

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH PAUL STEIGER

SUBJECT: COLLABORATING AND COMPETING IN JOURNALISM'S NEW ERA

MODERATOR: ALAN BJERGA, PRESIDENT, NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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**ALAN BJERGA:** (Sounds gavel.) Good afternoon, and welcome to the National Press Club. My name is Alan Bjerga. I'm a reporter for Bloomberg News, and the President of the National Press Club. We're the world's leading professional organization for journalists and are committed to our profession's future through our programming and by fostering a free press worldwide. For more information about the Press Club, please visit our website at [www.press.org](http://www.press.org). To donate to our professional training programs, please visit [www.press.org/library](http://www.press.org/library).

On behalf of our members worldwide, I'd like to welcome our speaker and attendees to today's event, which includes guests of our speaker as well as working journalists. I'd also like to welcome our C-SPAN and Public Radio audiences. After the speech concludes, I will ask as many audience questions as time permits. I'd now like to introduce our head table guests.

From your right, Wes Pippert, Director of the University of Missouri School of Journalism's Washington Program. Kayleigh Kulp, a marketing communications specialist and former business reporter. Deb Price of the *Detroit News*, recently named a Neiman Fellow at Harvard University for the coming academic year. **Gemma Puglisi**, assistant professor at American University School of Communications. Matt Small, radio producer for Associated Press. Evan Sweetman, the Chair of the National Press Club's Young Members Committee. Denise Li, associate dean for the Masters of Professional Studies in Journalism Program at Georgetown University. Andrew Schneider, associate editor of Kiplinger and Chairman of the Press Club Speakers Committee.

Skipping over our speaker for the moment, Jerry Zremski, Washington Bureau Chief of the *Buffalo News* and a former National Press Club President, the organizer of today's luncheon. Jennifer DePaul of the *Fiscal Times*. Michael Freedman, professor of journalism at George Washington University and the executive producer of the National Press Club's Kalb Report Series. Grazia Salvemini, reporter for Hispanic Link News Service. Camille Elhassani, senior White House producer for Al Jazeera English TV. And, Gil Klein, of GFK Media Projects, a former President of the National Press Club.

[applause]

Our speaker today won the National Press Club's Fourth Estate Award for career achievement three years ago. Since then, he's only kept on achieving. In his 16 years as managing editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, Paul Steiger oversaw staff that won 16 Pulitzer Prizes. This year, ProPublica, the non-profit investigative newsroom he now leads, won its first Pulitzer for a narrative about a New Orleans hospital overwhelmed by Hurricane Katrina.

Newspapers used to produce such stories with more regularity. As we all know, the economic model that's sustained newspapers for more than a century is being swept away. What will replace it? We don't know. We do know at least one new journalistic force offers us hope of a new way. ProPublica, where Steiger serves as editor in chief, President and chief executive, produces journalism that shines a light on the dark corners of society where the strong exploit the weak. It does this without the bottom line burdens that many journalists feel.

It's fitting, then, that he would be our speaker today, in conjunction with the Federal Trade Commission's Workshop on "How Will Journalism Survive the Internet Age?" ProPublica has discovered one possible answer to that question. It's possible that the future of journalism that matters most lies in the hands of citizens who care enough to fund it. But, the future of journalism also lies in the hands of the people who do the hard work of digging out stories that the public needs to see.

Please welcome Paul Steiger to the National Press Club.

[applause]

**PAUL STEIGER:** Thank you very much Alan. And, thank you all for coming today. The last time I was here, one of my college classmates roasted me by putting up on a screen all of the worst sports leagues that I wrote for my college newspaper. [laughter] So, it's with great joy that I'm here to do better this time than I did that time. [laughter]

What I want to talk about with you today, and leave as much time as I can for your questions and comments, because I'd be delighted to respond to any question that you think I can be helpful for. But, what I want to talk to you first, is about one of those buzzwords that seem to gain currency but then tend to be discussed a bit vaguely, as seen as if with gauze over the lens.

The buzzword is “collaboration.” Collaboration seems the rage in our business today. Everyone is for it, no one against it, at least in public. And, it’s easy to see why. Basically, journalists, especially those of us who began our careers in newspapers, now favor collaboration for the same reason that Benjamin Franklin, an old newspaper man himself, recommended it when he told his fellow Revolutionists, all newly minted traitors to the British crown, “We must all hang together. Or, assuredly, we shall all hang separately.”

Facing the prospect of a different sort of hanging, we have taken to hanging together, or at least talking about it. But, what does this mean? And, what can it mean for the future? For years, most news organizations dismissed the notion of collaboration. We were amply funded and staffed. And, we usually felt that any story worth our participation was worth doing alone.

