

Today's Deep Throats

06-05-2005



AP FILE PHOTO

Watergate reporters Carl Bernstein, left, and Bob Woodward, back in the day at their 1973 Washington Post work stations.

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Joseph Darby. Sibel Edmonds. Joseph Wilson.

These are the W. Mark Felts of today.

But while many were hailing the finally identified Deep Throat as a great patriot last week, the new generation of American whistle-blowers who've uncovered government wrongdoing, security breaches and fabrications have faced retaliation and persecution, losing livelihoods and reputations.

They operate in a milieu in which they are often branded unpatriotic for swimming against the tide of the U.S. war on terrorism, relying on media that are dealing with a credibility crisis and reassessing their reliance on the anonymous source, and a White House that is masterful at turning on its accusers.

During a week when *The Washington Post* was being hailed for protecting a confidential source for 33 years, two prominent American journalists inched closer to jail terms for trying to protect their sources.

These are some of the stark differences illuminated by a gap of more than three decades and some of the reasons why many analysts wonder whether a Watergate-style story depending on an anonymous source could happen today.

Some wonder whether there is any longer a capability of the media to shock, of a public to reach a consensus, of facts to stand on their own.

"Successive governments have learned to withstand shame," said Ed Wasserman, a journalism professor at Virginia's Washington and Lee University.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson, co-editor of *The Press* and an analyst at the Annenberg Public Policy Center, which last month studied the media's eroding credibility, says conservative bloggers and TV talkers would have kept up attacks on *The Post*.

"Certainly, there are many more people holding the media accountable these days, from the right and the left," she says. "It would have been much more difficult not to reveal the source."

Carl Bernstein, who co-authored the Watergate stories with Bob Woodward, raised the question himself in an interview with CNN's *Larry King Live* on Thursday night. As he watched the likes of former Nixon administration speechwriter Pat Buchanan and convicted Watergate conspirator G. Gordon Liddy try to tear down Felt, he spoke of the differences in the two eras.

"There were only three networks, no 24-hour newscasts," he said.

"I'm not at all sure that the same way that Buchanan and Liddy, and all these guys, have gotten on this week and said, 'Oh, it's all a bunch of nonsense,' had they had that ... 24-hour soapbox then, it might have been more difficult."

Woodward, on the same program, spoke of another difference — the immediacy of today's journalism.

In the early 1970s, the duo spent weeks researching stories. Today, Woodward said, there would be pressure to immediately post any incremental advance in a story on the paper's website.

The accolades tossed to Felt, the second-ranking FBI official of the day, brought into stark focus the travails of today's whistle-blowers.

Joseph Darby is the American soldier who exposed the Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal, but he had to come out of protective custody to receive a "Profile in Courage" award last month.

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Sibel Edmonds, FBI whistle-blower

He and his family have faced threats of recrimination for his decision to breach the code of silence in the military.

Joseph Wilson is the former U.S. diplomat who blew the whistle on the Bush administration's false claim that Saddam Hussein had tried to buy "yellowcake" uranium for nuclear weapons, then watched as his wife's identity as a CIA agent was blown by an administration official who leaked it to a widely read columnist.

Sibel Edmonds is the former FBI translator who was fired when she went to superiors to complain about sloppy and incomplete translations of intelligence information before and after the Sept. 11 attacks of 2001.

Edmonds has emerged as one of the country's most celebrated whistle-blowers and founder of an association of those who are trying to shine a spotlight on government wrongdoing.

"What we saw this week just makes us more determined to get this type of information to the public," she says, adding that there is typically a media fascination with the retribution brought upon whistle-blowers, but less scrutiny of the charges they make. In the United States of 2005, Edmonds says, whistle-blowers, whether they go public or remain anonymous, deal with the pervasive "fear factor" that those who challenge authority are being unpatriotic.

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"How many people do you think read (investigative reporter) Seymour Hersh in *The New Yorker*? The average guy in Iowa doesn't do that. He turns on Channel 4. And just turn on your TV any night to see the message they're getting."
Ask Mike German.

