

A TELEPRESS CONFERENCE BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND ASIA

# Challenges and Prospects of Investigative Reporting

**PANELISTS IN THE UNITED STATES :**

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 and  
 Freedom for Media Studies Center  
 Columbia University  
 New York, New York

**JONATHAN NEUMANN**  
 "Philadelphia Inquirer" Newspaper  
 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

**PANELISTS IN KUALA LUMPUR :**

**MOCHTAR LUBIS**, Indonesia  
 Chairman  
 Press Foundation of Asia

**S M ALI**, Bangladesh  
 Chief Editor  
 "Daily Star" Newspaper  
 Bangladesh

**SHAMSHUDIN ABDUL RAHIM**  
 Dean of Communications  
 National University of Malaysia

**PROCEEDINGS**

**MATHEWS :** I will first begin by introducing the panelists in the United States. They are Bill Dedman from New York and Jonathan Neumann from Philadelphia.

Bill Dedman is a fellow at the Freedom for Media Studies Center at Columbia University in New York city. He is writing a hand book for journalists called "Power Reporting: Your Complete Guide to Computer-Assisted Journalism."

In the late 1980s, he wrote a series of articles on "The Color of Money." These articles were on racial discrimination by banks and savings and loan associations. For his work, he received the 1989 Pulitzer Prize in investigative reporting.

Dedman, was, for a brief period, a staff writer for the "Washington Post."

Jonathan Neumann is editor in charge of investigative reporting for the "Philadelphia Inquirer." The "Inquirer" is one of the top investigative newspapers in the United States.

Here in Kuala Lumpur we have with us two distinguished personalities from Asia. From Indonesia, we have Mochtar Lubis and from Bangladesh, S M Ali. Let me introduce them to you individually.

Mochtar Lubis is chairman of the Press Foundation of Asia. A veteran journalist of Indonesia, he is well-known worldwide. He is one of the members of the famous McBride Commission. He was also one of the authors of the "New World Information Order."

He accounts for 50 years of journalistic experience, having also served as editor for a number of dailies in Indonesia.

S M Ali is the chief editor of the "Daily Star" of Bangladesh. Formerly, he was managing editor of the "Bangkok Post" in Bangkok and the Hong Kong Standard in Hong Kong. He also served as roving editor of the "Straits Times" in Singapore.

A former director of the Press Foundation of Asia, he retired as the Regional Communications Advisor of UNESCO for Asia prior to his present post.

My name is Philip Mathews. I'm the coordinator of this discussion. With us in this conference call are over 30 editors and senior journalists taking part in a seminar on development journalism.

Today is the last of the three-day seminar. We have one hour for questions and answers. Without much ado, I would like now to introduce to you Mr. Mochtar Lubis, who will ask the first questions.

**LUBIS :** Hello, Bill. May I call you Bill? Good morning from here, maybe good evening in your place.

**DEDMAN :** Yes, Good morning to you, sir.

**LUBIS :** And also Jonathan — can I call you John?

**NEUMANN :** Certainly.

**LUBIS :** My question is first to Bill. Bill, how do you — how could you break into the bank computers? I think everybody in this room in Kuala Lumpur would like to hear from you.

And to John, I would like to ask you, how far do you go with your investigative reporting? Even to impersonating other people?

**DEDMAN :** We did not break into the bank computers. This story was referred to as an example of what we call "computer-assisted reporting," not "dynamite-assisted reporting."

Because of allegations of discrimination in this country by lenders in the 1960s and 1970s, laws were established. The advocacy groups and neighborhood organizations were not able to get strict controls on lending to ensure fairness, but they were able to get disclosure of information about where banks made loans and where they did not.

One could obtain, on paper or computer, a list from the federal government, of the number of loans made in each area by each lending institution for residential loans. From then on, it's just a simple matter of counting and sorting and cross-indexing that information with Census information to show race and income and property values in these neighbourhoods.

I think we often find that the most powerful tool is not any sort of political editorial or opinion, but merely a rather dry, even-handed, even-toned, conservative statement of the facts.