The most notable exceptions were when a fellow journalist was killed in pursuit of a story, as with reporter Don Bolles in Phoenix in 1976 and editor Chauncey Bailey in Oakland, California in 2007. In such cases, journalists from multiple news organizations banded together to ferret out how their colleague was killed, why and by whom, or to complete the reporting that was cut short by the murder.

The first iteration of what one might call the new collaboration was Joint Publication of Stories. We at ProPublica posited, when we started out in the beginning of 2008, that as an essential part of our model, we could have the greatest impact, which was and remains our goal, by publishing many of our longer deep dive stories, in partnership with traditional news organizations.

I believe that the business crisis in publishing, which even then was clearly serious, would make both editors and publishers more receptive to such collaboration than they would have been in the past. But, as is appropriate in our line of work, there were skeptics. The *New York Times* story announcing the creation of ProPublica wrote that, “Newspapers routinely publish articles from wire services. And, many of them also subscribe to the major papers’ news services and reprint their articles. But, except for fairly routine news wire service articles, the largest newspapers have generally been reluctant to use reporting from other organizations.”

That reluctance, I’m happy to report, has now been almost entirely overcome. ProPublica, alone, has published nearly 250 stories in partnership with 52 other news organizations. These have ranged across print: The *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *USA Today*, *Newsweek*, *Business Week*, television: *60 Minutes* and the *CBS Evening News*, *20/20*, CNN, CNBC, radio: NPR, WNYC, WQED, *This American Life*, *Marketplace*, and online: Politico, Slate, Salon, Huffington Post, Daily Beast.

And, we’ve had success doing this. Our collaborations have had remarkable reach and impact and received important recognition. Alan alluded to work by Sherry Fink with

the *New York Times* that was honored with both a Pulitzer Prize for Investigative Reporting and a National Magazine Award for Reporting, that *New York Times Magazine* is one of those few hermaphrodites that can be on both sides of the magazine/newspaper world at the same time.

Work by Charles Ornstein and Tracy Weber with *The Los Angeles Times* was a finalist for the Pulitzer for Public Service. And, other work by T. Christian Miller with *The LA Times* and also the *Washington Post* and ABC received a Selden Ring Award. Work by A.C. Thompson with the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, the *Nation Magazine* and the PBS show *Frontline*, was a finalist for Harvard's Goldsmith Award and, more importantly, has led to what is shaping up as a complete overhaul of the New Orleans Police Department.

And, perhaps most remarkably, another of our reporters, Abrahm Lustgarten, won the George Polk Award for Environmental Reporting for a string of more than 50 stories published in the *Albany Times Union*, *The Denver Post*, *The Pittsburgh Post Gazette* and online in *Mother Jones Politico* and *Scientific American*.

It's important to note that, while many dismiss newspapers and some other traditional platforms as media dodo birds, the fact is that they still have enormous reach. It's not unusual for work we've published with partners to reach an audience 20 times the size it might enjoy if it appeared only on our own growing website.

Audience size certainly matters. And, just who makes up that audience can matter even more. Thus, partnering with the right newspaper or other news organization can be critical in generating impact. Two quick examples: Last July, reporters Ornstein and Weber published a massive exposé with the *Los Angeles Times*, demonstrating that the State Board that licenses nurses was taking as long as six years to remove licenses from nurses who had stolen drugs from patients, beaten them up, or otherwise abused them. The nurses would be fired, but then could take their licenses down the street and start all over again at another hospital.

The day after the story ran, the Governor fired a majority of the Nursing Board and replaced them with others whom he mandated to fix the policy-- fix the problem. If that story had appeared only on our website instead of in the biggest paper in California, I doubt the Governor would have acted so quickly, if at all.

Even earlier, in 2008, Reporter Lustgarten published, in the *Albany Times Union*, the first of his many articles on the dangers to the water supply from under-supervised drilling for natural gas. Hours before, New York Governor was to give the industry *carte blanche* to drill in that state. The Governor reversed course on the spot.

I'm delighted that this publishing model has already been embraced with considerable success by others, including the Center for Public Integrity right here in Washington, *California Watch* and the *Texas Tribune*, all of which have published outstanding work and important collaborations with a range of publishers.

All this has been gratifying and a bit daunting as we look to the future. And, like everyone in journalism, seeks to do better. But, I would argue that it was only the first iteration of the new collaboration. In recent months, I think we and others have made significant progress in developing the second iteration. It involves a series of innovative techniques for a different sort of collaboration, one that has the potential to be even more powerful and to produce, possibly, even greater impact.

