

NEWSROOM >>

Neighborhood Watch

PAPERS EXPAND INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING EFFORTS BY SHUFFLING STAFFS

BY MARY LYNN F. JONES

WITH NEWSROOM budgets tightening, devoting an editor and full-time reporter to investigative projects—some of which can take weeks to produce—might seem counterintuitive. But Joseph Kieta, editor of the Observer-Dispatch in Utica, N.Y., doesn't agree.

When Kieta reorganized his newsroom into 10 teams in January, he included one for watchdog reporting, although he did not increase his overall staff size. "This is something that only [newspapers] do," Kieta says. "It's so vital to our democracy, and it's good business sense because readers love it," he adds.

"There is a real pent-up demand for this kind of journalism."

— JAMES SHIFFER,
STAR TRIBUNE

Investigative reporting has long been a hallmark of newspapers, which have enjoyed the staff and resources to devote to projects that may be too complicated to tell in a few minutes on television, for example. Even as newsroom budgets are stretched, several editors are beefing up their watchdog efforts without adding costs by reassigning current staff or turning to help from local universities to make sure investigative stories are covered.

In Utica, an editorial page writer is now the paper's watchdog reporter, and Kieta is using a vacancy to fill the watchdog editor job. Both positions will focus full time on watchdog work. The two staffers will work on long-range investigative projects as well as with reporters on other Observer-Dispatch

teams on the paper's Sunday showcase enterprise story.

In the past, the paper did not have a dedicated watchdog reporter but allowed reporters time to work on stories, Kieta says. Creating a full-time watchdog team guarantees the paper will cover such stories regularly, he adds.

A desire to focus on more short-term investigative stories and draw upon readers' knowledge led the Star Tribune in Minneapolis to launch the Whistleblower blog (<http://blogs2.startribune.com/blogs/whistleblower/>) last April. Readers can write in with tips—anonously, if they choose—about topics they think the paper should investigate.

"There is a real pent-up demand for this kind of journalism," which is "very problem-solving, interactive, participatory journalism," says James Shiffer, who was previously an assistant city editor at the paper before starting the blog, a full-time position. Shiffer says he receives at least a dozen tips a week from e-mails, phone calls, other reporters and by looking through public records. About 75 percent of the stories he writes for print and online come from tips.

The paper will add a second reporter to the blog this month and increase its investigative staff by two more for a total of eight, says Nancy Barnes, the paper's editor and senior vice president. The new reporters will come from within the newsroom, with other newsroom reporters absorbing their old duties, she notes.

The Times Union in Albany, N.Y., moved three reporters from its city desk to its investigative team, which also includes a full-time editor and a research director, who serves the entire newsroom but spends much of her time on database manage-

ment and research for the investigative team, says Editor Rex Smith. The city desk still has 30 reporters and editors.

"Readers will remember [an investigative piece] more than half a dozen daily stories that you forgo," says Smith, adding that he believes the paper has a special obligation to do watchdog reporting because it is located in the state capital.

It also relies on some outside help, thanks to a strong relationship with the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in New York City. The Times Union's senior editor for investigations, J. Robert Port, and a political writer, Irene Jay Liu, are teaching there this semester, and Port's students have worked on reporting projects for the paper since 2007, including a series last year on lawmakers who break the law. The Times Union also relies on a recent Columbia j-school graduate who works full time at the paper through a fellowship funded by the university.

Other newspapers also are forming partnerships with local universities. In January, Boston University launched the New England Center for Investigative Reporting at Boston University (www.necir-bu.org), which will partner with The Boston Globe and three other media partners to help produce investigative stories, says Joe Bergantino, the center's director and senior investigative reporter.

Six to eight students will spend a semester doing research on stories. This year, the center plans to produce four major investigative reports, which it will make available free to newspapers on its Web site. The goal is to "boost the quality and quantity of investigative reporting in the region," says Bergantino, who hopes to increase the number of media partners to 10 next year. ■

