

Cash for Coverage: Bribery of Journalists Around the World

A Report to the Center for International Media Assistance

By Bill Ristow

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The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), a project of the National Endowment for Democracy, aims to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of media assistance programs by providing information, building networks, conducting research, and highlighting the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies around the world. An important aspect of CIMA's work is to research ways to attract additional U.S. private sector interest in and support for international media development.

CIMA convenes working groups, discussions, and panels on a variety of topics in the field of media development and assistance. The center also issues reports and recommendations based on working group discussions and other investigations. These reports aim to provide policymakers, as well as donors and practitioners, with ideas for bolstering the effectiveness of media assistance.

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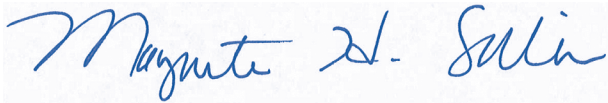
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Preface

The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) at the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) commissioned this report about bribery of journalists. The purpose of this study is to examine the key issues surrounding corruption of journalists—including its effect on the credibility of news media—and to consider the factors that create media environments where journalists are willing to accept cash for news coverage.

CIMA is grateful to Bill Ristow, a veteran journalist and international journalism trainer, for his research and insights on this topic.

We hope that this report will become an important reference for international media assistance efforts.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Marguerite H. Sullivan". The signature is written in a cursive style and is set against a light blue rectangular background.

Marguerite H. Sullivan
Senior Director
Center for International Media Assistance

Executive Summary

In Ghana, a reporter goes to a press conference, and inside her press packet, there's a brown envelope containing the equivalent of a \$20 bill. Not surprised, she slips it into her purse before heading back to the office to write up the event.

In Russia, a public relations agency sends out a bogus press release about a fictitious company. Thirteen publications swallow the bait and agree to run the release just like a story, but only after demanding payment ranging from about \$125 to nearly \$2,000.

In Cambodia, a newspaper publishes a special edition devoted to the birthday of a prominent politician, complete with congratulatory advertisements from businessmen and lower-ranking officials. Then the paper sends out a bill for the ads – even though many of the “advertisers” didn’t know the ads were being used. They pay up anyway, rather than risk seeming not to want to honor the politician.

Cash for news coverage: It’s what Rosental Alves, director of the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas at the University of Texas, calls “the dark part of journalism”—and it happens every day somewhere in the world.

Nearly everyone agrees that it is an enormous and extremely serious problem

for the profession. But Alves is among those who believe that journalists’ groups have not done enough about it.

“It’s not an issue that’s much covered,” he said. “We have been so much engaged in defending journalists, that we become shy sometimes in uncovering or exposing this side of our craft.”¹

Not only do journalists accept bribes and media houses accept paid material disguised as news stories, but all too often,

reporters and editors are the instigators, extorting money either for publishing favorable stories—or for not publishing damaging ones.

With all the organized efforts to support media development and defend press freedom around the world, there has been remarkably

little done in any concerted way to reduce the problem of corrupt journalism—and the most thorough work that has been done has come from a source that might surprise journalists: public relations professionals. Their international associations have sponsored the most comprehensive research on the problem, and in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, PR people have tried to work with their journalist counterparts to clean up the business of news.

Some people, including experienced press-freedom experts, theorize that advocates for journalists are facing attacks from so

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many sides that they are not comfortable criticizing any aspect of the media themselves, however well-deserved that criticism may be. Alves, though, is one of those who believe that you can defend press freedom and also demand high standards.

He also disagrees with the common concern that the problem of cash for news coverage is so deeply ingrained as to be virtually insoluble. “I don’t think it’s impossible,” he said. “It’s very difficult, but the improvements that have happened show that it can be done. It’s a question of keeping going.”

Based on interviews with people who have grappled with the thorny challenges of corruption, these are recommendations for actions that could make a difference in reducing this stain on the profession of journalism.

International journalism organizations should:

- Take the initiative to support a summit on the topic of cash for news coverage, to include representatives of the public-relations industry and experts on how corporations deal with bribery.
- Issue regular reports documenting instances in which journalists have received—or extorted—payment for news as a clear sign of acknowledging this “dark side” of the profession.
- Take the lead in documenting—and publicizing—the pay levels of journalists around the world, which, particularly on the lowest end, undoubtedly have an impact on journalistic ethics.

Media-development organizations should:

- Sharpen their focus on ethics training, recognizing it as the foundation of good journalism’s success in the changing media environment, with specific training on why and how to avoid taking cash for news coverage.
- Support the creation and nurture of media accountability systems such as ombudsmen and other mechanisms to heighten transparency in how journalists do their work.

News media owners, managers, and editors should:

- Adopt, publicize, and then stick to a firm policy of zero tolerance for any form of cash for news coverage—from simple “facilitation” payments to reporters to paid ads masquerading as objective news.
- Review pay policies, acknowledging that pay can have an impact on ethics, and work to remove that rationale as an excuse for journalists.
- Take the initiative in creating accountability systems on their own, such as appointing an ombudsman, to establish a more transparent relationship with their audiences.

Public relations professionals and their organizations should:

- Not wait for the journalists to suggest a summit. They can suggest it themselves, drawing on the

research they have sponsored and the work that their members have done around the world.

- Encourage their members to practice zero tolerance, declining the sometimes too-easy path of paying in hopes of getting the best spin on their clients' stories, and helping them with strategies to do so without hurting their business.

NGOs and corporations should:

- Just say no. Experts (and corporations who have done that) say that it is surprisingly easy to buck the trend of paying all those bribes, small and large— if you follow a strict game plan: adopt a firm rule against paying, put it in writing and make it public, and stick to it in all cases.

Introduction

To appreciate the full irony of what happened to Alexandra Wrage, it is necessary to know that she is the founder and president of a non-profit association that helps multinational corporations deal with bribery and corruption around the world.

Her organization, TRACE International, wanted publicity for an event in India and asked for a proposal from a respected local media-relations firm. The firm submitted two proposals, but Wrage was confused: they were full of “oblique language,” she said, and the prices were very different. She got in touch with a representative of the firm and asked why.

The answer was straightforward, Wrage remembers: The higher-priced proposal “would provide enough money to pay off journalists to get the stories we wanted.”²

When a press-relations firm blandly assures the head of an anti-bribery organization that she’ll get better publicity by bribing local reporters, it strongly suggests that the profession of journalism has a big problem on its hands.

It does.

Every day of the year somewhere in the world—and, more likely, many

places around the world—money changes hands in order to buy positive coverage or avoid negative coverage.

From the “red envelopes” of China to the “brown envelopes” of Africa; from “extortion journalism” to a “sitting allowance;” from a few dollars for “facilitation” to a few million to put a news outlet on retainer, the phenomenon of cash for news coverage can seem as much a part of the craft as the who-what-when-where-why lead paragraph.

For all the power journalism may have to topple governments and expose the inner secrets of giant multinationals, it can also be an exceptionally fragile institution, vulnerable to the petty greed or strained economic circumstances of a single reporter or editor.

And it highlights one of the paradoxes of the profession. For all the power journalism may have to topple governments and expose the inner secrets of giant multinationals, it can also be an exceptionally fragile institution, vulnerable to

the petty greed or strained economic circumstances of a single reporter or editor.

In the end, the only real product a news organization has to offer is its credibility. “A good journalist would not sell his or her soul,” said James Tumusiime, managing editor of the politically independent Ugandan newspaper *The Observer*. “Indeed often, word goes round that such a reporter or editor or newspaper has a price for every story if approached, so credibility suffers, and without it, there is no newspaper to speak of.”³

Oddly, however, while cash for news coverage is a problem that nearly everyone familiar with international journalism characterizes as extremely serious, it receives remarkably little in the way of focused work toward a solution. Many consider it intractable: a problem too deeply ingrained in local cultures, or in human nature, to lend itself to effective reform.

