the Hurley Symposium, in fact, where we learned a lot about how social media shaped the 2012 election. Speakers came from all over (though mostly from Missouri) and I learned a lot.

As for my project research, I am happy that this past week I completed a draft of my research and sent it to my project chair, Charles Davis, who just sent me back a first round of edits. I’m so close to done, I can taste it.

Today’s been an odd day in the newsroom between Pulitzer announcements (5 finalists and one winner here at the Post) and the explosions at the Boston Marathon. I’m going to get back to chipping in where I can.

*Week 15 (April 15-19)*

To say that this past week was a crazy week would do a disservice to the word crazy. Crazy would want no part of last week. It was beyond insane in a lot of respects that I don't need to get too in depth about.

The one piece of awesome that happened this past week involved the data tool I'm beta testing for the Post. For the most part, we saw this tool having a lot of utility in day-
to-day reporting and being able to pull data quickly for breaking news. It wasn't until the fertilizer plant explosion in West, Texas that we found out just how great it could be. Shortly after the explosion, everyone was scrambling in the newsroom to find out about the plant that exploded. Being quite a distance from Texas, it was going to be hard. However, a cursory search using the data tool yielded an EPA violation because the plant “Failed to implement the Risk Management Plan.” The Post broke it because I found it and I felt pretty proud about that.

On the investigative front, I dedicated a lot of my week to procuring and adding data for Kimbriell Kelly's project. In that regard it was a fairly successful week. The hardest part was identifying missing data because we had no idea how to find what was missing. Then, a conversation about how a lawyer I talked to for the other stories with Debbie Cenziper and Mike Sallah showed up in this data too, we used him to backtrack and find a bunch of data from areas that we hadn't been able to find. All in all, it was a good week for that project.

In the other project, the writing process has begun. In what will likely be a month-long process, we're compiling the stories as we think they'll be written and are trying to identify the areas that need more research or more analysis. I feel that I'm learning a lot about the writing process for investigative series and it's pretty neat. We also had a big meeting with staff from all over the organization to discuss the project. The exciting news is that we're getting innovative and taking the New York Times “Snowfall” model and building a super interactive investigative project. I'm very excited for it, to say the least.
At the seminar, we talked with a pollster. It was an interesting conversation, but I thought it would have been a lot better if it hadn't been restricted to an hour. We only got so much, and I know he's busy, but I wanted to get deeper into his profession.

On the professional project front, I'm happy to say that it's basically done but for the formatting. I'm excited to defend it in a week and a little bit nervous. Look for the final copy either today or tomorrow. I'm excited for you all to see it!
Chapter Three: A Symbiotic Relationship or How I learned a lot and taught some things, too

When I started my internship at the Washington Post, I had no idea what I should expect. Not only was it to be a new experience for me, but a new experience for my editor as well. The Investigative Unit at the Post has a long tradition of excellence but had never before taken an intern to have an active role in reporting. In my first meeting with my editor, Jeff Leen, I was warned that this would be the scenario and that bylines would be anything but guaranteed.

While I have yet to get a byline during my internship (yet), I have learned more than I ever imagined, thanks to my editor and the many knowledgeable reporters I had the pleasure of working with. The beauty of the internship was that while I picked up my share of skills from those I worked with, I was also presented with the opportunity to teach them a little as well.

My intentions going into this project were threefold. I wanted an opportunity to work on investigative projects at the Washington Post and leave my mark on investigative projects that are written primarily to expose and correct the wrongdoings and negligence of government entities. I wanted to see how the skills I'd acquired through classes at the University of Missouri and previous internships would stack up on one of the top investigative teams in the country, if not the world. Finally, I wanted to take the opportunity to function like a sponge and soak up all the knowledge that members of the team had to offer so I could become a better journalist. My goals, while admittedly lofty, were within reason and I think I went a long way to achieving them. That's not to say there weren't a few bumps in the road.
From the first day I arrived, I was presented with the opportunity to report and write public interest journalism. Jeff Leen immediately hooked me up with Debbie Cenziper and Mike Sallah, reporters on the investigative team who had just begun the research and reporting on their next big project. The pair each have a pair of Pulitzer Prizes for previous investigative work, so it was an honor to get to do work alongside such accomplished journalists. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a bit awestruck for the better part of my first week.

Once the awe wore off, I got to work. My attitude with every job I've ever had has been to be somewhat of a yes-man. It wasn't that I'd always agree with reporters and editors on how to do something, but I would always agree to do everything that was asked of me. This sometimes gets me in trouble, especially when I don't know how to do something or I overbook my schedule to the point that I have to work longer hours or weekends to meet deadlines. This does a number on my social life, but I figure that if you want to prove to people that you're exceptionally good at what you do, you make a few sacrifices to your schedule and maybe a little to your sanity. I've done just that while working at the Post.

Part of the reason I've worked my butt off is because I've enjoyed what I've been working on during the semester. The story I've been working on deals with a government practice that not many people would care about. However, in my infinite nerdiness, I've found it incredibly fascinating and the findings should keep everyone on the edge of their seats when the stories publish. Part of the type of journalism I love to do is taking stories that no one would want to read in a million years and make the readers care about it because it's important. The sale of people's liens to investors who couldn't care less about
the people is one of those stories. Add in a complacent tax office that doesn’t do due diligence, or any level of diligence in the process, and you’ve got a story that needs to be told. I believe that Mike, Debbie and I are making the story into one that will bring public attention on an issue that truly needs it. Add in a team that includes photographers, videographers, graphic designers and web editors, and the story will turn into a multimedia piece that we hope will be the envy of other outlets. We’re trying to take the New York Times’ “Snowfall” piece and apply it to investigative journalism. A lot of people at The Post are excited to see it and I think it truly accomplishes the first goal I set out to accomplish. Add in another important story I’ve worked on with reporter Kimbriell Kelly and I’ve done more than I could have imagined when I set out my goals.

Perhaps the most important goal I had was to see how my skills would stack up while working with some of the best investigative journalists in the world. The short answer is that I’m proud to report that I think I could fulfill a vital need on this or any investigative team. However, I realized that I still have a lot to learn in some respects. Overall, I think I did a great job preparing myself to perform well on an investigative team of any kind. Allow me to elaborate.

