

Purveyors of truth about the powers that be

BY CHARLES LEWIS

The great astronomer Galileo Galilei once said, "All truths are easy to understand once they are discovered; the point is to discover them." That is, of course, no simple task in our increasingly intricate, 21st-century society too often larded with layers of willfully inaccurate and artificially sweetened information distorting the ability of citizens to hold those in power accountable.

Indeed, for those wielding power, whether in the private or the public sector, the increasingly sophisticated control of information is regarded as utterly essential to achieving success, regardless of subject or policy or administration or even country. Besides controlling the external "message," strict discipline about internal information is also regarded as absolutely essential, severely limiting current and future access to various documents, including calendars, memoranda, phone logs and e-mails. In our warp-speed world, concerning the most controversial, politically inconvenient subjects, mere delay is the simplest, most efficacious public relations tactic.

There are astonishing financial profits in delaying and distorting the truth when you knowingly manufacture harmful products, as the tobacco, asbestos, lead and other industries have been found to have done. There are immediate electoral rewards for delaying and distorting the political truth, as President Lyndon Johnson did in 1964, girding for a major war in Vietnam while publicly promising not to send more U.S. soldiers off to war; as President Richard Nixon did in 1972, secretly authorizing a political "dirty tricks" operation inside the White House that, among many other things, effectively derailed the campaign of his most formidable Democratic foe, Sen. Edmund Muskie. Both incumbent presidents breezed to their election victories in those years.

The most Machiavellian manipulations by our leading political and business figures and their organizations are rarely discussed openly or in writing, mostly because they are not discovered until considerably after the fact. But when salient information about significant government or corporate decisions is selectively parsed out over many years or even decades or is simply *never* made available, such actions connote a contemptuous disregard for the public and the democratic principle of the "consent of the governed." They also present a most formidable reporting challenge for journalists and their news organizations.

The heroic *New York Times* and *Washington Post* publication of the secret, voluminous history of the Vietnam War known as the *Pentagon Papers* and their and other media's coverage of the *Nixon Watergate*

scandal *still* represent U.S. history's high-water mark in the longstanding struggle between raw political power and democratic values, poignantly affirming the public's right to know about its government. Even then, in both celebrated sagas — emblematic moments of an independent, skeptical press in the American experience — important information about those in power still took years to become known to the public.

And that is why now, on the 100-year anniversary of the founding of Sigma Delta Chi, more than ever before, we need fearless truth-tellers to ferret out the overtly obscured or merely inaccessible facts about the decisions, policies and practices that affect our daily lives. We need investigative reporters, with their unusual, forensic approach to amassing and analyzing massive volumes of disparate information, over weeks and months and sometimes years, with their unique temperament, otherworldly patience, steadfast perseverance and razor-sharp incisiveness. And we certainly need their editors and publishers to literally create the time and the space for this important work and effectively shepherd these salient truths to the public, sometimes outside the frenetic exigencies of daily journalism.

We sometimes forget, for example, that at the *Washington Post*, the city editor Barry Sussman assigned 10 reporters and editors to cover the Watergate burglary within hours of the break-in, and for the next 17 months, as the special Watergate editor, he oversaw and directed full-time the daily reportage of Bob Woodward, Carl Bernstein and others. Such an aggressive, institutional commitment to finding the truth seems quite remarkable today for a news organization, but even then, it was unprecedented.

We need to ensure that in the next 100 years, there will be a Seymour Hersh to expose domestic spying by the CIA, to reveal human rights atrocities committed by U.S. soldiers during wartime, that there will be a James Risen and Eric Lichtblau to persevere in exposing warrantless federal surveillance of the telephone and e-mail conversations of thousands of Americans, that there will be a group of investigative journalists at the Center for Public Integrity to request, demand and even sue to obtain all of the Pentagon contracts the next time the United States unilaterally decides to go to war.

One way or another, published facts are and must continue to be the coin of the realm in a democracy, for government "of the people, by the people and for the people," to paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, assumes to some extent an informed citizenry. And there can be no substitute for the truth about the powers that be. On this point, Lincoln could not have been more emphatic: "I am a firm believer in the people. If given the truth, they can be depended upon to meet any national crisis. The great point is to bring them the real facts." ❄️



CHARLES LEWIS is executive editor of the Investigative Reporting Workshop at American University in Washington, D.C. A former ABC News and CBS News' "60 Minutes" producer, he founded and for 15 years was executive director of the Center for Public Integrity, which won the George Polk Award in 2004 for posting the U.S. war contracts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Co-author of five Center books, including the bestseller, "The Buying of the President 2004," Lewis was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in 1998 and received the PEN USA First Amendment Award in 2004.