There are others, though—and perhaps surprisingly, they are especially people

who are not journalists themselves—who resist this fatalistic philosophy.

Alexandra Wrage is one of them. “I’m not Pollyannish about corruption,” she said, citing her experience with TRACE International. “But I have watched real, incremental improvement over the past 10 years. There’s no reason you can’t have progress—slow, steady progress.

“The fact that a problem is big, or bad, doesn’t mean you just roll over.”²⁴

A single problem with many faces

In South Africa, a journalist admitted in an affidavit that he and several others had set up a media relations firm that received cash payments for helping an African National Congress official in his struggles with party rivals. The politician, Ebrahim Rasool, referred to the firm as his “airforce” for battling opponents, according to the affidavit by Ashley Smith, who was a reporter for the *Cape Argus* at the same time he co-owned the media relations firm.

“It was always understood by those involved that I would receive compensation,” Smith wrote, and indeed, he described receiving payments of 5,000-10,000 South African Rand (roughly \$700-\$1,400 in 2010 exchange rates). He understood, he said, that he “could not write negative reports about Rasool or his allies.”⁵

In Cambodia, so-called “blocking” newspapers “use blackmail to extort money from prominent figures or businessmen not to publish stories, especially when illegal logging, smuggling, corruption or extra marital affairs are involved,” according to a report by LICADHO, the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights.⁶

“For major scandals,” the report states, “the pay-offs can be high—as much as USD\$1,000 for a blocked story according to one senior editor.”

In Ukraine, the problem most commonly expresses itself as concealed advertising—material that has been paid for and provided to the media without being identified as an ad. “TV packages of news and whole programs are sold; articles and covers are also sold,” said one journalist quoted in a research report on Ukraine, where the various forms of cash for news coverage are collectively known as “jeansa.” “It is really harmful for journalists as this practice does not allow them to realize their professional duties ... and even honest journalists are often accused in bribery.”⁷

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— *Ukrainian journalist*

In Lebanon, “the practice of ‘gifting’ journalists remains widespread,” including at festivals such as Eid or Christmas, according to a report from the International Research & Exchanges Board

(IREX). The report quoted a manager at Voice of Lebanon radio: “Certain politicians have a budget for bribes. Depending on your rank and the media you work for, it could be a car or a laptop.”⁸

In Peru, the head of the secret police under then-president Alberto Fujimori “methodically bribed judges, politicians, and the news media ... [and] kept meticulous records of his transactions” according to a report by John McMillan and Pablo Zoido of the Stanford University Graduate School of Business.

Those bribes, the report states, included payments to media organizations including as little as \$500 for smaller stories in a tabloid newspaper on an “incentive contract,” and a \$3 million signed contract, at \$500,000 per month, for a television station.⁹

In Nicaragua, remembers Patrick Butler—he was then a new Knight International Journalism Fellow, and now is programs vice president of the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ)—“there was a ‘Day of the Journalist’ on one of my first days. I thought, ‘Wow, they actually have a day to honor journalists, how cool!’ Turns out, it’s a day to *bribe* journalists. Officials send journalists gifts, from food baskets to cash.”¹⁰

Then there are the countless smaller payments sometimes called “facilitation” that are common in Africa, China, and elsewhere—\$5 or \$10 or \$20 inside a brown or red envelope, ostensibly to cover travel costs for some sort of press event but actually provided to all journalists, even those who may have simply walked across the street to attend.

Zhu Qi, a Chinese journalist, wrote about the first time this happened to her, and how her boss, when she asked, told her the payments—in the range of 300 yuan, or about \$44 at the 2010 rate of exchange—were “normal procedure.” The event where she had received her “little envelope” was just a product promotion, she recalled, so she was “tortured about what to write. Finally, as the money was biting me through my pocket, I wrote a short report, going against my judgment as to its newsworthiness.”¹¹

And these are just a sampling of the different ways the money changes hands.

What the research shows

Katerina Tsetsura, an associate professor of at the University of Oklahoma’s Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication and a public-relations consultant, is a leading expert on the topic, dating back to the days when she was a graduate student at Purdue University. She happened to be working under Professor Dean Kruckeberg, now at the University of North Carolina, who had been hired by several public relations associations to survey the extent of the problem worldwide.

In their seminal 2003 research report on the topic, Kruckeberg and Tsetsura adopted the phrase “cash for news coverage” as an umbrella way of identifying all the different forms the phenomenon can take.¹²

Tsetsura breaks down the ways money can change hands into three categories:

- **Interpersonal:** The cash is handed directly to the journalist by a news source.
- **Intraorganizational:** An editor tells the journalist what to write or not write, due to some sort of internal pressure, such as from advertising.
- **Interorganizational:** Especially in countries such as China, Ukraine, or Russia, she said, there can be fairly formal arrangements. There may even be a legal contract under which a company pays a news organization a monthly amount in exchange for having a certain number of articles published about that company.¹³

One of the challenges of the topic is that there is not a large body of hard evidence

about it. Journalists and people who work with them almost everywhere around the world know it exists, but aside from the work Kruckeberg started and Tsetsura has continued not a lot is quantitatively known.

There have been some useful surveys that strengthen the anecdotes with hard numbers, though.

The report that LICADHO researched in Cambodia, for example, included an anonymous survey of journalists. Among other things, it reported, “25% of respondents said they knew journalists who took bribes in return for favorable coverage [and] more journalists, 34%, said they knew a colleague who took bribes for *not* reporting stories.”

The report added: “Predictably, when journalists were asked if they took bribes themselves, only 13% admitted they did. But when asked if they had ever accepted money or gifts for attending a press conference, a third of journalists surveyed said they had.”¹⁴

Survey results from more than 200 journalists in Ghana and Zambia found even more widespread evidence of cash for news coverage: “Almost all the journalists surveyed and interviewed attested to engaging in the practice [of brown-envelope journalism] ... journalists perceived the practice as customary ... and part of media culture in their respective countries.”¹⁵

Tsetsura gave an overview with a 2007 survey of 93 journalists (members of four major professional organizations) from 35 countries, plus 310 PR practitioners from 56 countries. Sample findings:

- When asked how frequently “A news release that is not newsworthy appears

in a publication in exchange for a paid advertisement,” 26 percent of respondents answered “often or always” about national daily newspapers, while 21 percent said the same thing about national TV stations.

- When asked how frequently “News sources put financial pressure on the media to influence media news judgment,” the comparable figures for “often or always” were 28 percent and 26 percent—and if you add in the respondents saying that this happens at least “sometimes,” the total grows to 64 percent saying this is true for national newspapers, and 60 percent for national TV stations.
- Forty-nine percent of respondents agreed that “It is considered OK to accept payments by national media in my country.”¹⁶

Throughout the world, both the anecdotal and the statistical evidence make it evident that cash for news coverage is more common in regional and local media than in national media. For instance, in the survey of journalists and public relations professionals cited above, 42 percent said a local or regional daily would “often or always” print a non-newsworthy press release in exchange for an ad, compared to 26 percent saying the same about a national daily.