As to the question of how far to go, there is a great difference of opinion in this country on such questions as whether or not an investigative reporter can pretend to be someone else. That's a practice that's generally frowned upon.

I must admit that it's frowned upon more often by editors when one asks in advance if it's permitted and less often after the fact, when one has found out something of note by doing so.

**NEUMANN :** In answer to your question of how far do we go, I took that to mean two things.

How far — what subjective matters do we feel that we can pursue safely, or are we on dangerous ground, or will the government interfere, or are we in danger of doing reporting of certain types of subjects?

And the answer to that is that there really is no government censorship at all when it comes to newspaper reporting here. We look and very frequently do write about local and federal government corruption, wrong-doing, in terms of individuals who may have taken bribes or some something illegal as well as departments, such as the police, a local police department that may frequently use brutality in doing their investigations.

So there really is no limit as to the subject matters that we can investigate, and we don't feel any restrictions as far as our government is concerned.

We do feel restrictions in terms of our being as fair as possible in writing the story and also, for our own concerns, there are courts in the United States in which newspapers are frequently sued for libel by the people we write about; and increasingly, in the last ten years, there have been more suits filed against newspapers just for the fact that we've written stories.

So there's a lot of pressure on a newspaper, not only to do a story accurately but to make sure that it can defend itself in court, not just on the matter of the fact, but knowing that issues of fairness and people's personalities will come up.

So we're more concerned with fairness than we are with government censorship.

**MATHEWS :** Dedman and Neumann, can I ask a supplementary question? What, in your view, are special challenges that computer-aided journalism poses?

**DEDMAN :** Are you asking about computer-aided journalism? Is that what you ask?

**MATHEWS :** Computer-aided journalism — do they pose

*In February, we published a short report on a telepress conference on investigative journalism in which two experts in the United States joined in a 60-minute conversation with a group of senior editors in Asia. The report evoked considerable interest, especially from students of journalism. Thanks to the assistance from the Asia Foundation, the United States Information Services, Dhaka and the Kuala Lumpur-based Asian Institute for Development Communication (AIDCOM) which had organised the seminar in Kuala Lumpur, The Daily Star now publishes the transcript of the discussion conducted by Philip Mathews of the New Straits Times, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.*

any special kind of challenges to modern-day journalists? **NEUMANN :** Well, yes and no. At our newspaper and at a lot of the larger newspapers, we have people on staff full-time whose expertise is in computers and interpreting data, in addition to newspaper reporters.

So in some ways, the challenge is for the computer experts rather than the reporters. But for the most part reporters are out in the field interviewing people or getting records. If it means getting computer tapes, computer information, and we have difficulty in interpreting it or sorting it out, we do have computer experts who work with at the paper to do that.

**DEDMAN :** I would agree with that, certainly. I think using the computer in reporting provides many more opportunities than it does present problems.

The main opportunity, I think, is to examine — and this, I think, is the primary function of the press — is to examine those institutions and people that hold power, whether they are businesses or the government or individuals, and examining of documents or looking at a large set of information or data with a computer can allow one to get beyond what the newspaper usually relies upon, which is what the government says about itself.

In this country and, I'm sure, in others, the great mass of what's reported is press releases and press conferences and briefings and interviews and announcements; and these are often self-serving, and when they're not that, then they are frequently manipulative or conflicting, and whatever they are, they don't help citizens make informed judgements, not about what the government is saying but about what it is doing. That often is the power of the ability to analyze a large volume of information.

**MATHEWS :** We'll now move on to S M Ali.

**ALI :** My question should be to both, Bill and Jonathan, because these are two very general questions.

We are all very, very impressed throughout the world by your track record on investigative reporting with some of the most earth-shaking stories. And I'm looking back on Watergate and a few other things.

What would be your assessment, Bill and Jonathan, of your track record on local issues, local issues that do not make big headlines around the world, but could well, very well mean, a lot to the people in the United States? That's my first question.

