

2. A multi-platform approach to investigative journalism

COMMENTARY

Robert Rosenthal began his career in journalism at the *New York Times*, where he was a news assistant on the foreign desk and an editorial assistant on the Pulitzer-Prize winning Pentagon Papers project. He later worked at the *Boston Globe*, and for 22 years at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, starting as a reporter and eventually becoming its executive editor in 1998. He became managing editor of the *San Francisco Chronicle* in late 2002, and joined the Center for Investigative Reporting as executive director in 2008. Rosenthal has won numerous awards, including the Overseas Press Club Award for magazine writing, the Sigma Delta Chi Award for distinguished foreign correspondence, and the National Association of Black Journalists Award for Third World Reporting. He was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in international reporting, and has been an adjunct professor at Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and the University of California at Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. The Australian Centre for Independent Journalism (ACIJ) invited Robert Rosenthal to speak about the transformational model of investigative journalism which he has pioneered at the CIR as the keynote speech at the 'Back to the Source' conference.

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IDON'T think I know the future of journalism, but I'm certainly trying to figure it out.

I was incredibly fortunate as a 22 year-old, a few months out of university, to get a phone call one night. I was a copy boy on the phones. Someone whose voice I didn't recognise said: 'I want you to come to room eleven-eleven at the Hilton hotel tomorrow. Don't tell anyone you're going, not even your

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parents (I still lived at home), and bring enough clothes for a month.’

And I said: ‘Who is this?’

Actually I cursed, rather inappropriately, and it was one of the editors at the *New York Times*.

About 24 hours later, I was xeroxing the Pentagon Papers and you can imagine being a 22-year-old and standing there with a big xerox machine that was about 4 metres long at the time, and had green rays coming out of it. I thought it was sterilising me (but I do have three kids). And literally reading documents that said ‘For your eyes only’, ‘Top Secret’, ‘Secretary of State’, ‘President of the United States’.

The time frame for this is 1971 and in the United States there were huge protests against the Vietnam war. People were on the streets and 50,000 plus Americans and countless Vietnamese were being killed.

So it was a pretty remarkable learning for me. On top of that I became part of a team. And really the best journalism is created by teams. As part of this team, even though I was the junior member, every night at the end of very long days—sometimes we’d sit down and eat it would be midnight—in a suite of rooms we had at the Hilton we would go over everything and there was a tremendous sense of being open and listening and learning.

And I was really informed as a very young man with values that stayed with me my entire career. One of them was the value of the free press. It was the value of investigative reporting, that journalists could make a difference and that every member of every team had a value that would be important to a story. And really at the core of everything was a story.

I left the *Times* because I wanted to be a reporter, and, as you heard, I went to the *Boston Globe*, to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. You do really anything. It was 1979, at that time the *Inquirer* was the most interesting paper in the United States. It was a place of enormous ambition and fun, which is really crucial for journalists. Without ever dreaming that I would do it, I eventually became the editor of the *Inquirer*, after being a foreign correspondent and doing a lot of investigative reporting. Becoming the editor of the *Inquirer* was probably something I thought I would do for the rest of my career. It was 1998, but what I really discovered was an incredible conflict between the values of the newsroom, which are based on creativity and passion and the story, and the values of corporate ownership where the core demand and the core goal was profit. There was a tremendous disconnect and I really had a hard time.

I was the editor of a newsroom with 630 people, a big newsroom, a budget of \$75 million. The *Inquirer* was owned by a company called Knight Ridder, our profit margins were north of 20 percent and they wanted to go higher and higher and higher. It was publicly traded. When 2000 came and everything began to shake out and the internet and classified began to move, newspapers started to see profit and revenue decline. And the way corporate media dealt with that was to downsize. I really opposed that. There was no strategic thinking, there was no looking ahead and there was no thinking that we were making a product, journalism, that people really wanted. But they were figuring out a way to get it in different ways, and that was obvious on the internet. So long story short, I was sacked, as you say here, at the end of 2001 and I had no idea what I would do.

I taught at Columbia and I decided I had one more newspaper in me and I ended up going to San Francisco to be the managing editor of the *Chronicle*. That didn't work out either and in the middle of 2007 I left and I decided that I was not going to go back to a newspaper. I was not going to go into a situation where creativity ran into a wall, where corporate thinking was really about what we used to do and not about what we could do, from my point of view, and everything in terms of innovation was driven by the first question: 'What is it going to cost?'

