

DECEMBER 29

Journalists should expose secrets

Journalists should be in the business of providing timely information to the public. But some – notably at the top rungs of the profession – have become players in the power games of the nation's capital. And more than a few seem glad to imitate the officeholders who want to decide what the public shouldn't know.

When the New York Times front page broke the story of the National Security Agency's domestic spying, the newspaper's editors had good reason to feel proud. Or so it seemed. But there was a troubling backstory: The Times had kept the scoop under wraps for a long time.

The White House did what it could – including, as a last-ditch move, an early December presidential meeting that brought Times publisher Arthur Sulzberger and executive editor Bill Keller to the Oval Office – in its efforts to persuade the Times not to report the story. The good news is that those efforts ultimately failed. The bad news is that they were successful for more than a year.

"The decision to hold the story last year was mine," Keller said, according to a Washington Post article that appeared 10 days after the Times' blockbuster Dec. 16 story. He added: "The decision to run the story last week was mine. I'm comfortable with both decisions. Beyond that, there's just no way to have a full discussion of the internal procedural twists that media writers find so fascinating without talking about what we knew, when, and how – and that I can't do."

From all indications, the Times had the basic story in hand before the election in November 2004, when Bush defeated challenger John Kerry. In other words, if those running the New York Times had behaved like journalists instead of political players – if they had exposed this momentous secret instead of keeping it – there are good reasons to believe the outcome of the presidential election might have been different.

Chiseled into the stone facades of some courthouses is the credo "Justice delayed is justice denied." The same might be said of journalism, which derives much of its power from timeliness. When egregiously delayed, journalism is denied – or at least severely diminished.

MEDIABEAT 2005 | NORMAN SOLOMON

Yet quite a few prominent journalists have expressed a strange kind of media solidarity with the Times delay of the NSA story for so long.

Consider how the Washington Post intelligence reporter Dana Priest, for instance, responded to a request for "your opinion on the NY Times holding the domestic spying story for a year," during a Dec. 22 online chat. "Well, first: I don't have a clue why they did so," Priest replied. "But I would give them the benefit of the doubt that it was for a good reason and, as their story said, they do more reporting within that year to satisfy themselves about certain things. Having read the story and the follow-ups, it's unclear why this would damage a valuable capability. Again, if the government doesn't think the bad guys believe their phones are tapped, they underestimate the enemy!"

Also opting to "give them the benefit of the doubt," some usually insightful media critics have gone out of their way to voice support for the Times news management.

Deferring to the judgment of the executive editor of the New York Times may be akin to deferring to the judgment of the chief executive of the United States government. And as it happens, in this case, the avowed foreign policy goals of each do not appear to be in fundamental conflict – on the meaning of the Iraq war or the wisdom of enshrining a warfare state. Pretenses aside, the operative judgments from the New York Times executive editor go way beyond the purely journalistic.

"So far, the passion to investigate the integrity of American intelligence-gathering belongs mostly to the doves, whose motives are subject to suspicion and who, in any case, do not set the agenda," Bill Keller wrote in an essay that appeared in the Times on June 14, 2003, shortly before he became executive editor. And Keller concluded: "The truth is that the information-gathering machine designed to guide our leaders in matters of war and peace shows signs of being corrupted. To my mind, this is a worrisome problem, but not because it invalidates the war we won. It is a problem because it weakens us for the wars we still face."

(By the way, Keller's phrase "the war we won" referred to the Iraq war.)

The story of the NSA's illicit domestic spying is not over. More holes are appearing in the Bush administration's damage-control claims. Media critics who affirm how important the story is – but make excuses for the long delay in breaking it – are part of a rationalizing process that has no end.

"The domestic spying controversy is a story of immense importance," Sydney Schanberg writes in the current Village Voice. The long delay before the Times published this "story of immense importance" does not seem to bother him much. "The paper had held the story for a year at the administration's pleading but decided, after second

MEDIABEAT 2005 | NORMAN SOLOMON

thoughts and more reporting, that its importance required publication." Such wording should look at least a bit weird to journalistic eyes, but Schanberg doesn't muster any criticism, merely commenting: "From where I stand (I'm a Times alumnus), the paper should get credit for digging it out and publishing it."

Professional loyalties can't explain the extent of such uncritical media criticism from journalists. Many, like Schanberg, want to concentrate on the villainy of the Bush administration – as if it hasn't been aided and abetted by the New York Times' delay. Leading off his Dec. 24 column with a blast at George W. Bush for "asserting the divine right of presidents," the Los Angeles Times media critic Tim Rutten proceeded with an essay that came close to asserting the divine right of executive editors to hold back vital stories for a very long time. Dismissing substantive criticism as the work of "paranoids," Rutten gave only laurels to the sovereign: "The New York Times deserves thanks and admiration for the service it has done the nation."

A cogent rebuttal to such testimonials came on Dec. 26 from Miami Herald columnist Edward Wasserman, who wrote: "One of the more durable fallacies of ethical thought in journalism is the notion that doing right means holding back, that wrong is averted by leaving things out, reporting less or reporting nothing. When in doubt, kill the quote, hold the story – that's the ethical choice. But silence isn't innocent. It has consequences. In this case, it protected those within the government who believe that the law is a nuisance, that they don't have to play by the rules, by any rules, even their own."

While many journalists seem eager to downplay the importance of the Times' refusal to publish what it knew without long delay, Wasserman offers clarity: "Didn't the delay do harm? We know that thousands of people were subject to governmental intrusion that officials thought couldn't be justified even under a highly permissive set of laws. We also know that because knowledge of this illegality was kept confined to a small circle of initiates, the political system's response was postponed more than a year, and its ability to correct a serious abuse of power was thwarted. I don't know what the Times' brass was thinking. Maybe they just lost their nerve. Maybe they didn't want to tangle with a fiercely combative White House right before an election. But I do believe that withholding accurate information of great public importance is the most serious action any news organization can take. The reproach – 'You knew and you didn't tell us?' – reflects a fundamental professional betrayal."

Perhaps in 2007 we will learn that the New York Times had an explosive story about other ongoing government violations of civil liberties or some other crucial issue, but held it until after the November 2006 congressional elections. In that case, quite a few

MEDIABEAT 2004 | NORMAN SOLOMON

media critics and other journalists could recycle their pieces about giving the Times the benefit of the doubt and appreciating the quality of the crucial story that finally appeared.

*Norman Solomon's latest book is "War Made Easy:
How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death."
For information, go to: www.WarMadeEasy.com*