And I might as well pose you the second one, so you can take your time answering both. We get the feeling here, in Southeast Asia or Asia, that the biggest problem in investigative reporting is sources cannot be named, government records cannot be examined, so you rely very much on hearsay or, to go back to the Watergate, to that so-called "Deep Throat". Doesn't it pose a problem of accuracy and credibility when it comes to major investigative reporting?

And those were my two questions, and you take your time answering them.

**NEUMANN :** I'll take the first crack at that.

Most of the investigative reporting that we do, and most of the reporting that's done in the United States is local; it's not national. Obviously, in foreign countries, you would not hear about the local news; you would hear about the news about Washington. And I think we could do a lot more investigative reporting locally but, for the most part, that's what we do, and we look at what's going on in our cities and in our local communities.

As far as we're concerned at the "Philadelphia Inquirer", it is virtually a requirement that the people, the sources, are named in stories and that people who are quoted are quoted by name and that when we get records or documents, that we refer specifically to the records and where they come from, because we think the credibility of the stories is absolutely essential and that, as you pointed out, if you don't name people and if you have anonymous quotes, to a certain extent you're not proving your story and you're not really succeeding in doing what you want to do.

So that's really an essential part of what we do, and most of it — we will take as long as a year to do one story. It's pretty routine for us to take six months to a year to do one story, and most of that time is spent documenting, on the record, quotes and other documentation, so that when we



*Does the US press investigate why banks in white neighbourhood offer loans more quickly than those in black dominated areas?*

tell the story, all of it has names attached to it, because that's really the most important part of the credibility of the story.

**DEDMAN :** I would agree on the question of time and persistence and patience. Of course, this requires a greater commitment on the part of editors and publishers to allow reporters to go the extra hour or the extra phone call. If one is faced with the short deadline and not able to use an unnamed source, sometimes that does mean that the door is closed on the story.

On the question of source-based reporting as opposed to document or record reporting, I think there's a misconception in this country even among a good number of reporters who are or hope to be investigative reporters, that the best stories come from the "Deep Throat".

I'm not Bob Woodward, and I never expect to be Bob Woodward, and never expect anyone in a parking garage in the dark to give me a good story. I think we do better by

looking for documents and by being prepared in advance. Often the story one gets from a source can't be published until one tracks down the verification for it later.

In hindsight, I often see that if we had been more diligent in putting out mobster traps, in putting out our net to find the little bits of information about the subject areas we were interested in — whether or not it's the business holdings of public officials or the coverage of routine lawsuits in the arrests, and the reaction time it takes for an arrest to be followed up in one part of town as opposed to another, or a pattern of fires and who holds the insurance on those buildings — by looking at the small details and building files, often one will get to a pattern, a realization, a perception, or just a hunch which one can then get some direction from a source, and one's built the information that will allow you to push the story so that the editor, the publisher, the government official will face a burden that one can't overcome to keep a story out of publication.

