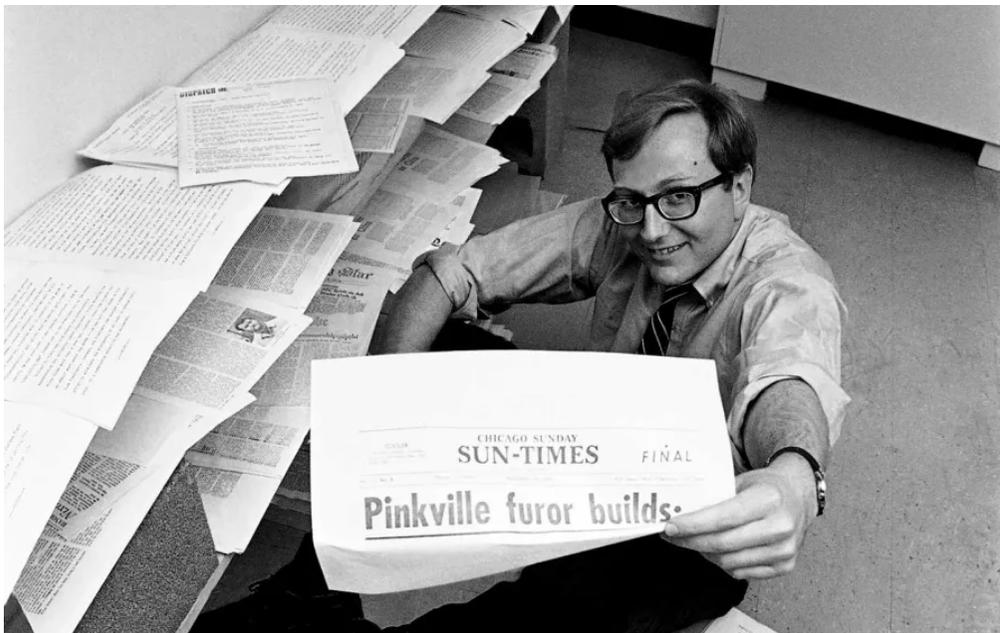


# Breaking News

*Seymour Hersh and the ambiguities of investigative reporting.*

By Michael Massing

SEPTEMBER 27, 2018



Seymour Hersh in 1970 at Dispatch News Service Offices. (AP Photo)

**P**ENTAGON CURBS MEDIA ACCESS. So ran the headline over a July *Politico* report about the “increasingly adversarial relationship” between the Defense Department and the reporters assigned to cover it. Since Donald Trump took office, journalists have complained about the infrequency of briefings, the inaccessibility of officials, the president’s refusal to call on reporters who displease him; even the

threat to move the White House press room from its traditional place in the West Wing has occasioned loud protests. While the ferocity of Trump's attacks on the media seems unprecedented (at least since Richard Nixon), the media's demand for access is not; in fact, it's a perennial feature of American journalism. So too are the associated risks, for, in seeking that access, journalists often have to make various compromises and accommodations.

The benefits and perils of access are a central theme of Seymour Hersh's new memoir, *Reporter*. Over the past half-century, Hersh has been one of America's premier investigative journalists. But unlike, say, Bob Woodward, who specializes in getting those in power to talk, Hersh has been an untethered operator whose scoops have resulted from veering from the pack. In describing how it's done, *Reporter* offers a best-practices guide to journalism as well as an implicit critique of the way it's practiced today. The book also captures Hersh's own ambiguous relationship to access and his sometimes questionable use of anonymous sources. No less important, *Reporter* exposes a structural weakness in American journalism—one that, while linked to the culture of access, extends far beyond it.

**H**ersh first encountered this weakness while working at the City News Bureau in Chicago. He got there through an unlikely route. Born in 1937 to lower-middle-class Jewish immigrants, Hersh didn't know anyone in the newspaper business; his father ran a dry-cleaning store in a largely black

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intelligence officers. After attending a two-year junior college, he transferred to the University of Chicago, where his ability to write helped him get his degree and eventually earned him a position at City News, which covered the courts and police for Chicago's newspapers. According to Hersh, the mob ran the city, the cops were on the take, and reporters mostly ignored the corruption in return for access to crime scenes and the right to park wherever they wished.