In Pakistan, Amir Mateen, a special correspondent and former Washington correspondent for the English-language daily *The News in Islamabad*, says that the direct payment of cash for news coverage isn’t particularly common in the big-city offices of papers like his. “But bribery in cash is practiced in vernacular (Urdu)

What color is your envelope? A short glossary of bribery

If you are in the business of paying money to influence news coverage, or accepting it, you probably aren't so crass as to call it a "bribe." That may explain why there are so many ways of referring to the practice around the world. Just a few examples:

- **Brown envelopes:** This is the common term in much of sub-Saharan Africa and refers to the color of the envelopes found in every supermarket or stationery store. Conveniently, it is hard to see through them to the money inside.
- **Red envelopes:** That's the variation in China, based on the more innocent tradition of giving holiday gifts in such envelopes.
- **Soli:** That's what journalists call it in Ghana—a short form of the word "solidarity," which is how they feel as a group in expecting these small payments.
- **Jeansa:** That's the term in Ukraine, where politicians and businessmen often pay reporters to write stories favorable to them. The term comes from the blue jeans that reporters commonly wear.
- **Ndalama yamatako:** The Zambian term apparently translates literally as "money of the buttocks"—but journalists use it to mean "sitting allowance," something to sweeten the experience of sitting in all those press conferences.
- **Tips:** In Madagascar reporters typically earn about \$40 a month and routinely receive envelopes with money from the organizers of press conferences to cover transportation costs. The envelopes frequently include extra money, or "tips," ranging from \$10 to \$50, to encourage favorable coverage. Sometimes their editors receive tips three times larger.
- **Zakazukha:** This Russian slang phrase has, in the context of journalism, come to generically mean "pay for publicity," originating in the idea of "order for the story"—as in ordering a dish in a restaurant.
- **Blocking papers, wishing papers:** In Cambodia, a "blocking" paper is one that specializes in telling someone they are about to publish a damaging story about them unless they get a good enough bribe. A "wishing" paper might publish a fawning special edition honoring a senior politician's birthday, and run congratulatory advertisements from mid-level officials or businessmen—without asking them first. Then the publisher sends a bill, and the unsuspecting "advertisers" pay rather than run the risk of not seeming supportive of the person.
- **Mermelada:** In Peru, where the word means marmalade or jam, it refers to straight handouts to journalists, says Kela León, executive director of the Peruvian Press Council. There are also los lobos, which means "the wolves" but which also is a play on the English word "lobbyist": "These are really PR lobbyists who have been journalists and still present themselves as journalists and don't refer to the particular interest they are working for in, for example, their newspaper columns or radio programs," she said.¹

¹ Kela León, in e-mail to author, June 16, 2010.

newspapers in two out of ten cases,” he said. “It can be nine out of ten among ‘district correspondents’ in small towns.”

The range of these payments, he added, can be “huge”—from as little as 1,000 Pakistani rupees, or roughly \$12, to “millions of rupees”—\$23,000 or more.¹⁷

Why does it happen?

This is simple, and it is complicated—just as with bribery and corruption in other realms.

At its simplest level, and usually involving the smallest transactions, cash for news coverage clearly happens for basic economic reasons. In many countries journalists are not well paid even at their best, and freelancers or staffers for small local or regional media outlets are barely paid even token amounts.

At a workshop on brown envelopes and journalistic ethics for a group of freelance reporters in rural northern Uganda, a reporter came up after the session to make a point. Gesturing to that day’s newspaper, he noted that he had been paid 10,000 Ugandan shillings (about \$5) for one article. But the freelancers must pay for their own mobile phone calls, and for using the Internet café to transmit stories to the front office, he added—so how are they to turn down a brown envelope with 5,000 shillings of “transport” money, even though they never used it for transport?¹⁸

One can hear that same story in Russia, in Cambodia, and in Albania. And there is no doubt: The harsh economic realities at the lower end of the salary scale can make it nearly impossible to resist a small payment. Tsetsura, who was a journalist in Russia

before she became an academic more affiliated with the public-relations world, acknowledges that low pay “is a big problem. This has been a theme throughout our studies, especially with local and regional media.” And she admits she doesn’t have a ready answer to it. “We need some big keynote speeches [about the pay issue] at international journalism conferences or the World Economic Forum!”¹⁹

Anthony Mills, now the press freedom manager for the International Press Institute in Vienna, formerly worked with journalists in Lebanon. He noted that the low pay reporters receive can lead to “a psychological justification: ‘I had no choice; if I want my family to live, I have to do this.’” While that can be true, Mills said, it would be wrong to use it as a blanket justification. “Those who take bribes from politicians or others very often do not do it because they are destitute,” he said.²⁰

Tsetsura thinks back to when she was a journalism student in a Russian university, and students would ask each other: Would you take the cash? She still remembers one professor saying, “There will always be someone who makes more than you. As a professional, you have to make a decision for yourself. The amount you get paid is not an excuse.”²¹

In 2004, a group of journalism students from the University of Oregon participated in an internship program with journalists in Ghana. A follow-up report by the internship coordinator included this anecdote from one student who was accompanying a local reporter:

We went to a Ghana Telecom speech that was already over by the time we

got there. The PR agent handed us a copy of the speech, and then gave us an envelope filled with money ‘for transport.’ ... We then made our way to an event celebrating women in science, after which we received more ‘transportation money.’ [The Ghanaian journalist] gave me half of the money and told me I could go home. She said she was going to buy a dress and that she would write the stories. ... I asked her if this was how she earned money. She said, ‘Yes, don’t worry you will make lots of money.’²²

If low pay is one explanation for incidents of cash for news coverage, perhaps the most obvious explanation is also very simple: Governments, corporations, and private individuals often want to control what is said about them. The easiest way to do that is, effectively, to “own” the journalists.

McMillan and Zoido’s study, *How to Subvert Democracy: Montesinos in Peru*, gives an extraordinary look into the motives and methodology of a free-spending briber, secret-police chief Vladimiro Montesinos Torres.

They use their analysis of the bribes he paid to many different organizations during the Fujimori regime as a way of addressing the question: “Which of the democratic checks and balances—opposition parties, the judiciary, a free press—is the most critical?” In Peru, they note, “Vladimiro Montesinos

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systematically undermined them all with bribes.” So which of these institutions did the regime think was worth the *most* money?

It wasn’t even close. Far and away, Montesinos chose to invest in control of the news media:

“The typical bribe paid to a television-channel owner was about a hundred times larger than that paid to a judge, which was about the same as that paid to a politician. One single television channel’s bribe was four times larger than the total of the opposition politicians’ bribes.”²³

Corporations, of course, have a strong vested interest not only in getting their news into the media, but getting the spin they want on it. And in some countries, that’s the most common form of cash for news coverage.

“Direct payments (mostly for journalists) are a minor problem, in my opinion,” said Rafal Szymczak, director and manager of Profile, a major Polish public relations consultancy, and a former government press spokesman. “The real problem in Poland is ‘institutional corruption,’ or hidden advertorials. Companies and agencies are buying media content with their advertising budgets.”²⁴

This practice was so common in Russia that a 2001 *Moscow Times* article called hidden advertising “a multimillion-dollar industry involving nearly every publication in the country” and cited estimates that

nine leading publications alone were reaping a total of \$25 million per year through payment for articles, often from PR agencies placing stories for their clients.²⁵

False accusations

As if the topic of cash for news coverage weren't tough enough already, it gets even more complicated when it turns out that charges of journalists taking bribes are spurious. Such charges can serve as a way to suppress independent journalism.

