



## Lost art of infiltration

■ **William Gaines**

*University of Illinois, USA*

No one in a newsroom today would dare suggest that a reporter get information through any kind of subterfuge and certainly not by secretly getting a job in the ranks of the target of a newspaper investigation. Such thoughts made the newspapers' lawyers very nervous in the 1970s and today I fear they would respond with derision.

Today there is something called ethics that we thought of in Chicago in the 1970s as a poor excuse for not getting the story. Also today, common sense tells one that if a patient in a nursing home or hospital was injured in the course of medical care and it turned out that the orderly handling the patient was a reporter untrained in health care, it would cause a nightmare of litigation that would be discussed in law schools throughout the century. But such adventures did occur at the major newspapers in Chicago and I saw the idea develop, hit its stride, and then pass away.

As a reporter at the *Chicago Tribune*, I went undercover and reported on my experiences in seven undercover jobs from 1973 until 1979. I had been a police reporter in the suburbs in the sixties when the *Tribune* had no designated investigative reporters. However, George Bliss, who had won a Pulitzer for an exposé of the Metropolitan Sanitary District in 1963, had important sources and worked up many investigations. He would go into a bar dressed like a carpenter with a hammer and nail pouch hanging on his belt and place a numbers bet. He would write up a few such incidents as a report of wide open gambling in the suburbs. The next day, he would want a follow-up story and would ask me to 'get the state's attorney to say' that he was going to start an investigation. I called the state's attorney and was lectured on the fact that Bliss had written in a previous story reporting that the state's attorney was going to follow up on the exposé when he actually had said no such thing. The state's attorney told me that there was an ongoing investigation of illegal gambling and Bliss' article had nothing to do with it.

Bliss took the quotes from me in silence. The next morning, there were huge headlines stating an investigation by the state's attorney was underway based on Bliss' previous article. I called Bliss and said I was afraid the state's attorney was misquoted again. 'What's he going to do about it?' Bliss asked. 'Hold a news conference and say he is not going to conduct an investigation?' He did not.

It was in this atmosphere that undercover reporting was born. We were aggressive and righteous. Bliss had the blessing of Clayton Kirkpatrick, the editor who delivered the *Tribune* from out of the stifling biases of the recently deceased Colonel Robert McCormick and into the reality of the 1960s. Bliss suggested an undercover job as an ambulance driver and a rising new reporter, William Jones, got the assignment. Jones won a Pulitzer Prize in 1971 for his work, in which he showed that patients with no money were being turned down by ambulance drivers.

Jones and Bliss then organized the Tribune Task Force, a group of four reporters who worked only on special projects. They produced a series on nursing homes for which they all got undercover jobs and had another Pulitzer winner with a series on election fraud, in which reporter William Mullen worked undercover in the elections board office. Also at the time there was a unique partnership with the Better Government Association (BGA), a civic organization dedicated to ferreting out local political corruption by helping newspapers. At one point, Bliss went over to the BGA and worked from there with Jones and his team. I believe that now this outside influence would be widely frowned upon.

When Jones became city editor, he selected Pam Zekman to become head of the Task Force and I became a member. I had done some investigations in the suburbs that Jones liked. (Pam later became a TV reporter for CBS in Chicago where her reports got top ratings.) My first assignment was to go undercover and work with bill collectors and expose how abusive they were to debtors and people mistaken to be debtors. I believe one of my bill collectors was the most colorful of them all and I had some exciting observations to relate. It was about two years later that I and William Crawford, another Task Force reporter, told of our bill collection experiences to the US House Banking Committee, which was considering new regulations.

The readers responded to us favorably, the journalism community gave us awards, and even Congress loved us. We had cause to believe that we were on the good side and above criticism.

In 1975 we had a tipster who told us janitors were often called into the surgery room at Von Solbrig Hospital to help move the patients. I falsified my credentials, got a job as a janitor there and was called several times to move unconscious patients back to their beds. I was told to bypass the 'Recovery

Room' where unconscious patients are to be taken so their vital signs can be monitored by a registered nurse until they awaken. But there was no time for a stop at the recovery room at Von Solbrig, where families of five or more had their tonsils extracted in assembly-line fashion and a bill was sent off to public aid. The stories were shocking in a city where it takes a lot to shock people. The hospital closed and never reopened, I testified to Congress again and we won a Pulitzer. One of the Pulitzer judges praised our series for infiltrating the target of our investigation.

I then worked undercover as a salesman of truck driver school enrollments, seller of medical insurance, and a democratic precinct worker, always falsifying my credentials. Bill Rechtenwald, who had come over from the BGA to become an investigative reporter, worked undercover as a guard in a prison. But Zekman had gone to the rival *Sun Times* and was hatching the biggest, most elaborate undercover reporting ever. The reporters set up a bar which they called 'The Mirage' to see how many inspectors would come and solicit bribes. It was on their property so they could set up concealed cameras. The beer business was good but the bribes were hardly solicited and came off more like tips. Nevertheless, the stories were an international sensation. I was jealous, but I believe the investigation missed the mark because people remembered what the reporters did but not what they found.

At that time, I was asked by Bernie Judge, my editor, to come up with an idea that would not be similar but would top the Mirage. I suggested that we buy a house in a black neighborhood, have estimates for home improvement loans, insurance and repair work and then move the house to a white neighborhood and get the estimates again to prove that there is a cost to racial redlining. I had a mover all set to go but Bernie said no. A good editor has a way of saying no, and he explained that it would be merely a stunt and not good journalism because the same comparisons could be made with existing houses in black and white neighborhoods.

When Pulitzer time came in April everyone stood around the teletype to see announcement of the Mirage selection come across but it never did. It is widely believed in journalism circles that Ben Bradlee, editor of *The Washington Post* at the time of Watergate, spoke out against it, saying that it was improper for a reporter to use deceit to get a story. In any case undercover reporting was dealt a mighty blow.

Actually, it had already gone out of style in an era of increased news coverage by television. When we learned of conditions at Von Solbrig from a janitor, we could not print his word for it. I had to become the janitor and write to the reader that I had seen it. In television, a camera eliminates the need for the first person account because when the camera goes undercover the viewer experiences the story.

I gave up undercover reporting and dedicated my career to digging out documents from musty courthouse basements. I shared a Pulitzer in 1988 for a series on corruption in Chicago City Council that included no undercover work. Of course, it is not as difficult to find corruption in the city council as in a hospital. I have joked that if undercover reporting comes back in style, I will be ready with my mop and bucket. But I can say that safely because I know it will not return. It was a unique chapter in journalism that exposed wrongdoing and waste, and got protection for victims of fraud.

Okay, so we had a little fun doing it.

### **Biographical note**

**William Gaines** is a Professor of Journalism at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

*Address:* University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign, 601 E. John Street, Champaign, IL 61820-5711.