One of the things that I never realized going into the internship was that the investigative unit at the Washington Post had no dedicated computer assisted reporter. While there are a few data people at the Post, they find themselves on the graphics team and pulled in every direction on a daily basis. While they do some work for the investigative team, they don’t generally have the time to do daily data analysis work for investigative reporters.
As such, I truly filled a need of the team and was able to do spot analysis for the team every day I was there. Not only did I provide the data analysis skills the team needed, but I brought with me the data collection skills that are highly valuable on any investigative team. Taking the coding skills that I'd picked up over the years, though largely self-taught as opposed to formal schooling, I scraped the web for data that was thought to be hard to acquire. With government agencies taking as long as possible to get us the information we requested, or often denying us with various exemptions, we didn't have time to wait to get the data needed to report our story. My skills were put to use and I got all the data asked of me for reporting in both the projects I've been working on.

Not only were these skills welcomed on the team, but others were interested in picking up some of the basic skills I had in web scraping so they could apply it to their work if I am unavailable or after I potentially leave the Post. I organized weekly sessions where I sat down with either Kimbriell Kelly, David Fallis (another investigative reporter) or both and taught them the basics of the Python programming language and how it can be used to write simple and sophisticated methods of programmatically acquiring data. Not only was it nice to see that some of my colleagues were still willing to learn and acquire new skills, but it was nice to know that those skills are rare and sought after.

However, my investigative skills as a whole needed a little work. My previous internships have mostly involved just data analysis and research, but those weren't the areas where I struggled. One of the biggest issues I still have is talking to strangers and getting their input on my stories. I don't have this problem as much with elected officials but more so with regular people. I've always been something of an introvert, which
doesn't always compute in the journalism world. However, I think my introversion has made me a much better listener than most. This is great, but if I can't get up the nerve to talk to people, I don't have the opportunity to listen to what they have to say.

On top of that, my journalistic writing leaves something to be desired. Oftentimes, when I'm writing up my analysis, it takes a bit of an academic tone. Mike Sallah has pointed this out to me repeatedly and tried to emphasize that I need to put the analysis in more readable formats. Writing has never been my strongest suit in journalism, so it's something that I've wanted to improve. It's markedly better than when I got to school almost two years ago, but it still needs some work. That being said, I worked hard with Mike to make it better.

The final goal I had with this internship was to soak up the knowledge and expertise of the journalists I worked with to help become a better journalist. Whether they know it or not, almost every journalist on the team has helped me in some facet to become a better journalist. Some sat down and helped me and some taught me by example. Either way, I believe that I learned three major things while working at the Post.

The first thing I learned was that good data begets good sources begets good data and so on. The cycle of data and sources can help a reporter to dig deeper and more efficiently than someone fishing for stories or data. The cyclical nature of this type of journalism is necessary but not always practiced. In the main project I'm working on, this method has been applied over and over to the point that we have sources and data now that we never thought we'd have or that we'd never known existed. It's not something I'd ever realized before this point, but it's something I'll continue doing as long as I'm a journalist.
Secondly, I learned that playing dumb is one of the best skills of an investigative reporter. I've always been pretty good at playing dumb, but I didn't realize it was that important. However, the skill is one of the utmost importance. By using it, you can procure all sorts of information from folks without showing your hand as to the type of story you're going to be doing. Along with this, while requesting documents or data from a government agency, it helps in getting the data without essentially telling them that you're going to use what you're requesting to show that they're incompetent. It's a nifty little skill that's entirely undervalued.

Finally, I learned that the best journalists are the perpetual students. Now this isn't to say that I'm going to stay in school and get my doctorate but rather to illustrate that I intend to pursue new knowledge for as long as I live. With the advent of the internet and computers and their use in journalism, some chose to learn how to use them and some kept with what they were doing. That second batch of journalists is virtually nonexistent in the current journalism world. As journalism evolves, so must the journalist. Especially in investigative journalism, it's important to be constantly learning new skills and methods to make stories the best they can be.

Sometimes, this means learning to work with new people. For example, the investigative project I'm working on with Mike and Debbie is using the skills of journalists from across the organization to improve upon the total project. While it's not feasible for a journalist to possess every skill out there, it is feasible to compile a group that comes close to achieving that goal. I love that the Washington Post has provided for a large variety of journalists to come together to do the best journalism possible. I now see
that an organization that I consider working for must provide me with the ability to work with such an amalgamation of phenomenal journalists of all backgrounds.

All in all, my experience at the Washington Post is better than I ever could have imagined when I sat down with Jeff Leen in a coffee shop way back in November. I was provided the opportunity to work alongside some of the greatest investigative journalists in the world. I was allowed to actually report on matters that are important both in the Washington, D.C., metro area as well as the nation as a whole. I learned a lot and taught folks a bunch as well. And best of all, I get to stay on for a second internship over the summer doing it all over again. It's probably part luck and part skill that I'm in the position I'm in today, but it doesn't really matter. I'm going to continue to work my butt off being the best journalist I can be and things will fall into place as they're intended to. I'm going to sit back and enjoy it.
Chapter Four: Abundant Physical Evidence of work at *The Washington Post*

Because my work is investigative in nature, I have no physical evidence of stories completed yet because stories are all still being worked on. Dr. Davis has advised me to have my editor write up a piece on what I've contributed to the Washington Post this semester in lieu of the work that will be completed in the coming months.

*Written by Michael Sallah and Debbie Cenziper:*

When a Washington Post projects team launched an investigation into one of the District's most troubled industries six months ago, the reporters called on the computer skills of Steven Rich to help them break down a complex and troubling story.

Without his help, it would not have been possible.

Week after the week, he built databases, crunched numbers and scraped websites -- including court sites, property records and other government databases -- to help expose a predatory systems of debt collection that has impacted thousands of District residents.

Known as the tax-lien industry, it's supposed to work this way: When a property owner gets behind on his taxes -- even by a few hundred dollars -- the city can put a lien on the property and then sell it at a public auction. If the property owner can't repay the taxes, the winning bidder gets to keep the house.