The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists, whose motto is “Defending Journalists Worldwide,” has issued numerous statements and alerts over the years about this practice. In a typical example, CPJ wrote in 2006 about a journalist in Uzbekistan, a former correspondent with the London-based Institute for War and Peace Reporting, who was arrested “on trumped-up charges of extortion and bribery after writing several articles critical of local authorities.” The arrest happened, CPJ said, shortly after Ulugbek Khaidarov had published articles “about the unpaid salaries of workers at a local marble factory managed by Rakhima Abdullayeva.” The CPJ report went on: “The international press and a CPJ source close to the case reported that Abdullayeva approached Khaidarov while he was standing at a bus stop and put an envelope containing US\$400 in his pocket. Khaidarov threw the envelope on the ground, where it was immediately picked up by four police officers, who arrested Khaidarov. Abdullayeva told police Khaidarov tried to blackmail her.”

CPJ has reported on similar cases in Russia, China, and elsewhere. But the press-freedom group has also acknowledged

the difficulties in sorting out the facts when bribery may be a factor.

In a 2008 article about the investigation of two Chinese journalists arrested for alleged bribery, a CPJ official expressed concern “that bribery allegations can be easily fabricated to wrongfully imprison journalists who dig too deeply in an investigation.” On the other hand, the article continues, “Corrupt practices exist in Chinese journalism. Gifts or cash payments, made to those carrying press credentials in return for publishing or withholding a story, are common practice, leading to concerns among local media analysts about editorial integrity.”

CPJ quotes David Bandurski, of the China Media Project: “There is no question that local authorities in China are in the habit of using charges of corruption to target reporters who are uncovering stories,” Bandurski said. “But there is also little question that corruption in China’s media is a worsening problem. A general lack of transparency and fairness—in the press, in the courts, in law enforcement—makes it very difficult to know what to make of any one particular case.”²⁶

The impact of cash for news coverage

As a UNESCO-supported news manual for reporters in developing countries put it: “To accept a bribe is dishonest. Your honesty is like virginity—it can only be lost once. Once you have accepted a bribe, you can never again be trusted as a professional person.”²⁷

That’s a good way of describing the impact for the individual journalist. But it goes much further than that, and many observers

argue that the phenomenon of cash for news coverage has devastating impacts both on the society at large and on the profession of journalism—even on the business success of individual media organizations.

McMillan and Zoido, in laying out the way Fujimori’s secret-police chief used his multimillion-dollar bribe treasury in the 1990s, draw a direct conclusion: The fact that the most money, far and away, was spent on bribing the media (especially television stations) demonstrates that “the news media are the most potent of the democratic checks and balances.” The courts and a truly open political process are also keys to democracy, they acknowledge, but the efforts in Peru to suppress a free media revealed the news media as “the chief watchdog.”

As a result, they argue, “measures to safeguard the media’s independence from political influence and to ensure their credibility to the public are perhaps the crucial policies for shoring up democracy.”²⁸

The cash doesn’t need to be in the millions of dollars, as in Fujimori’s Peru, to place a stranglehold on the flow of crucial information to a country’s citizens. Even those relatively tiny payments at press conferences can make a difference.

Twange Kasoma documented this in his study of brown-envelope journalism in Zambia and Ghana—for example, in the report’s summary of comments from a Ghanaian journalist:

“A male reporter for a private radio station who received 200,000 cedis (about US\$20) at a press conference by a mining company said that receiving *solli* from news sources ‘helps relieve the journalist of financial difficulties but should not in any way affect

how the journalist reports. But it is also true that taking money from a news source makes it difficult to write against them.”

Journalists in Zambia, Kasoma said, were more direct. After receiving about \$125 from a political party, one journalist said, “It naturally made me want to write a story slanting on supporting the source ... The trend has an inevitable influence on the reporter where they feel remorse not to write in the interest of the source.”

And a lecturer at the University of Zambia gave a stark example of what a difference money can make, describing an International Labor Organization project she had been involved with that aimed to get more media coverage of child-labor issues.

“The journalists came to the workshop and immediately started to ask how much they were going to be paid to write such stories,” she said. “ILO agreed to pay them a token for a specified period (two months) and believe you me for that period, journalists wrote a lot of stories on child labor. After that period ended the stories disappeared—that is how serious the problem is.”²⁹

And then there are those well-paid, highly professional Western reporters who accepted transportation, meals, and swank lodging from the European Union to cover its parliament. One broadcaster quoted in an *International Herald Tribune* article—only on condition of anonymity—admitted that “perks such as these had prompted journalists to refuse requests by editors to write stories on members’ privileges and travel expenses at the Parliament, a topic of growing interest in Europe. ‘How can I expose such perks when I myself am benefiting from them?’ the journalist asked.”³⁰

In Cambodia, where payments ranging from as little as \$1.25 to \$20 are typical, journalists may say they are not influenced—until they also squirm a bit. The LICADHO report included this anecdote:

“‘When we accept the envelope we are not biased,’ said a senior manager of a radio station, before adding, however: ‘... the voice of the envelope-giver is a bit longer.’”

A television reporter “boasted of receiving US\$50 and free transport to cover a government event,” the report said, pointing out that partly because of such payments, the masses of Cambodians, who rely on television for their news, end up seeing a preponderance of stories about the government’s accomplishments. “Some openly admit that their role is more like a public relations department of the government, rather than an independent news provider.”

“Corruption in the media reflects the reality of Cambodian society at large,” the LICADHO report noted, “but it is particularly troublesome for an industry supposed to be based on accuracy, fairness and independence. When these foundations of ethical journalism can be bought so cheaply, the essential role of the media in society is compromised.”³¹

It’s not just high ethical principles that are compromised by cash for news coverage. The business of news is at stake as well.

Rosemary Armao, an assistant professor of journalism at the State University of New

York in Albany, has trained and worked with journalists—and seen the practice of cash for news coverage first-hand—in Uganda and in Bosnia, where she is a consulting editor with the Center for Investigative Reporting.

“If a media outlet is credible, people come to trust and count on it, and this means more customers who pay for your product and read your advertising,” she argues. “The more customers, the more you can charge for that advertising. So good behavior means profit. That’s a strong motivator.”³²

In Poland, Rafal Szymczak has a similar opinion, from the perspective of a public-relations professional. “My main argument,” he said, “is that it’s a matter of life and death for the media (not for PR!). Credibility is the main value which makes people ready to pay for journalism. If the public is not able to differ between what is real journalism and what is paid

(advertorials), they’ll see no reason to pay for any newspaper—so more people will use free-of-charge media and the Internet, which, in fact, we currently observe.”³³

Alexandra Wrage’s experience with corruption around the world comes from the point of view of the multinationals she works with and counsels through her non-profit, TRACE International. But she’s also a consumer of the media, in the U.S. and wherever she travels, and even though her organization doesn’t directly deal with cash for news coverage, she is passionate about its impact.

“When these foundations of ethical journalism can be bought so cheaply, the essential role of the media in society is compromised.”

— LICADHO report

“A free and open media is critically important to a democracy,” she said. “The idea that the media can be bought and paid for should be an outrage. I don’t understand why we’re not talking more about this.”

The true impact, she worries, is in all of those countries where the practice is prevalent.

“The citizens of these countries suffer from corruption way more than you or I do,” she said. “Things can be done [to improve those societies], and reporters are the engine of getting things done. I depend on reporting. For me to know that reporters themselves are on the take is very discouraging.”³⁴

Toward a solution

Patrick Butler, whose job as vice president of the International Center for Journalists gives him as good an overview of international journalism as almost anyone, knows how important the problem of cash for news coverage is. After all, he said, “How can [readers] trust anything they read if they don’t know whether the journalist has been paid?”

But he also knows that not enough has been done about it by journalists or their support organizations, and he wondered aloud whether that’s maybe simply a result of the nature of the problem.

