

Barbara Sehr

Barbara Sehr has a steady algorithm that dances to a different aerial density. OK, she's a funny technical writer who brings out her recently diminished profile, her artificial intelligence, and her native German sense of humor. Despite all that, she is not only funny — she is the only known journalist to interview Bill Gates as both a male and female reporter. Visit her Web site: www.liftingthefog.com

Hacking the Journalism Ethic

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As the world wonders how far the current “hacking” scandal penetrates the Rupert Murdoch Empire, I wonder aloud about what it says about my chosen field of journalism. My career began when newspaper reporting was a gilded enterprise, heralded by the pursuits captured in *All the President's Men* — the story of the Watergate scandal and the reporters that uncovered it.

So much has changed since those early days when I was a cub crime reporter at the dearly departed Los Angeles *Herald-Examiner*. We didn't have computers, cell phones, or even voice mail. Telephones were typically answered by humans.

But we had ethics —lots of them. We also had lots of folks looking over our shoulder — including our readers.

The only hacking going on back then was the occasional techno-wizard who could figure out how to make a free call from a pay phone (anyone remember pay phones?) or better yet, make a free long distance call. That usually wasn't done by reporters. If a reporter wanted exclusive information, you had to go into detective mode — more like “networking” in today's terms. You had to get to know your beat, and at Parker Center in Los Angeles, there were cops that you could count on if you needed details not available from the official press office — as long as the coffee was hot, and the donuts were fresh. You could find cops who could tell colorful background stories about some of Hollywood's biggest stars — especially when some “TV Cop” encountered a real-life police situation. One time they even let me sit in on a meeting with a celebrity “cop” when he came in to report his car stolen from the set.

Today, (at least at the now departed *News of the World*), reporters apparently are too busy learning about breaking and entering into a wireless gateway or buying police officers at a far more substantial price than coffee and donuts. Like the world at large, it is easier for a reporter to fjord an electronic voice stream than speak to and listen to actual human beings. [According to NPR](#), hacking into voice mail is pretty simple — if illegal. Apparently British wireless services are each given a default pin code that is given to every voice mail customer. A majority of customers never change that Pin. Here in the US, few wireless providers require a Pin to get into voice mail as long as the call is coming from the customer number. Of course, as the technically literate know, caller IDs can be spoofed.

Meanwhile, building up a network of sources is relatively hard work. Here you have to actually learn perspectives into someone's makeup, character, and competence in a time of trial. It is also perfectly legal to develop story leads from a source. But of course, it is easier in today's world to ask forgiveness than permission. In short, why waste all that time, when you can just break the law?

If I learned anything at all about newspaper operations, during my reporting years a long time ago, it is that most newspaper expense accounts are reviewed, inspected, and reviewed again with eagle eyes by everyone from the guy upstairs in accounting, (the one with the green shades) to the crusty upper management that would keep my editor in half-sheets of newsprint. Therefore it is difficult to believe that someone with an austere reputation like Rupert Murdoch could avoid confronting the bumps and grinds in the expense accounts at *News of the World*.

I know that as a reporter, I made absolutely sure that the figures for my car mileage were not overestimated. Journalism jobs are even harder to get nowadays; you don't want to give anyone in accounting a signal that you could be first in line at the next layoff. Paying off police and other clandestine sources could be an expensive proposition on a reporter's salary.

With newspapers (especially the newsprint variety) fading into vapors everywhere, one might think that the general allegiance to a certain ethic would remain. Then again, this is not a world that's necessarily fair and balanced.

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