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"Investigative Reporting: Making A Difference" (7 Oct @ 11:45am)

by Roberta Baskin, Senior Producer, ABC News "20/20"

Don't quote me.... But even if they didn't pay me, I'd still want to be an investigative journalist. It is a special privilege to come to work... and dig up stories that can affect so many people's lives. We get to uncover a problem... shine a bright light on it... and on a good day, right some wrongs.

I've been working in this arena for more than twenty years... And today I'd like to share four different types of investigative reports that I've done over the years... that have made a difference. Many of the stories I've done have focussed on problems with big companies that are doing something wrong... I tend *not* to hear from public relations people pitching story ideas. Instead I hear from company lawyers with threatening letters about why the story shouldn't air. Many of these letters go to my bosses, or the president of the news organization.

Some strange things have been said about my work over the years... I've been called a "vulture and a prelude to neo-marxism." Told I "operate on the 3 Hs: harassment, harangue and hysteria." I've been told to "grow eyes in the back of my head Most of the time it's not thugs, it's advertisers I've offended. Before I worked in network news, I worked in local news, where television stations are also dependent on advertising to support the news operation. One of the early stories that I did when I worked in local news in Chicago illustrates how a huge industry (and television advertiser) and a cozy relationship with regulators in the federal government needed some exposure to bring about changes.

Strange Brew: Cancer-causing agents in beer...

Way back in 1980, I was reading one of those publications that are written *behind* the consumer's back: "Brewers Digest." I like to get my hands on those kinds of behind-the-scenes industry articles because they're so full of ideas. This particular article said German brewers were

reporting a shocking discovery... that German beer was contaminated with a well-studied, potent cancer-causing agent called Nitrosamines. I knew that the American government had a health standard applying to nitrosamines in bacon. In fact, that year the U.S. Department of Agriculture had shut down three bacon plants for nitrosamine levels considered a health hazard. The level under discussion in German beer was well above that health standard. So I wondered about beer in America and started making calls to American breweries. All of them referred me to their trade association in Washington D.C., the U.S. Brewer's Association, which assured me that they were studying the problem but there was no cause for concern. I was also advised that the U.S. government's Food and Drug Administration (FDA) was looking into it with the brewing industry.

Always the skeptic, I followed up with the FDA. Sure enough a government scientist told me that he had just finished his laboratory analysis of half a dozen beers and that the results were surprisingly high. When I asked for specific levels in specific beers, he got very nervous and referred me to the press office and said I must file a "Freedom of Information Act" request. (That's the formal process to request information from the bureaucrats in our government.) I didn't want to do that because I knew I'd never get the information through official channels. So I just pestered him for the rest of the week, pushing for specifics, but without results. Finally, by Friday I was really desperate for the details because I wanted to test beers myself, but also wanted guidance on *which* beers had the highest levels, so that I wouldn't be wasting my station's money. The lab chemist kept saying "file a Freedom of Info Act" request. I began to beg. I explained that I worked for a cheap television station, I could never get the FOIA request through the bureaucracy in time for my report. So I suggested, instead of specific names and numbers that he cough or sneeze or rap on his desk... use some other creative way to communicate what I needed to know. Finally he said, "Gotta go. But weekends are made for it." That was the secret code. The advertising slogan for a very popular American beer called "Michelob." I was ecstatic. I had one beer to test that would show high levels of nitrosamines.

I did file that Freedom of Information Act request and discovered just how cozy the FDA & U.S. Brewers Association were with each other. The material that the U.S. Brewers Association wrote up and gave me on *its* letterhead was

identical, word for word, to what the FDA gave me on the government's letterhead. FDA refused to give me its testing data on nitrosamines in beer... Although officials changed their minds and released it the day after my report aired.

At the heart of the beer story, we tested 18 beers, using the same laboratory I knew the beer industry had used (so there wouldn't be any dispute over our results). Almost all the beers we tested had extraordinarily high levels of the cancer causing chemical, nitrosamines. It turned out Michelob wasn't as high as many of them. Instead, Heineken tested the highest... equivalent to eating 175 slices of bacon at the maximum legal level! An American beer called Coors had no nitrosamines. Immediately after the series ran on television, Coors took out full page newspaper ads in the "Wall Street Journal" boasting: "Coors: the beer with NO nitrosamines."

The investigation was also able to show how easy it was to fix this contamination problem. Although the American brewers called it a "mystery drama" and said they hadn't figured out how to fix the problem yet... A trip to Germany and interviews with German scientists revealed that Germany had already cleaned up its beer problem. They said it was "simple," just as they'd already told the American brewers. If you direct-fire the malt, you get nitrosamines. If you indirect fire it, you don't.

The story was really very simple. We could show the high levels of a cancer-causing chemical that was already regulated by the government in bacon... and show how to fix the problem... to get it out of our beer. Within six months, the government had new regulations to limit the nitrosamine contamination in beer... And the brewing industry had already switched over to the better malting process.

