

Brad Forder's interview with David Nakamura - transcript

5 April 2010, First email interview:

Q: D'Vera Cohn's article and an editorial in the Post mentioned you were contacted by a concerned homeowner in DC about the lead levels in their tap water. Could you comment more on how the story came to be? Were you digging around for information about it at the time? Once you received that piece of information, what was your strategy for putting the story together?

A: By way of background, I am not what one might traditionally be defined as an "investigative journalist," though I find such titles a bit simplistic because every story requires some investigating. It is just a matter of how much. Most often, investigative journalists are defined by the amount of time they have to work on a story and perhaps the unusually high amount of FOIA requests they issue. In that regard, I would probably best be described as a traditional "beat" reporter and at the time I was covering Washington, D.C., municipal government agencies. In fact, I was not rooting around WASA at all, but, as the stories mentioned, received a cold call from a homeowner in the ritzy Georgetown neighborhood who said he had gotten a note from WASA that said he had high lead levels in his water. He was concerned because his grandson often drank directly from the tap and he knew that high lead was potentially dangerous for young children's development. However, his concern was that the letter from WASA was technical and he had called the agency for more information, but had basically been turned away with little help. He was outraged about it and wondered if others had a similar problem with their water. He asked me for help in figuring out what it all meant and how wide-spread the problem was. At the time, I initially assumed it was a minor issue – perhaps a blip in his house or his block or perhaps a water main in the neighborhood. I knew almost nothing about clean water issues; but I agreed to make some calls to help him get a response from WASA. That's when things became more interesting because I also had trouble getting a straight answer from the agency. Initially, the managers said this was discovered in routine water testing and that sometimes this happened but they were taking care of it. I then pressed them to release data on the number of homes tested and how many had excessive lead contamination levels. I suggested we would file a Freedom of Information Act request for the data if they did not provide it and, after a week, they turned it over. We were stunned to find that 4,000 of the 6,000 homes tested had failed, as reported in the initial story.

(http://www.ewatertek.ca/htm%20files/washingtonpost_com%20Water%20in%20D_C_%20Exceeds%20EPA%20Lead%20Limit.htm) After seeing the data, managing editor Steve Coll basically said we needed to immediately turn our reporting to 1. what the health risks were; and 2. how long the government knew about the problem and what efforts it had (or had not) made to protect public safety. It was at that point we began to realize there was an important story here. However, we still had no idea about the size and scope of what was to follow. It would take several more stories for

us to see the ramifications. I got lucky, however, in that after my initial couple stories, an attorney contacted me on behalf of his client, Seema Bhat, who had worked in WASA's drinking water compliance office but had been fired by the agency. She was in the process of a legal fight to be reinstated with back pay and, because of disclosure, had secured thousands of internal documents, which she and her lawyer shared with me. I spent hours in their office reading and Xeroxing the documents. They provided a fairly clear picture, through memos and reports, that the agency had been attempting to circumvent the intent of EPA testing regulations in an effort to find enough homes without high lead levels so that the agency would not have to undertake the expensive efforts of replacing pipes and introducing new water treatment chemicals to reduce the lead contamination. It was with that information that the story really took off.

Q: I saw recently Bob Woodward in an interview point out three ways journalists obtain information: from people, from documents and he mentioned "get your ass out of the chair" with regard to getting out of the newsroom to see things first hand

Could you discuss how you obtained information in the investigation? Of the methods you used what was the most effective? What method was the most challenging?

A: The lead-in-water investigation blossomed quickly after our first week of stories. Under the unusual setup of local DC government, WASA had been spun into a quasi-independent agency with its own Board of Directors (a product of previous mispending by former mayors in the 1990s, when DC nearly went bankrupt); the EPA was involved in oversight; the Washington Aqueduct, which provided water to WASA, was run by federal officials; and the Mayor's office at City Hall had to respond politically. Also, as you know, DC is sandwiched between Md and Va suburbs and some of the water functions are shared, so we needed to contact suburban officials because parents of young children across the region were suddenly very concerned about safe water.

We obviously interviewed hundreds of people over the six months, from government officials to health and school officials to regular parents and families to water quality and environmental experts. We attended press conferences by officials for months and public meetings where they attempted to explain themselves to the public. We got tours of water treatment facilities.

I would not say that any particular method of reporting was more important than another, but certainly the documents were critical. We ultimately took the data and did what WASA did not – use it to build a public database so homeowners could see their results, their neighbors results and so on. We also created graphics that explained in visual terms how water is purified and delivered to homes and why it had gone so wrong. The documents also contradicted public statements by the officials, for example showing that they had been trying to find ways to manipulate the test results in order to avoid the expensive repairs.

