



By James Etterna



Trying to stir public awareness

A nightmare comes to us now as the news: A woman is riding alone in the elevator of a Chicago Housing Authority apartment building when the elevator abruptly stops. From the trapdoor in the ceiling two men point a gun and order her to undress. "I tripped across the elevator floor to the buttons to get the elevator to move or the alarm to go off and no button, no alarm, nothing worked," she later tells a reporter. "I stood there on the elevator, naked, in the dark and it's almost like waiting on Judgment Day because you know somebody's going to come in there after you when there's nothing you can do." She is raped.

The image of crime recalled here would also have become no more than computerized memory traces had they not been recorded by Pam Zekman, a journalist who has been called the best investigative reporter in television. Zekman is a master practitioner in a journalistic genre that regularly invests such images with moral and political significance. She gave meaning to the account of rape on the CHA elevator, for example, by juxtaposing it with accounts of men who should have repaired elevators but did not. In a series of reports titled "Elevator Rip-off: An Open and Shut Case," Zekman introduces the viewer to a number of these men:

This is George McNamara. He's a Westinghouse elevator mechanic assigned to work on CHA elevators; paid nearly \$19 an hour.

McNamara claims he was hard at work on the day we took these pictures. His time sheet says he spent the entire 8-hour day working on elevators in 7 CHA buildings. But for 4½ hours that day he was nowhere near an elevator. He spent most of that time at a sandwich shop he owns with his wife.

McNamara is not an isolated example of a payroll cheat. Our investigation found that at least 25 men — nearly half the Westinghouse mechanics and supervisors assigned to the projects — are ripping off the CHA.



The journalism of outrage

As the story unfolds, we see worker after worker at another job, entering a bar or just sitting in his car. Several of them say that they sometimes take the afternoon off just to get away from the housing projects. Others say they go to bars to consult with their supervisors. Meanwhile, a newly appointed CHA official blames both the labor union and the company for the 400 injuries and 20 deaths over the previous decade and a half. He vows to take quick action. A union official claims the workers are doing their job — at least until he is confronted with the evidence. Westinghouse officials who collect \$8.2 million in annual revenues from the CHA say they'll review the findings and comment later. And in the midst of all this we hear Mrs. Charlene Smith say of her son who fell 13 stories to his death when elevator doors swung open from the bottom, "The way my baby went, I don't feel that it should have ever happened."

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work in the Journalism of Outrage, which attempts to summon righteous indignation not merely at the individual tragedy but also at the moral disorder and social breakdown that the tragedy represents. Often, though not always, this form of journalism finds the blame for the suffering of innocent victims in the incompetence, indifference or illegal behavior of public officials and agencies. And typically it demands, at least implicitly, the response of the public and officials to the breakdown and disorder. This genre of journalism can, of course, be a force for social reform. But more fundamentally, it is a ritual of moral commitment and renewal. It offers the community an opportunity to test and affirm what is, and what is not, an outrage to the moral order. It is, then, part of the ongoing process through which the community continually reinforces — and occasionally realigns — the boundaries of that order.

Pam Zekman patrols the boundaries of the moral order under the auspices of WBBM-TV in Chicago. In the small office shared with her investigative team — an office in which Emmy and duPont/Columbia Awards have casually become bookends and paperweights for the books, directories, papers and files that are everywhere — Zekman talks about her kind of journalism. "I look for a subject, first of all, that is going to affect a broad spectrum of people — a subject that they can relate to," she says, "something that is more than just a single individual who may be hurting a small group of people." But Zekman's goal is not simply public appeal. "I look to whether or not it's an area where something needs to be done," she continues. "Is there a need for regulation? Is there a need for legislation? Is there a need for stepped-up enforcement by some governmental agency that's not doing its job?"

Zekman's criteria for a good investigative story are nowhere better exemplified than in "Killing Crime: A Police Cop-Out." She says of the story:

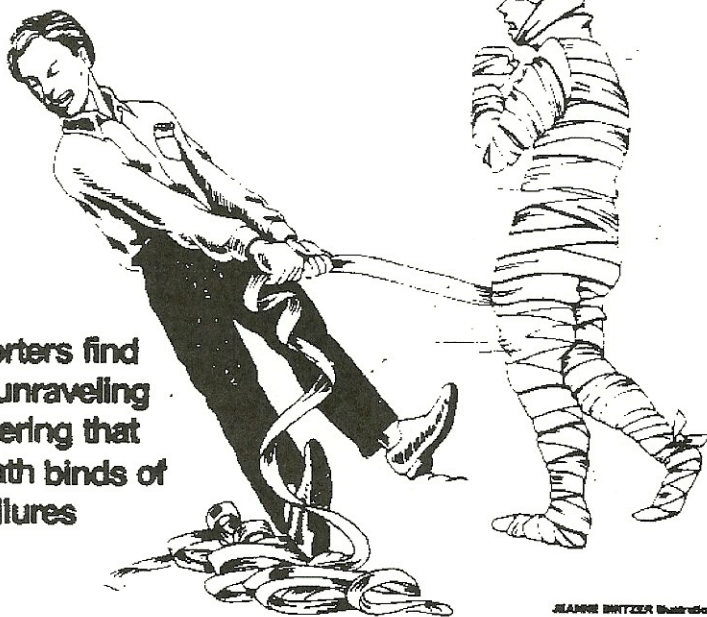
Killing crime was something that some of the black policemen had been screaming about for years. Nobody had paid much attention to it and I wanted to show that it affected more than just low-income residents.

