

CHAPTER SEVEN

Connecticut's Watchdogs

The role of media in covering Connecticut politics was not one of the topics in the first edition of this book. This was not due to a lack of respect for the media on the part of the author. Instead, at the time the first edition was written it seemed as if the media were essentially reporting and describing developments in Connecticut politics, rather than aggressively investigating what issues were behind or beneath reported stories. However, between the writing of the first and second editions, a period of approximately six years, the media in Connecticut appeared to assume a new and quite different role in their coverage of Connecticut politics. “Investigative journalism,” a term associated with reporters such as Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of the *Washington Post*, now seemed to characterize the reporting of several media outlets in Connecticut. Unearthing and exposing political scandals now became a fairly common activity for political reporters in Connecticut, with newspapers in particular at the forefront of this intriguing development.

Much to their credit, newspapers, more than any other information source in the state of Connecticut, appear to be serving as the true “watchdogs” over Connecticut’s political system. Thus, it would be remiss for a fresh text on Connecticut government not to devote a chapter to the challenging tasks and noble efforts of those individuals known as investigative journalists. Quite frankly, were it not for the work of investigative newspaper journalists employed by

local newspapers, deceitful and corrupt public officials, several of whom have wielded extraordinary power at the state and local level government, would continue to degrade and blemish Connecticut's long tradition of good government.

Newspapers

Although the raw number of newspapers as well as the percentage of persons who read newspapers have severely declined in states across the land, due primarily to the advent of television as a news source, there are still several daily newspapers published in Connecticut that provide readers with an in-depth and substantive look at state and local politics.¹ Among the two hundred newspapers with the widest circulation in the United States, four are based in Connecticut. The *Hartford Courant*, which proudly claims credit on its front page as "America's Oldest Continuously Published Newspaper" has a Sunday circulation of 272,919. The *New Haven Register's* Sunday circulation is 90,389, followed by The *Connecticut Post's* Sunday circulation at 85,772. The fourth largest circulation belongs to The *Waterbury American-Republican* with a Sunday circulation of 61,100.²

In addition to the four newspapers with the widest circulation, a number of newspapers in Connecticut with a more limited circulation also devote considerable space to politics and government. The *Danbury News Times*, Meriden's *Record Journal*, the *Norwalk Hour*, and the *Stamford Advocate* are examples of such informative and politically penetrating publications. Currently, there are a total of sixty-nine newspapers with varying degrees of circulation published in Connecticut, along with a variety of creative and captivating campus newspapers. There is certainly no shortage of print press in the state of Connecticut. For those who prefer reading a newspaper online, practically all of the newspapers in Connecticut can be read on the Internet. The information one reads is identical to hard copy, although the reader will have to contend with a plethora of advertisements and pop-ups interspersed in the body of articles.

Television and Radio Stations

Television and radio stations are also present in Connecticut and provide the citizenry with yet another source of political information, albeit less substantive than stories in the print press. The ABC (Channel 8, New Haven) CBS (Channel 3, Hartford) NBC (Channel 30, Hartford) and Fox (Channel 61, Hartford) affiliates employ political reporters and routinely provide informative and easily digestible political newscasts on a daily basis. Cablevision 12 in Norwalk also devotes a considerable amount of time to Connecticut politics, despite a regional audience confined to a portion of New York state and Fairfield County in Connecticut.

For those who prefer to watch their government in action without narration, cable channel CT-N is ideal for this purpose. This is Connecticut's equivalent of C-Span. Committee hearings at the state Capitol in Hartford, reports from commissioners, speeches by the governor, and a variety of activity on the floors of the General Assembly are available for uninterrupted viewing on CT-N.