The second iteration moves beyond the bilateral, or occasionally, trilateral partnership model, for producing a single story or series to techniques for leveraging the efforts of many reporters, from many news organizations, often in many different places, to produce entire graphs of related stories. And, there is potentially greater leverage in this newer sort of collaboration.

The second iteration has already taken many different forms and will surely take many more in the months and years ahead. For us, it began rather prosaically, with our publication of federal government stimulus spending data. We massaged those data, cleaned them up quite a bit, and published the entire package online in our recovery tracker database, the first tool to track such stimulus spending down to the county level across the country.

Making the data available in this manner seemed to us a great way to tease out story ideas. And, we found quite a few of those at the national level, writing scores of stories on stimulus spending in 2009 ourselves. But, for local reporters around the country who didn't have the time and other resources to gather a list of all stimulus spending by the rash of different federal agencies in their coverage areas, ProPublica's recovery tracker suddenly made important local stories accessible as well. And, we encouraged this trend, promoting recovery tracker to local reporters around the nation. Within months, nearly a hundred publications, some as large as the *Chicago Tribune*, others as small as *The Facts of Brazoria County, Texas*-- I hope I pronounced that right-- produced their own reported local stories based on our data.

Some months later, spotting an important emerging trend in state unemployment insurance funds, sliding toward insolvency, we made a similar push to get this new data set, this time on a state-by-state basis, out to reporters around the country. The result: Another 22 local stories, from *The Sacramento Bee* to *The Des Moines Register*, to *Cape Cod Today*.

This year, we have continued to experiment with additional techniques. In January, we sought to use our ProPublica reporting network, what we call our distributed reporting operation, but others sometimes term "citizen journalists," under the leadership of Online Engagement editor Amanda Nichols(?). To help us scrutinize Congress at the Super Bowl, we asked the question, "Is your congressman going to the Super Bowl?"

Amanda, who ran the Huffington Post Off the Bus Project in 2008, led the way to energize our reporting network, now 5,000 strong, to determine which members of

Congress were attending the game, so that we could report on where and for how much they bought their tickets, and whether they were using the big game for fundraising.

But, while we got a lot of help from individuals in our citizen network, we were surprised and delighted to find other news organizations rallying to the task as well. So, the *Orange County Register* undertook to call all members from Southern California. California Watch volunteered to finish out the state's delegation. By the time we were done, we had gotten answers in nine business days from 375 members of Congress, and had done so with the help of 15 other news organizations in nine states, as well as 14 other volunteer professional journalists.

In March, we added two more innovative techniques. First, reporters Ornstein and Weber, who did the work on problems plaguing the oversight of nursing in California, published their reporting recipe for discovering similar problems with nursing and other professional licensing regimes in other states.

At the time, my colleague, Steve Engelberg(?) and I wrote on our website that, "Nursing is regulated state-by-state. And, we lack the resources to investigate 50 nursing boards or the agencies regulating a variety of other critical hound professionals. But, we can share the means for the nation's newspapers, Public Radio stations, broadcast outlets and news non-profits to do so. From what we've seen in several states, there are problems nationwide with how quickly these boards act, and how they share information with one another and with citizens. Our techniques can help reporters or the public have a significant impact on their communities."

When Charlie and Tracy hosted a conference call shortly thereafter, to walk people through their recipe and take questions, more than 80 journalists joined the call. Later, in March, reporter Paul Kuehl(?) and editor Amanda Nichols teamed up to create what we call our first reporting matchmaker. In this case, we had been covering, for quite a while, the stories of homeowners frustrated by difficulty in securing aid under the federal government's home loan modification plan.

We noted that sometimes, loan ...(inaudible) requests stuck for months in bank bureaucracies, would suddenly come unstuck, almost miraculously, when we or other reporters inquired about their status. Now, we knew we couldn't make a meaningful dent in the backway-- in the backlog this way, doing, you know, one at a time ourselves.

But, we thought we might make more of a difference if we published a map on our site of all the applicants-- a dot on the map represented an applicant-- who had told us their stories and then offered access to the homeowners with permission, of course, to local reporters who might have a similar result when they called the banks and wrote their stories. To date, such stories have been done in Florida, Kansas, Oregon and Washington State.

These examples of new kinds of collaboration seem, to me, important for a number of reasons. First, they offer the possibility of local impact at scale, something that

people have questioned as, perhaps, beyond the capability of non-profit journalism. Second, they are the sorts of initiatives that, at least in my observation and experience, only a non-profit, a mission-driven rather than audience or profit-driven organization, is likely to undertake. Third, they suggest that the possibilities for further iterations of collaboration are nearly endless, and that we have only begun to understand the creative possibilities at hand.