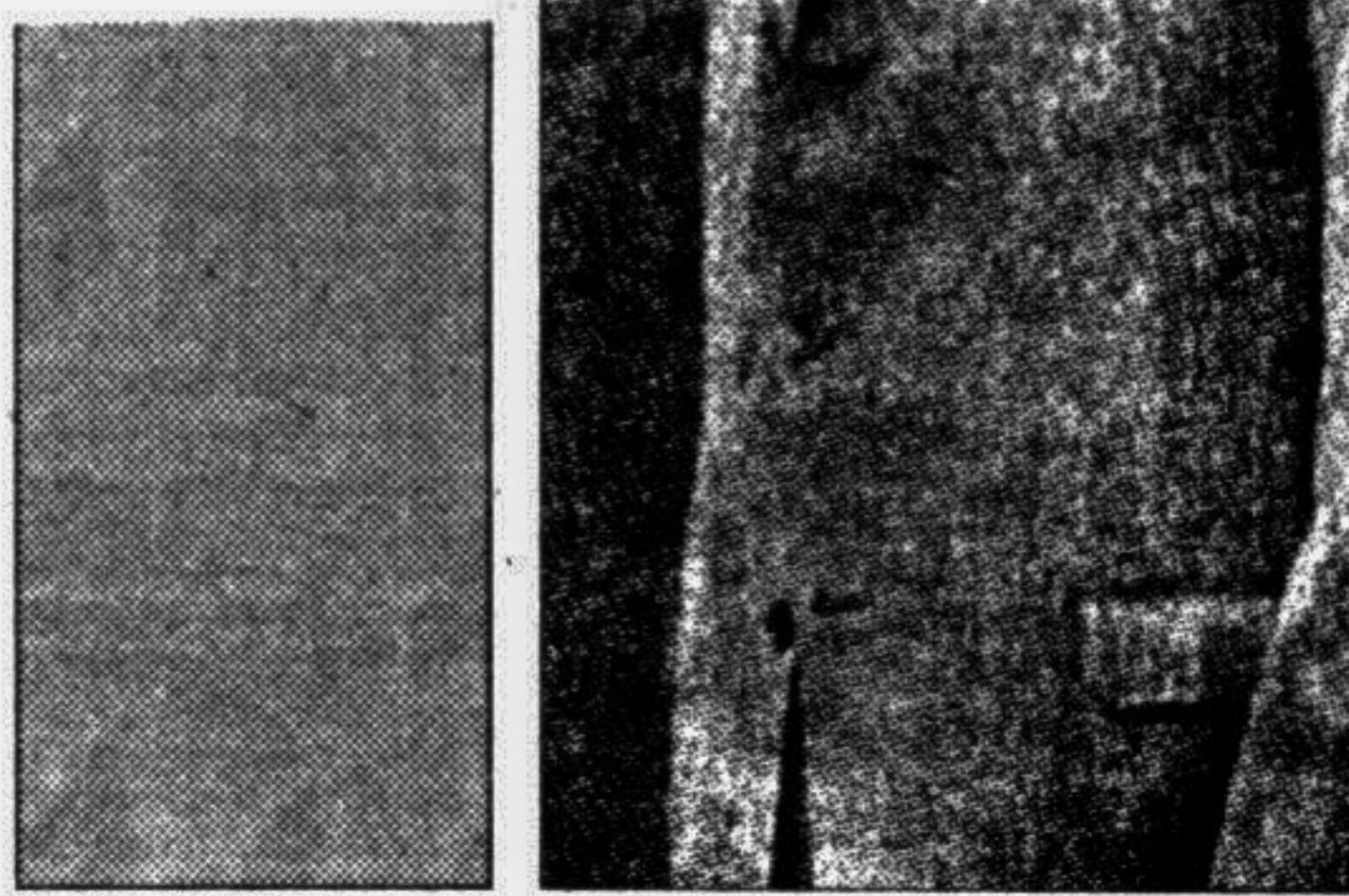
I've heard this called the "tyranny of information." One builds such a case, one floods the system with so much information and so much good reporting, that no editor wants to be known as a censor, and more of it will get through the system.

**NEUMANN :** I'd like to add one more thing about the issue of named or unnamed sources in a story. It's pretty common, when we do local stories. Recently, we were doing a story about the mental health system in Philadelphia and problems with it.

It's pretty common. In fact, the most common problem I have when I work with reporters is that they will come back with very interesting and revealing interviews that they've done, with ordinary citizens as well as public officials, and the reporter will say that, in many of the cases, "This person told me this but they didn't want their name used."



*Nixon: The biggest catch of investigative reporting in the United States.*



And probably the toughest part of our job and the longest part of our job is to go back again and again and again to convince people that if it's an important story and they feel that there's need for the public to know the story, that we need to use their name.

That's really a large part of what we do, is work to get names on the record, and you do need the time. There's no doubt about it. You have to take the time to do it. But we find that it's definitely worth the time and the effort in doing that.