With Steven’s help, the reporters were able to find that the bidders -- many with criminal records -- were quietly tacking enormous fees and penalties on the liens, making it impossible for people to repay the debt, or save their homes.

In the end, winning bidders managed to foreclose on hundreds of homes over the past five years during one of the most difficult economic periods in the city's history.
Steven also found patterns of bidding among top investors that indicate they may be colluding to win the most bids at the cheapest possible costs. An expert statistician confirmed Steven's findings, saying the likelihood that the bidding was truly random was 1 in 1,000.

Besides database work, Steven evaluated changes in law, criminal cases, foreclosure cases, bidder registration forms and other documents, filed and followed up on FOIAs, interviewed key sources, and coordinated with The Post's graphic artists, mapping experts and online editors.

A deep-dive on the tax lien industry hasn't been done before by any major newspaper, and Steven's findings are key to the team's major stories.
Chapter Five: Coverage of money in politics during non-election cycles

The time to track monetary campaign contributions and their effect on politics isn't during an election cycle; it's after it's ended.

With a new political landscape in the wake of the 2010 Citizens United Supreme Court decision, reporters and the public as a whole got a good look at the big money that gets pumped into politics, especially in the lead-up to an election.

While the money has been there for years, this Supreme Court decision put the issue on the national forefront.

Despite being at the center of conversation, journalists mostly stopped reporting on the issue after Election Night. That's precisely when they should be reporting.

Journalists and policy experts say that campaign contributions mean less until a candidate is elected, at which time contributions are seen by some as favors that need to be returned by the freshly elected official.

However, the deluge of articles and news segments on campaign contributions during the campaign cycle is often followed by silence in the media on how legislation is affected by all this money being flooded into the system.

“Where the money really is important is in the influence it buys after the election,” said David Donald, the data editor at The Center for Public Integrity, the country's oldest and largest nonpartisan, nonprofit investigative news organization.

Part of the problem is that there are various perceptions of how money influences politics, and there's a bit of truth and a bit of misperception in most views. The truth about the effects can be rather complicated.
“How money influences things is a lot more subtle than what people think,” Donald said.

Sheila Krumholz, executive director of the Center for Responsive Politics, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research group that tracks money's effects in politics, believes that the time to really cover campaign contributions is when most of the media stop paying attention. She also wants to help them come to this realization.

“The Center for Responsive Politics wants to focus on journalist training for the post-election period when the media turns away from covering money in politics which is a shame because that's precisely when reporters should be focusing on money in politics in our view because that's when donations that are made (during the election) are viewed as an investment that will be cashed in,” Krumholz said.

**Lobbying loopholes**

The people who often catch the most flak in the media for their attempts to influence politics with money aren't the people who pump millions of their own, or their company's, money into support of politicians. Instead, it's the people these millionaires hire to do the work for them who are seen as a scourge in Washington, D.C.: the lobbyists.

In a 2011 Honesty and Ethics poll conducted by Gallup, lobbyists were ranked as the least trustworthy profession, in a tie with car salespeople and members of Congress. A large part of the reason that the media, and the public in general, are frustrated by lobbyists and their practices has to do with a loophole in the law that has exempted a vital piece of information from public disclosure: who exactly lobbyists meet with.
This loophole has hindered understanding of just who is being lobbied in Washington. In 1989, Robert Byrd wrote the “Byrd Amendment,” which required outside lobbyists to report who they were meeting with in the government. After about two years, Congress realized that most meetings were not with departments within the government, but rather with members of Congress and it was damaging reputations. In response, they removed the part of the form where one would report who they're meeting with.

“The big, big loophole is that lobbyists may have spent $50,000 lobbying this bill but they don't say if they lobbied Senator 'X' or Representative 'Y',” Donald said.

Without this type of disclosure, a full understanding of the inner workings of lobbying is virtually impossible to discern.

“We know they lobbied someone but that's pathetically inadequate toward knowing if they met with key officials,” Krumholz said.

While the difficulty in closing this loophole will be difficult as Congress has to eliminate it and that might not be in their best interests, some feel that there's no reason it shouldn't already be public information.

“I do feel there should be full disclosure of the meetings at least with the offices they're lobbying,” Krumholz said. “That's critical information that we should be privy to as well.”

With that information, it might be easier for journalists to establish a quid pro quo situation with officials and lobbyists. It's difficult to establish otherwise.

“You're never going to find a congressman to say that he took campaign money and it affected his vote on a piece of legislation,” Donald said.
However, that's not always what's going on. Sometimes, lobbyists bring actual language their clients would like inserted in a bill. Lobbyists don't necessarily guarantee money from their clients but tend to emphasize previous transactions.

“There's a difference between saying 'you vote and we'll give you campaign money' and just to remind the senator that he or she received campaign money from whoever they're lobbying for,” Donald said.

Krumholz can see why some don't want the loophole closed.

“The best argument for not making it more transparent is that it will have a chilling affect on across-the-aisle negotiations and audiences,” Krumholz said. “If disclosed, conservatives won't meet with Greenpeace and liberals won't meet with Americans for Tax Reform.”

But transparency should trump this rationale, according to Krumholz. Members of congress should be encouraged to hear all sides of an argument.

“I think we need to prioritize transparency and educate people on a congressman’s right to hear diverse perspectives and get a backbone,” Krumholz said.

**Misnomer of Non-election cycle**

When an election occurs in the United States, a cycle of contributions to a campaign generally comes to an end. The attitude of many after the conclusion of the 2012 federal election was one of relief from the barrage of advertising that goes alongside campaigning.

Though many consider this the end of the electioneering, in reality, it's the start of the next cycle. The Federal Election Commission (FEC) runs in two-year cycles.
“So that means [the FEC] are already taking information about contributions for the 2014 election cycle.”

“It just keeps going on; it never stops. It's the eternal money machine.”

Believe it or not, television advertisements for the federal mid-term elections in 2014 have already been seen by many in at least 12 states, courtesy of the American Petroleum Institute.

“Even though everyone was sick of the election, people are already gearing up for 2014,” Allison said.