“Everybody knows how serious it is,” he said, “but because it is so hard to fix, people don’t treat it as seriously as it really is.”³⁵

Interestingly, the first concerted international effort to do something about journalists taking cash for news coverage was inspired by a public relations firm

that finally just got fed up with paying reporters. It was in Moscow in 2001, and the PR firm was Promaco, which also had offices in Finland and St. Petersburg and affiliations with an international PR agency.

Promaco, which had recently entered the Moscow market, had tried to buck the common practice of paying for the publication of its releases, but with little success. So the staffers came up with a sting: They invented a fictitious company, and wrote a phony press release about the company’s supposed new store, which they sent out to 21 publications.³⁶

- One magazine ran the release for free, without questioning it.
- Three publications said they’d run it, but only labeled as advertising.
- Four others said forget it—this isn’t newsworthy.
- And that leaves what one publication titled “The unlucky 13”—publications that ran the press release as if it were a story, but only after they were paid. Their rates ranged from \$525 to \$1,732 (for those listed in dollars) and from 3,859 rubles to 57,320 rubles (\$127 to \$1,886, based on exchange rates in the summer of 2010).

The agency held a news conference to detail what it had done and the results. The affair set off a minor firestorm in the Russian media, some of which apologized, while others criticized Promaco or squabbled about which practices were ethical or not.

But more important in the long run, said Katerina Tsetsura, Promaco took its story to

the UK-based International Public Relations Association, and agencies from around the world started sharing *their* examples. IPRA decided to pursue the issue, and, with several partners, hired Kruckeberg to conduct some academic research.

With the help of his graduate student, Tsetsura, Kruckeberg produced in 2003 what appears to be the first serious review of the extent of the problem worldwide: “A Composite Index by Country of Variables Related to the Likelihood of the Existence of ‘Cash for News Coverage.’” Almost exactly a year later, IPRA, the Florida-based Institute for Public Relations (IPR), and four other global organizations, including the International Federation of Journalists and the International Press Institute, announced their support for “a set of principles designed to foster greater transparency in the dealings between public relations professionals and the media, and to end bribery for media coverage throughout the world.”³⁷

It was a grand start. But more than six years later, it’s hard to point to any grand results.

The public-relations groups *have* continued to support research work. Robert Grupp, currently IPR’s president and CEO and a former president of IPRA who was involved with the media-transparency campaign from its early years, says that the two big public-relations organizations had done things “supportive of research and helping disseminate the findings internationally—that was probably our primary role.”³⁸

“How can [readers] trust anything they read if they don’t know whether the journalist has been paid?”

— Patrick Butler, President, International Center for Journalists

Indeed, there has been a gradually building body of research since that 2003 report, much of it conducted by Tsetsura on her own or with partners, some of it in conjunction with the IPR—touching on issues in Romania, Ukraine, Poland, China, and Russia, among others. And she and Kruckeberg have a book in the works, scheduled for publication in spring 2011: *Transparency, Public Relations and the Mass Media: Combating Media Bribery Worldwide*.

But, as Grupp notes, “The problem has been in application. We know this takes place, but what are we to do about this?”

What about the media partners listed on that 2004 press release—the big guns in this field, International Federation of Journalists and International Press Institute? What has their role been on the so-called Campaign for Media Transparency?

“Not a lot,” said Grupp, “other than lending their name and brand equity to the announcements of the research and its importance.”

David Dadge, then director of IPI, agreed. Asked what has happened since the announcement of the new transparency charter, he said that as far as he knows, “nothing has been done since.”³⁹

It’s not entirely fair to say that nothing has been done. Aidan White, general secretary of the International Federation of Journalists, points to the Ethical Journalism Initiative, a campaign IFJ launched in 2008,

“which has as its focus the need for media to maintain and enhance professional standards including of transparency both of ownership and political affiliation.” The IFJ believes, White said, “that an urgent global campaign to support journalism as a public good is needed. This campaign must focus on new funding models for traditional media, but must also address ways of sustaining the values of public interest journalism.”⁴⁰

These are worthy and important goals. And the campaign’s cornerstone document, White’s book-length *To Tell You the Truth*, properly makes the case for ethical journalism both in principle and for solid business reasons. But naturally enough, that book and the ethical journalism campaign reflect IFJ’s core mission – as a stalwart defender of “press freedom and social justice through strong, free and independent trade unions of journalists.”⁴¹

To Tell You the Truth does sharply challenge journalists to encourage the use of peer review or accountability mechanisms such as ombudsmen or press councils to give their own work greater transparency and credibility. The problem of cash for news coverage, and particularly bribe-taking by journalists, however, plays only a small role in White’s book. And there is no mention of the Charter for Media Transparency, which IFJ had cofounded just four years earlier. “Courageous reporters risk life and

limb every day to defend press freedom and human rights,” White said when the charter was released. “We cannot stand by while bribery mocks those sacrifices, anywhere in the world.”⁴²

Today, White’s focus – reflecting IFJ’s core mission—is more on the management of media organizations than on the practice of individual journalists. “The depths of the problem facing journalists who wish to maintain notions of mission in their profession against the corruption of money-driven publishing is evident in all regions,” he

said. And, addressing the seriousness of cash for news coverage, he said there is a need for governments “to enforce strict transparency rules concerning the management, funding and ownership of media.”⁴³

In truth, the most concrete work in search of solutions

for cash for news coverage has come from the field of public relations.

For example, after she and a research partner were asked to do a study of bribery for PR professionals in Poland, Tsetsura said, the results were “widely discussed in meetings of public relations professionals and journalism professionals,” and the two groups went on to develop codes of conduct. Some PR associations said they would only allow membership for companies that refused to pay for stories, she continued, and some journalism groups said they would only deal with public relations people who were ethical.

“Courageous reporters risk life and limb every day to defend press freedom and human rights. We cannot stand by while bribery mocks those sacrifices, anywhere in the world.”

— Aidan White, General Secretary,
International Federation of Journalists

“Now those incidents [of cash payment] are less,” Tsetsura said. “What is most important is agreement between the two parties, and finding the common point of interest.”⁴⁴

The research in Poland also spilled over into Ukraine, and the conversations it provoked, Tsetsura said, eventually led to an amusing and novel initiative by the Ukrainian public-relations professionals. In 2006, they created an award known as “PRAVDA”—the acronym spells the Russian word for “truth”—for the best ethical practices by a PR agency each year. And they created a second award, the Honest Spice Cake award, to honor a journalist who was particularly ethical about not taking money for journalism.⁴⁵

Marina Starodubska, a partner in a Ukrainian public-relations consultancy, said the name of that award “is just a funny word-play in the Russian language. It basically means, someone who is ‘in-your-face honest.’”

Journalists, she said, have been supportive of the idea of the award, “for there was nothing to be offended about. Deep inside, most of the journalists do not like the pay-for-news situation but do not see—or want to see—other alternatives.”

Still, although the award has been going on for several years now, few journalists are making nominations, Starodubska said. Mostly, it is public relations professionals who identify the ethical journalists.⁴⁶

Why not the journalists?

It is a bit of a puzzle. Considering the cancerous effect this problem of cash for news coverage can have on journalism, ravaging the body of the profession, why was it public relations professionals—and PR

people are often the scorn of the journalistic community—who committed first and most aggressively to addressing the problem?

Tsetsura is inclined to be charitable. This is a “close to home subject” for PR professionals, she pointed out, and they have an economic interest: Given the choice, none of them wants to have to pay to get basic information out to the public.

She can see another reason: “Journalists are very, very busy; there are so many other issues of journalism that are very central. They may overcome the issue of cash for journalism. It may just be a small part of the bigger issues.”