Q: Were there situations when people with important information you needed were reluctant to talk with you? If so, how did you handle those situations? And did you work with anonymous sources during the investigation? How did you handle those sources? What were the challenges?

A: We did have some sensitive sources. As I mentioned, a key source was the woman who had been fired by the agency. She was somewhat shy and hesitant to talk publicly, even though her lawyer encouraged her to. I also talked with other current and former WASA employees, not all of whom agreed to be identified in the stories. I had to treat their information with caution, in part because it was important to ascertain the accuracy of what they said and to be sure of their motivation for talking on background. Obviously, the documents we obtained through FOIA requests and interviews with experts helped triangulate the information.

Q: How often did you use of the Freedom of Information Act to obtain information for the investigation? How long did the process take? What type of information did you obtain using it?

A: Because there were so many moving parts, we were forced to look many places for information. We filed several FOIA requests under local (state, DC) guidelines and also federal guidelines, asking for all data testing sets (over many years) in the region and, ultimately, nationwide. We filed FOIAs for all correspondence (memos, reports, emails) between local agencies and federal agencies. Ultimately, we received boxes upon boxes of papers, after which we had to sort through it all and follow up with experts and interviews to determine what it all meant. One of the most priceless emails was one federal official writing to a local one after the first lead story and basically saying (I am paraphrasing) “Wow, this was a big hit, but it will blow over after the weekend.” He was wrong. I think we wrote regular stories for more than six months.

Q: How much time was spent in the news room (using telephone/email communication) versus outside getting information?

A: For a day story we would talk to as many as a couple dozen people because we had several reporters on the story. Time spent in the newsroom v. outside was probably more heavily skewed to inside the newsroom than normal because this was a story where WASA and City Hall immediately circled the wagons to deny access and we had to rely on the documents to get our initial breaks. Later, with the press conferences, public relations tours, and public meetings, we got out more.

Q: The article by D’Vera Cohn mentioned that the metro editors put together a team of investigators and briefly outlined your roles. How soon after your story broke was the team assembled? Could you comment more about your own role on the team?

Also, how often did you meet? What did you discuss in general during the meetings?

A: Within days of the first story, the editors began assigning other reporters to the story. Carol Leonnig, who took on the federal/EPA response; D’Vera Cohn, who took on the Washington Aqueduct aspect and water quality/environmental experts; and Avram Goldstein, who covered the D.C. Dept. of Health. Many other reporters also chipped in, including our mayoral reporter and school reporters.

Ultimately, a final reporter was added to the story – Jo Becker, one of the nation’s top traditional investigative reporters, who led our look at water quality nationwide. That took several months and relied on nationwide FOIA requests for testing records to show that this problem was more widespread than people knew.

My role on the team came as the lead reporter on the daily, breaking news stories, coming from WASA and City Hall. With my initial jump on the story and my connection to Seema Bhat and her lawyer, I had an inside track on the agency that kept me the most closely connected to what was happening inside the D.C. government. That gave my colleagues time to work on more explanatory pieces about the technical and health aspects of water quality and about the accountability of public officials in the case. I also wrote some profile/feature stories of key players in the case, such as WASA General Manager Jerry Johnson, who had been hired to curb the rampant agency waste and misspending of the 1990s but, in doing so, appeared to have been trying to avoid costly repairs in this lead-in-water case.

The divvying up of reporting worked pretty naturally in this case because oversight of DC water was such a three-headed monster: EPA, Aqueduct, WASA (or four with Mayor/City Hall). The public react and schools also were areas of reporting, of course.

Q: How were the dynamics of the team of reporters? Did you all work well together? How did you divide the work and share information gathered? How were contacts/sources divided among your team?

How many editors (and which editors) worked with you on the investigation? What were their roles? Were you given enough freedom by management at the Post to publish the content that you wanted? Could you comment on the support/challenges from management?

A: Several editors were part of the team, including then-DC desk editor Gabe Escobar and DC politics editor Marcia Slacum Greene. Investigative editor Barbara Vobejda took on the national review of water quality. Management was very

supportive and we met often, usually several times a week, as a group. They encouraged us to be aggressive from the start and demanded that we hold officials as accountable as possible. In all honesty, there were some frustrations when we reporters stepped on each other's toes and I do remember once or twice getting upset over being relegated to a support role as someone else took the lead on a particular story that I thought I should have dibs on. But those times were remarkably few in the grand scheme of a fast-breaking, complicated story like this.

Q: I read that over 200 stories were run by the Post on the water quality issue. How long did the entire investigation last?

Aside from the obstacles listed in D'Vera Cohn's article (D.C. water utility officials unwilling to hand over test results, for example), were there other obstacles that you faced throughout the investigation?