**DEDMAN :** I would add to that that an incremental approach is possible, that it need not always be all or nothing. Often one can do an interview and the person, a government official will say, "That was all off the record; you can't use any of that," and one has had the conversation, one has taken the notes or remembers the information.

One can then say, "Well, what about this small bit here?" And you pick the most innocuous piece of information, such as whether or not it rained on Thursday, and say, "Can we assign your name to that piece of information?" And when you get to that, go on to the next least innocuous piece of information.

After some time, one can find that often, through persistence, you can get a good part of a notebook back on the record.

**ALI :** Could I come back with a couple of questions, which may sound like supplementaries, but might open up some new areas?

I think you will all agree that — both of you will agree that — the professionalism in any country in journalism is an uneven thing. I mean, it's not the same in every newspaper.

That being the case, do you see any danger of, or do you see the signs of some of the smaller papers using investigative reporting for mud slinging or what we have now in Britain, royalty bashing, often going beyond the normal limits of professionalism. That would be my first question.

The second question — and then, of course, I'll pass it on to my other colleagues here — that your people, US reporters and journalists, do travel a lot in Asia and Africa and other countries. What is your assessment of what we call the sensitivities of the governments in this part of the world to investigative reporting, especially when it is done or carried out by US or western reporters?

**NEUMANN :** Yes, This is Jonathan. You're absolutely right that there's really no steady, reliable pattern. If you studied any 100 newspapers, you wouldn't find probably that even the majority of them handled the same story the same way or that they were equally responsible.

But I'm not sure that that really is an issue of investigative reporting. I think that goes more to what the publisher of a newspaper or the editor of a newspaper is hoping to achieve with their particular publication.

There are publications that are literally trying to stay alive or trying to make money by publishing very exciting or splashy headlines. So they would do that, if it was an event that occurred yesterday or it was a story, so-called, an investigative story.

I don't really see that, if that's the approach that a newspaper is taking, I'm not sure that the method, whether it's investigative reporting or daily reporting, makes any difference. And there are no safeguards against that in the United States, because we do have tremendous freedom and no censorship. And therefore, it's in the hands of each individual newspaper to try to be responsible.

You know, I'd lying if I said everybody was responsible. It's

very spotty. There's no way of predicting or controlling it.

**DEDMAN :** I would agree that professionalism of spotty and depends on the news organization involved.

On your question of sensitivity to outsiders making criticisms, yes, we, as you, would be sensitive to others coming in and applying standards that might be different from the local standards. I do have an impression that, at our core, journalists here may operate from a different assumption of what our primary role is. I would be interested to hear from you your perception.

But I'm not sure that we perceive that our first role is the well-being of the nation in the sense of the well-being of the bureaucrats who happen to be at the nation's service at that moment, or that necessarily our goal would be to move the country forward. America I would classify as a developing nation as well — more developed than most, but still developing.

We would — at least those who consider themselves investigative reporters would — see that we were adding to subject matter is the environment — by let's say our subject matter is the environment — by pointing out questions of soil erosion or waste disposal, these sorts of questions. I would consider that these are not necessarily matters of political orientation.

Not that our goal is to create any sort of national consensus on issues, but that we are to point out the fact and the problems. People can then make up their minds about how to resolve those questions.

**MATHEWS :** I have one question. I know part of this question has been answered. But could you tell us under what other circumstances would it be defensible to report an issue which may at first seem one-sided?

**DEDMAN :** Could you give an example, explain that further?

**MR. MATHEWS :** Well, you know, when you got to the authorities for information and you don't get the kind of information you want, and you continue reporting an issue and you only get one-sided views all the time, how long can you justifiably go on carrying on stories like this without any response from the authorities?

**DEDMAN :** Jonathan, do you have an idea on that one?

**NEUMANN :** That's a tough question and, I mean, it goes both ways. I think that many journalists are very frustrated by that, particularly when you talk about a one-sided story.