## Climate Change

One night, when Hersh was on duty at police headquarters, he overheard two cops in the parking lot discussing a robbery suspect who'd been shot dead. "So the guy tried to run on you?" one of the cops asked. "Naw," said the other, "I told the nigger to beat it and then plugged him." Leaving the scene undetected, Hersh called an editor at City News and told him what he'd heard. The editor urged him to ignore it; it would be his word against theirs, and the cops would

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story drop. It was, he recalls in *Reporter*, a shameful example of a practice he would witness time and again throughout his career: self-censorship.

In discussions of the American press, self-censorship is rarely mentioned. Thanks to the First Amendment, journalists in the United States enjoy some of the greatest freedoms and strongest legal protections in the world, but they often fail to make full use of them. In *Reporter*, Hersh offers some telling examples, including one that occurred while he was working for the Associated Press, which he joined after a stint in the Army and some time spent at newspapers in suburban Chicago. Hersh provides an exhilarating description of his early wire-service years, in which he covered everything from racial strife to birth control. After being transferred to the AP's Washington desk, he was eventually assigned to the Pentagon, which finally gave him an opportunity to report on the expanding US presence in Vietnam.

**M**ost journalists assigned to the Pentagon beat had been on it for a decade or more and valued access above all else. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara would hold cozy off-the-record sessions with reporters, who dutifully relayed the official point of view in their stories. The Pentagon press room, Hersh wrote, had all “the earmarks of a high-end social club.” Hersh refused to join it. His initial major breakthrough came after he read a series in *Science* magazine about the Pentagon's research on chemical and

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carried articles about retirement parties held for colonels and generals, and Hersh compiled a list of names and addresses. He then spent two months on the road, interviewing these retirees in small towns and stopping by the local papers to learn about the research facilities in the area. The Pentagon claimed that the research was being undertaken to defend against a possible attack by the Soviet Union, but the weapons under development seemed to have a destructive capacity far beyond that. Hersh prepared a five-part series totaling more than 15,000 words and gave it to the head of the AP's investigative unit. Two weeks passed, with no response. Finally, the series was shrunk down (without his consultation) to a single story of slightly more than 1,000 words and sent out over the AP wire just after midnight on a Sunday morning—"the darkest of dark holes for wire service journalism."

But Hersh refused to let the story die. In a long piece prepared for *The New Republic* (dramatically titled "Just a Drop Can Kill"), he listed 52 universities and campus research centers that were doing work on CBW under military contract. Student protests erupted after the piece appeared. With much of the mainstream media continuing to ignore the matter, however, Hersh decided to leave the AP and write a book about his findings.

After completing the book, he was offered a job as press secretary for Eugene McCarthy. An outspoken critic of the war, McCarthy in 1967 had decided to challenge Lyndon

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The McCarthy campaign proved to be both chaotic and exasperating. In the New Hampshire primary, McCarthy shocked the nation by winning 42 percent of the vote (versus Johnson's 49 percent), but he was a cerebral and reluctant candidate. The poet Robert Lowell frequently joined McCarthy and Hersh on the campaign trail, and as the three sipped chilled vodka from a thermos, Hersh would frantically try to prepare McCarthy for the next event. The senator's wife, Abigail, was given to venomous comments and paranoid flights, and she once complained about all the "Hebrews" working for her husband. McCarthy had his own blind spots, especially on matters of race. After the senator canceled a series of events in black Milwaukee neighborhoods in the belief that it would improve his chances with white Wisconsin voters, Hersh resigned from the campaign.

When his book on chemical and biological warfare appeared, *The New York Review of Books* ran an excerpt, and *The Washington Post* covered the findings on its front page. Hersh spent the summer promoting the book in talks on campuses and at bookstores. With the US military's defoliation program in South Vietnam gaining attention, the debate became ever more emotional. Congress held a hearing, and in November 1969 President Nixon announced that the United States would end the production of offensive biological-warfare agents and destroy its existing stockpiles. Without lobbying anyone in Congress or the White House,

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he press's reluctance to report such discomfiting realities became even more glaring as Hersh pursued his next big story, which makes up the dramatic centerpiece of *Reporter*. In the fall of 1969, while working out of a small office in the National Press Building, he got a tip from a young lawyer named Geoffrey Cowan about a soldier who was being court-martialed for the murder of 75 civilians in My Lai, a village in South Vietnam. Cowan didn't give the name of the perpetrator, an Army lieutenant, but Hersh, running into a colonel at the Pentagon, asked if he'd heard about the mass murder of civilians in Vietnam. "This Calley is a madman, Sy," the officer said, noting that he'd even killed babies. "There's no story in that." But Hersh knew there was and, now supplied with the name of the officer, set out to track him down. "I liked being the best, the leader of the pack, and I sensed there was a game-changing story that revolved around William Calley, wherever he was. I was going to be the first reporter to find him," Hersh writes. This is one of several conspicuous flashes of vanity in *Reporter*—a quality that would ultimately cause serious problems for Hersh.