A: Our stories lasted from Jan. 31, 2004, through August or September of 2004. Even after that, we would do occasional stories. ... In terms of other difficulties, perhaps the biggest challenge for us was to present to readers a very, very complicated story that was moving very quickly in a responsible way. The initial piece ran on page A1, stripped six columns across the top of the Saturday newspaper. Yet at that time, we did not have a lot of answers to the questions we knew anxious readers would want to know (in fact, not a lot of scientific research had to that point been done about the affects of consuming lead in water v. paint or gas). So we had a responsibility to break the story but at the same time we had a responsibility not to panic the public unnecessarily. It was a delicate balance and the government often accused us of blowing the story out of proportion and scaring parents for no reason. However, it has since become clear through testing of blood-lead levels of DC children that indeed there was a spike directly correlated to the period of high lead-in-drinking-water.

Q: In your opinion, what was the biggest accomplishment of the investigation?

A: The accomplishments of the story were many, but foremost were about public health, as I just mentioned. In the end, the government provided free water filters and blood tests to families, added chemicals to the water supply to stop the lead from leeching from the aging pipes, and embarked on a \$300 million plan to replace all the lead pipes in the city (that program was stopped about halfway through because of expenses and because the chemicals in the water supply had indeed stopped the erosion of the pipes and reduced the contamination).

Q: How did you grow as a journalist from this investigation? Did you learn anything new about investigative journalism?

Could you comment on being awarded the 2005 Selden Ring Award?

A: Absolutely, I learned a great deal from the process. Some people, including Post Chairman Don Graham, expressed a bit of surprise when we won the Selden Ring Award because, as he told me, that award is usually presented to investigations that

last, say, one year and produce a series of long, detailed stories that run over the course of a few days, then the follow-up stories about changes the series produces. In this case, it was a regular beat story that exploded into a major national story (I attended on Congressional hearing on the matter in which new Senator Hillary Clinton told WASA officials that she lived in Georgetown and worried about her water). I certainly learned about the important role that newspapers can play in representing the public in fighting powerful institutions (remember, this started because a citizen was frustrated that he could get no information from his government). The process of using FOIAs and interviews to patiently re-create a hidden narrative that contradicts the statements of elected public officials was perhaps my most important lesson.

Q: I noticed an article from last year (April 2009) that you wrote on the resignation of WASA's general manager, five years after you broke the story. After a story has been out for a while other news obviously takes its place. . . How important is it to follow up on these types of stories where some results won't be seen for years (like water pipe replacement)?

A: As for following up after the fact, it is critical and in this case I would say we did not do as much as we probably should have. Carol Leonnig and I wrote stories over the years that followed up, but by 2005, I was covering the political fight over Washington using public money to build a new baseball stadium. By 2007, I was covering the election of a new mayor (Fenty). No one took over DC agencies as a specific beat and certainly no one was directly covering WASA.

Q: How would you define investigative journalism? Is it different from "ordinary" journalism? If so, how is it different?

A: As I mentioned at the top, I do quibble with the idea of "investigative journalism" simply because pretty much all stories require some investigating. I think the traditional idea is a reporter or a team that has a theory about corruption by a particular person or company or agency and sets out to find out if it is true, then patiently reports it in granular detail before laying it all out in a long narrative. But as the lead story suggests, there are other models.

Q: Why is investigative journalism important?

A: Perhaps the key role for newspapers is to hold powerful people/institutions accountable, especially publicly elected government agencies. Having the time and patience to delve below the publicly available narrative to fight a deeper truth is critical to protect people's welfare, money and freedom.

Q: What are the obstacles facing investigative reporters in the US now?

A: As with so many aspects of journalism these days, the internet has altered investigative reporting drastically. For one, there are fewer slots on

newspapers/tv/radio, etc., for dedicated investigators because of revenue woes. The speed of reporting on the internet has made turnaround times faster and more competitive, leaving less time for thorough reporting. And the public's patience and time for reading long-form investigative pieces is probably getting smaller. Also, the younger generation of reporters, reared on blogs and social media, might not have an interest in the more sluggish, long-term investigative reporting that is required to ferret out some kinds of scandal and accountability reporting.

A: What is the future of investigative journalism in the US?

Q: There will always be a role for strong investigations – just look at the NYT takedown of Gov. Patterson, which featured some good, old-fashioned accountability reporting and the patience to publish the stories only when they were ready. (As you know, the NYT stayed patient even after competitors speculated about their story and even after some criticized the first story as too soft – turned out the next one was the biggie.) I was pleased to see former WPost reporter Serge Kovalski, a true bulldog investigative type, on that team of reporters.