While advertising has already started being played in states across the country, many newsrooms are ill-equipped to handle this type of reporting with so much time until the next election.

“A lot of places remove it as a beat after the election – it morphs into something else,” said Derek Willis, an interactive news developer at the New York Times who built a campaign finance application for reporters that allows them to subscribe to updates based on certain criteria.

The problem is that many forget that every end of an election cycle corresponds to the beginning of another.

“Some editors sort of ignore that the system doesn't shut itself off after the election,” Donald said.

When reporting on money in politics, it's inevitable that spikes of reporting will happen in concert with releases of financial information such as federally- and state-mandated campaign finance reports, to be submitted by campaigns, political action
committees and others. The closer to an election, the more these types of reports receive coverage.

“Reporting is probably more during the election season because that's the news hook,” said Edwin Bender, executive director for the National Institute on Money in State Politics.

The reporting feeds on a sort of horse-race mentality.

“The elections go on day to day and candidates look to define themselves and their audience is the public,” Bender said. “Reporters tend to go along with that.”

However, experts say the time to do this type of reporting is after the election has run its course.

“It's a critical time for all of us to be on alert and monitor,” Krumholz said.

Unfortunately, that's not happening. Since the 2012 election, the New York Times has seen just a couple articles per month about money in politics. Before the election, it wasn't unusual to see one or two a day.

“There's obviously not as much reporting on money in politics after an election,” Allison said. “Obviously a lot more can happen.”

Changing dynamics in the newsroom

A lack of resources in newsrooms is a common complaint among all reporters, but it's a huge issue among reporters wanting to dig deeper.

“One of the problems is that newsrooms are under such a crunch in terms of resources that they really don't have the time to invest in the kinds of deep dives that used to be par for the course for newspapers,” Allison said.

Part of the problem has been a redefinition of a reporter's responsibilities.
“We've lost a lot of seasoned reporters and reporters are covering wider beats,” Krumholz said.

Bender said that legislative reporters, especially at the state level, used to be the pinnacle of a career. But with these reporters being asked to do more, there aren't a lot of seasoned legislative reporters left. The Kansas City Star, for example, only has one dedicated City Hall reporter, and that reporter hasn't worked in the position for two years, yet.

“We don't have the institutional memory in the news world today,” Bender said. Beside that, money has such a place in the legislative branch, it's imperative to report on it at all times.

“Money in politics has major ties in the legislative process but editors think there's not an appetite for it in the reader,” Bender said. “As such, some experienced reporters aren't allowed to report on it during non-election cycles.”

On the other side, many political reporters are stuck in an old-fashioned mindset that “if I know all the right people, they'll tell me what's going on,” according to Willis.

“If that's all you're doing, you're only as good as your sources,” Willis said.

For Willis, the problem is mostly that the media isn't keeping pace with campaigns.

“There's a growing deficit between what we know how to do and what campaigns know how to do,” Willis said. “Well-funded campaigns can do this stuff and count on journalists not doing it well.”
Journalists could be finding stories frequently like the recent story about how Sarah Palin's political action committee gave more money to consultants than to candidates.

“There's at least a story a week that could be done on committees that pay consultants or give no money to candidates,” Willis said.

Some say there's just not enough time in the day for the few journalists who report on these issues.

“There's such an enormity of the task in hand,” Bender said. “Reporters are human. They have to sleep and eat and this is a different kind of animal.”

**Secretive organizations**

Money in politics may not be as bad as everyone says. The issue, however, lies in the fact that a lack of transparency shrouds everything. Without being able to pull back the curtain, journalists assume the worst.

“Even the appearance of corruption, in essence, corrupts the system because it erodes faith in the system,” Donald said. “Even if there's no corruption, the appearance erodes public sentiment just as actual corruption would.”

While pundits tend to look at the Citizens United Supreme Court decision as a turning point in the political process that hailed in a new era of politics driven by money, experts argue that its effects were minimal.

“I don't think the Citizens United ruling changed that much,” Allison said. “What Citizens United did was it created a vehicle of the Super PAC where everything is disclosed and it's easier to follow the money in politics.”
While Super PACs became new vehicles for big money in politics, they also opened the door for journalists and researchers to see big donors and were, in a way, more transparent than the big money operations of previous elections.

Before Citizens United, the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 was the major thing standing between big-money donors and campaigns. But Allison said that people quickly adapted and found ways to put their money into elections using nonprofit 527 organizations.

“These guys have always found a way to get around the restrictions,” Allison said.

So with no donor disclosure, 527 organizations were able to pump tons of money into elections with no oversight and no disclosure of donors.

Groups like Swiftboat Veterans for Truth and MoveOn.org took advantage of the 527’s exempt status to raise large sums of money for electioneering without ever disclosing donors. But the Federal Election Commission caught on and started going after 527s.

“There was a chilling affect after the 2004 election when the FEC went after big donors to 527s asking for intent and why people gave to these organizations,” Allison said.

That hasn't prevented people from using nonprofit organizations to fund political advertisements. Now, 501 c4s and c6s are much more active than they used to be. Allison thinks the Internal Revenue Service won't crack down on political activities because the IRS doesn't want to figure out what is and isn't political activity. For example, Karl Rove's “social welfare” organization, Crossroads GPS, toes the line between what it means to be participating in political activities.
The biggest difference between money given to Super PACs and money given to nonprofits is that nonprofits do not have to disclose their donors. However, political nonprofits are allowed to use no more than half their money for political purposes.

“If I give a million dollars to a Super PAC, a million dollars can go into the election,” Donald said. “If I give a million to a 501 c6, only 49.9 percent can be used for political stuff. You basically pay for disclosure.”

Krumholz has seen this move as detrimental to the political system and believes that transparency needs to prevail.

“Organizations are using the tax exempt status as a shield both for themselves and their donors in a way that was not intended for social welfare organizations and we should amend the rules for at least a minor level of transparency,” Krumholz said.

**Establishing Relationships**

Some experts argue that we're covering money in politics, from the most basic standpoint, all wrong.

“We need to look at money as establishing and defining relationships instead of as transactional,” said Willis.