Like Felt, he was an FBI agent who saw wrongdoing, but unlike Felt, he did exactly what the Nixon apologists say Deep Throat should have done.

German resigned after 16 years of service, went public with his charge that the FBI had failed to act on a plot involving American right-wing militias sharing information with Islamic extremists, fumbled the probe and then falsified documents to discredit their own sources.

And nothing happened.

As is the case for Edmonds, who is taking her case to the U.S. Supreme Court, no one has ever come forward to deny German's charge or shatter his credibility.

"I couldn't stay with an organization which covers up its own mistakes, especially when it comes to terrorism," the former agent says.

"But I can understand why Mark Felt took the route he did.

"Had he done what I did, I don't think he would have had any better luck than me."
Time magazine's Matthew Cooper and Judith Miller of *The New York Times* are, in some respects, the Bob Woodwards of this year.

Cooper and Miller face up to 18 months in jail for their refusal to reveal who blew the cover of CIA officer Valerie Plame — wife of "yellowcake" whistle-blower Wilson — whose identity was divulged by columnist Robert Novak.

There is an obvious irony here — they are protecting a source who used a leak to punish a whistle-blower — but the principle remains the same: something both Bernstein and Woodward referred to last week when speaking of the need to respect a pledge of confidentiality.

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But Cooper said in an interview that each case is unique and that the only common thread is the protection of confidential sources.

Had Woodward been subpoenaed and not provided his source, he, too, could have been facing jail, Cooper said.

"I didn't shake my head ... and wonder why this had happened to me and not him."
And what of the use of the anonymous source?

Many in journalism in 2005 think anonymous sources have been overused and many outlets are reassessing policies in light of *Newsweek's* use of an unnamed source to report that U.S. authorities flushed a Qu'ran down a toilet at the Guantanamo Bay prison camp. Under intense pressure from the White House, *Newsweek* retracted the item after the Bush administration blamed the revelations for sparking anti-American riots that left at least 15 dead in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

But the flood of Watergate memories has returned some of the lustre to the tarnished anonymous source.

"This proves that anonymous sources, if treated properly, are invaluable," Ben Bradlee, *The Post's* executive editor during the Watergate period, told CNN.

Says Stephen Hess, a presidential and media scholar at the liberal-leaning Brookings Institution: "I don't know why we have to make this so complex. If the story is important enough, if the source is important enough, if the editor backs you, then you go with it. "If you're wrong, you apologize."

The Watergate era came at a time when American journalists were involved in a period of self-examination over whether they had been too soft on president Lyndon Johnson during the escalation of the Vietnam War. It was much like the introspection now underway about the reporting of the run-up to the American-led invasion of Iraq. The Watergate stories also came shortly after the first concerted conservative attacks on the media, which were being portrayed as liberal institutions bent on discrediting the conservative movement.

That line of attack is best remembered by the alliterative broadside of Spiro Agnew, Nixon's first-term vice-president, who dismissed the media as "nattering nabobs of negativism."

But the North American media does not have the same public trust it had in the 1970s. That is largely the result of a string of recent American media scandals, most notably the Jayson Blair fabrication fiasco at *The New York Times*, the plagiarism by award-winning *USA Today* reporter Jack Kelley, the discredited story on George W. Bush's National Guard service on CBS and, most recently, the Qu'ran story in *Newsweek*.

The Annenberg poll released last month indicated that 48 per cent of the American public thought news organizations were "often inaccurate," while only 45 per cent thought the media generally get their facts straight.

Some 68 per cent of those polled agreed there were times when the government had the right to limit the publication of a story.

For journalism professor Wasserman, America was more "quaint" during the Watergate era. Had *The Washington Post* taken on the Republican administration today, it would have faced vitriolic and mean-spirited counterattacks by email and on cable news. "Politicians have learned facts do not stand alone," he says. "Someone has to explain what the facts mean."

"If it happened today, that gang would have found some way to grit it out."