Traveling to Salt Lake City to interview Calley's lawyer, Hersh provoked him into showing a file that contained the Army charge sheet, and after the lawyer took it back and placed it on his desk, Hersh, while continuing the interview, read it upside down; it stated that the actual number killed was 109. Aware that Calley was at Fort Benning, Georgia,

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was good at it.” After a series of bluffs, browbeatings, blind alleys, and narrowly averted expulsions from the base, he managed to coax a former roommate of Calley’s into giving him the lieutenant’s address in the nearby town of Columbus, where he discovered a rattled, frightened, very pale young man. Calley agreed to be interviewed, and on the plane ride back, Hersh outlined his story on the My Lai massacre.

Finding an outlet for it would prove nearly as difficult as finding Calley. Both *Life* and *Look* magazines rejected the piece. Hersh was “devastated” and “frightened by the extent of self-censorship I was encountering in my profession.” Eventually, he gave the piece to David Obst of Dispatch, a small anti-war news agency; calling around to newspapers, Obst offered it to each of them for \$100. The story was bought by dozens, including the *Chicago Sun-Times*, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and the *New York Post*, and a number placed it on their front page. There was little follow-up, however, and, like Hersh’s initial report on chemical and biological warfare, the story did not have the hoped-for impact.

But then he read in *The Washington Post* about a former soldier named Ron Ridenhour, who said that he had been responsible for initiating the Army’s inquiry. Hersh immediately flew to Los Angeles to talk with him. Ridenhour said he had firsthand information from five members of Calley’s company who confirmed the scale of the atrocity. He

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cowering in ditches. Hersh's story appeared in many major papers, and Meadlo was interviewed on the *CBS Evening News*. With its grisly particulars, the story set off a wave of articles about American atrocities in Vietnam, further eroding support for the war. Hersh's five pieces on My Lai earned him the 1970 Pulitzer Prize for international reporting—a rarity for a freelance journalist. A “fringe player” (as Hersh calls himself) had managed to scoop the entire press corps.

**H**ersh's reporting on My Lai landed him a job first with *The New Yorker* and then, in 1972, with *The New York Times*. From early in his career, Hersh had wanted to work at that paper, with its unmatched influence, and *Reporter* records what happens when a headstrong and independent-minded individual joins a powerful institution with its own entrenched set of rules and traditions. Hersh clashed constantly with Abe Rosenthal, the *Times*' equally tetchy executive editor, who was suspicious of Hersh's left-leaning politics but nonetheless pushed him to do some of his best work.

Just beginning to turn against the war, Rosenthal sent Hersh to the *Times*' Washington bureau to help move it in that direction. Hersh was disturbed to find that Henry Kissinger talked regularly on background with columnist James Reston and bureau chief Max Frankel, resulting in front-page articles with quotes from “an unnamed senior government official.” Setting out to expose the “secret world”

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Hersh also turned his eye to domestic matters. By then, Watergate was dominating the news, and with the *Times* being regularly beaten on stories by *The Washington Post*, Rosenthal directed him to concentrate on the growing scandal. Over a roughly 10-week period in 1973, Hersh produced 42 articles, all “moving the needle closer to the President.” One day, he met in a restaurant with a former FBI official, who left behind a file containing copies of 17 wiretap requests—16 of them signed by Kissinger and aimed at his closest aides as well as top reporters. The story caused an explosion. Nearly as sensational was Hersh’s revelation that the CIA had extensive domestic operations, which spurred two major congressional investigations. In a taped conversation later made public, CIA director William Colby irritably remarked that Hersh “knows more about this place than I do.”