This will help readers to better comprehend the process, something journalists don't give readers enough credit for, according to Willis.

“The more we can describe these [contributions] as a social relationship, the more they understand,” Willis said.

However, publicly available data isn't great for this. Data from the FEC has no way to establish social constructs, Willis said. Still, journalists and researchers do their best to find relationships as much as they can. Rosalind Helderman of the Washington
Post has recently done excellent work connecting Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell to a campaign donor from money given to McDonnell’s daughter's wedding.

“The money does show evidence of some kind of a relationship and through those relationships we can connect the dots part of the way,” Krumholz said.

But Willis sees the fundamental flaw as journalists not focusing on changes in relationships between donors and candidates over time. One key element of relationships isn't covered well enough.

“We don't look at who broke up enough,” Willis said.

**How to improve – government, journalists and non-profits**

But there is still a ways to go to reach the level of transparency that journalists and nonpartisan research groups would like.

While journalists and researchers explore how money affects politics, it's up to the government to make more data available to the public.

Closing the loophole that allows lobbyists to not report exactly who they're lobbying would be a start, according to Krumholz.

Besides responsibilities the government may have of opening up the doors for more and better data, it's up to news organizations to allow people to report on money in politics before and after elections.

“I think it's a challenge for the media to make sure there are people out there who are afforded the opportunity to do that work,” Krumholz said. “If a reporter has a scoop and they've done the legwork to find it, they do get rewarded. Good reporting has its own rewards.”
Organizations like The Center for Responsive Politics and the Sunlight Foundation are attempting to make the lives of these journalists easier by creating applications that cut down on reporting time.

“Sunlight is trying to be a resource for reporters so they don't have to spend hours and hours just downloading data from the FEC,” Allison said.

At the state level, Bender hopes to provide connections between money and legislation.

“The next step for us is a link between money and legislation someone is introducing so we'd have a pretty good way of getting reporters to make links better and quicker,” Bender said.

Willis sees an easy fix for journalists that will not only keep things fresh but also keep readers from feeling a bit of deja vu.

“We've just got to stop writing the same story over and over and over,” Willis said. “Don't be Captain Obvious.”

Also, journalists can change the way they report on money in politics by not fully relying on sources that may give skewed information, according to Willis.

“Focus on changes in the system – changes in behavior, donors, fundraising – and be more data driven,” Willis said. “It's not outside the realm of possibility to write stories with greater context other than one donor or one meeting.”

For Krumholz, breaking the facade of political nonprofits would be a priority.

“We need to find the resources to track down these political organizations because it's not just a charitable hobby of the politician, it's their shadow campaign now,” Krumholz said.
Finally, Bender believes that news organizations should allow journalists to report on money in politics all the time, whether or not it will attract readers or be a large source of revenue.

“It's accountability,” Bender said. “Journalists should be doing it even if the readers don't normally read it.”

While the future of journalism is uncertain, the need for seasoned journalists to report on money's effects in politics will always remain.

If journalists keep pushing for coverage and organizations like the Center for Responsive Politics, the Sunlight Foundation and the National Institute on Money in State Politics continue to find funding to help journalists in this mission, there's plenty of reason to believe that the future is bright for transparency for money in politics.
Appendix: Original Proposal

Introduction

When I came to the Missouri School of Journalism, I had only the vaguest notion of where journalism would take me. I knew that I had an affinity for longer-form journalism, but that was the extent of my plan. Little did I know what was in store for me as to that point I had only written a few small features for a bureau of the Roanoke Times. I think that every course I’ve taken at the University of Missouri has had some impact in shaping my view of journalism, but there are three classes that I think have truly influenced my career choices and prepared me to do the project I will describe below.

The first course that prepared me for my project was the Controls of Information class with Charles Davis. In the class, I learned the ins and outs of First Amendment law and how to use federal, state and local sunshine laws to acquire the information needed to write stories in the public interest. With a big, semester-long reporting project, I was also able to utilize my programming skills to build an interactive using Python and JavaScript, something I had not previously been able to do in any other class.

Another course that has proven beneficial to my project was the Computer-Assisted Reporting (CAR) course with David Herzog. In the class, I learned how to properly mine data for stories as well as where to find data that I might need to give my more depth. With that knowledge, I am now able to take large datasets and extract some meaning quickly and communicate it to an audience.

The final course that has prepared me for the rigors of this project was my Quantitative Research Methods class with Maria Len-Rios. The class prepared me in ways beyond the research component of this project. It taught me how to find
significance in data points and understand how to properly find correlation within a set of data. While the CAR class helped me to find stories in data, this class went a step beyond and helped me to learn how to ensure that any findings from data analysis are significant.

The skills that I acquired from these classes, as well as many other classes, have pointed me in the direction of being an investigative data. My experiences to date include doing research for investigative reporter Ian Urbina at the New York Times and performing database editing at USA TODAY. Ideally, my future career lies somewhere in between, allowing me to do long-form investigative pieces with a data-driven plotline, something that many journalists do not have the skills to do themselves. Ideally, I hope to end up at a major national publication, but I acknowledge that it may take some time to get there.

This project, which will be performed on the investigations team at the Washington Post in Washington, D.C., will help me show that my skills are viable in a competitive atmosphere and that I provide a set of skills that editors will create positions for, even when the budget is tight. I’m not saying this project will make me the next Nate Silver, but I think that my skill set is rather unique and this project will help illustrate that.
**Skills Component**

I plan to work at the Washington Post in Washington, D.C., from January through April 2013 to fulfill the professional skills portion of my professional project. This work will include an emphasis in public policy reporting, investigative data reporting, and the building of interactive applications for the engagement of readers.

While at the Post, I will work 40 hours a week for approximately 18 weeks. I will work with many of the reporters on the team to shape their stories using the skills I’ve acquired and highlighted in the previous section. I will include any and all clips I produce in my final project to meet the requirement for abundant physical evidence of my work. My supervisor at the Post will be Jeff Leen, the assistant managing editor/investigations. Barbara Cochran will be checking in from time to time to make sure everything is running smoothly.
Professional Analysis

Framework

In Washington, D.C., officials, elected and unelected, make decisions that affect millions of Americans daily. Americans who are vigilant may read a line or two in the newspaper or online about what new policy has been enacted and maybe, just maybe, they’ll know who is responsible for passing that policy. In terms of energy-related policy, it’s not surprising to see some more investigative outlets, like ProPublica, the Center for Public Integrity, or the Sunlight Foundation, report on the lobbying that occurs in advance of votes on those policies.