FM and AM radio stations located in Connecticut also provide a degree of coverage concerning unfolding political events in Connecticut. The stations vary in their attention to political stories, but one can find several that probe the political landscape in considerable depth. AM stations such as WELI (960 AM), WICC (600 AM), and WTIC (1080 AM) do a good job of covering state and local politics, while the National Public Radio affiliates, WEDW (88 FM), WNPR (89.1), and WSHU (91.1) are clearly the best in terms of detailed reporting and commentary concerning the Connecticut political scene. There are currently 101 radio stations located in the state of Connecticut.³

Blogs

For those who prefer non-traditional and purely citizen-based political reporting, the blogosphere offers yet another medium for political news. Politically-oriented blogs are often created by citizens to promote a particular point of view regarding candidates and

political issues, although some blogs are created for the purpose of facilitating political dialogue and discussion. Although blogs (short for web logs) should not be viewed in the same light as newspapers and other forms of journalism, they do serve to inform citizens about important developments within government and the political arena. Young political activists in particular are the most familiar with and attracted to blogs. Indeed, many seem to depend on blogs for their daily political information and perhaps even voting cues. The political impact of blogs with regard to shaping political information as well as the motivations of those who create and maintain blogs, i.e., the “bloggers,” calls for extended research and analysis.

There are currently 57 million blogs on the web, with 1.3 million posts recorded each day and 54,000 posts recorded per hour.⁴ Among the 57 million blogs, however, it is estimated that only 55 percent can be classified as “active” blogs. Blogs have become a global phenomenon, and appear in many different languages as well, most notably English and Japanese.⁵ Not all blogs are political and one can find blogs devoted to an extraordinary array of subjects well beyond that of politics. Nevertheless, the political “blogosphere” is what has attracted the most attention.

Blogs made their debut in American politics during the emotionally charged presidential campaign of the former Democratic governor of Vermont, Howard Dean. Although Dean failed in his bid to win the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination, blogs continued to proliferate across the land. As noted in Chapter Three, blogs were credited with propelling the 2006 Connecticut senate campaign of insurgent Democratic challenger Ned Lamont. The blogosphere was often cited by pundits as one of the contributing factors behind Lamont’s primary victory against Senator Joe Lieberman. During the 2006 general election, bloggers both inside and outside the state devoted a great deal of their energy to supporting Lamont and other Democratic candidates in hotly contested Connecticut races.

In addition to campaign reporting in newspapers such as the *Hartford Courant* and *Connecticut Post*, one could follow campaign

developments on a daily basis by reading Connecticut-based and non-Connecticut-based blogs. In the state, for example, Connecticut Bob, My Left Nutmeg, Connecticut Blue, and Cup of Joe were exceptionally active with regard to posting comments and views concerning Connecticut election contests. The extent to which the traditional media trolled blogs looking for leads and late breaking developments in campaigns is difficult to assess, although there is reason to believe that newspaper reporters scanned blogs with some regularity, searching for fresh information and leads. Regardless of how one perceives the information value of blogs, the fact of the matter is that an increasing number of citizens are receiving political information from this Internet phenomenon. Any person can create a blog at virtually no cost.

Investigative Journalism: A Challenging Task

Working as an investigative journalist for a newspaper is not an easy task in this day and age. Although a large majority of Americans support the media's role as a watchdog over the political process, many Americans are nevertheless skeptical of the media's motivations. In a 2001 survey of 1,012 adults conducted by the Center for Survey Research and Analysis housed at the University of Connecticut, 82 percent of citizens surveyed indicated that it was important for the media to watch over government. At the same time, however, 71 percent of persons surveyed believed that it was desirable for the government to hold the media in check.⁶ When asked if they were more concerned with the freedom afforded to the media or government censorship of the press, 41 percent of the respondents expressed concern with the former, while only 36 percent indicated a concern with the latter. Moreover, 46 percent of respondents in the survey stated that the press has been allowed "too much freedom."⁷