Also, Tsetsura suggests, “a lot of journalists don’t understand what to *do* with this.”⁴⁷

Asked why he thinks the PR people took the lead at looking for solutions, David Dadge, the former IPI director, has a blunt reply: “It’s the dirty subject that nobody wants to talk about on our side.”

Dadge has a theory about why his own organization, and others like it, have done very little. Journalists and their advocates can feel beleaguered by the number and variety of attacks on them and on press freedom—from governments, from drug cartels, from politically inspired media critics. In this context, Dadge said, for a group like IPI, “it’s very hard to turn around and criticize journalists. We need to focus on being an advocacy group.” He wondered if that’s not one reason why these groups haven’t really tried to do much about journalists or media organizations that solicit or take cash for news coverage, whether in direct payments or hidden advertisements.

Not Just a Problem for the Developing World

Without a doubt, corruption is a huge and damaging problem in many emerging nations, both in journalism and throughout society.

But Westerners should be cautious about being holier than thou.

Mainstream American journalism is not that many decades removed from the days when travel reporters would receive free hotel rooms and other perks from the very businesses they might be recommending, or when cases of booze would be delivered to newsrooms for annual Christmas gifts.

As recently as 2005, an ethics scandal exploded when *USA Today* revealed that Armstrong Williams, a conservative commentator, had been paid nearly a quarter-million dollars to promote the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind Act through a government contract with a public relations agency. The contract reportedly required him to comment regularly on the Act on his television show and to interview the Secretary of Education about the Act.¹

The affair was embarrassing for the public relations industry and prompted a passionate comment on the personal blog of Richard Edelman, president and CEO of the multinational public relations firm bearing his name. "This kind of pay for play public relations takes us back in time to the days of the press agent who would drop off the new record album and \$10 to the deejay," Edelman wrote. "It makes our industry's efforts to 'clean up' behavior in newly created PR markets such as China and Russia look decidedly ridiculous."²

And there are increasing concerns that developments in the communications world, particularly the proliferation of bloggers as a primary information source that may or may not hold to any set of ethical standards, will bring an increase in questions about cash for news coverage.

Early in 2010, for instance, the technology blog TechCrunch was forced to tell its readers that an intern had "asked for a Macbook Air in exchange for a post about a startup...[and] on at least one other occasion, this intern was almost certainly given a computer in exchange for a post."

"We are all shaken here at TechCrunch," Michael Arrington wrote on the site. He added: "I apologize to each one of you. I promise that we will always maintain complete transparency with you on how we operate, even when it isn't such an easy thing to do."³

The stakes get higher when a technology giant such as Microsoft is involved, as it was in late 2006, when, David Pogue reported on his *New York Times* technology blog, the firm sent out free laptops to about 90 technology bloggers, ostensibly to help them evaluate Microsoft's new Vista operating system.

"I think very little of the bloggers who are keeping Microsoft's bribe laptops," Pogue wrote.

"Clearly, they're exploiting the lawless, Brave New World of the blogosphere, where, since they're Not Quite Journalists, they don't feel constrained by any of those pesky journalistic ethics guidelines. Like the one that says, 'You don't keep \$2,200 gifts from the subject of your review. You might think you can still write an impartial review, but it's highly unlikely—and either way, nobody will believe it.'

"But Microsoft gets much of the blame, too. It deliberately exploited a weak spot in today's court of public opinion: how bloggers influence consumers, but generally don't have conflict-of-interest policies."⁴

Journalism professor Dean Kruckeberg, whose 2003 research report was the pioneering document on cash for news coverage, sees the explosive changes in information delivery as a significant new threat. “The role of journalism is becoming increasingly deprofessionalized, and this has impact on the *ethics* of journalism,” said Kruckeberg. “If you want to hold up the United States as a standard, you could say that rather than others becoming better, we should talk about how we are getting worse” as the media landscape changes. He believes this puts a new and challenging burden on the news consumer to determine the credibility and value of the information, compared to the days when you could just trust your local paper.⁵

A 2006 article in the *International Herald Tribune* detailed how the European Parliament “is subsidizing journalists to cover its parliamentary sessions in Strasbourg,” apparently for the slightly embarrassing reason that otherwise the EU feared the parliament would be ignored.

Journalists were receiving travel and entertainment subsidies, and, the article noted, “One television journalist who regularly travels to Strasbourg using funding from the program said the daily stipend was sufficient to pay for a quality hotel and lunch at an upmarket brasserie, including a glass of Bordeaux wine and a dish of Strasbourg’s celebrated sausages.”⁶

The wine website *decanter.com* wrote about how “Wine magnate Bernard Magrez has outraged a group of journalists by offering each of them a Cartier wristwatch worth €1,650 (£1,322/\$2,641).” As they left the luncheon event in the Alain Ducasse restaurant in Paris, “journalists were offered a bag that contained a press kit and a box that most did not open until after leaving the restaurant. The box contained the watch, and a certificate of authenticity signed by a Bordeaux jeweller.”

The article reported that the “majority” of journalists returned the gift.⁷

“Rich Westerners may not think of their societies as plagued by corruption,” a commentary published in *The Economist* puts it. “But the definition of bribery clearly differs from person to person. A New Yorker might pity the third-world businessman who must pay bribes just to keep his shop open. But the same New Yorker would not think twice about slipping the maître d’ \$50 to sneak into a nice restaurant without a reservation.”⁸

1 For background on Armstrong Williams and citations on the controversy, see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armstrong_Williams#cite_note-14.

2 Richard Edelman, “Pay to Play PR Is Not On,” blog, January 7, 2005, http://www.edelman.com/speak_up/blog/archives/2005/01/pay_to_play_pr_1.html.

3 Michael Arrington, “An Apology to Our Readers,” TechCrunch, February 4, 2010, <http://techcrunch.com/2010/02/04/an-apology-to-our-readers>.

4 David Pogue, “A Wake-Up Call to Microsoft’s PR Team,” Pogue’s Posts, January 25, 2007, <http://pogue.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/01/25/a-wake-up-call-to-microsofts-pr-team>.

5 Dean Kruckeberg, telephone interview with author, Charlotte, North Carolina, June 15, 2010.

6 Dan Bilefsky, “EU Funding Journalists to Cover Parliament, *International Herald Tribune*, April 4, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/04/world/europe/04iht-eu.html>.

7 Jane Anson, “Magrez Luxury Gifts Rebuffed by Journalists,” April 22, 2008, <http://www.decanter.com/news/253458.html>.

8 “The Etiquette of Bribery,” *The Economist*, December 19, 2006, http://www.martinfrost.ws/htmlfiles/dec2006/etiquette_bribery.html.

Rosental Alves, director of the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas at the University of Texas, believes journalist-advocacy groups can do both—defend press freedom and also acknowledge journalistic corruption. “We have to recognize that there are bad practices, and we should call attention to them,” he said. “One thing should not preclude doing the other.”⁴⁸

Still, Dudge’s theory may point to another reason why there hasn’t been any concerted effort from the side of journalism.

While there is a good range of organizations whose stated missions are to protect press freedom, other organizations focused on industry issues, and still others committed to helping with the development of journalism in emerging democracies, a topic such as cash for news coverage

can fall between the cracks. There’s no clear type of organization with a sharp focus on this issue, with the possible exception of media ethics groups—which generally are smaller, more local, and less formidable than the big international media organizations—or groups such as Transparency International, whose main focus is on governments.

It’s not as though journalists and their supporters are doing *nothing*. Media development organizations such as ICFJ, Internews, and others all teach classes in ethics overseas, although Butler acknowledges that “in terms of cash for stories, I wouldn’t say that’s a central part of what we do.” And

“We need to understand that what makes journalism different is the ethics. It’s what journalists need to distinguish ourselves from the cacophony around us.”