That story was about a pervasive problem, a scandal in the police department, that was not necessarily the doing of one individual but a systematic pressure to kill crime reports being felt from the top. . . . Police Superintendent Brzezick got up at his last press conference before he resigned and announced that his audit had not only confirmed our findings but more. . . . It was the first time in my entire career that a public official had gotten up and admitted that everything we said — and more — was true. They completely changed the whole reporting system in the police department.

In Zekman's hands, the Journalism of Outrage is socially concerned but its focus is not the enduring social issue. Zekman is concerned with the poorest of Chicago's citizens and the safety of Chicago's streets, but her focus is not "the poverty issue" or "the crime issue." Rather, it is the elevator mechanics' failure to meet contractual obligations and the police department's violation of FBI crime-reporting guidelines. Similarly, a series titled "License to Deal," an investigation of clinics and pharmacies that provided the ingredients necessary to concoct a street drug called 'loads' to Medicaid patients, was not about "the drug issue."

The "License to Deal" series began as a tip, a complaint by a community group about one clinic. I wouldn't be interested in doing that story if it was only one clinic. We did some pre-

Project reporters find success in unravelling human suffering that hides beneath binds of systemic failures



JEANNE BRITZER illustration

liminary research and we discovered that it wasn't just one clinic. It was a chain of clinics and the more we got into it the bigger it grew. And then we learned that the combination of drugs that was being given out was "loads." It was something that had been a big problem in L.A. and then in New Jersey and now it was in Chicago.

So now I had a situation where I didn't have one community being affected by one bad clinic but I had fourteen clinics all over the city. I had a major new drug being abused in Chicago that had not been exposed, and then on top of that I had Medicaid fraud. . . . I think one of the things that really fascinated me was the morality of these people — doctors, pharmacists, owners — who could exploit addiction so callously.

"There are lots of stories about social issues that are interesting," Zekman says, "but unless they have that investigative edge, I'm not interested." The "investigative edge" is the exact combination of public importance and individual wrong-doing found in "License to Deal" or any other of Zekman's stories. "Some people would argue that I pick subjects for the villains and the heroes," Zekman concludes. "I don't get into a lot of shades of gray."

Jonathan Kaufman of the Boston Globe, is another reporter who unabashedly directs his efforts toward stories with potential for public interest and the possibility of change. "I love getting people's attention," he says. He wants his readers to respond, "Holy shit!" and "This is an outrage!" And when he feels he hasn't gotten this response — when he misjudges the boundaries of the moral order — he admits to frustration.

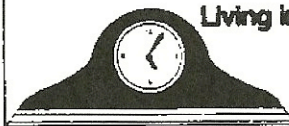
A series of reports by Kaufman and colleagues on racism in Boston won the Pulitzer Prize but probably would not have met Zekman's criteria for a story with the investigative edge. The series focused too much on the enduring social issue and documented too few specific acts of wrongdoing by those with power. Indeed, the series could serve to mark the point at which investigative reporting becomes another journalistic genre — interpretive reporting. However, the investigation of Massachusetts's most esteemed institutions, including Harvard, high-tech and the Globe itself was more of an attempt to "take names and kick ass" than most writing on "the racism issue." "We didn't put anybody in jail but by running those stories across the top of Page One of the Globe . . . you

change the way people talk about issues," says Kaufman. "That's what attracts me to it."

Kaufman takes pride in his ability to influence the moral agenda of his community. "I do the kind of reporting I do, in part, because I think newspapers should write for people who have no voices," he says. "If we're not going to write about homeless people and poor people and people discriminated against, who will?" He says he wants Boston to be the best city it can be and yet he rejects the idea that his work is driven by his own sense of moral correctness:

I think it was driven by a sense that it was important to the city. The Globe has been accused of being above the city and pointing down and saying, "You people should act better. You people should act like good, well-to-do liberals." My feeling here — and the way we wrote about institutions — was that this was crucial for the city to face. It wasn't something we wanted to impose on people but the city was being torn apart.

Newspapers are not just repositories of what happened yesterday. This was a very activist piece. It tried to say, "There's something important going on here that we must think about and think about hard."