It was very short term thinking. And I ended up at the Centre for Investigative Reporting because I really wanted to try and create a new model. I had no idea what I was getting into. CIR as you heard is the oldest non-profit investigative reporting organisation in the United States. It was founded in 1977. When I got there it was really in a stress situation. It was unclear whether we would survive, it was based on raising funds from philanthropic organisations and big foundations.

When I went there what I really wanted to do was create a model where you take a core story, the investigation, and you think of it as the hub of a wheel. Every spoke of the wheel is a different media platform.

So what do you do to make this happen? You create a team around a story and push it out on every platform simultaneously. You have to create an organisation, either through internal staff skills, or through collaboration, where you're working as a unit from the inception of the story to the time you publish it across all platforms and reach the largest audience possible in the way the audience wants to receive the story.

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The board of CIR was very sceptical that this could happen. I set out to raise money. It was the beginning of 2008 and the financial markets were in total collapse. The first 18 months I was at CIR I couldn’t raise any money. Somehow we survived. I brought in a development officer and by the end of 2009 we had gotten around \$3 million. We now have a staff of 32 people which has grown from seven people in 2008, and budget of nearly \$5 million.

What we are doing is a multi-platform approach to investigative reporting.

The easiest way for you to understand that is with an example.

About six months ago or longer, we obtained something called ‘suspicious activity’ reports. The United States Department of Homeland Security creates suspicious activity reports, which it sees as part of its ‘counter-terrorism’ activities, and we did a Freedom of Information request to multiple police organisations across the United States and one, I think inadvertently, sent us a bunch of these police activity reports which they probably weren’t supposed to do. We got 125 associated with the Mall of America.

We did a series of stories and this is where the model really works. We have a very good relationship with National Public Radio and public broadcasting. We took the story to them around six months ago and we said: ‘We want to work with you.’ This involved a tremendous amount of trust. Simultaneously in-house we have the capabilities to produce broadcast video animation, print stories, interactive multimedia with the documents.

When the story was released, it was released in two segments on national public radio, one on *All Things Considered*. There was a 20-minute piece with an intermission. There was a nine-minute piece on *Morning Edition* the next day. It was broadcast nationally on public broadcasting. It was in newspapers around the United States, it was on multiple websites, it was pushed out through social media through Facebook and Twitter. And conservatively probably reached an audience of 5 or 6 million people.

One of the things we also did and which I want to show you is really an innovative step. We are starting to play around with animation. It’s about how you simplify a very complicated story and get it to an audience that really doesn’t care about reading long form, might not listen to public broadcasting, may not watch public television, but is getting its information in completely different ways.

This animation, *Suspect America*, is an attempt to push out the essence of the story to a different audience in the hope that an audience that might use



Figure 1: *Suspect America* video — vimeo.com/28556335

this would get curious enough to go to some of the other elements of the story. The print version of that was around 4500 words, many minutes on radio and television and it's something I never thought I would be involved in. I really think as we're going forward all of us have to think about how you tell your story and reach the largest audience and the essence of that is collaboration. And it's happening. We produced that in-house and hired the illustrator. Carrie Chane, the narrator, whose voice you heard, wrote the script.

Everything in there is based on information and facts we obtained elsewhere. Everything we do is cross-vetted. Credibility is really the centrepiece of any investigative journalism.

If you go to our website, America's War Within (americaswarwithin.org), you'll see a tremendous amount of information substantiating everything including one thing about what you can do as a citizen to find out if there's a suspicious activity report around about you.

It is almost impossible even if you're the subject of one to even know about it, or to get access to it. One of the things we did, because we had the reports, we tracked people down and they didn't even know they were in the system. We showed them the reports, some of them were 15 or 20 pages long. You can imagine their reaction. Surveillance pictures were taken of people in the mall, which they didn't know were being taken, and attached to the

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suspicious activity reports, many of which were about completely mundane and ludicrous things. So again, this is an attempt to try and reach a different audience, tell the story in a different way, and adapt it to emerging and evolving technologies.