Another investigation that I did that helped expose a serious problem and bring about some changes was a project I did when I worked in local news in Washington D.C.

Radon: Home Safe Home...

The radon story is somewhat unique for me because it's not about something that a company or government agency did wrong. In this investigation, about deadly radon gas, there's no one in particular to blame. God put radon in the

ground. But when it gets trapped inside our houses, breathing it is dangerous. Radon is the second biggest cause of lung cancer, after cigarette smoking. In America, it's estimated to cause up to 20,000 lung cancer deaths every year.

When I first heard about radon it was 1985 and I read a story about a man named Stanley Watras in Boyertown, Pennsylvania who kept setting off the radiation detectors inside the nuclear power plant where he worked. Eventually, they tracked the source of the radiation down and it wasn't coming from his job. The radiation was coming from his home. His home was contaminated with radon gas at levels hundreds of times above safety levels.

It made me wonder if there could be a problem around the Washington D.C. area, where I was working at the local affiliate for ABC news. I went to our federal government's Environmental Protection Agency and asked if there was a potential problem and officials said, "No. There's nothing in the geology, nothing in the ground, to worry about." Always the skeptic, I wanted to check. There were only two places that had radon detectors back then. One was in California. The other was through the federal government's Department of Energy. I got the energy department to give me fifty radon testers and asked people around the television station to put them in their homes. The results were stunning. A third of the homes had very high levels... Including our well-known sports anchor who happened to have just given up smoking and was on a great health kick, jogging on a treadmill every day down in his basement where, it turned out, the levels were the highest. I got to inform him that his radon levels there were equivalent to smoking three packs of cigarettes a day.

That was just a little test. Next we decided to test a lot more homes.... 100,000 of them! It was the largest radon test ever conducted. Once again, a surprising one-third of the homes had elevated levels of radon gas... Above the federal government's "action level." There were many results to the story. The U.S. Congress held hearings. The National Association of Realtors held many meetings and soon it became common for home buyers to radon test a house before agreeing to purchase it. The series of reports also helped launch an industry... Last time I checked there were some four thousand radon testing companies across America. It's also a fixable problem. There are home improvement companies that can put in special pipes and fans to blow the radon gas in the basement outside where it's harmless.

A postscript to this story: While we, in America, were discovering radon gas and trying to figure out how to fix it... another country across the Atlantic was way ahead of us. Not Germany this time, but Sweden, had built radon protection into its building codes in the early '80s... years before we had "discovered" our own problem. It's a great example of why we should have forums like these to share ideas and keep the communication going across borders and oceans.

Foul Ball: Child Labor in Pakistan...

Another story close to my heart... is one that opened my eyes to the worldwide problem of child labor. It was an investigation I did as a correspondent at CBS News, back in 1995. More than half the soccer balls imported into the United States are hand-stitched in Pakistan. It turns out that American children were playing with soccer balls sewn by Pakistani children. A small village called Sialkot was the headquarters for making these soccer balls. The nearest city, Lahore, is about three hours away. We would drive to Sialkot every day and walk through alleys looking for the stitching workshops. Every single workshop we entered over the course of a week had children in it, some as young as six years old. They couldn't go to school. But they could stitch two soccer balls a day for big companies like addidas, Reebok, Nike.

Reebok had a human rights policy against using child labor or bonded labor (virtually like slave labor), but we found both problems in these remote stitching workshops. When we went to the soccer ball factory where all the balls were assembled for various athletic companies, the company president denied that children sewed the soccer balls. But when I told him I'd just come from taking pictures of children in all these different stitching workshops, he said, "If it happens, it happens beyond our face." But when we showed these pictures and reported the reality of this to the big-name companies whose logos were on the balls, they formed an alliance to tackle the problem, as well as contribute to the education of these children.

As so often happens, when you're out reporting on one story you find another. That happened in this case. While looking for children making soccer balls, we kept stumbling across children hunched over grinding wheels making surgical instruments. These children had their hands bandaged and were bent over grinding wheels with sparks flying. In one

place the owner yelled for the children to hide from our camera. But we caught them on tape running away... Then we looked at the tools the children were making and to our surprise saw the name "UNICEF" stamped on the handles! UNICEF, the United Nation's advocacy organization for children. When I went to UNICEF back in NY and shared these images with officials they said they'd heard about the problem, inspected... and found no problems. But when they announced they were coming to inspect they were taken on what I call the "Chamber of Commerce" tour... meaning everything's cleaned up, spotless and by the rules. Of course you won't find child labor when you announce ahead of time that you want an official inspection to see if there's a problem. That's why what we do as journalists can have such a powerful effect. We can make a reality check on what company's say they're doing... Instead we can see first-hand what they are doing... And by exposing the truth... bring about changes.

