

# Journalists organize

by Ron Stang

What are the attributes one needs to be an investigative reporter?

"Common sense, ability to work, determination and balls," was the opinion of one delegate at the founding convention of the Centre for Investigative Journalism, held last weekend in Montreal.

More than 300 journalists from across the country attended the conference, the first of its kind in Canada. They were brought together by their desire for more investigative news reporting, something they agree was greatly lacking in Canadian press, radio and television.

Another delegate said the greatest personal trait needed to be an investigative reporter was ego. Only with ego and the desire to have one's story appear on the front page would a reporter be motivated to do good investigative research.

A third delegate disagreed. It isn't ego that's important, he said, "but an understanding of social inequality and the power relationships in society. These, coupled with the ability to relate that information to people."

There were about as many different opinions about what it takes to be a good investigative reporter as there was about the meaning of the term "investigative journalism" itself.

One delegate thought the term pretentious. Calling a reporter "investigative," he said, tends to glamorize that person rather than look at the substance of his reporting for what it's worth. "There is no such thing as investigative reporting," he said. "What

we call investigative is only everyday reporting done in a more in-depth way." The fact there has been an arbitrary distinction made between investigative reporting and other reporting in recent years only shows the general state of reporting in print and broadcast media is not very good, he said.

Morton Mintz, a columnist for the Washington Post and the author of the books "America Incorporated" and "Power Incorporated" told delegates that all too often what passes for investigative reporting is the "scoop" and not the story itself. He said some reporters revel in being able to scoop their competition by getting the news story first regardless of how trivial that story may be. "Personally, I find that (attitude) very difficult to defend," he said.

Mintz said news should be judged not solely on its novelty but on the merits of the story itself, how what's being reported affects the lives of the people reading or hearing it.

A theme which kept recurring during the conference's three days of sessions was concern over the recent trend among professional news organizations toward "soft journalism." In the past few years an ever greater number of newspapers, radio and television stations have been altering their news formats, downplaying "bad news" items like crime and corruption. Relying on market research surveys which indicate the public is tired of such news, the media, fearing a loss of readership, has responded by "brightening" the news. One example of this is the increased em-

phasis put upon various forms of "lifestyle" reporting. This could be anything from articles advising the best way to redecorate the home to celebrity gossip columns.

Many delegates at the conference said they worried that the trend toward "soft", "light" or, as some call it, "happy news", is coming at the expense of investigative reporting into such traditional "bad news" issues like politics and social problems.



As a delegate in one session argued, "soft journalism" is little more than pap for the masses. According to CBC reporter Arthur Lewis, even the increased attention given over to such lifestyle articles such as "where to get the best buy" columns for consumers is only superficial reporting at best. The only thing this kind of reporting is doing, he said, is making people better



consumers. "It only tells us where we can get the best buy. It doesn't question what consumerism is all about," he said.

The discussion about the trend toward soft journalism brought up another question. Given the fact readership surveys show the public is tired of negative news, many delegates wondered if there was a future for investigative reporting.

Gerry McAuliffe, a former reporter with the Globe and Mail who wrote a series of articles about police corruption in Toronto three years ago, said that after his series appeared the Globe's circulation dropped by 3500.

However, Steve Lovelady, assistant managing editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer and the head of that paper's Pulitzer prize winning investigative reporting team, said the Inquirer's experience has been that readers are still interested in reading investigative articles into such issues as government and corporate corruption. Lovelady maintained that people will continue to read such stories so long as they have some bearing on their own lives.

Likewise, Brian McKenna, a producer of the CBC's Fifth Estate, said viewer surveys show that his program's biggest audiences are always those for programs in which there are major investigative stories. "In fact," he said, "the more difficult the story is to understand, the more com-

plex it is, the bigger the audience."

If nothing else, the conference showed there were many journalists in Canada extremely interested in investigative reporting. Conference organizers were overwhelmed by the number of people who found their way to Montreal for the conference. Originally they had expected about 100 delegates and had planned accommodation and meeting space accordingly. When it was apparent a great many more were arriving, organizers scrambled to find extra hotel rooms, billets and larger halls in which to conduct conference sessions. All totalled, over 300 people attended.

Not only were delegates enthusiastic about setting up an organization devoted to promoting the cause of investigative reporting in Canada but they agreed it was an historic occasion for Canadian journalism generally. The country has no national organization of professional journalists. Until this time journalists have been isolated from one another with few, if any, vehicles for exchanging views and promoting their work. After last weekend, that situation no longer exists. Resolutions at the final day's plenary session set up the Centre for Investigative Journalism, a non-profit organization having the mandate to bring Canadian journalists together on a regular basis and promote their common interest.

**Staff meeting at 7:00.**

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