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Double Exposure: Is Investigative Journalism Dying or Alive and Well?

Patricia Goldstone · Wednesday, October 12th, 2016

The gene pool for long-form, “deepdive” investigative journalism has been shrinking quicker than the Arctic ice-sheet for decades, while the recent success of films like *Spotlight* and *Citizenfour* have whetted audience appetite for investigative stories. The Double Exposure Investigative Film Festival tackled this existential crisis head-on in Washington D.C. this weekend in exploring questions ranging from how to define the boundaries of truth as visual storytellers and journalists increasingly poaching each other’s preserves to where the next generation of investigative journalists will come from.

The famous question “What is truth?” is complicated by professional journalists’ need to get paid by someone. The skepticism towards power that seeds investigative work is inimical to most large corporations unless, of course, it advances an agenda: one of the more fascinating panels explored what happens when an independent filmmaker or journalist is engaged to propel the work of investigators paid by private clients such as investment groups or political parties into the public consciousness, a feature of the film *Betting on Zero* screened at the festival. One conspicuous exception is Kristi Jacobson’s *Solitary*, in which the director inveigled her way inside three privately-run “supermax” prisons to show how corporate cost-cutting predicates inhuman treatment of prisoners by allowing wardens and other inside workers to tell their side of the story. *Solitary* was financed by HBO.

Rendering complex issues into sound bites has been a problem since the advent of television and the progressive dumbing-down of corporate media took a predictable hammering by the festival’s participants, the vast majority of whom were funded by independent sources like the Reva and Richard Logan Foundation.

A good deal of the quiet desperation resonating in seasoned investigative journalists of the 7,000-word story school comes from the driving need of marketers to grab the fragmented attention of millennials. In a panel on how to translate the Panama Papers, which involved some 11 million leaked documents, into a coherent film narrative, *New York Times* Washington bureau chief Elizabeth Bumiller appeared bemused by a cable television effort to explain the Panama Papers by a “scene-based narrative” involving cat GIFs and a reporter playing a woman trying to set up a shell company for her cat. On the other end of the narrative scale, David LeLoup, a young Belgian freelancer whose first feature-length documentary, *A Leak in Paradise*, debuted strongly at the festival, followed a highly dramatic central character for seven years—ex-compliance officer Rudolf Elmer, who released two CDs full of Swiss banking secrets to Julian Assange and was slammed into solitary confinement for six months as a form of plea-bargaining before the Swiss authorities reached a judgment on his case. Even strong central characters do not make storytelling a

cinch: in a sidebar conversation, LeLoup revealed that Elmer occasioned his own imprisonment by calling a press conference midway through the making of the film. When the Swiss retaliated by jailing him, it gave the film its dramatic center, but added years to its completion, with many role reversals between the film director and his very strong protagonist along the way.

If one strong protagonist is a challenge in storytelling terms, how do you manage 400 reporters, not to mention over 11 million documents which don't necessarily translate to film? Bumiller put the question to Marina Walker Guevara, deputy director of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalism, who co-managed the Panama Papers investigation, thereby pointing out what may be a backstage narrative. Walker Guevara said that the goal of the Panama Papers project, which was far too huge for any one reporter to master, was to "debunk the role of the lone wolf reporter, in isolation, hoarding scoops." But the lone wolf reporter is a staple hero in film terms, and hoarding scoops is in the competitive nature of journalism, particularly in an age where original material is increasingly a commodity. (*One Source, 400 Journalists*, ICIJ's own Panama film, is half an hour long, released on YouTube, relies for drama on a scene where Iceland's Prime Minister is cornered in his kitchen, and has had only 6,443 views.) Although Walker Guevara said she chose her "community" of reporters based on their ability to share, it is hard to imagine that, after years of toiling in secrecy there were no murmurs of rebellion in the ranks as fame and Hollywood deals materialized, particularly when Walker Guevara hired Pulitzer Prize winner Jake Bernstein as a freelancer "to increase our capacity." Bernstein's forthcoming book on the Panama Papers, *Secrecy World*, has been optioned for film, with Steven Soderbergh set to direct. Bernstein, another panel participant, said "it's too early to tell" what the narrative center of the film will be, a *Spotlight* story or a *Frontline* story. "Of course, I have a soft spot for stories in which journalists are the heroes," Bernstein remarked drily. "They're inexplicable."

But the need for journalists to be heroes is hard to kill, as the sold-out, cross-generational audience for *All Governments Lie: Truth, Deception, and the Spirit of I.F. Stone* attested. The film traces Stone's evolution as "the first blogger," exposing the hypocrisies of the Vietnam War and Richard Nixon in a humorous weekly typed with two fingers in his home office typewriter, which Marilyn Monroe gifted every U.S. Senator, to his influence on modern independents like Matt Taibbi, Glenn Greenwald, and Jeremy Scahill (whose extended family financed his first trip to Iraq). No visual storyteller, Stone was the original document nerd, diving deep into government archives to emerge like a porpoise with the truth (or at least considerable embarrassment to the powers that be) gripped firmly in his ever-smiling jaws. Scahill's interview—and in fact the film itself—is a clarion recruitment call to the millions of millennials who turned out for Bernie Sanders to put away their cat GIFs and become the next generation of I.F. Stones. As the Double Exposure Festival showed, investigative journalism has become a vocation even more than it is a profession. For the good of the democracy, hopefully some will answer the call.

Top image: Still from All Governments Lie: Truth, Deception, and the Spirit of I.F. Stone

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