And as much as the internet has negatively affected budgets for investigations, it has also created new outlets for accountability reporting and some of the new media outlets have had their own hard-won scoops. So that is indeed promising. That said, there is no question that investigative reporting is in jeopardy as the media undergoes a metamorphosis.

7 April 2010, Second email interview:

Q: I saw on the Post's website, you started out as a sports reporter and read the Post sports section growing up. Is your enjoyment of sports what led you into journalism? Do you have certain teams that you follow? I also saw that you covered the University of Maryland men's basketball team. Have you been able to watch any of the NCAA tournament in Japan and who do you think is going to pull it off?

A: I started as a sports reporter after realizing in high school I would never be a pro athlete. Started at the WPost as an intern in sports in 92 and 93, then spent three years covering U-Md. from 94-97, along with all the other big DC teams on occasion. Loved it but decided to switch to news for more long-term growth. In 2001-02, I was in Hiroshima for a year for JET and remember sitting in the computer room listening to a choppy, delayed internet feed of the Terps NCAA tourney victory over Indiana. Couldn't believe Gary Williams had done it. This year, I was able to watch the whole thing on CBS' online coverage. So I saw Hayward just miss those two potential game winners yesterday.

10 May 2010, Third email interview:

Q: I wanted to focus on your use of documents and the FOIA requests.

When you were given access to all the reports from Seema Bhat and her lawyer or when you sorted through the FOIA requests, what were your initial thoughts on how to sort and organize everything? And how do you efficiently and quickly get through all that material? Was there anything from your past experience that prepared you for that type of research?

A: After the initial stories broke, we started to get waves of information. The first big break, as I mentioned before, came when Seema Bhat's attorney called me after my first story to say his client was in the process of suing WASA to get her job back and back pay. The lawyer invited me to his office, where he gave me access to hundreds/thousands of pieces of paper that they had won from WASA during the discovery part of the lawsuit. He allowed me to use the office copy machines to copy whatever I wanted (The Post later paid his company for the cost of the copying). I sat at an office table and looked through the papers--focusing on memos, water tests, copies of email that would show the extent of the lead-in-water problem and WASA's strategy in reacting to it. From my memory, there were several very critical pieces of information, including memos and emails between executives showing that the strategy was not to inform the public in a broad way of the potential health threat but rather to keep testing more houses until WASA could find enough "clean" ones to satisfy the EPA water-testing regulations. As we soon learned, the problem was that the more WASA tested, the more "dirty" houses they found. Later, after we sent in FOIAs, WASA and the EPA and the Army Corps dumped thousands of documents on us and we had to go through them all. Often, the problem with FOIAs is that if they are not specific enough, the agencies will purposely just dump them in boxes to make it hard to find what you want. Luckily, I had several colleagues familiar with that strategy and they tried to be specific with the FOIA requests. Still, the process required a lot of old-fashioned digging through the material piece by piece. I still remember when my colleague Carol Leonnig found one email from one guy telling a WASA official something like, "Wow, we took a big hit this weekend but it will blow over soon." It was after my first story but of course we ended up writing probably more than 100 more before it was over.

Q: And I'm also interested in what keeps you motivated when you have boxes and boxes of information to sort through or you're making copies for hours on end?

A: What motivated me was simple-- figuring out what was happening. I still remember getting very complicated water quality reports and taking them home and reading them in my bed until after midnight with a yellow highlighter pen. Then coming into the office early to try to explain what I had learned to my editors which, since it was so technical and complicated, was not easy. But the tedium was usually mitigated by those moments of discovery when we could say, "Aha! Here is why

WASA did this or didn't do that" and could write a story explaining to the public what was happening when the experts were closing ranks and failing to communicate what was going on. WASA officials tried to badmouth us and say we were just trying to win a big award, but the truth was I did not think that at all (I had never even heard of the Selden Ring Award until the day my editor told me we had won it in spring 2005).

Q: How did the demands of the investigation affect your free time? Was it (and is it) difficult to find a good balance between a personal and professional life as a journalist?

A: In terms of balance, I think it is up to the individual reporter. It is true that in the 24-hour news cycle and hyper-competitive environment we are in these days, that you can be totally consumed by work. I remember updating our Inauguration Watch blog about Obama until after midnight and my wife rolling her eyes. I have had to miss vacations (such as when I covered the DC baseball stadium funding debate in Dec. 2006 and I missed a flight to my wife's family Xmas in Montana -- at least the Post paid for my canceled ticket). But for the most-part I feel I can balance things. It depends on what you are looking for in life and I do try to keep a balance of family time, personal time and work time. That said, had I been on Twitter back in 2004 for the water thing, I'm sure I would have been even more frantic about the pace of the story than we were