This animation was placed on the NPR sites, on public broadcasting sites, it was on our site. We are now in a very early conversation with YouTube. Because we're in Northern California we can really open doors with the really big tech companies, whether it's Yahoo or Google or Apple, and really they're trying to figure out how to help the non-profit sector in the United States, especially around investigative reporting. But the key thing always is to tell the story in a lucid, coherent way and to think how we can use the evolving technology and push things out on every platform.

And hopefully the perception is that it's not biased, that it's impartial. As an investigative reporting organisation, we don't want to be seen as partisan, aggressive or conservative. And in the United States, and here, is a polarisation of news and information that's really very dangerous.

If you think about where I come from in terms of how I started my career xeroxing the Pentagon Papers and got to this, and what it means as a manager and a leader: it's really about giving up what didn't work and being open to risk-taking and experimentation in the new model.

Now I can answer questions about the complications of keeping this alive, in terms of securing the funding and the philanthropic model. As a non-profit we are also charging for-profit news organisations for our content. And the reality right now is that we're overwhelmed by the opportunities. Our next step as a bunch of journalists is to bring in people who can help us generate revenue. We're not good at that. I'm not a business man.

Question: I'm very interested in what you say about how you earn your money, which is selling to traditional media coupled with your interest in selling animation and cartoons. I read that 9/11 commission report as a cartoon book format and I was very interested in asking you whether you think that translating really complex issues, in terms of animation or cartoons, is where you're going to make a significant amount of your revenue in the future.

Robert Rosenthal: We don't know the answer to that. If I knew the answer I'd probably share it very openly.

One of the things in the States that's happening is a tremendous amount of transparency between the non-profits. There's something called the Investigative News Network which was started about a year and half ago. I'm on the board. It was 60 non-profit investigative or news organisations in it. Just to be clear about the amount of revenue we're generating from for-profits: if we're fortunate, we hope to get to 20 or 30 percent of revenue in the next couple of years, because it's just evolving. But we have a project that's just focussed on California which is the biggest state in the country where we have relationships and deals which generate revenue with six or seven American agencies for broadcasting, not American ABC affiliates in the state. Some of our stories are published in as many as 20 or 25 newspapers simultaneously.

We're taking macro issues and breaking them down to hyper-local issues because we have to get communities involved and interested in stories that they feel they may have no relationship to so there are multiple ways we're trying to generate revenue. I'm not sure animation is the key. I would say everything that we're doing is in the innovative, creative, experimental stage. I would not have thought three years that we would have as many distribution partners on the same stories we have now. The concept of exclusivity has been shattered.

If you'd asked before we started this California Watch (californiawatch.org) project how many newspapers would run our stories, in a state the size of California, I would have said a handful. But what's happened is the news organisations want our stories because they're unique and they would rather have it than not have it, and the audiences are so fragmented whether it's in print or on their websites that they don't care if even in the Bay area we'll have a story on the same day that might be in 5 or 6 newspapers, on public radio, on commercial television and on multiple websites. So you're really seeing a saturation of audience. How we transform that into audience revenue is something we can't answer right now. Part of our challenge—and every new organisation's challenge is understanding who and how large your audience is through analytics and the metrics. We have a site and our model is not to be a destination site but to push it out. So we might have 250,000 to 350,000 visitors to our site a month. One of our stories could be on a larger website, whether it's *Huffington Post* or a big metro paper, and that one story in one day could have 100,000 unique views. We're not getting credit but our founders want audience, they want impact.

So the model for the non-profit in the States is not about making money,

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it’s about informing the public, it’s about the traditional role of investigative reporting in a democracy, it’s about audience and the next challenge from their point of view is ‘engagement’. How do you get people involved in an issue? How do you get them informed on an issue and take action? Historically as journalists a lot of us have shied away from ‘solutions’ but we’re really trying to master that. How do you get people to care about an issue either through geography or subject matter?

So these are all things we’re trying to figure out and experiment with but I think the beauty of what we’re doing is we’ve created a new model.

As you know, change in any news organisation is really difficult but if you’re creating something new you say this is how we’re doing it and we’re very nimble. This is not only journalism, it’s in any start-up, the energy of trying new things, but it always comes back to a good story.

