

Hey, Anybody Want to Win a Pulitzer?

BY A. BARTON HINKLE

“**T**he 35-year-old federal law regulating tap water is so out of date that the water Americans drink can pose what scientists say are serious health risks and still be legal,” the *New York Times* asserted back in 2009. The passage of time certainly has validated the newspaper’s concern. Who among us can get through the day without stepping over the rotting corpses of fellow citizens done in by tap water?

The sentence quoted above came from the paper’s “Toxic Waters” series, one of many examples of high-minded investigative journalism in recent years. (For those of you who work for a living, investigative journalism is the sort of work that news reporters like to do, as opposed to reporting the news, which is terribly ho-hum.) National Public Radio, too, has done an investigative series on “Poisoned Places: Toxic Air, Neglected Communities.” This summer it ran another series, on coal-mine dust: “An investigation by NPR and the Center for Public Integrity found federal regulators and the mining industry are failing to protect miners.”

Not to be outdone, the Associated Press produced its own investigative series, “Pharmwater,” about pharmaceuticals in the water supply. Last year, the AP ran another series on how “federal regulators have been working closely with the nuclear power industry to keep the nation’s aging reactors operating within safety standards by repeatedly weakening those standards, or simply failing to enforce them.”

And let’s not forget the *Washington Post*’s year-long, 2010 series on “The Hidden

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Life of Guns,” including reports on “How Politics Protect Gun Dealers,” “How Cop Killers Get Their Guns,” and how the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives’ “resources [and] reach are limited as the gun lobby wields its influence.”

You might have noted a subtle pattern here. (You could hardly do otherwise; to paraphrase Raymond Chandler, it sticks out like a tarantula on a slice of angel food cake.) Between corporate America’s innate malignancy and government’s shocking reluctance to regulate, it’s an absolute miracle that anyone still draws breath in this septic tank we call America.

One mustn’t jump to conclusions; it is possible the media have cranked out some investigative series that do not reflect this premise. Curious, I sent a query to the AP asking if it had ever done a series suggesting that there might sometimes be *too much* regulation, or even recognizing that as a theoretical possibility. Nope. The best the Washington bureau chief could come up with was last year’s exposé on how the New York Police Department had been spying on Muslims. “At least some libertarians,” the chief noted, “jumped on the revelations ... as an example of a govt [sic] with too

much power and not enough curbs.”

Indeed. But that series goes in the file labeled “civil liberties,” not “excessive regulation.” And in the realm of civil liberties the media do harbor an intense skepticism of government power. One gets the sense their attitude is rather less skeptical when the topic turns to the regulation of industry. Why could this be? It couldn’t possibly be ideological, could it? No way! The Washington bureau chief insists, “We as a matter of course don’t have political slants.” Oh.

If you take a look back, some investigative series have turned out rather badly. In the late 1990s, the *Cincinnati Enquirer* ran an 18-page series alleging that the Chiquita banana company had been very, very naughty: abusing workers, breaking laws, smuggling drugs, etc. Chiquita sued. The newspaper retracted the entire series and published a front-page apology.

Around the same time, both CNN and *Time* retracted stories they had run about the U.S. military using sarin gas in Vietnam. The *Washington Post* had to apologize for Janet Cooke’s Pulitzer Prize-winning, but fabricated, stories about an eight-year-old drug addict. The *San Jose Mercury News* had to recant Gary Webb’s stories about CIA involvement in drug trafficking. Etc.

Then there are the wider media foul-ups, such as the 1996 church-burning scare. “FLAMES OF HATE: Racism Blamed in Shock Wave of Church Burnings,” said news accounts, even though the number of church burnings had gone down, not up. Or, to cite a better-known example, take CBS’s botched coverage of George W. Bush’s military record. The untenable story relied on memos that were, in the *New York Times*’ priceless phrasing, “Fake But Accurate.”

From these and many other examples, it becomes clear that the media often subject the American public to reporting that is egregiously, if not dangerously, false. And yet, one might say, the 223-year-old law regulating freedom of the press is so out of date that the reportage Americans consume can pose what observers say are serious risks and still be legal.

Talk about Pulitzer bait. This seems like perfect fodder for a 17-part investigative series. Don’t you think? **R**