Now, of course, collaboration is not a cure for all that ails us. And, it can even be overdone. As executive editor Bill Keller of the *New York Times* wisely reminded us at Berkeley's Logan Symposium on Investigative Reporting last year, "Competition does help people dig deeper. And, I'd hate to see people lose that edge in working together too much." As somebody who used to run a large news staff, though not as large as Bill's, I agree with that.

Also, we need to be careful that collaboration does not become so pervasive, perhaps on a particular story or subject, that it verges into packed journalism. So that, for instance, I can see value in a consortium covering climate change. But, I would worry if that consortium grew so large that other views of the same issue couldn't find an outlet.

One final point. I don't need to tell you that we are in the middle, perhaps just in the early stages, of an enormous upheaval in the way people get news, information and understanding of issues that matter immensely to them. There have been huge losses to democracy in the shrinking and even shuttering of major newspapers.

But, as I've tried to indicate in a small way today, there are also great opportunities to use new technologies, new funding structures, and new ways of thinking, to take us forward to a world that not only will be different from the one we're used to, there's no going back to the old world, but can also be better.

Thank you very much. And, I would love to take your questions.

[applause]

**ALAN BJERGA:** And, thank you in advance for sending in your questions. We have no shortage here, but certainly want to know a lot of thoughts and perspectives that people have here, today, as well as being able to hear more of your own. Our first question, to elaborate a little more on the collaborations that you are doing with different organizations, describe the process of what happens when a news organization, a news outlet, may approach you guys with an idea. Is this happening? Or, do you more often have to reach out to prospective partners?

**PAUL STEIGER:** Very good question. Most often, the way it happens is that we are working on a story. And, we approach a potential partner and say, "Do you want to work with us? Here's where we are in the story. And, shall we collaborate?" There are occasions, however, when we respond to people coming to us. In fact, one of the biggest stories we've ever had resulted from the Public Radio operation in Chicago, *This*

*American Life*, coming to us and saying that they thought there was more work to be done in the area of derivatives trading, that so contributed to the financial meltdown.

And, we talked it over with them, and it fit right with reporting that a couple of our folks were eager to do, Jesse Eisinger and Jake Bernstein. And so, they set off on a seven-month project to look into how an outfit called Magnetar, a hedge fund in Chicago, was actually, without getting into the complexities of it, was working to create billions of dollars of securities that they could then better guess, that they could sell short. And, as a result, they made billions of dollars and all this contributed to the financial meltdown.

So, when the reporters were almost done with producing a 5,000-word text story, it went back to intensive-- they had been keeping the radio guys up-to-date all along. But, they went back into an intensive meeting with them over a week and a half, and produced an amazing radio script that the radio talents of the folks at *This American Life* are spectacular.

And, the radio guys came up with the notion of, in addition to-- as part of a 30-minute radio broadcast, we will-- why don't we do a song? And, we'll do a parody from the movie and Broadway show *The Producers*. I don't know how many of you know the plot. There, the idea is that these two wise guys come up with a play, *Springtime For Hitler*, that they want to fail.

And so, these guys did a song. The song went viral on YouTube, which connected more people to the radio show, which connected more people to our text version. And so, the result is the story was the biggest story we've had yet on our own website. So yes, we do respond to other people. [laughter]

**ALAN BJERGA:** With that innovation in mind, can you discuss your business model? And, I think here is a big question on everyone's mind-- And, if you have an answer to this, we'll get it out as far as we can, as loud as we can, as quickly. The second question, after discussing your own business model is, what do you see as the sustainable model in the future for today's newspapers, economically?

**PAUL STEIGER:** Okay. Our own business model is really quite simple. We are philanthropy-based. We were launched as a result of a commitment by Herb and Marianne Sandler, a very successful and wealthy couple in California, who simply wanted to support investigative reporting.

And, for the same reason that we think investigative reporting is important, they think it's important too. And, they were prepared to put up to \$10 million dollars a year into the kitty for doing this. So, we launched with that commitment. We now have 32 journalists, plus half a dozen support people. And, we want to diversify our funding. And, the Sandlers want us to do diversify our funding over time. And, we're actively engaged in that. Last year, we raised a million dollars from other than the Sandlers. This year, we've raised, already, \$2.2 million. And, we'd like to get that number even higher.



And, we are looking for a bunch of sources of support, foundations, nearly all of the foundations that support journalism in a significant way are supporting us. And, we're very pleased by that. But, we're also looking for-- you know, for major gifts from other people who share the Sandler's vision.