Living in the slow lane

To be an investigative reporter is to live in the journalistic slow lane. To be an investigative reporter is, perhaps, to comb through 43 boxes of government files — 20,000 documents — as Bill Freivogel and Jon Sawyer of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch's Washington bureau did early in their investigation of a hometown company, General Dynamics Corp. Their reporting helped to revive the interest of the Justice Department and other federal agencies in an investigation of defense waste and fraud that had died in the early years of the Reagan administration. Their relentless tracking of the use — and misuse — of Pentagon dollars has also given them a tolerance for the frustration of dead ends, or even worse, loose ends. Sawyer provides an example:

I've been trying to find the former auditor of the F-16 plan in Fort Worth. He was very ag-

gressive in trying to gain access to records and was threatening to shut down payments to General Dynamics. He was the most aggressive auditor they'd ever had. He'd been there for only two months and suddenly he quits. He says he's going into the automotive parts business and refused to talk to anybody about it. Then General Dynamics makes a deal with the government that ends the access problem without giving access to the records that this guy had wanted.

It's become a joke in the office — "Where is Patrick Sanchez?" I bet I've made 300 calls. I've called every town in Oklahoma because somebody told me he'd moved to Oklahoma. Yesterday, I got a new lead from an assistant U.S. attorney in Dallas who's been working with DCAA (Defense Contract Auditing Agency) people in Texas for several years. He says, "Oh yeah, Patrick Sanchez. I know him. He's got a hell of a story to tell."

I put in a lot of time. . . . I talked to all the other DCAA people down there, I got all the company records. I got a company response. I got all these documents that Sanchez wrote about but it doesn't quite hang together without Sanchez.

"We waste a lot of time," says Pam Zekman. "I don't know how else to do it." Zekman understands very well, of course, that time is a scarce resource in journalism. "The practical facts of life are that your day-to-day beat reporter doesn't have the time — the luxury of time — that we have to probe behind what's being presented to him. It's all he can do to keep up with best requirements." For Zekman, the luxury of time-to-waste is another of the defining characteristics of investigative journalism. "I want to get into a subject where we can dig in and do a really responsible job. Some people don't want anything to do with that. They wouldn't have the patience for it."

If investigative reporters are different from other reporters, it is in this ability to stick with the story despite the pace of the work. I've got friends who would just go berserk if they have to go weeks without being in the paper, says Jon Sawyer. "If they're not in the paper every day they have this tremendous weight building." But Sawyer too feels the pressure to get something in the paper. "If I don't write a story today or tomorrow or the next day or by Friday, I feel like I better have something pretty good that I'm working on because I'm going to have to justify to myself and my editors the time that I've spent."

Lucy Morgan of the St. Petersburg Times first sensed a story about drug smuggling in Dixie County, Fla., when she saw a connection among the disposition of certain drug cases by the Florida grand jury system. Under the system in use at the time, a statewide grand jury could bring an indictment but the case would then go to the local venue in which the crime had occurred for prosecution. Morgan noticed that the indictments of a particular smuggling ring always seemed to "fall away to nothing" once they were returned to the local court system — especially in Dixie County.

Then she saw another connection:

About a year before, a group of detectives from one of the local agencies had come to me complaining that they had been following defendants up into that (Dixie County) area and found themselves fending off the law enforcement officers more than the smugglers. Then a prosecutor had told me that the marijuana smugglers had built a church in the county with their money, which was intriguing. Then a state attorney had told me that his biggest frustration was that elected officials from Dixie County would go to testify on behalf of the smugglers in other jurisdictions around the state every time the smugglers got caught.

I went to talk to the head of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement about the need for a statewide prosecutor, which we now have in Florida. . . . In the course of the conversation I asked him about the problems in Dixie County and he gave me some of the best quotes you would ever get about the endemic nature of the problem — the code of silence among the citizens and all of the other things that made it hard to investigate drug smuggling in that county.

I walked out of there thinking about what he had said — the totality of it. I called one of our editors and said, "You know I think I need to go down to Dixie County and play around awhile and see if there's not something to do." At that time my assignment was to roam around Florida.

I began by simply going to courthouses everywhere that there had been prosecutions related to Dixie County and just reading the records. I'm a great one for public records and . . . I usually make them the foundation of something that I'm starting.

The second thing I did was to try to develop a local source who could direct me. I called everybody I knew in law enforcement — state and federal — that might have a connection there trying to search out the names of people who were reputable, who were not part of the smuggling. I had great difficulty with that and found only one name tended to emerge over and over again.

At the end of the first week I went down and knocked on his door. I told him who I was and that I was there looking at the drug smuggling. He burst into tears and told me that I was an answer to a prayer.