The survey data presented above are not the only reason why working as an investigative journalist is a daunting profession in this day and age. Additionally, newspapers across the country are currently downsizing their journalistic staffs, which further impedes

investigative efforts.⁸ According to Howard Kurtz, a respected staff writer for the *Washington Post*, declining revenues resulting from a decrease in newspaper circulation appear to be the basis for such an unfortunate development. Moreover, a desire on the part of corporate CEOs to maximize profits has further contributed to staff downsizing. Examples of downsizing cited by Kurtz include the *Dallas Morning News* and *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, two major newspapers that suffered severe staff cutbacks of 19 and 17 percent respectively. The newsroom staff of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* was also trimmed by 15 percent, while 8 percent of the newsroom staff at the *Washington Post* accepted early retirement packages. The cutbacks, according to Kurtz, will inevitably result in “fewer bodies to pore over records at City Hall, the statehouse or federal agencies.”⁹ How newspapers can generate future revenue and hire staff writers to cover politics and government are clearly among the serious challenges facing the newspaper industry in the twenty-first century. The continued staff cutbacks and loss in revenue, according to Kurtz, are “bad news for serious journalism, and good news for corrupt politicians.”¹⁰

However, irrespective of cutbacks in the number of investigative journalists employed by newspapers along with public skepticism towards media reporting, the print press in the state of Connecticut has still been able to investigate and report the malfeasance of public officials in great detail and with amazing persistence. Newspaper revelations of illegal activity involving the mayor’s office in the city of Bridgeport, as well as in the office of state governor, demonstrate quite clearly that investigative journalism is alive and well in the Constitution State.

The Ganim and Rowland Scandals

The reporting of the *Connecticut Post* regarding the scandalous activity of Bridgeport Mayor Joseph P. Ganim, as well as the investigative reporting of the *Hartford Courant* concerning the illegal activity of Governor John G. Rowland were journalistic efforts worthy of a Pulitzer Prize. The investigative reporting of both

newspapers underscores why a free, fierce, and unbridled press is essential to the preservation of the American republic.

It is not the intention of this chapter to chronicle the investigative reporting of the *Connecticut Post* that resulted in the federal conviction and imprisonment of Bridgeport Mayor Ganim. Nor is there any need to review in detail the investigative work of the *Hartford Courant*, which led to Governor Rowland's resignation from office and federal imprisonment. For those interested in the sordid details of the two separate scandals, the archives of both the *Post* and the *Courant* should provide a treasure-trove of information. Suffice it to say, investigative journalists for both newspapers were able to assemble a puzzle – piece-by-piece and day-by-day – that depicted a pattern of greed, deceit, preferential public contracts, various forms of bribery, and sinister cabals of so-called “public servants” who used their power in ways that not only broke the law but also violated the public's trust. Although some might argue that both newspapers piggybacked on the work of federal investigators, the sequence of events which led to the downfall of Mayor Ganim and Governor Rowland suggested that the *Post* and *Courant* reporters were the first to unearth their scandalous activity. The tireless work of reporters is what provided federal agents with the signposts necessary for an effective investigation.

After a lengthy trial in federal district court, Mayor Ganim was found guilty under sixteen separate counts, including, among others, tax evasion and racketeering. The five-term Democratic mayor and former candidate for lieutenant governor, who had been mentioned quite often as a possible gubernatorial candidate, was sentenced to nine years in federal prison. Associates of Ganim were also convicted and received prison sentences that varied in length. For those who closely watched the Ganim scandal unfold, it was clear that the investigative reporting and coordination of reporting on the part of Bill Cummings of the *Connecticut Post* was primarily responsible for Ganim's downfall. Cummings's reports and journalistic queries always seemed to be one step ahead of the F.B.I.'s undercover investigation. A veteran and seasoned journalist, Cummings is known for his objective, thorough, and

uncompromising reports concerning government corruption in the city of Bridgeport. Cummings described his work as an investigative journalist in these terms:

When people ask me what I do for a living I usually tell them that I'm a government cop. I'm the guy who asks what government is doing and why. It's not always easy, and government does not like to reveal its secrets. But the clues are there if you look, in the piles of documents and paper that government generates. Those are a reporter's tools, along with the sources who offer information. I checked out dozens and dozens of tips during the Ganim investigation. Many went nowhere. Others were right on the mark. It can be a tedious and time-consuming process, but that's the way it goes. You keep digging and sooner or later the truth, or at least a version close to it, emerges.¹¹