We will be looking at sponsorships. We will be looking, also, at ways to stimulate more individual giving. Several thousand individuals have already sent in anywhere from, you know, \$5 dollars to \$20,000 dollars to us, just over the transom. And, we'd like to regularize that.

So, there is no business model. It's more of an economic model. This corner of journalism, investigative reporting, is one of the areas-- foreign reporting is the other-- that are highly expensive and don't tend to generate revenue easily. So, we think that we will be dependent on philanthropies for quite a while. But we're looking for, you know, if it becomes more common to charge online for content, we'll do it. We don't look to be a leader in that area. But, we'll do it. But philanthropy, for the foreseeable future, will remain very large for us.

Now, your broader question about newspapers, I think I can give a shorter answer to. First of all, I don't talk about newspapers, I talk about journalism. Because the important thing is maintaining the professionalism and the teams that do journalism of a sort that we do, and to encourage the increasing development of web-based journalists who do the kind of things that individuals who don't need a big organization behind them, don't need lawyers behind them, can do.

And, I think a lot of this has been emerging spontaneously on the web. I mean, right here in this town, you've got two of my old friends and former colleagues, Jim Vandehei and Marcus Brauchli, *Politico* and the *Washington Post* going head-to-head on politics, the *Washington Post*, the traditional dominating player, *Politico*, the new web-based entity.

And so, there's a lot emerging on the web. But, the most expensive stuff, like ours, is, I think, going to need philanthropic support for a while.

**ALAN BJERGA:** ProPublica is showing that there can be a successful national model for investigative reporting. But, how about investigative reporting on the local level? Is there any possibility that the non-profit model, which you're using, for funding investigative reporting, will become common in communities across the country?

**PAUL STEIGER:** Now, this is terrific, ...(inaudible) question.

**ALAN BJERGA:** That's a plant.

**PAUL STEIGER:** That's very cool. Not only is it possible, it's happening. *Voice of San Diego*, the In Post(?), if Joel Cramer is here today. Joel, are you in the room? He's not in the room, but I know he's been in the building today. There's a

significant number of hyper local web-based news organizations that are doing investigative reporting and are based, at least partly, through philanthropy.

Then, there are larger organizations like California Watch, affiliated with Cal-Berkeley, which has got a budget of several millions of dollars, and is doing major investigative reporting in California. *Texas Tribune*, also a multi-million dollar budget, it's focused on politics as well as investigative reporting in Texas. But, it's doing a significant amount of this reporting in-- this kind of reporting in Texas.

So, it is happening. And, there are different varieties of the model. But, it's being tried in a gratifying number of places.

**ALAN BJERGA:** Could ProPublica withstand a libel suit? It is said that startups like yours do not have the deep pockets to do courageous journalism.

**PAUL STEIGER:** We can withstand a libel suit if we win. [laughter] And actually, that's not as trivial as you might think because sometimes, you can win a libel suit but go broke, particularly if you're underfunded. We are not underfunded. I'm happy to say we've had one libel suit, and it's one to nothing in our favor.

**ALAN BJERGA:** A few years ago, with La Figaro(?) on the edge of bankruptcy, the French government intervened. And the country's President said, "Democracy cannot survive with the free press permanently on the edge of an economic abyss." I know this has been a topic of discussion during the panels going on today. Does the economic state of journalism pose a danger to Democratic governments? And, if so, are there steps government can take to combat the problem without undermining the independence of the press?

**PAUL STEIGER:** Well, we've had a whole phalanx of panels right in this room, trying to address that very subject. And, you know, I think there were about 30 people with 40 different opinions. But, I'll give you mine, which is that there are risks to democracy in the loss of investigative reporting, without question. And, particularly true at the local and state level, which is why we focus so much on trying to do things that will help our colleagues who focus at that level, even as we're focusing on the national level.

But, whether government can or should be the solution, I think we have to be very careful about-- I mean, I see some room, and I think it would be a good idea-- it certainly wouldn't oppose expanded funding for Public Radio and Public Television, but not so much that it crowded out private activities.

And, I think that there are things that government can do to make it easier for people to launch, for example, non-profit journalistic enterprises without worrying that they're going to run afoul of some IRS rule. And, there were a number of, I thought, very sensible proposals, events this morning for doing this.

But, there have been some ideas of, you know, creating a huge BBC-sized public on media operation in the U.S. I wonder about that. You know, I just worry about politicians getting involved in news organizations that are supposed to be monitoring-- that are supposed to be monitoring them.

So, I would be very cautious about saying, "We need a, sort of, industrial planning for the news business." There's a lot of creativity going on right now, immense amount of creativity. And, I think that we should allow that creativity to occur. We should help where we can around the edges, you know, stimulating philanthropy, maybe making it somewhat easier for producers of content to charge for it without interfering, with First Amendment protections and so on.