— Rosental Alves, Director, Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas

others certainly touch on the problem: IREX is honest about corruption among journalists in its regular *Media Sustainability Index* reports; CPJ in its reports on the ethical lapses in China, Mexico, and other places. But nobody is claiming that anything close to enough is being done, and certainly not by the groups representing journalists, whose profession, after all, is the one being stained by this practice.

Alves, who also holds a Knight Chair at the University of Texas, believes it is vital that media support organizations focus on

all the changes that are happening in social media and new forms of information delivery. But, he said, “We’ve been so obsessed with the technological transformation that we’ve allowed ethics to take a second place.”

That’s not only wrong in principle,

he believes, but it will be damaging to journalism as it goes through radical change. “We need to understand that what makes journalism different is the ethics,” Alves said. “It’s what journalists need to distinguish ourselves from the cacophony around us.”

Changing a deeply ingrained culture of corruption is undeniably hard, and it will be challenging. But, as Dudge put it, “Just because it’s difficult to solve doesn’t mean you shouldn’t have a fair attempt at it.”

And Alves, for his part, sees reason for a cautious optimism. Media corruption is “a huge problem,” he said, “but in my lifetime

I've seen it diminishing" in Latin America, where he has followed the media most closely.

He credits the improvement in part to the amount of journalism training of the past few decades, much of it due to a major effort by media development organizations. This sort of training, he said, "spreads the culture of what a free press means." Similarly, a development that has "helped a lot" in Latin America, Alves said, is the more widespread adoption of codes of ethics. He acknowledges that at first he was not a supporter of such codes, fearing that the media were just creating something that could be used against them in court. But he later became a fan of ethics codes: "Even if they are mostly a marketing effort, still they provide a tool, externally and internally, that people can use against these practices."

Anthony Mills, the press freedom manager for IPI, acknowledges that although his organization is "in the business of defending journalists around the world, we are very strong as well in our belief that journalists should—on a voluntary basis, of course—have a strong set of editorial and ethical guidelines ... Unfortunately, we've seen that around the world there's still a lot to be done."

He is also frank about the impact and the ways the profession may be lacking in its response to the problem. He talked about an incident when he was living in Lebanon, when two journalists were killed and another maimed because of their work. Those journalists, he said, showed "enormous courage against those who would suppress them."

"What is sadly lacking," he added, "is a similar sense of commitment against bribery and corruption of journalists." This doesn't just hurt the profession, he said,

it hurts the cause of press freedom: "A press that would take bribes ... is not free."⁴⁹

Suggestions from outside

Perhaps one of the difficulties in solving the problem of cash for news coverage is that it involves three different sets of players whose national and international organizations rarely talk to each other about this problem: the journalists who receive the cash; the corporations and governments who pay it; and the public relations professionals who often play the role of middleman.

This suggests that no solution will come without the combined effort of the "three legs of the stool," as Robert Grupp of IPR put it. But it also provides the opportunity for more brains, with different perspectives, working on the problem. And some of the ideas from the two other legs may be useful for journalists.

Rafal Szymczak, the Polish public-relations expert, said journalists and their associations "officially ... are quite cooperative, and declare that such practices [of cash for news coverage] are unacceptable. But there are not any activities from that side to deal with the problem. The reason is quite obvious in my opinion. It's a typical 'prisoner's dilemma'—nobody is interested to be the first who changes practices, because profits are significant.

"So, we need a child who will say that 'the king is naked.'"⁵⁰

But journalists don't need to act alone—and in fact, that is probably not the most productive approach. "One of the ways to take a stand is simply to take it up and discuss it," said Tsetsura. If she were speaking before a convention of journalists, rather than her

normal audience of PR people, she said, her message would be simple: “Let’s talk!”

“A lot of journalists still have very 20th century stereotypes about public relations professionals,” she said. “Public relations has really developed and changed,” and students are being taught they need to be ethical members of society.

“This is a good chance for public relations professionals of the 21st century and journalists of the 21st century to sit down and talk,” Tsetsura said. “The more the professionals will talk about it, and stand up to this practice, the less this practice will happen.”

Similarly, Grupp emphasized that “it will take multiple organizations speaking in similar contexts for different audiences” to make a difference on this topic. “There needs to be a fairly steady drumbeat ... I think it can be solved, but it takes a groundswell. The issue is speaking publicly about it.”

Alexandra Wrage can represent an important aspect of the “third leg,” since she works with the multinational corporations who can be on the paying end of cash for news coverage. Her message: You must *act*—firmly, clearly, and consistently. Something like the Charter of Media Transparency is fine, she believes. It’s important, but it is not enough.

“A statement of grand principles is a wonderful skeleton,” Wrage said. “Now you need to develop musculature.” What is needed, she said, is intensive follow-up. For example, her group puts together detailed guidance documents on what a corporation should do if someone approaches them for a bribe. They insist on

mechanisms to hold people accountable, so that everyone in the corporation is on notice—and on topic. They hold an annual meeting for member corporations in order to discuss what challenges they face around the world and what other companies are doing in similar situations.

She cares deeply about the value of the free press, and said she would be happy to meet with journalists or others to help look for ways out of the cash-for-news-coverage dilemma. She wondered aloud whether there isn’t some way to reduce the problem of the small bribes that can be masqueraded as innocent “transport” or “facilitation” support: Perhaps the organizations who make those payments should publicly announce that they will not do it that way anymore but instead will create a fund, independently administered and monitored, to which journalists can apply for legitimate expense reimbursement when their media houses don’t provide for that.

Above all, though, Wrage is passionate in her rejection of the idea that this problem is too hard to solve.

“You don’t say this community has always practiced child labor,” so you can’t work to end it and have to go along with it, she said. The same should be true with this problem. But it should be done on a broad level—looking for solutions as a coalition, with a plan.

And it will involve a difficult, but vital, first step for journalists: acknowledging that cleaning up their own house is as important as—and maybe more than—exposing the failings of others. As Alves put it: “We love when we shine light on others, but not on ourselves.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

When the Charter for Media Transparency was introduced in 2004, Frank Ovaatt, then president and CEO-elect of the Institute for Public Relations, said this:

“We continue to believe this is a critical issue that serious journalists and public relations people must address together.”

This has not happened—certainly not with the commitment and vigor implied in that original announcement, and certainly not from the journalism community.

The reasons why it has not happened are complex, and some of them are understandable. Cash for news coverage is a difficult, multilayered issue.

Again and again, the key players say that extreme difficulty is no excuse for insufficient action on serious problems—and that this is a problem of the utmost seriousness. Yet too rarely are those words accompanied by aggressive, creative action.

Meaningful action will require efforts from all the different players in this too-sad, and too-common, drama. There is plenty of work to go around:

International and national journalism associations should take the initiative to start a dialog with the public relations community about making the problem of

cash for news coverage public and about working together to reduce or eradicate it. This is an ideal opportunity for a summit on the international level. As David Dadge, then the director of IPI, put it, “having more of a conversation about this and getting into more of the details would be better” than simply pretending it doesn’t exist. Dean Kruckeberg, the pioneer in researching cash for news coverage and a former journalist himself, said he usually supports the “respectful separation” of journalists and PR people. “But this is a societal problem that

both journalists and PR professionals have expertise and interest in, and it is one area where they could work in concert,” he said. “This is a very critical problem in our society.”

Journalists should shine a light on this problem, just as they do on attacks against journalists.

