

SF Examiner

Guy Wright

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The Jailed Newsmen

Peter Bridge is a young reporter serving time in jail for refusing to tell the politicians how much he knows about their crooked deals.

Other reporters have endured the same treatment. Others are right now threatened with it. And the list will grow.

As the list grows you will read less and less in your newspaper about how you are being robbed. The crooked politicians will be free. And the honest reporters will be behind bars. Neat, isn't it?

Bridge wrote a series for the Newark News about an attempt to bribe a housing official. His series was enough to tell any sharp DA where to start digging.

Instead, the reporter was hauled before a grand jury and ordered to tell how much more he knew.

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CAN YOU IMAGINE a more effective maneuver by a corrupt political machine to hush up a scandal? If the reporter doesn't know much, perhaps some City Hall underling can be made the scapegoat and the case quickly closed. If he knows a great deal, it may be necessary to ax some of the higher-ups.

I don't say that was the motive which moved New Jersey officials to make such curious use of a grand jury, but to honorable men the possibility should be embarrassingly apparent.

Eighty-five questions reporter Bridge answered. On five he balked. That's understandable. In digging out the kind of story he was after, it is not uncommon for a newsman to agree to omit details that would reveal the identity of his news sources.

For refusing to answer those five questions, Bridge is in jail and will remain there for the term of the grand jury — which has been twice extended.

There has been increasing use of star chamber inquisitions to make newsmen disclose how they get embarrassing information.

Joseph Weiler wrote a series for the Memphis Commercial Appeal about child abuse in a state mental hospital. A state legislative committee ordered him to name his sources. He refused and now faces jail.

Which raises a question. Are Tennessee politicians concerned about child abuse? Or about hospital employes who blab?

Edwin Goodman, of radio station WBAI in New York, spent three days in jail for refusing to give a DA a tape of his coverage of a jail riot.

Paul Branzburg did a series on narcotics traffic for the Louisville Courier-Journal, refused to tell a grand jury more than he had written, was sentenced to jail and found it prudent to move to Michigan when the Supreme Court upheld his Kentucky conviction.

William Farr wrote a story about the Manson trial for the L.A. Herald-Examiner that angered a judge. California has a law protecting the confidentiality of news sources. But when Farr later quit his job on the paper, a court held he had forfeited his immunity. He now faces jail for refusing to name his source, unless he wins an appeal.

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THERE IS NO protection of news sources in the federal court system. Thus Earl Caldwell, who did a series on the Black Panthers for the New York Times, is still fighting federal incarceration for refusing to surrender his notebooks and tapes to a federal grand jury.

If he loses, it's the stoney lonesome—he has shredded the notes and erased the tapes.

But the classic case is that of Peter Bridge in the Jersey housing scandal. Besides the matter of principle, he is paying a personal price.

His paper, the Newark News, recently folded. So there's no paycheck while he is in jail. And Judge H. Curtis Meanor, a man for whom it is difficult not to feel contempt, refused to stay the jail sentence until after Bridge's pregnant wife had their baby.