But, I would oppose a huge new effort in which I don't think anybody sees there to be the money for it, anyhow, to have the government walk into our domain.

**ALAN BJERGA:** This questioner writes, "I can't put my fingers on it, but something bothers me about newspapers outsourcing their investigations, even to you. Does anything bother you about newspapers outsourcing their investigations, even to you?"

**PAUL STEIGER:** No. [laughter] Even with the papers that we had the biggest relationship with last year, I think it might have been seven or eight or nine stories, maybe ten stories. With most of our partners, it was two or three. So, if they think they're outsourcing their investigative reporting to us, you know, they're crazy, you know.

I mean, it is-- We are doing a job that there is less resource being applied to in the U.S. But, we are picking our agendas, picking the coverage areas that we want to pursue. And then, for the most part, the wonderful *This American Life* exception to the contrary notwithstanding, for the most part, taking them to partners.

So, it's not outsourcing, it is their being receptive to, you know, a relatively small number of stories that serve their readers and also keep them away from a competitor, rather than an outsourcing of an important part of their process. I mean, you know, the *New York Times* had a bunch of Pulitzer winners this past year. The *Washington Post* had even more. The *L.A. Times* had three finalists. And yet, these were partners with whom we did some of our best work. I don't think anybody would say that the relatively small number of stories we gave those folks amounted to outsourcing.

**ALAN BJERGA:** You mentioned some large national newspapers in your examples of continuing journalistic excellence. Is that the same phenomenon you see with, say, a 50,000 to 200,000 circ. daily newspaper?

**PAUL STEIGER:** Actually, in many ways, the smaller newspapers have-- this is not true in every place, obviously, but they often are in a better position than their brethren from the mid-sized and even larger domains, because they have a close

identification with their local place. And, they also have the only dedicated ad sales team of any size in their local place.

So, my sense-- I mean, I have not done a study of this-- but my sense from just from people I've talked to, is that even with this huge secular change going on, the movement to the web, and the worst recession in many years, many of those papers are keeping their heads above water. Whereas, a lot of the bigger ones have been running deficits.

So, you know, I think that it might be more fun running a small paper these days than a big one. And, we've also found that small papers can get off the dime quickly and deal with our stuff. I mean, I will never forget Rex Smith, the editor of the *Albany Times Union*, when we called him up and told him about Abrahm Lustgarten's gas drilling story. And, he said, "Let me see. Story is free. It's right in the middle of my coverage area. And, all you have to do is cut it from 3,000 words to 1,800 words because that's all I can fit in my front page slot. Why don't you send it over?" [laughter] And, you know, it moved fast, it was on their front page just in time to change the Governor's mind.

**ALAN BJERGA:** But, the example that you just cited could be an example that the questioner would have said it as outsourcing, that the local newspaper could have done that story, perhaps with a larger investigative staff. Do you see the smaller and medium-sized newspapers have been less likely to have an investigative team? And, is that part of the market need you're trying to fill?

**PAUL STEIGER:** Actually, I think that particular story is a kind of story that, even ten years ago, when newspapers were rolling in money-- I mean, I remember in 1999, at the *Wall Street Journal*, you know, we had to lock the doors at night to prevent people from shipping money in. [laughter]

And, even in that period, you would-- it wouldn't be impossible, but you would be unlikely to find a reporter on the staff of a paper the size of the *Albany Times Union* who had both the expertise and the time to develop a complex story like this.

So, this is not a case of *Albany* coming to you and saying, "We've got an empty spot on our front page. Can we outsource it to you?" It's us taking a story to them, that their editor recognized was perfect for his audience, and we saw it as perfect for getting the word out. And, it was a great marriage.

**ALAN BJERGA:** So, taking a look at possible topics for investigations today, I could think of one topic that might be of interest to readers, and say, Lake Charles, Louisiana, Biloxi, Mississippi, Mobile, Alabama. What are you guys looking at, in terms of the BP oil spill? And, what questions should be asked on that issue?

**PAUL STEIGER:** Well, you know, the BP oil story is one of those stories that we usually don't jump into because everybody has jumped into the story. And so, what

do we have special to add that isn't likely to be uncovered by the scores, if not hundreds, of journalists flocking to the story every day?

But, what we happen to have on staff is the same Abrahm Lustgarten, who, when he was at *Fortune*, covered BP. And so, he's loaded with sources, both in the company and around the company. And so, we put him on the story. And, he had a piece that ran on the front page of the *Washington Post* just about a week ago, underneath that striking photograph, you may remember, of the two birds covered in oil. It's just an amazing photograph. And, the story underneath was pretty amazing, too.