I do not have the exact numbers, but I think if I were to count the total number of federal policy changes in a given year, less than ten percent would be related to the oil and gas industries. In terms of how money affects policy, the oil industry is one of the major players and gets a large portion of the media coverage. Since the oil and gas industries have money to burn, a lot of the money gets pumped into politics. However, more money than that lines the pockets of our politicians through lobbying and campaign contributions.

With that foundation laid, I will propose the professional analysis portion of my Professional Project and lay out not only the steps required for completion, but also the theoretical building blocks on which the analysis will be constructed.

In order to fully understand the analysis portion of my project, it’s important to understand the basis of my project. It is one thing to track how outside money is infused into politics and quite another to equate that money to a vote. Since not many journalists take that next step, it is my goal to create a database that not only keeps track of money
politicians receive (and from whom they receive it) and how they vote, but also to create a scoring system based in theory to see how closely these votes correspond to contributions made. Ideally, this project would serve as the foundation for an interactive that would be created that journalists and the public alike could use to see how their politicians decide which way to vote on any given policy.

With that base, the professional analysis portion of my project will answer the following question: “How do journalists at news organizations covering federal government better track money's influence on politics during on-election cycles?” It’s a straightforward question, because my gut tells me that journalists aren’t doing the greatest job at answering it. I don’t want to just answer this question with how it feels in my gut; I want to take a scientific look at how journalists cover money and politics and come to a sound conclusion based in research and logic. I believe this research could be of great importance to journalists and could help journalism as a whole. It probably won’t “save” journalism, but I’d like to think it could help.

The question is of importance to journalism as a whole because generally when votes come up in Congress, they just get reported as outcomes; how many congressmen and women voted ‘yes’ versus ‘no’. By looking at voting records and the rationale behind votes for each member of congress, including money they receive from lobbyists, journalists can help readers to better understand the true workings of legislation. This question often falls to non-profit news organizations, but many people don't read or know about places like ProPublica. More importantly, with trust in journalism at or near an all-time low, it’s as important as ever that journalists show their audience that they truly can be the fourth estate not only by being a watchdog of the government, but also by showing
that they truly understand the workings of the government on which they are reporting. By holding politicians accountable for how they vote in relation to monetary interests, I think we can build a base on which to rebuild public trust. This may sound grandiose to some, but I truly believe we need to at least consider reader trust as a major hurdle to journalism and work to rebuild it.

The theoretical framework of my project will revolve around one major theory with a small assist from a second. The central theory to my research will be gatekeeping. It’s a pervasive theme in journalism research and, depending on the researcher can have slightly different definitions.

Gatekeeping is one of the most common theories in journalism and yet it wasn’t initially posited by a journalist. Psychologist Kurt Lewin (Shoemaker et al, 2001) theorized that forces exist which either facilitate or constrain the passage of news through the gatekeeping process. It wasn’t until White (1950) applied gatekeeping to journalism that the theory gained steam in the journalism community. White argued that a wire editor’s decisions were “highly subjective … [and] based on the gatekeeper’s own set of experiences, attitudes and expectations” as to what comprises the news. Snider (1967) and Bleske (1991) followed up this research, garnering similar results.

There are countless pieces of research that make use of this theory. I’ll highlight some of the relevant research projects whose use of the theory, in some way, could help shape my own research.

Lazaroiu (2011) looked at gatekeeping in a digital era, especially focusing on the rise of citizen journalism, including blogging. He argued that while the gatekeeping function of traditional journalism appears to have disappeared in citizen journalism, it's
still there. There are just more gates being minded by more people, not all of whom could
be considered journalists in the traditional sense. Bowman (2008) examined gatekeeping
in legacy news organizations during the digital era. He concluded that regardless of the
changes occurring in journalism, gatekeeping will always be a vital role in organizations.
Though the 24-hour news cycle means more news, it doesn’t mean that the gate goes
away. It just means a widening of the gate to meet an organization’s needs. Singer (2010)
argued that allowing citizen journalists access to occasionally publish on professional
sites helps with the gatekeeping role as well as strengthens trust within the community.
This model worked well in the United Kingdom and there’s no reason it couldn’t work in
the United States.

Along with gatekeeping, I think it’s important to talk about framing, as discussing
how politics is covered by the media is important in this context. Everything in
journalism has a frame. It’s inescapable. For that reason, it’s important that journalists
understand framing. Goffman (1974), who many attribute with first conceptualizing
framing, argued that the onus of framing falls upon receivers of messages. It wasn’t until
Gitlin (1978) applied the theory to journalistic reporting that the term began to become
more refined.

This theory, much like gatekeeping, is often used in research. Swafford (2012)
looked at local election coverage as it relates to framing. He found that while problems
with election coverage exist at the national level, they aren’t nearly as prevalent at the
local level. This research will provide a solid foundation for my project as I plan to look
at politics on the national level. A lot of the theory in Swafford’s thesis relates directly to
coverage of government and could be similarly used in my research and professional
analysis. In future iterations of project planning, I expect this aspect of the project to gain more importance. My project chair, Charles Davis, agrees.

With this framework, my research can take flight. I will carefully collect and use stories from D.C.-based outlets covering government to see how journalists cover money in government. Once I’ve informed myself on the issues, I will take my findings to editors at several of these outlets, whom I’ve already started discussions with, to share results, get their impressions of the results, and attempt to find solutions and enhancements to any issues or shortcomings that may arise from those results.

Methodology

In order to fully evaluate the effects of both framing and gatekeeping on the reporting of money’s affect on politics, it’s important not to oversimplify the methodology. That being said, a method that becomes so complex that it’s hard to extract meaning from conclusions is not ideal for any study, let alone this one. As a result, this project will employ one research method: interviews. Journalists at major newspapers will be interviewed regarding this research in an attempt to draw more meaningful conclusions from the analysis.