Unlike Ganim, who chose to face a federal trial, Governor Rowland agreed to plead guilty to the minor federal criminal charge of depriving the state of Connecticut of honest services. Rowland, a Republican who had recently been elected to the state governorship for an unprecedented third term, was sentenced to one year and one day in federal prison followed by four months of house arrest. Although the work of federal investigators was central to Rowland's demise, it was more than evident that investigative journalists employed by the *Hartford Courant* were the individuals unearthing and exposing the governor's illegal actions. Like the *Connecticut Post's* investigation of Mayor Ganim, stories published by the *Courant* seemed to structure the federal investigation. David Altamari, one of the two lead investigative journalists for the *Courant* during the entire Rowland episode, described the relationship between the stories published by the *Courant* and the investigative activity of federal agents as follows: "The stories led federal investigators, who seemed reluctant to go after Rowland, to start an investigation of the governor, and ultimately he plead guilty in federal court. None of it would have happened without the

Courant's stories exposing Rowland using the power of his office for personal gain."¹² Members of Rowland's administration and close associates involved in the scandal were also convicted of various crimes and received prison sentences.

The Spirit of Jefferson

Generally speaking, the investigative work of the *Connecticut Post* and *Hartford Courant* provides special meaning to the perspective of Thomas Jefferson, one of our nation's foremost Founding Fathers and a staunch advocate of a free press. Writing to Archibald Stuart in 1799, Jefferson had this to say concerning a free press: "Our citizens may be deceived for a while, and have been deceived; but as long as the presses can be protected, we may trust to them for light."¹³ Much to their credit and much to the benefit of the Connecticut citizenry, the *Connecticut Post* and the *Hartford Courant* have served as sources of "light" in their reporting of political corruption at both the local and state level of government. The thoughtful words of Bill Cummings concisely summarize the critical importance of objective and aggressive investigative journalism: "Reporters don't set policy; we examine it. We have no special license or privilege. But without people who are willing to poke and probe, democracy does not work. It will only benefit those in power."¹⁴ For those who care about the exercise of political power, and who believe that ethics and good government are inseparable, it should be gratifying to know that there are still individuals employed by newspapers who keep a watchful eye over the conduct of government and who report corruption when they see it. Thomas Jefferson would most certainly applaud the efforts of Connecticut's watchdogs.

Notes

1. See "The State of the News Media 2004: An Annual Report on American Journalism," online at www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/narrative_newspapers_audience.asp?cat. The report notes that slightly more than half

(54 percent) of Americans read a daily newspaper, while 62 percent read a Sunday edition. Moreover, the number of newspapers in the U.S. has declined by 1 percent each year for the past two decades.

2. ABC's FAS-FAX ending March 31, 2006, online at www.accessabc.com/reader/top150.htm.

3. Online at www.shgresources.com/ct/radio.

4. Dave Sifry, "State of the Blogosphere, October 2006," online at technorati.com/weblog/2006/11/161.html.

5. Sifry, "State of the Blogosphere, October 2006."

6. Kenneth A. Paulson, "Good News, Bad News in Latest First Amendment Survey," June 28, 2001, p. 1, online at www.freedomforum.org/templates/document.asp?documentID=14257.

7. Paulson, "Good News, Bad News," p. 2.

8. Howard Kurtz, "Reporters as Detectives," Washingtonpost.com, October 23, 2006, p. 2, online at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/blog/2006/10/23/BL2006102300297-pf.

9. Kurtz, "Reporters as Detectives," p. 2.

10. Kurtz, "Reporters as Detectives," p. 2.

11. Quotation obtained from Bill Cummings via e-mail, November 27, 2006.

12. Quotation obtained from David Altimari via e-mail, December 19, 2006.

13. Thomas Jefferson on Politics and Government," online at text.virginia.edu/jeffersonquotations/Jeff1600.htm, p. 3.

14. Bill Cummings, November 27, 2006.