So, we are pursuing that story. And, I could tell you what leads we're following, but then I'd have to shoot you. So-- [laughter]

**ALAN BJERGA:** Among the crises the media faces is a crisis of confidence. Poll after poll indicates that the public doesn't trust journalists. What can be done to cure this crisis?

**PAUL STEIGER:** Well, this is more than a crisis, it's a trend. I mean, it's been going on for, you know, for many years and something I worried about when I was at the *Journal*, even though the *Journal* was consistently rated at the top among print media for trustworthiness.

And, you know, I think part of it is that, for the last 15 years or so, we've had increasingly a culture of contention, where all institutions, and many, many different kinds of prominent people have come under attack. And so, why should we be any different? And so, you know, so some of it, we have to be philosophical about.

The things that we can do something about are, first of all, to be less arrogant. And, I think the economic times, which starved a lot of the arrogance out of even the haughtiest editor, own up to our mistakes when we make them. But, stick to our guns when we're not mistaken. But, you know, that's all you can do. All you can do is the best that you can.

But, when the society is increasingly polarized by the way you get an audience on television is to shout, the shouter is going to piss off somebody, you know. I mean-- And so, you get a level of umbrage that splashes everyone. And, we're in the public eye, so it's going to impact us.

And, I think, what will cause change is (a) our being on our best behavior, and (b) a movement away, the swing of the pendulum back from this heated discord. I mean, you know, and you see the public looking for that. I mean, this vote in California the other day to have, in essence, a non-partisan mandate, a non-partisan primary, seems to me it's, most of all, a demonstration that people want their politicians to stop shouting at each other and solve problems.

Maybe that's an outlier, in which case the problem will persist, if it's one of these trends that starts in California. I think we would benefit from that, too.

**ALAN BJERGA:** Given that foreign reporting, like investigative reporting, is experiencing a drop-off in response to the high cost of conducting it, do you see ProPublica branching into this realm as well? Or, alternately, could you see the potential for a ProPublica-like organization entering that space?

**PAUL STEIGER:** I don't see us doing it. We're focused on accountability journalism and investigative reporting. We are prepared to and have sent journalists all around the world in pursuit of a story. But, the idea is to serve a U.S. audience.

I think the area is ripe for a non-profit approach. There's also for-profit approach. A couple guys in Boston have started this Global Post. Have you folks connected with that at all? And, that's an effort to come up with a model to replace some of the overseas reporting we've lost with a for-profit approach. You know, I think that they are just getting started. And, I don't know how it's going to-- how that is going to work out. But, that's a different approach. But, I also think it could line itself to a non-profit approach.

**ALAN BJERGA:** Are you satisfied with the pickup of your Enterprise stories nationally by wire services and other large disseminators of news?

**PAUL STEIGER:** Well, you know, we're not looking for pickup, in that sense, in that we try to place our stories with one or two or, you know, three partners because that's the way, I think, to get maximum impact from a story. But then, we publish everything we do on our website under creative commons, which means that anyone is free to pick it up. And, we have a deal with AP, where they have special rights to pick things up.

But, the deal is that they have to run the whole story because, when you're doing investigative reporting, you don't want the denials cut out, you know. Because then you'll get a libel suit that you'll lose. So, if you want to cut one of our stories, we have to, under that process, we have to give you permission. And, we're not-- we don't always have the time-- We try to, whenever we can, but we don't always have the time to do that.

So, you know, we're not-- we're happy when our stuff is picked up by the wire services and just picked up by other papers. But, what we're really seeing is increasing and tremendous pickup on the web. I mean, our ...(inaudible), the news sites, the aggregating sites, are using our stuff more and more. And, for them, length isn't an issue, you know. I mean, what's a few more electrons, you know? I mean, it's not-- it isn't a problem. And, we've seen explosive growth in our web traffic as a result of that.

**ALAN BJERGA:** One of the major criticisms of online journalism, particularly blogs, has been the lack of editorial oversight with resulting costs to accuracy and

objectivity. Has online journalism moved beyond such difficulties? Or, does this remain a concern?

**PAUL STEIGER:** As the husband of a blogger, I have to walk carefully here. [laughter] Look. There are hundreds of thousands, millions of bloggers. I mean, I'm the chair of the Committee to Protect Journalists who tries to get journalists out of jail around the world. And, for the last two years, the largest single group of journalists in jail around the world have been online journalists. They outdistanced print two years ago.