To their credit, organizations such as IREX and the Committee to Protect Journalists frankly acknowledge ethical lapses in their overview reports on the status of journalism in individual countries. But reports whose central focus is on bribery of journalists are rare. Zlata Kures, deputy director of the Beta News Agency in Serbia, speaks with some despair about ethical challenges in the context of that country’s severe economic problems—and thinks the best way to solve those challenges is by airing them. “The only way to at least partially suppress such attitudes is to bring the most drastic cases before

Again and again, the key players say that extreme difficulty is no excuse for insufficient action on serious problems. Yet too rarely are those words accompanied by aggressive, creative action.

the courts of honor of Serbia’s journalistic associations,” Kures said. “Also, if the most respected members of the profession spoke up about such examples, both media houses and their ‘clients’ would probably have to think twice before venturing on similar arrangements in the future.”⁵¹

Journalists should document and publicize journalists’ salaries. Low pay isn’t the only cause of corruption among journalists, but there’s no doubt it is a real problem. Publishing regular surveys of what journalists make in different countries—both staff and the pitifully paid freelancers or regional reporters who are most vulnerable to bribes—would be a major step in pressuring media houses to improve.

The media-development community needs to keep a sharp focus on ethics training. Trainers and media developers tend to focus on the new, digital media—citizen journalists using cellphones and social networking—and targeted special-topic reporting, which is indeed important. But observers such as Alves are right to worry that one result may be that ethics then takes “a second place”—and that this is a problem, because, as he put it, the ethical foundation is “what journalists need to distinguish ourselves from the cacophony around us” in this period of technological transformation. This training can make a difference. Mike McGraw, writing in *Global Journalist*, quotes a Russian journalist who had attended a professional development program sponsored by the ICFJ that included a focus on ethical training. Back at work, she felt conflicted about her paper’s common practice of taking payments from political candidates and then publishing positive articles, albeit labeled as purchased. “The journalist discussed the practice with

colleagues and mentors on an email list set up after the [ICFJ] program,” McGraw wrote. She and her coworkers pushed to end the practice, and she told him, “when the stories stopped, circulation went up.”⁵²

The media development community should support media accountability systems, such as ombudsmen in newsrooms. Amir Mateen, the longtime Pakistani journalist who has also worked in the United States, calls the problem of bribery widespread in Urdu newspapers, particularly in smaller towns but also in the cities. The situation could improve, he said, if journalist associations could be supported in “remedial steps like, for instance, the formation of a media complaint commission, the implementation of codes of ethics, and having ombudsmen in media organizations.”⁵³ And Dudge comments about media accountability systems, “In fact, they may be the lever that can have an effect.” Alves makes a point of crediting Brazil with progress in improving media accountability and transparency, citing two key factors: that country’s strong news ombudsmen, who regularly point out flaws in the media, and its press observatory website (and related TV and radio shows), which can be very critical of the media. Those efforts, Alves said, created mechanisms that draw attention to bad practices, and “really had an effect.”⁵⁴

News media owners, managers, and editors must adopt, publicize, and then stick to a policy of zero tolerance. Rosemary Armao, the journalism professor and trainer in Bosnia and elsewhere, said: “The main thing that reduces all unethical behavior in newsrooms including cash for coverage is zero tolerance by editors. Editors set the standards, hold staffers accountable and must abide by them personally as well ... If

you look up to an editor you try to do your best work for him and you don't disappoint or betray him if you can help it."⁵⁵

James Tumusiime, the Ugandan journalist who is one of those editors, strongly agrees. "The solution lies in zero tolerance," he said. "Newspapers here have done it, but we need to do it more, reminding the public that our journalists must not be given handouts in return for coverage."⁵⁶ Zero tolerance should extend to the cash for news coverage that the media owners and managers themselves accept and sometimes solicit: special "advertorial" sections paid for by corporations but written by the newspaper's journalists themselves and thinly labeled, if at all; "check-passing" photos with no news value published to appease big advertisers; commitments for coverage in return for a monthly retainer. No media company that allows any of these practices can expect to enforce ethical rules on its reporters.

Media owners and managers should acknowledge that pay can have an impact on ethics. It's true that low pay is sometimes treated as a blanket excuse. But nearly everyone agrees that when pay is abysmally low, as it is for journalists—especially freelancers and rural journalists—it makes it far tougher for them to take the ethical high road. In this sense, Alves believes, media owners paying such low salaries are "giving license" to corruption among their journalists. Media houses that couple

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a zero-tolerance policy with at least livable base pay have the best chance of reducing the problem of cash for news coverage.

Media houses can take their own steps for accountability. Media organizations don't *have* to wait for outside assistance to establish a more transparent relationship with their audiences. In its own excellent list of recommendations for dealing with the problem of media corruption, the Cambodian organization LICADHO suggests that the media "establish complaint mechanisms for staff and for readers/viewers/listeners to report ethical violations."⁵⁷

Public relations professionals and their organizations should not abandon this important effort. PR people have taken some of the most significant steps to understand and do something about this problem, particularly in the research their international organizations have sponsored. But as Robert

Grupp, of the Institute for Public Relations, acknowledged, "the problem has been in application." Perhaps rather than waiting for journalists' organizations to take the initiative in suggesting a summit on the topic, the PR groups could take the initiative. All sides have expressed their interest and willingness; now somebody just needs to step up.

PR agencies should practice their own zero tolerance. In the numerous countries where cash for news coverage remains prevalent, public-relations agencies could follow the good example of their colleagues

in countries such as Ukraine, where there have been creative efforts to promote and reward good behavior and transparency. “The more companies realize that the goal of PR is reputation, not direct sales, the faster this pay-for-news practice goes away,” says Marina Starodubska, who has been directly involved with the Ukraine experience. “It does take more time and effort—to collect the data, to prepare the speakers, etc.—but in the end, it is worth doing.”⁵⁸

Corporations and NGOs should also just say no—publicly, and without exception.

Those organizations that pay in any fashion for news coverage, from small “facilitation” payments to expensive advertisements or even regular retainers, can easily position themselves as the victims in this story. It’s not as simple as that, of course; the payers, including high-minded NGOs, are not immune from wanting to guarantee their own spin on the news through cash payments. And it can be easy for them simply to say that this is such an ingrained part of a culture, we have to participate. Many people say that this is a false argument—and that the bribe payers have an important role in ending the practice.

In Cambodia, one of the recommendations of the LICADHO report reads: “NGOs and other civil society groups ... should actively promote a free, fair and responsible news media, including by: adopting a policy of not paying journalists in any way for news coverage (including not paying them to attend press conferences) ... [and] make it clear to news media outlets that decisions about NGO advertising, etc, will be made

according to how responsible and ethical outlets are in their news and other content.”⁵⁹

Alexandra Wrage, founder and head of TRACE International, authored a short paper “to educate business people and compliance officers” on the topic of “facilitation payments” to government officials—the small bribes that are an everyday occurrence in many countries, just as brown envelopes and similar payments are common for journalists.

TRACE conducted interviews with nearly 100 companies, she wrote, “to learn how they have stopped paying small bribes.” The key, according to Wrage’s report and a separate interview, is for those paying the bribes to adopt a clear written policy banning *any* payment, however small; to train employees on the reasons for this policy and how to communicate it; and to follow through with enforcement of the policy. And it’s critical to be consistent. A company that refuses to pay bribes 95 percent of the time, she said, is simply telling the bribe-receiver that they might be among the lucky 5 percent.

To those who might argue these small bribes are a necessary part of doing business around the world, her paper has a blunt reply: “Many of the companies interviewed have found that it is possible—occasionally even easy—to refuse to participate in bribery schemes ... none of the companies that approached the issue carefully and comprehensively reported significant or prolonged disruption in their business activities.”⁶⁰

Endnotes

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