Question: Media is going through so much change and I worry as a young journalist, and wanting to be a good young journalist, what is the open media and what does that mean to an investigative journalist? How do I get a source that I know is the right source? Like Judith Miller she made these beautiful scripted articles after 9/11 and really created a war from it. And I worry about open media because there is so much change and there is no regulatory body watching it. What do you see in the future? Is there a negative effect?

Rosenthal: Historically, information, misinformation, accuracy errors happen. You take *The New York Times* and Judith Miller. I was in the newsroom with a lot of people who didn’t want to believe or print some of those stories. Some of them were single sources. The media has been taken to task justifiably as a whole, as a unit for not doing the job. I think there’s not much we can do about it.

Anyone can be a publisher—the access to information, the ability to put out accurate info, disinformation. No fact checking is just something we have to deal with, as an opportunity and as a danger. From a consumer’s point of view, it’s going to be important that you believe that some news organisations have more credibility than others. At the same time we’re seeing a siloing of news organisations where people go to the source they feel good about because they agree with it. I don’t pretend to have an answer but I think that in our small way we’re trying to be a small source of information that doesn’t have

an agenda and what we're seeing is that many big publishers want our content and believe in us because we're perceived that way. But we're in a period of time where the ability to manipulate and control information is greater than before. If you look back in history, it's control of information that is central to totalitarian states' functioning, and the people that oppose that and try to challenge that state's story line frequently have been journalists and they're the first people eliminated.

We're all involved in a profession where you can be imprisoned, beaten, killed because you're a journalist. In a sense, it's a calling.

In Australia the model with the ABC is pretty unique. There are issues with that in the States now you have the incorporation for public broadcasting—my own personal view is it's really crucial in terms of democratic practices to have investigative reporting. To have journalists who can challenge reporting but also to cover things. One of the great problems in the States right now with all the downsizing, so many local governments, courts, police agencies, there's no reporting. No one knows what they're really doing. So I think as a young journalist in the future, your role is going to be maybe more important than ever. How and what the structure is of how information is vetted and put out there is something we're all going to be a part of answering.

I feel this period in the last 10 years historically is probably one of the greatest changes in information and technology that's ever happened in history. We're in the middle of it, we're in the Petri dish now. Some of you will be around in 40 years and you'll look back and see how this evolved. I'm not standing here telling you I have an answer. I'm telling you I'm in the game and we're trying, and what I'm doing and what I'm trying to do is based on my own experience in terms of standards and managing people and trying to get to 'the truth'. I don't have the answers but what I do is really support risk-taking and innovation.

We're on the edge. I don't know if we're going to secure the funding from the foundations over the next 2 or 3 years to really do some of the things I think we can do to support and sustain all journalists, not just at CIR. So we're trying not to do these things for ourselves but for journalism. Some of our founders call this a transformational model but the question you asked is something we're all trying to figure out.

Question: Given how labour intensive your work is, looking through thousands and thousands of digital documents, and also given that we're hearing

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a lot of people are prepared to work for free—how do you see the dynamic between professional and citizen evolving?

Rosenthal: I think it's really crucial because we have the ability to reach out and get information from an incredibly diverse community. There's something in the states called the Public Insight Network (PIN), which was started by American Public Media out of Minnesota, and it's a managed social network where the goal is for citizens, people who want to work with journalists, to join up and ask them questions. You have a range of people who can be your sources. I think the answer to the broader question is: you can't just say you want to do that. You have to set up an infrastructure where you manage the information you get in.

If you're doing the kind of work that we do, which a lot of the time is vulnerable to legal action, you have to figure out a way to vet the content and vet the information. I think it's crucial philosophically and strategically to have that as a core part of your community. I think we can do it better. And large news organisations are trying to do it more consistently and can do it.

The technology has created opportunities that never existed. When I was a young reporter, I took my notebook and I went to the story. The reporters who sat in the newsroom and waited for the phone to ring never got as good a story as someone who went to the story. So now we can go to the community, they can come to us. At the same time, you have to physically be out there as well because your story is always better when you go to the scene of it. And I think that's something that has been lost quite a bit and it's really crucial. You can rely on your computer to do a lot of things, you can access information but you still have to have the sources. You need the people to help frame it and give you the context. They're the ones taking the most risk personally because of legal action or threats or losing their job so these are things we ought to think about. They're important, both for traditional journalism and in the new model, but if you're covering it for an agency people have to see your face, know who you are, read your byline, hear you on the radio and see you on TV. If they trust you and see you're placing accurately what's in the organisation, that's your best chance of getting information you may never get.