For interviews, seeing how conclusions brought forth by research line up with their perception of coverage will be important. Finding out how, or why, they cover money in politics will go hand in hand with this. It is as important, at least, to know what limitations journalists and their organizations may have to covering money in politics as well as they hope. With money being tight within many news organizations, it could be that which holds back better coverage.
Second, these experienced journalists will be asked for their ideas on how to improve the coverage of money in politics. There’s no telling what kind of answers they’ll give, but if the answers are similar, the solution may be easier than once thought. Lastly, the journalists will be presented with the potential interactive that could come from this project and asked the role they believe it could play in fixing the problem, should it be determined that one exists. The hope of this line of questioning would be to refine the practical component to best suit the needs of these journalists.

Interviews would be conducted with top journalism in the field of political reporting and data journalism with no fewer than five professional journalists, potentially including:

- Jennifer LaFleur – Director of Computer-Assisted Reporting, ProPublica
- Bill Allison – Editorial Director, Sunlight Foundation
- Sheila Krumholz – Executive Director, Center for Responsive Politics
- Ed Bender – Executive Director, National Institute on Money in State Politics
- James Grimaldi – Investigative Reporter, Wall Street Journal
- Ron Nixon – Investigative Reporter, New York Times
- David Donald – Data Editor, The Center for Public Integrity
- Sarah Cohen – Senior CAR Reporter – New York Times
- Matt Stiles – Data Editor – National Public Radio
- Jeff Leen – Investigations Editor – Washington Post
Literature Review

The Primary Informative Function of Journalism

Throughout the history of the profession, academics and practitioners of journalism have argued the major function of the newspaper is to inform the citizenry. In writing about the necessity of the American newspaper in the 1830s and its informative role in the development of democratic activity, French scholar Alexis de Tocqueville argued for the necessity of the newspaper for two major reasons. The first envisioned the role of the free press as a watchdog, “whose ever watchful eye exposes the secret motivations of politics and forces men in public life to appear one by one before the court of public opinion” (Tocqueville, 2003, p. 217). The second involved informing the public so that they could make the decisions necessary to sustain a democratic society; Tocqueville suggested newspapers “sustain civilization” because, without them, “there would be hardly any communal action” (2003, p. 601). The informative function of the press, Tocqueville contended, must be to inform citizens about who their elected leaders are and what they are doing, and to allow them to congregate based on the issues that are important to them through a common pool of knowledge.

This core informative value of the newspaper has received increased attention as the 21st century has dawned and the media landscape has shifted considerably. Kovach and Rosenstiel’s robust and extensive study of the priorities and attitudes of journalists throughout the United States in the 1990s provides a resounding endorsement of Tocqueville’s original findings. The authors list several principles of journalism that emerge from their interviews of news professionals, but insist that chief among them “is that the purpose of journalism is to provide people with the information they need to be
free and self-governing” (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007, p. 5). This definition ties in the two functions of a free press identified by Tocqueville: freedom from harm by secretly motivated public officials and presenting the information required to engage in the act of governing one’s self by making democratic choices. The authors further suggest that this type of journalism is essential to creating a sense of community in a conceptual model of democratic development (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007, p. 12). In an empirical study of newsroom professionals at the turn of the century, Kovach and Rosenstiel provide evidence to support that the informative function of the newspaper, and democracy-building effects that flow from informing the public, are still deeply esteemed within the profession.

Though Schudson (2008) proposes a different model of democratic development as it relates to journalistic practices than Kovach and Rosenstiel, he concludes that empowering the public through information is an important function of the modern media. Schudson argues that the informing and investigating practices of the American press may have been more influenced by democratic institutions, than the democratic institutions being reformed through the organic development of journalistic practices; for example, shifting definitions of the freedom of the press played out in the political sphere allowed for the freedom to report news and reporters to gain access to certain documents (2008, p. 67). Schudson sees a model of journalism development as independent of democratic development, and vice versa. However, he does insist journalism is “crucial to modern democracy” (2008, p. 67). Schudson also upholds the watchdog function of the media as described by Kovach and Rosenstiel, among other scholars. He insists that the actions of public officials, including how money is spent, whether campaign promises
were upheld, and other areas of evaluation for future potential voters should be public knowledge, and “the media, therefore, should investigate” (Schudson, 2008, p. 68). While Schudson and other theorists disagree on the causal relationship between journalism and democracy, their belief in the importance of the informational function is congruent. Journalists must inform the public so they can engage, and the information provided must signal when engagement is necessary.

Ettema (2007) splits the traditional watchdog function into component parts, arguing that effective journalism must inspire an active role from the audience in deliberative democracy. Ettema argues that the watchdog role of journalists involves two specific procedures: publicity and accountability. The first, publicity, ensures that both the specific data that influences decisions made by elites and the reasoning for those decisions is available to the public (Ettema, 2007, p. 146). Ettema cites Schudson in his 1995 book *The Power of News* to display the importance of the publicity procedure in watchdog journalism: “So long as information is publicly available, political actors have to behave as if someone in the public is paying attention” (as cited in Ettema, 2007, p. 146). Publicity, Ettema argues, is a necessary antecedent to the accountability procedure, in which journalists use the data to reveal instances where public figures do not live up to the democratic ideal of their office and use their privileged position as leverage to protect themselves from scrutiny (2007, p. 145). Like Schudson, Kovach and Rosenstiel, and other media scholars and commentators, Ettema argues that this watchdog role of journalism, part of its foremost informative function, plays a key role in supporting American democratic communities. This function also implies a specific relationship between journalists and citizens that dominates practices within the profession.
Solving the Problem, Digitally

As technology has progressed, so has the speed at which journalists were expected to report stories. Though many see the 24-hour news cycle as a result of the internet, scholars posit that cable news channels like CNN put the first major time constraints on journalists. When these networks started emerging, Hrach (2009) found that “the problem is there is no time for journalists to think about the news, ponder the impact of reporting, and analyze what it means (Hrach, 2009 p. 716). Indeed, the authors also found that the problem has been exacerbated with the coming of the internet, and that the problem of immediacy wasn’t solved initially and continues to lag behind.