If the one side is coming from an official government spokesman, which is the most typical example, then all newspapers and television and radio essentially have a responsibility to report what was said, because you know that responsibility to report what was said, because you know that it's going to be on the wire services and it's going to be in all the other papers tomorrow, so you have to report it. You may not have time to do any reporting, investigating, to look into the truth of what the government official said. And that comes up virtually every day. There's really nothing we can do about that for the daily newspaper, but that we try to do, you know, when there are scandals — and it seems like there are scandals frequently in the United States.

When the issue of the arms for hostages with Iran came up a few years ago, and the possible illegal supplying of weapons to the Contras in Latin America by the United States government, everything was one-sided at first, coming from President Bush's Administration, and we had no choice but to report what the President and his spokespeople were saying about those issues.

But, over a period of time, we sent reporters out to Iran and to Central America and to the Army bases here, to try to find out what was actually happening. And it took months to do that.

But you don't really have a choice. As the news events unfold or as the public statements are made, you have to report them, even if you know that there must be more to the story. All you can do is send your reporters out and hope that you could get the other side of the story, at least in time so that by the time you report it, it's not just history.

But there's really — it's a tough position for reporters to be in when they know that there's more than one side to a story and yet, because it's a public pronouncement, you have to report it today. I don't see any way around that.

**DEDMAN :** As a local reporter, covering a city or county government, I often wished I had been two people — one who could ask the tough questions and the other who wouldn't suffer the retribution of being frozen out of information for having asked those tough questions.

Sometimes there's a benefit that comes from demonstrating your independence. Even the official who you have angered may call you late at night. I was surprised the first time this ever happened to me. The official was decrying me in the press during the day, and at night he would call me and tell me all the bad things the other politicians were doing.

But usually, once is placed in a situation of a conflict, of having to choose — "How far do I push, how tough can my questions be?" Some journalists are blessed with the ability to ask the tough question and to give the appearance that it's only because one's doing one's job and one takes on grief from it whatsoever. This was not a skill that I had.

Sometimes, the solution may be, in fact, to assign two reporters — one who covers, at the State Department, let's say, the daily announcements and the briefings and the days' events, which could easily take up one person's time, covering any ministry of the government; and the other reporter, who doesn't have to rely on the good graces of the officials but who can try to go around a little behind the scenes, not write stories quite so often, not be in the paper every day, but attempt to find out, through the back door, what is going on.

But we do have an obligation to report the pronouncements of government, but they need not be all that we report. The Greek historian, Herodotus, said, "It is my duty to report all that is said, but I'm not obliged to believe it all alike."

**A PARTICIPANT :** This to add to what Philip said a little while ago. This is really a problem in parts of the world — this part of the world — that you have a story and you are not getting the other side of the story, mainly from the official sources.

What we do — and I wonder if you would like to have advice on it — that if the reporter is reasonably convinced in his mind that there is another side and it is more or less speculative — official sources don't confirm it, but official sources might head the other side of the story.

Our reporters do try to bring it in, into the story, and try to make it, as Philip said earlier, a balanced story. Because as you had said earlier that we have problems, even in the United States, of the editors frowning on some of the investigative stories, because they may not be balanced. And then you have problem with the court, if it goes before the court.

What is your advice? I mean, is it fair that you have one side of the story which is based on some record and some hard-hitting quotes from the critics on the particular government policy and on the other side you have a government policy being explained in rather speculative terms? Would that fit in with your concept of a good investigative reporting?

**NEUMANN :** You haven't told us what kind of restrictions, if any, your papers may be under by the government in the different countries that you're doing reporting in, and that could affect our answer tremendously.

But if reporters are not restricted from speaking to any given people, then what we're basically talking about is the difficult job of legwork and persistent interviewing of people. I think that sometimes reporters make the mistake of thinking that if something comes out of records or if there is a story to be gotten in a record, that that's the only place that stay exists.

But records, after all, are only pieces of paper that tell you about something that happened with real people, and the goal is always to get to the primary people who the story may be about — whether it's a government policy or whether it's

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Regular columns "MY WORLD" and "WRITE TO MITA" are held over for unavoidable circumstances.