After Nixon’s resignation, Hersh decided to apply his investigative skills to the world of big business. His attempts to penetrate that realm are among the most instructive sections of *Reporter*, showing the many obstacles standing in the way of journalists who seek to do likewise. Hersh chose as his initial quarry Sidney Korshak, a low-profile Los Angeles lawyer with many ties to organized crime. The series required six months of work and cost tens of thousands of dollars. The *Times* editors fiddled with it so much that at one point Hersh threw a typewriter through a window in his office; he returned the next day to find the

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Undeterred, Hersh next proposed taking on Charles Bluhdorn, the CEO of the giant conglomerate Gulf and Western. After getting the go-ahead, Hersh “walked into four months of sheer hell.” Bluhdorn socialized with the *Times*’ publisher, Arthur Sulzberger, and Gulf and Western sent a stream of accusatory letters to both him and Rosenthal. The company also began investigating Hersh and his assistant, Jeff Gerth. The business editor, John Lee, savaged both men in a private memo, complaining that the material was “excessive, diffuse, and poorly organized,” and Hersh clashed repeatedly with Rosenthal over his use of anonymous sources. After Hersh handed in his 15,000-word “bill of attainder,” Lee and “his ass-kissing coterie of moronic editors” eviscerated it. The story was also lawyered to death, and in the end it caused barely a ripple.

“Writing about corporate America had sapped my energy, disappointed the editors, and unnerved me,” Hersh confesses. The courage that the paper had shown in taking on the president and the attorney general when publishing the Pentagon Papers in 1971 “was nowhere to be seen when confronted by a gaggle of corporate con men who were struggling for their existence in the face of a major SEC investigation.” In trying to expose the power and prerogatives of a major conglomerate, Hersh had to deal with not only the formidable resources that the company could marshal—legal threats, pressure from executives, private investigations—but also the discomfort of his own

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and corporations that investigative journalists too often turn out. In the end, he writes, “there would be no check on corporate America.... Greed had won out.”

In 1979, Hersh returned to the more comfortable world of national security and politics, producing books on Kissinger and John F. Kennedy, among others. In a mordant touch, Hersh recalls seeing a woman reading *The Price of Power*, his thick Kissinger tome, at a YMCA pool in suburban Maryland; half an hour later, he saw her asleep with the opened book shielding her face from the sun.

After Tina Brown took charge of *The New Yorker* in the early '90s, Hersh rejoined the magazine and, on September 11, 2001, her successor, David Remnick, told him that he was “permanently assigned to the biggest story” of his career. According to Hersh, he periodically disagreed with Remnick over the reliability of the intelligence that Bush officials were using to justify their plans to invade Iraq, but Remnick nonetheless allowed him to publish what he was learning about the administration’s internal deliberations.

Hersh’s greatest feat in this period was breaking, along with *60 Minutes*, the story about the United States’ use of torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. This would be his last major scoop, and the sections in *Reporter* that come after it lack the sparkle and crispness of the earlier ones. They also raise troubling questions about Hersh’s professional evolution since the early 2000s.

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discussed  
notes; “we  
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as Assad, who grant us interviews and speak openly with us. But access inevitably provokes ethical dilemmas.” Hersh, however, only superficially explores those dilemmas as he recounts his dealings with the Syrian president.

On the morning of February 14, 2005, he met Assad in Damascus and discussed his dispute with Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. At the end of the interview, Hersh found out that, while they were talking, Hariri had been murdered. He suspected he may have been used to create an alibi for an assassination perhaps ordered in advance by the Syrian president, and, despite pressure from *The New Yorker*, decided not to write about the meeting. In *Reporter*, he doesn’t explain why, observing simply that his decision not to write about the interview “did not prevent me from having further ones with Assad.” The Hariri assassination, he adds, “remains unsolved to this day.”

In these years, Hersh’s relationship with *The New Yorker* became increasingly strained. While he liked and respected Remnick, he writes, “I was troubled by what I saw as his closeness to Barack Obama during the 2008 presidential campaign and the fact that he was planning to write a biography of him.” After the killing of Osama bin Laden, Hersh prepared a long report about the raid. Contrary to the Obama administration’s claims that the operation had been carried out without Pakistan’s knowledge, Hersh maintained that bin Laden had been living in Abbottabad under Pakistani control and that the United States had undertaken

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unnamed source, balked at running the piece. Instead, it ran an article by Nicholas Schmidle that closely followed the administration's narrative.