Usher and Layser (2010) examined how the increasing economic pressures have caused newspapers to layoff large numbers of journalists, reducing the scope of their coverage. The current economic crisis has done nothing but intensify the problem of diminishing support from commercial advertising and a subscription base that is increasingly moving to the internet in search of news that doesn’t cost a penny.

Some scholars suggest that television may be one of the best methods because the money needed to undertake such a project is in their hands. Cordell (2009) argues that broadcast news may be the best-equipped medium to handle the time and economic investments that this type of reporting requires. Cordell’s pilot study of ABC’s *Four Corners* was a look at a television program that was billed as investigative journalism. Cordell argues, after reviewing 30 television programs, that because the expense and time commitment are so high for investigative journalism, broadcast may be the only medium suited for it production. Cordell also argues that as the newspaper model of the 20th
century becomes less profitable, it is the duty of broadcast journalism to pick up the slack and produce quality investigative reporting to the public.

However, this does not seem to be the common line of thinking. Many scholars see the future of investigative journalism not necessarily lying in a new medium, but rather functioning under a new business model. This new model is that of the non-profit newspaper. With cutbacks being made across the board in legacy newsrooms, many newspapers have had to significantly reduce the amount of investigative journalists they hire, if not completely eliminate the position. Usher and Layser (2010) examined the non-profit model of news from a legal standpoint. The authors looked at several models of non-profit news organizations including the Poynter Institute, the Central City Extra, The Voice of San Diego, MinnPost, National Public Radio and ProPublica. Usher and Layser look at the legal advantages and disadvantages on forming a non-profit, tax exempt news organization. One of the biggest advantages they cite is the ability for non-profit news organizations to partner with for-profit organizations, much like the St. Petersburg Times is doing.

Shaver (2010) takes a basic look at the emergence of nonprofit journalism outlets and the place they currently function in society. Shaver argues that while nonprofits help for more hyperlocal coverage, they may never truly overtake legacy news as the most viable place for news. His research covers several models in depth, and examines the pros and cons for both for-profit and nonprofit models.

Browne (2010) isn’t so convinced that the nonprofit model of journalism will be unproblematic as the medium develops. Browne looks at three institutions from the U.S., Ireland and Eastern Europe. Of particular interest to the author is ProPublica, a nonprofit
news organization based out of New York City, which has partnered with several media outlets in the U.S. to essentially subsidize the investigative reporting function in legacy media. With the financial constraints seen across the board in legacy media outlets, more and more organizations, including the Wall Street Journal and CBS, have been leaning on ProPublica to get the investigative reporting they can afford. For Browne, this leads to a fear that the implementation of nonprofit news organizations could lead to a decline in transparency, credibility and viability of journalistic institutions.

Guensburg (2008) does not see a decline in transparency. Because nonprofit organizations have to disclose their donors, she argues that these types of journalism operations would, in fact, be more transparent. Her biggest qualm with the nonprofit model is the overreliance on grants and the need to constantly be fundraising. She points out that journalism grants get renewed at a rate of about 25 percent due to factors like “developments in research, demographics or regional politics, changes in leadership or board structure.” This type of instability can make the future of nonprofit journalism uncertain.

Stephenson and Chaves (2006) pointed out that nonprofit organizations, if not correctly managed, are open to more investigations in general. A 2003 Washington Post series wound up digging deep into a nonprofit organization involved in conservation not journalism, and depicted the organization in a negative light, which forced the nonprofit to respond. Stephenson and Chaves explore the political and social impact of the articles and looks at the accountability of both investigative reporters as well as of nonprofit organizations.
Houston (2010) addressed an issue that he was asked to discuss countless times in his tenure as executive director of Investigative Reporters and Editors: the impending death of investigative journalism. He explained that while positions in legacy media for “investigative reporters” were diminishing at a rapid rate, positions for “watchdog journalists” are increasing and are seen as the future of investigative journalism. Watchdog journalism is essentially investigative journalism that doesn’t require months to complete. Instead media outlets hire the journalists to do daily news, while keeping an eye on government or business to turn investigative stories when they pop up. This has allowed some legacy media to maintain a level of investigative reporting, without investing the high levels of time or money into hiring journalists to spend months working on a story that may or may not pan out.

Kirchhoff (2010) looks at the future of investigative journalism from the standpoint that the news industry is going through its worst economic period since the Great Depression. Many newspapers abandon investigative reporting because they cannot stay financially in the black. She points out that while nonprofit startups like the Voice of San Diego are promising, no one has yet to find a viable solution to replace the income created by print advertising. Many newspapers, which have been moving more and more toward the internet, are experimenting with ways to curtail newsroom cutbacks by using new financial models including micropayments, exploring the world of revenue sharing with online search engines like Google or Yahoo!, and by cracking down on unauthorized reproductions of the material they produce. Kirchhoff isn’t sure exactly where the future of print journalism lies, but she sees a hybrid print/internet model being a starting point.
Bacon (2011) suggests that the news industry should look towards journalism schools to help fill the gap created by the diminishing of investigative positions in newsrooms around the world. “Considered collectively, this is a large editorial resource which can be partly be deployed in producing journalism in the public interest, including investigative journalism.” Bacon suggests that if academia could consider investigative efforts to be considered research by universities, a model of collaboration could be used where undergraduates, graduates and professors in universities across the world would write investigative articles and allow legacy newspapers to publish the result for much less expense than hiring a full-time investigative journalist. Birnbauer (2011) agrees with Bacon that universities could be a hotbed for investigative journalism. A project that Birnbauer tentatively referred to as UniMuckraker would use students to provide investigative stories to legacy news outlets. The model, Birnbauer says, would be a win-win situation for the students and the news outlets. With students producing work for professional outlets and those organizations paying much less than they would for a full-time investigative journalist, this type of collaboration could prove to be a fruitful model in the future.
Works Cited:


Swafford, S. (2012). FRAMING IN COMMUNITY NEWSPAPERS’ COVERAGE OF LOCAL ELECTIONS.

