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The Press/Spy Affair: Cozy and Still Murky

The press has emerged from still another exposure of its escapades in the spy business with nothing more than a few scratches. Unlike scandals involving public officials, those involving the press are self-limiting: There is a flurry of superficial attention followed by benign neglect.

The latest examination of coziness between the CIA and the press was, as usual, not in the "serious," hard-news press. It appeared in Rolling Stone, a magazine devoted mostly to rock music.

The author was Carl Bernstein of Watergate fame, no longer a Washington Post reporter but a free-lancer. It was a long article (about 12,000 words), and it contained an attention-getting estimate of the number of journalists who have played ball and more with the CIA: 400. Many of the specifics had been reported before, but the article conveyed, as no previous one had, the depth of CIA involvement with the press and its sanction in the executive suites.

Probably the most serious injury was done "The New York Times. Bernstein identified The Times as one of the CIA's most valuable news-business connections. He quoted an unnamed CIA source as saying that between 1960 and 1966 The Times provided cover for about 10 CIA people as part of a top-level agreement to cooperate with the agency. Among the journalists he singles out as having close CIA ties was C. L. Sulzberger, foreign-affairs columnist of The Times.

When Bernstein and Rolling Stone distributed copies of the article a few weeks before its publication, The Times carried a column-long news story and, a

day later, a longer story consisting largely of denials, including strong ones from The Times and Sulzberger.

With the second article, The Times published a letter to the CIA pleading for information on any past or current relationships with the newspaper or its employees.

Nothing the allegations in the Bernstein article, The Times told the CIA that its refusal to disclose its dealings with the media "has placed The Times and its employees in an untenable position." It stated a much broader problem than its own when it said: "The American public is confused and some foreign

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governments are using this situation as a weapon against the press. . . . The work of correspondents has been hindered and, because we have been denied access to our only source of authoritative information, we are unable to present all the facts to the public."

The CIA was unmoved. It said that it would not provide the information and, furthermore, that by its refusal it was not admitting such information existed.

The Times's frustration is understandable, and yet one must wonder what would happen if it unleashed a team of its own top reporters on the story. Bernstein seems to have been able to find talkative CIA sources, despite the official stonewalling.

Publication of the Bernstein article

was marked by an entertaining bit of infighting between the author and his old employer. The Washington Post.

After the text of the article was made available to the press, but several weeks before its publication, The Post carried a long article on CIA and the press in general and the Bernstein article in particular.

This article, by Richard Harwood, deputy managing editor of The Post, and Walter Pincus, a Post reporter, was mostly rehash. But it contained an allegation of a serious flaw in the Bernstein piece, tucked discreetly between parentheses: A Senate source was quoted as saying that at least half of the 400 CIA summaries of operations involving journalists received by Senate investigators concerned foreign, not American, journalists.

A telling blow if true, but Bernstein got in the last lick. When his article appeared in Rolling Stone it contained a paragraph that hadn't been in the earlier version. It said that a "relatively small number of the summaries described the activities of foreign journalists." And in a dig at The Post for relying on a Senate source rather than on CIA sources, Bernstein added: "Those officials most knowledgeable about the subject say that a figure of 400 American journalists is on the low side of the actual number who maintained covert relationships and undertook clandestine tasks."

Something more should be said about that 400 figure. First of all, just how deeply involved were these journalists? That's a little murky. Bernstein said at one point that the figure "refers only to

those who were 'tasked' in their undercover assignments or had a mutual understanding that they would help the agency or were subject to some form of CIA contractual control." It does not, he said, include the journalists who occasionally traded favors or information with the CIA. It is a pretty broad definition, and it is not helped by Bernstein's tortured efforts to make his lead-off case, a 1963 trip columnist Joseph Alsop made to the Philippines, qualify as a CIA "assignment."

In any case, the estimate that 400 journalists worked for or with the CIA over 25 years is less startling when one remembers that early last year, after much pruning by the agency, a Senate report found that the CIA still had covert relationships with 50 American journalists and other employees of American media organizations.

Bernstein's article was interesting and useful. He clearly did a lot of dogged legwork. But its value is mostly as history.

The give-and-take that goes on between journalists and sources undoubtedly will continue with CIA sources, who often can be extremely valuable. But the systematic use of the American press for intelligence purposes seems to be a thing of the past.

One problem area does remain, however. That is the CIA's use of the foreign press. The agency has refused to renounce this activity, even though it smacks of hypocrisy and is bound to be an international irritant. Congress could ban it in the CIA charter now being drafted, but it is too early to predict that it will.