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News Business, Spy Business

The news business has been blessed with its own little CIA embarrassment. Now let's see what it does with it.

The latest links between the spy business and the news business came to light in the usual way. A partial early draft of a report of the House intelligence committee was leaked.

The report revealed that the Central Intelligence Agency had 11 fulltime secret agents working overseas in the guise of journalists last year. It further revealed that 15 television, radio, newspaper and magazine companies provided cover for these agents, apparently knowingly.

If these disclosures had a familiar ring, don't blame *deja vu*. The situation is not a new one. It first came to light in 1973.

The 1973 version was first published by the Washington Star after CIA Director William Colby dropped a hint, purposely or inadvertently, at a meeting with Star editors. The story then was that the CIA had on its payroll three dozen American journalists working abroad. Some were fulltime agents. At that time it was not disclosed whether their employers—their news business employers, that is—were knowingly providing cover.

The story reported a promise by Colby that he would get rid of five fulltime agents who were masquerading as correspondents for general circulation news organizations. He said he would not get rid of more than 30 agents who worked for specialized publications or who were not fulltime correspondents for any single organization.

This latter group included "stringers"—free lance correspondents who sell their work to news outlets on a piece basis, sometimes with yearly retainers or guarantees.

How has the situation changed since then? How many journalists or fake journalists are now working wholly or partly for CIA? Did the agency get rid of the five who worked for general news organizations? If it did, have others

replaced them? It's all very murky, which is probably the way the agency wants it.

One thing is clear, though. The House committee report and recent statements by Colby on the eve of his departure from CIA make it clear that he considers stringers fair game. The CIA is still using them and apparently it will continue to do so unless its new director, George Bush, decrees otherwise.

The press showed little interest in the 1973 revelations. The Star's exclusive was followed by the usual catch-up stories in the rest of the media and then there was silence. Ironically, the most thorough examination of the CIA-press relationship was an article by Stuart H. Loory in the Columbia Journalism Review, a magazine seldom seen by members of the general public.

That pattern may be repeating itself. The disclosures in the House committee's draft report got passing attention in the newspapers and on radio and television. Since then, at least up until this writing, there has been silence.

One wonders how the media would have handled it if the disclosure had been that the CIA had 11 fulltime agents stashed away in the overseas offices of, say, the big oil companies. The investigative bloodhounds of the Washington press corps would not have rested until the names of the companies providing shelter for the spies, and probably the names of the agents themselves, were delivered to the public.

This is not to say that reporters aren't working on the story. They are. But the usual congressional sources don't seem to be leaking this time; either they don't have the names or they are being exceptionally tight-lipped.

Nevertheless, the press should not again let this matter sink from view until it resurfaces, a few months or years from now, with new figures but with the same basic fact: pollution of

the news business by the spy business.

The identities of the journalists taking CIA money and of the CIA agents posing as journalists should be made known, and soon. If publication could endanger some in foreign posts, the agency should be given time—a brief time—to get them out.

This publication should include the names of the CIA's stringers as well as the fulltime reporters on the take and the agents masquerading as reporters. Although most newspapers designate stories from stringers differently from those of regular staffers in the fine type under the byline, readers can't be expected to make the distinction. A corrupted stringer is just as harmful to the news business as a corrupted fulltime reporter.

Furthermore, and perhaps most important, the names of the news organizations that knowingly have given cover to CIA agents should be made public.

These measures I recommend may seem harsh. But they are necessary if the news business is to be cleansed. The alternative is that American journalists in foreign countries must operate under a cloud and the stories they provide must be suspect.

Colby's insensitivity to the role of the press in an open society can be excused. After all, he had his business to run and, as he has pointed out, his agents needed cover of some kind.

But the news business has no such excuse. The First Amendment protection under which it operates requires, not in words but certainly in intent, that it keep faith with the public. That faith is not kept when the line between press and government is breached—and particularly when it is breached in a way that taints the press with the suspicion of espionage.

Embarrassing though the CIA connection is, the press should use all its considerable skill to ferret out and print the details. This is one leak really worth pursuing.