In 2015, four years after bin Laden's death, Hersh's story about the raid finally appeared, in the *London Review of Books*. The White House's account, he claimed, was so full of "lies, misstatements and betrayals" that it "might have been written by Lewis Carroll." The most blatant lie, he added, was that Pakistan's senior military leaders were never informed of the raid. In making such claims, Hersh relied heavily on a retired senior US intelligence official who went unnamed. The one named source in Hersh's article who supported this account was Asad Durrani, who had served in Pakistani military intelligence more than two decades earlier and who said only that former colleagues of his backed up Hersh's claim. Hersh was criticized by, among others, *Vox's* Max Fisher for relying on a single unnamed intelligence official, who was not directly involved in the raid, and by CNN's Peter Bergen for ignoring the fact that two Navy SEALs involved in the operation had come out with details that directly contradicted his account.

Hersh wrote two other articles for the *London Review of Books* that contested the finding—almost unanimously accepted by the international community—that Assad had used chemical weapons against his own people in 2013; those pieces, too, relied heavily on unnamed sources.

Another piece proved too much even for the *LRB* and

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building containing fertilizers and disinfectants. Both the United Nations and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons had concluded otherwise, insisting that a sarin attack by the Syrian government had indeed occurred. The anonymous sources on which Hersh had relied throughout much of his career were becoming increasingly murky and questionable.

Hersh's recent reporting has triggered much commentary about whether the great investigator has turned conspiracy theorist. In a searching analysis in the British magazine *Prospect*, Steve Bloomfield surmises that, "after decades of exposing lies told by the American government," Hersh seems to have forgotten "that other governments have their own reasons for being mendacious too." Pressed by Bloomfield in an interview to explain his lack of skepticism about the Syrian claims, Hersh demurred. Not once in *Reporter* does Hersh take note of Assad's butchery and the hundreds of thousands of deaths his regime is responsible for. Instead, he observes that Assad's factual assertions during their interviews "invariably checked out." From Hersh's own description, one gets the impression that Assad detected the reporter's vanity and shrewdly played on it by showing him solicitude and respect. Hersh's credulous attitude toward the Syrian leader recalls his old colleagues' deference toward Henry Kissinger. After writing so extensively about the dangers of access, Hersh seems to have fallen prey to them himself.

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journalism,” when he was “free to travel anywhere, anytime, for any reason, with company credit cards,” making it possible for him to tell “important and unwanted truths.” It is “very painful to think I might not have accomplished what I did if I were at work in the chaotic and unstructured journalism world of today.”

It is undoubtedly true that the punishing economic climate in which news organizations operate today has limited their ability to do investigative work. Yet that’s not the whole story. The leading digital-news organizations have sizable staffs; if they wanted to, they could undertake much more in-depth reporting. What seems to be lacking is the necessary will and sense of outrage, especially when it comes to the area where Hersh himself most faltered—Wall Street. The big banks, hedge funds, private-equity concerns, and other financial entities that dominate the US economy operate largely out of sight, with limited scrutiny by the press. The nation’s five largest banks—JPMorgan Chase, Bank of America, Citibank, Wells Fargo, and Goldman Sachs—now control about half of all the assets in the American financial system; at the beginning of the 1990s, they controlled just under 10 percent. How did this happen? Is such a development healthy for the economy? Should these banks be broken up? Such questions too seldom get asked.

To a degree, the failure to report aggressively on these institutions reflects the need of reporters to maintain access to their sources and to the daily drip of information and

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roadblocks that Hersh did when investigating Sidney Korshak and Gulf and Western—including discomfort from their own editors. What else to call this but self-censorship?

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**Michael Massing** Michael Massing is the author of *Now They Tell Us: The American Press and Iraq* and *Fatal Discord: Erasmus, Luther, and the Fight for the Western Mind*.

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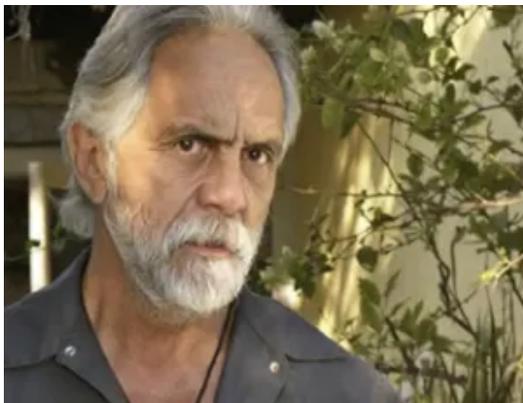
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