

How the FBI Used Reporters

6/1/76 Ex-Officials Say Trading of Data Helped Bureau

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Deputy Associate FBI Director James B. Adams told a House subcommittee recently that the "FBI still is using journalists as informants," but he ducked questions on what kinds of relationships exist.

Adams also declined to say how many journalists are involved.

The disclosures of the Central Intelligence Agency's clandestine use of reporters led recently to adoption of a new CIA policy barring such relationships

with reporters accredited to American news organizations.

The FBI, however, refuses to describe its journalist-informant program.

Adams told the House subcommittee that the "FBI does not exclude newsmen as informants as a matter of policy if they want to assist criminal or foreign intelligence investigations."

He did not distinguish between reporters who exchange information informally with the FBI as they work on stories and those who the FBI pay in return for cooperation.

Although present FBI officials refused to discuss the roles of journalist-informants a few former top bureau officials agreed to discuss them in general terms.

"Throughout the years," said one former assistant director, "we had tremendous assistance from the press. We got a lot of help and we gave a lot of help."

Most of what the FBI gave was news stories and information.

"I would doubt there was any paying [of money] on an extensive scale," said another official. "If anyone was going to get information and needed help," he added, "the bureau would pay expenses."

Reporters were used to distribute stories of the FBI in the COINTELPRO operation and to gather information in criminal and domestic intelligence areas.

One former official said the relationships with reporters under the late FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover were of three main types.

• Special contacts. These

were the highest-ranking confidential sources—executives, editors, publishers in the news business, corporate leaders, university presidents and some members of Congress. They would be infrequently and only with Hoover's personal approval.

"These people would never be paid," one former FBI official said. "If they went abroad, however, the FBI legal attache would meet them at the airport with a car, help them with shopping, perhaps get a discount on a hotel bill."

The Senate intelligence committee report gives an illustration of the use to which a "special contact" was put.

In 1964, according to the report, the FBI through its relationship with the board chairman of a national circulation magazine was able to squelch an "unfavorable article about the bureau" and forestall publication of an article by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

• Special sources. These are people at the working level of news organizations. Most are reporters on local newspapers who trade information with the local agents.

In Washington, however, the FBI's assistant director in charge of the Criminal Records Division for years had the responsibility under Hoover for developing what one former FBI official called "a stable of conservative newsmen" with whom he could plant stories.

Special sources also were employed on the mechanical side of newspapers and in

book publishing houses. At that level they could give FBI agents proofs of news stories and occasionally of books before they were published.

These people were not paid for their assistance to the bureau. The reporters profited professionally by the information they received and were given occasional gifts such as luggage, or golf clubs, according to former officials.

The Senate intelligence committee gave many examples of reporters taking part in the FBI's "Mass Media Program" by writing articles based on bureau material.

In September 1969, for example, according to an FBI memo, material on the "widening rift" between black militants and New Left activists was to be delivered to "a nationally syndicated columnist to focus attention on this developing situation."

The committee was unsuccessful in its attempts to find out the name of this columnist and others referred to in documents received from the FBI.

• Informants. The bureau had three classes of informants: walk-ins, or potential informants who are not paid but can have expenses reimbursed; potential security informants who are paid for the information they deliver, and security informants who are paid regular salaries as long as they provide satisfactory information.

Reporters who are informants are almost always in the first category, according to FBI sources.