Question: How easy it for start-up investigative centres in the States to get non-profit status? And also what kind of restrictions are on them for making a profit. I run a news website called New Matilda, it's crowd funded

and one of the restrictions that we face is that it's very difficult for you to get non-profit status and we're a private company. So any donation that we get, 10 percent of it goes in GST and anyone who donates to us can't claim that donation on tax. I'm wondering if you can explain the difference.

Rosenthal: We can bring in revenue to support the work but we can't bring in more than about 60 percent revenue, because then we have to shift to a for-profit. At the same time there's a new tax law called an LC3 in some states where you can be a non-profit and create a for-profit wing to support the non-profit, we can charge a for-profit organisation... but it's very murky. The other key thing you're supposed to be "non-partisan" and that's being blurred in the political climate in the States now...

For our model it's important to have multiple sources of funding, not just one or two and not just big foundations but also individuals.

Question: I suppose what we all share as investigative journalists is that we hope to translate exposing an issue to a call for action. When it comes to transparency and exposing something that you might think is important where do you draw the line between becoming a fear-monger or exposing something that you think is important but it doesn't elicit a fear in the public?

Rosenthal: I think it's in the storytelling and we all know sometimes you can do a big investigative story that just disappears. Nothing happens, which doesn't feel good. At the same time if you're doing stories that lead to changes in action or government legislation that affects a community it's tremendously rewarding.

The other thing that's really challenging: we did a huge investigation into seismic safety in schools in California. The concept came from a school collapsing in China where hundreds of children were killed. We're obviously an earthquake country. We did the story before the disaster. If a school collapsed in your housing community, everyone would be in there looking at records, housing contracts, who built it, was it shoddy cement whatever, was it on a fault line?

We did a story before the disaster: We had an interactive database with 19,000 schools and records no one knew existed.

As a result of that story there's legislative changes and an impact. If you're

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doing credible work you're not going to be seen as hysterical. At the same time information is frequently not believed...

The question you're asking is about credibility. If the news organisation consistently over time does the kind of work that holds up to criticism from the right or the left, and leads to results, that's the most rewarding work you can have.

Question: How if there is a greater emphasis on the part of funders and now more on your work as a journalist, not just on telling the story but looking for solutions – but that be interpreted in a politically partisan way?

Rosenthal: You have to be extremely careful to not allow your partners to dictate your stories. It's the same in a traditional model at a newspaper: you don't want the advertisers telling you what you do and what you don't do. And that's when you get most conflict with your editor if you're the publisher.

The best investigative reporting has context. It really explains the systemic failure of something and why it doesn't work, and through that you hope that it leads to a solution. I think now we have to push for the solution. It may not come from us. It's using the public... how do you put the spotlight on an issue and say, 'Why don't you help us answer these problems?'

There are issues that people do have answers to and people in this over-complicated world where they feel overwhelmed by problems, want someone to help them find answers. It's a tricky dance because someone will perceive bias in whatever you do. You all know when you're doing investigative reporting someone is going to try and come after you and try and tear it down. Over time if you're really going after one party or one problem you're going to lose credibility. Over time, if you're really going across the spectrum then you're going to be seen as fair.

We're facing a political campaign in the US where a couple of billion dollars may be raised, and with new Supreme Court rulings in the Citizens United case the ability to find who the sources are and where the influence is coming from can be harder and harder. But I think it's crucial for all of us to understand when an issue is being pushed. Show the impact of the special interest: who does it benefit, who does it hurt? Those kinds of stories, that kind of info when you're looking at an issue as a whole really give you

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credibility. It's not easy to do. The best investigative reporters grab something by the throat and they're not going to let go.

With the evolving technology we're in a new world and if we're going to survive and thrive, we need to adapt to the changing technology that is shaping who we are and what we do. A story from anybody, a blogger in a little community can go global just like that. We've seen it happen. So how do you adjust to that? And I think that's really got to be central to everybody's thinking as you're pursuing the core thing which is the story.

Robert Rosenthal was the keynote speaker at the 'Back to the Source' investigative journalism conference in Sydney in September 2011. He is executive director of the Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR) in Berkeley, California.