

C.I.A. Contacts With Reporters

Officials and Newsmen
Call Method Legitimate

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 24—The situation is a familiar one for American correspondents abroad: a fast-breaking news story, possibly in the midst of a war; conflicting claims from both sides; no sure information on what is really happening.

Often, in such a situation, the "station chief," the head of the Central Intelligence Agency unit in the local American Embassy, is one of the more neutral and reliable sources of information. Even in more peaceful circumstances, including here in Washington, the C.I.A. frequently has information and analysis that is not otherwise available.

Is it legitimate for a correspondent to seek it?

The answer, in the view of both journalists and Government officials, is yes. Under the American system of free and open communication by reporters with Government officials, the intelligence community is as legitimate a source as the Interior Department. By the same token, the information the C.I.A. provides must be weighed for bias and accuracy, no more—and no less—carefully than that from any other source.

The only distinction, in fact, is the sensitivity of the subject matter. Clearly, estimates of Soviet nuclear capability are and should be more closely held than estimates of the wheat crop in Kansas. But beyond that, the principle involved for the journalist is the same.

An Unusual Tradition

This tradition of Government openness to reporters, even in the intelligence field, is found only in the United States. Even in Britain, the contacts between a correspondent and intelligence officials are likely to be much more narrow and constrained than those of their American counterparts.

The American system is rooted in the constitutionally guaranteed concept of a free press, in which a correspondent is understood to have the right, even the obligation, to seek information from any official of any rank in order to present an accurate picture. Were it to do less, the press would be reduced to the role of simply conveying the official pronouncements of Government.

It is when this relationship is perverted, by Government officials who suborn newsmen or newsmen who lend themselves to subornation, that the system goes awry.

The abuses described in the New York Times series beginning today fall into three general categories: C.I.A. agents who posed as reporters, correspondents employed by legitimate news organiza-

Most C.I.A. propaganda was planted overseas, but it was once 'commonplace,' a former agency official said, for United States newspapers to pick it up.



Allen Dulles

In 1954, he told a New York Times executive that he did not believe the paper's Mexico correspondent was capable of reporting with objectivity on impending Guatemala revolution.



Lyman B. Kirkpatrick

He could not recall any C.I.A. official's ever questioning the ethics or legality of the agency's endeavors in mass communications.

The C.I.A.'s involvement with mass communications in this country was sometimes aimed at censoring impending accounts of the agency's own activities.

tions who were also hired for covert work by the C.I.A. and, finally, the reporters, columnists and commentators who were considered "friendly assets" by the C.I.A. and were given special information, sometimes with a special propaganda purpose, in the hope that it would be faithfully reproduced for the public.

The first two categories pose no problem from the journalists' point of view. They are outright violations of every code of ethics in the trade and serve only to discredit the entire profession.

The third group, the so-called "friendly" journalists, inhabit a problematic gray area. They have to draw a line between being informed and being used. If they weigh and scrutinize the information they receive, there is nothing inherently wrong in using it, so long as its source is indicated. But uncritical acceptance and rote publication of such information can lead to pitfalls. And the very fact that such journalists are considered "friendly"—meaning generally sympathetic to the agency's point of view—greatly increases the chances of their

being "used" to suit the agency's purposes, even if they never accept a dime in payment.

Legitimate contacts between the C.I.A. and the press have gone on for years and in fact have accelerated in recent years as part of the agency's much advertised "openness program." Correspondents in Washington, for example, are free to visit the C.I.A.'s campus-like headquarters in nearby McLean, Va., to get the benefit of the thinking of the agency's specialists. A total of 148 of these "background" sessions have been held so far in 1977.

Free-Ranging Conversations

The conversations are free-ranging, with the reporter free to ask anything he likes. The intelligence officers, a senior C.I.A. official said, "are under instructions to answer as fully as possible without disclosing secret material."

As a rule, the conversations are "on background," which means that the views expressed may be attributed to "Government officials" or the like. Some-

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times the agency will permit attribution to "intelligence officials," but only rarely to the agency itself.

Overseas, the relationship between correspondent and station chief is much less structured. Conversations take place casually and frequently, sometimes in the American Embassy but more often over lunch or at a cocktail party. Again, the information is usually offered on background and frequently will be attributed in the article to "American officials."

These contacts are considered by most journalists and intelligence officials to be part of the normal information-gathering process.

Another, more delicate problem arises when an intelligence officer turns the tables and attempts to question a correspondent on interviews he may have had or places he may have visited. Such situations occur frequently, and there is honest debate among journalists today about what information, if any, can be legitimately passed along.

The general rule, accepted by many correspondents, is that a reporter may discuss anything he would—or, ideally, already has—put into print. But the temptation for a trade-off of information is always there, and many reporters have no doubt succumbed.

The risks inherent in that situation are obvious. But as a result of the recent revelations about illicit C.I.A.-press contacts, correspondents today are probably more sensitive to the pitfalls than before.