So, you know, it's a huge phenomenon. And, you know, there are good reporters and bad reporters. There are good bloggers and bad bloggers. And, you know, and bloggers often are not-- usually are not getting paid. They're moving fast. They're doing this for fun or for whatever deep dark psychological pressures they're trying to deal with. Not you, darlin'. [laughter]

And so, yes. They are-- You would expect the typical blogger to be less accurate than the typical multi-edited newspaper or magazine reporter. But, I also think that the consumers have begun to learn about how to read, how to consume what they get on the web. And, they don't demand the same thing from a blogger that they demand from a *Wall Street Journal* reporter or a reporter in *The New Yorker*, you know.

So, the whole world is changing, both on the supply side and on the demand side. And, you know, it's not possible to go out and find an editor for every one of "x" million bloggers. I mean, you know, that's just not going to happen. And, it goes against our values to bar them from publishing. So, what do we do? We learn to revel in the best and dismiss the worst.

**ALAN BJERGA:** Would ProPublica open a Washington bureau? Why or why not?

**PAUL STEIGER:** [laughter] I spent seven years in the *L.A. Times* Washington bureau. And Steve Engelberg, my colleague, is a managing editor of ProPublica, spent, I think, even more years in the Washington bureau of the *New York Times*. And, when we got together in an empty floor the first week of January, 2008, one of the pacts that we made is that we would not have a Washington bureau.

We would have Washington reporters because we had a line, even then, on several truly outstanding reporters who we knew could not or would not move from your affair environments here. But, we didn't want to get the number above four because we figured, with a fifth, we'd have to have a bureau chief. Then, you're into bureaucracy. And, you know, when I was running 700 journalists at the *Wall Street Journal*, I wanted a 45-person Washington bureau. And, I loved having, you know, great bureau chiefs and, you know, sort of all that.

But, when you're small and you've got a relatively flat organization, and you don't have to worry that one of your New York reporters is going to get on the shuttle

and come down and interview some people in Washington, you don't have to get his Visa punched by the Washington bureau. I know I'm just as heresy to you guys. But-- [laughter] It just makes life so much simpler. And, as I say, we have wonderful people here in Washington. And, they closely connect with our folks in New York.

And, you know, all kidding aside, one of the things that we really wanted to do when we got started was to create a culture. And, to do that, you have to have as much connectivity, personal connectivity with people as you can. Yes, you can do it virtually. It's possible. But, it's so much better to have the Washington folks to come up to New York, the New York, New York folks come down here, and for everybody to report to a set of editors in New York.

And, at our size, with 32 journalists, we can bring it off. If we got much larger, it would be different. So, that's a long answer to a short question. But, no, we don't have-- We have four wonderful people in Washington, but we don't have a Washington bureau.

**ALAN BJERGA:** We're almost out of time. But, before asking the last question, we have a couple of important matters to take care of. First, a reminder to our members and guests that, on June 18<sup>th</sup>, Rajiv Shah, the administrator of USAID will speak about the U.S. response to disasters in Haiti and elsewhere, as well as the outlook for international development.

We'd also like to present our speaker with the coveted National Press Club mug. [applause]

**PAUL STEIGER:** Well, thank you. [applause]

**ALAN BJERGA:** And now, for our last question. As evidenced by our head table-- and, for some folks in the audience who may not know, we have a table here from Georgetown University. And, we also have, on our head table, representatives of American University and George Washington University and the University of Missouri.

And so, for our final question, in the world of changing news coverage, what advice would you give to young, aspiring journalists? Do you find value in collegiate journalism training? And, what do you feel you can contribute to this changing paradigm?

**PAUL STEIGER:** I think it's actually a very exciting time to be young and going into journalism. And, it's not so great, at all, for, you know, my friends in their 30s and 40s and 50s, who have kids they're trying to put through college, and mortgages they're trying to pay, and expected to be in their highest earning years, and are finding themselves struggling to keep a job or to find one.

But, if you're starting out, there is enormous opportunities. So, you know, it's sort of like the world that Henry Luce in Britain had and faced in the 1920s, when they got out of college together and said, "We're going to start a news magazine." And, other



people said, "What's that?" And, you know, the result is that the *Time*, then, you know, *Fortune* and so on magazine empire.

And, I think it's the opportunity to create your own future is here. The opportunity to get experience and start up. And, you know, if it succeeds, you're off like a rocket. If it doesn't succeed, you've gotten great learning, and you take it someplace else. You're not going to be-- you're not going to find the well laid-out ladder that was there when I got into the field in the 1960s.

You're going to have to build your networks, be entrepreneurial. But, the way that you can change the world and build your own pathway is greater than at any time I can remember.

**ALAN BJERGA:** Thank you. [applause] This meeting is adjourned. (Sounds gavel.)

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