Just Do It: Or Else...

Finally, I'd like to share one last story... Also, a story about the exploitation of workers. I think consumers care deeply about *how* things are made... But it's difficult for them to get information, apart from being bombarded with the commercial messages of what companies want us to think or feel about their products. Among the companies that have been most influential and powerful in selling their corporate image of youth, sport and stamina... is Nike with its ubiquitous "swoosh" logo. I heard rumors about the exploitation of the workers who made the shoes and set off first to Indonesia where I visited a number of shoe factories that Nike subcontracted with in the early '90s. There I found that the workers were making less than the country's "living wage," less than \$2 a day. In contrast I found a Canadian company called Bata that paid its workers well above the living wage, as well as extending many other benefits to the workers... workers making shoes that sold for far less money than Nikes. When I reported that story an academic expert on southeast Asia advised me that as soon as Vietnam opened up to American investment that's where Nike would jump next. He called them footloose... always pushing for lower labor costs... and ready to jump to a country that could provide a cheaper labor force. As soon as Vietnam opened up I arranged to go there to see if anything had improved in terms of Nike's concerns about the people who made its shoes. I found the situation was even worse than in Indonesia. The thousands of mostly women making Nikes selling for \$140 in the United States, made less than the minimum wage in Vietnam (40-dollars a month for a 6 day work

week)... In a sense the workers were exploited by not being paid a legal wage... and the consumers were being exploited by paying so much for these shoes. But what was worse than poor wages was a new development... a number of instances of physical abuse. Some women had their mouths taped shut for talking on the sewing line. A group of women were forced to kneel on the ground for 25 minutes with their hands in the air for not meeting production quotas. There was an instance of sexual harassment. And in a well-publicized case in Vietnamese papers, there was a cruel incident in which 15 team leaders were made to stand in an arc in front of their teams while a boss beat them around the head with the upper part of a Nike shoe. It was supposed to be a lesson in the importance of meeting Nike quotas. Even though I had interviewed most of the workers involved in this case (a case that the abused women had won in the Vietnamese courts) ... Back at the company's headquarters in Portland Oregon the head of Nike, Phil Knight, dismissed my reports as untrue and exaggerated. But later an internal audit by Ernst and Young, leaked to me and the New York Times, supported what I'd found: illegal wages, instances of physical abuse and other problems.

Unfortunately, by the time the report came out *only* the NY Times was interested in the story, where it made front page news. Sadly, in the meantime, Nike had made a deal with CBS to sponsor the winter Olympics in Japan. The follow up story which was scheduled to air was quietly and mysteriously taken off the schedule. Some time later, on the eve of the winter Olympics, Nike logos appeared on CBS jackets that the CBS reporters were required to wear on the air during the Olympics broadcast. In fact, some 15-hundred bags of loot were handed out by Nike to CBS correspondents, anchors, photographers and VIPs (that stands for Very Important People). The big Nike bags had Nike sports parkas, Nike hats, Nike vests, Nike pants, Nike boots, Nike gloves for CBS personnel. We have all become accustomed to seeing athletes decked out in corporate logos. But wearing a sponsor's logo on the air and accepting such expensive gifts was a strict violation of CBS News policy. This was an unethical line that had been crossed... Nike paid for and CBS accepted... turning its journalists into billboards for a program's sponsor. In despair at what I was *seeing* as a viewer and what I *knew* as a journalist, I protested with an internal memo to the President of CBS News, sending copies to the executive producers of broadcasts sporting the Nike logo. I expressed my embarrassment and shame that our ethics

had been comprimised and our integrity sacrificed for an advertising deal. I questioned how viewers could trust our reporting on sweatshop conditions when they'd seen CBS journalists sporting Nike logos from head to toe. Those questions were not appreciated... and led to my leaving CBS for ABC news a year ago. I went off the air in the hopes of influencing the decisions made about *which* stories we choose to do... and *how* we cover them.

These are challenging times in the world of journalism. There's more competition from the internet, more choices for how people can get information and news. There's also a bigger blurring of the lines between what's news and what's entertainment. I think it's more important than ever to share ideas and provide support to each other in this next adventure in journalism. The lines between television, newspapers, magazines and the internet are all converging together. The opportunity for consumers of journalism to design their own customized news... what topics they're most interested in knowing about in news, business, entertainment or sports... is here. But I worry that there's a lot of information that we may not *want* to hear about... but we *need* to know. Unpleasant wars, or stories about child abuse, or politics in places we don't think affect us may not be the headlines we would *choose* to see. But our world is getting smaller and we are affected by what happens anywhere in the world. And we need to care. So customizing the news into comfortable little tidbits of information about what we *think* we want to know may not tell us everything we *should* know.

We have many challenges and changes ahead of as journalists. I hope dialogues like this one will help us face the future with integrity and creativity...

Thank you...