Morgan got these stories not because she could smell news but because she could see potential newsworthy patterns — the similarities among events, the connections among cases. "I look for a trend" is how Morgan herself puts it. And, of course, she also knows how to document and describe the trend. Perhaps, then, it is an eye for trend-spotting rather than a nose for news that is the most prominent feature on the metaphorical physiognomy of the investigative reporter. In any case, this ability to find the story is the quintessential example of reportorial thinking-in-action.



Framing the story

Whether it is a connection that first catches a reporter's eye or a pattern that begins to emerge after the reporter investigates a tip, these recollections of getting down to work all reveal a struggle to "get a handle," "find the angle" or frame the issue.

One reporter who speaks explicitly of framing a story is Jonathan Kaufman. When pressed to define the concept of "frame" he argues that it is more than the "angle," that it is the "core" of the story. A story must, then, be framed much as a building is framed — to provide a basic internal structure. But when Kaufman recounts the early work on the racism investigation another sort of "frame" is suggested. A story, it seems, must also be framed as a picture is framed — to delineate it from the background and to focus attention:

I was at lunch with the assistant managing editor for local news — one of those get-to-know-the-boss lunches — and we started talking about race relations. He paused and said, "You know, you cannot have a meeting in the building these days without the subject turning to race again." A couple of weeks after that, he called me in and gave me a slip of paper from the executive editor saying, "I think it's time we began to look into this job discrimination thing to see if we can get any hard numbers."

Everyone knew Boston had problems in race relations, but the only way you'd be able to convince people was by actually documenting them. Anecdotes weren't going to get you anywhere because everybody had competing anecdotes. For every black guy you had being discriminated against, some white guy had a black guy who'd taken a job from him. It just didn't advance the argument at all.

I had learned when I was with the Wall Street Journal in Chicago that the federal government kept statistics about black managers so I decided to get those numbers and the initial memo (to the editors) was basically a description of those numbers which showed Boston had the lowest number, percentage-wise, of blacks in management positions across the board. . . . The memo went to the senior editors and they decided to do the project.



My background as a Globe reporter had been a lot of street reporting, a lot of neighborhood reporting. I was always right out in the neighborhoods writing stories and one of the things you'd always hear in the white neighborhoods of this city was "The Globe is fulla shit. . . . The Globe is too liberal. . . . I don't trust the Globe. . . . My dog puses on the Globe."

I thought for this to be useful, we have to get people to read it but how would you get people to read about an issue they were sick of reading about?

I remember talking to a reporter in the newsroom about it . . . and he said, "Well, the best way to do it would be to go after Tip O'Neil, Harvard or the Bank of Boston." All the coverage of busing had been focused on the working class people fighting with each other and no one had ever looked at the big institutions — the real players — and what they did.

That's basically how the series begins. We set out sights on the institutions — on the Bank of Boston, on Harvard, on the Globe itself — as if to say that these people are responsible for what's going on here. I think that appealed to people's sense of fairness. We weren't going to be picking on poor white working class people anymore. . . .

The next step for me was to get people to frame the issue in a way that would strike chords. I mean so much had been written about this issue and people had so many reflexive reactions to the whole question of job discrimination that I thought we had to find people who would really make it come alive, who would break through and give people pause.

It was a real revelation to me that none of these people were who I expected them to be. We spoke to all the usual suspects — all the usual characters and they said all the usual things. And it was only when we started going to the second- and third-level people, to people who don't get quoted in the paper, that we came up with images that turned out to be the most gripping — a black firefighter talking about how people at fires still call him "nigger."

At the same time, the other reporters were all doing their own reporting based on these statistics and that was really key to the piece. Once we had the numbers that showed what the situation was like, then it was a matter of finding what the reasons were and getting the examples.

Kaufman's interviews were more than a hunt for the good quote and the compelling anecdote. Based on his experience with other stories, he expected at some point to find several key interviewees whose perspectives would help him structure his thinking about the problem and to help him fit the pieces together. "I've discovered that the best way to do it is to just dive into it and the framing thing tends to occur," he says. "I call up the ten most interesting people who know this issue and one of them will usually come through with it."

Kaufman has come to call the interview in which someone comes through with the frame the "break-through" interview. One such interview in the racism investigation was with a deputy affirmative action officer at Harvard. "I walked into his office and two hours later I had the piece written," Kaufman recalls. "He had framed the issue in such a way that it suddenly made sense to me. He had basically made the major points that I knew I needed to make in the piece." For Kaufman, too, the experience is that of puzzle pieces clicking into place:

I feel it's almost an intuitive thing. I sense when I've got the frame. It fits, you know? It's almost like you're trying to get a piece to fit into a puzzle. You're gonna turn it this way, this way, this way and then suddenly it clicks right in and it all seems to fall in place. If I'm still thinking a lot about a story it's not framed right. But once I've got that frame down . . . I can sleep fine because I'm not thinking about it.