

FREEDONIA

A Case Study in Investigative Journalism

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FREEDONIA

The following story takes place in the country of Freedonia and mainly in Palisades, the capital.

Over the past decade, Freedonians have elected a series of governments which have promised economic and democratic reforms. But the efforts to build a sound base for sustainable socio-economic development and prosperity have been hampered by corruption and domestic instability.

Falling export revenues, poor harvests and mismanagement in the civil service have worsened Freedonia's economic and social problems. During the past two years, however, a process of democratization has gained momentum, catching the attention and appreciation of foreign donors.

Multi-party elections last year resulted in the formation of a coalition government, which apparently enjoys the backing of the business elite.

The government, led by the Liberal Party of Freedonia, LPF, has launched an economic reform program aimed at attracting foreign investors and promoting economic growth.

The government's reform efforts have met strong criticism from the main opposition party in Parliament, the Progress Party of Freedonia, PPF. The PPF advocates a more equal distribution of resources and protection of the rights of the poor and underprivileged.

FREEDONIA's Daily Press

Under the previous regime, all of Freedonia's newspapers were subservient mouthpieces of those in power. Journalists were not permitted to challenge authorities or politicians in the ruling party. When they did, they risked being jailed, tortured or even executed.

Today, things have changed for the better. Human-rights abuses have diminished. Occasionally, reporters who anger the regime are still jailed or harassed by authorities, but limits on freedom of expression have eased considerably and a new breed of independent journalists at fiercely independent newspapers has emerged. These papers are quickly drawing readers away from the stuffy, old-style publications that continue to trumpet the government's line.

In the following exercise, participants will join reporting staffs at the following five of Freedonia's most independent and respected newspapers -- fearless publications that are committed to reporting the truth, even when that means challenging the interests of those who hold power.

THE PALISADES POST

THE OBSERVER

THE GAZETTE

THE GLOBE

THE DAILY INQUIRER

FREEDONIA - 3***LATER IN THE NEWSROOM, AFTER THE THONKA PRESS CONFERENCE. ONE HOUR BEFORE DEADLINE.***

The newspaper's driver returns from his brother's well-known restaurant, Green Park Paradise, with somosas and other snacks for the reporters. He tells them he has spotted small bonfires in the crowded alleys of Green Park, and that the demonstrators are getting more and more agitated.

Half an hour later, the phone rings. A man on the phone says that he is a Green Park resident, but refuses to give his name. His message is the following:

“Things are getting out of control. Fighting has erupted in the streets. The policemen have gone mad, because one of their colleagues has been killed in Green Park. They have called in reinforcements and have started to clear the area near the Paradise restaurant. People have been arrested and taken away -- even children, including my niece, and she is only eleven!”

What to do now? Immediate decisions are needed. Your readers expect to be informed. Discuss five minutes and decide what goes into the main Green Park story in tomorrow's paper. (Take notes).

FREEDONIA - 4

Reporters who call the police station get the following response:

“We cannot assist you because we have no transportation. Would it be possible for you to come and pick us up?”

* * * * *

Time is running. Deadline is approaching. Write the full story, including the headline and sub-head. You now have 20 minutes to deadline.

FREEDONIA - 5***WEDNESDAY MORNING IN THE NEWSROOM.***

The reporter who was in Green Park yesterday evening and stayed until past midnight delivers an account of his observations:

The parents of some of the children who were taken away told him that they were very grateful to the police for protecting the children by moving them from the clashes. "Not a single arrest was made," the reporter tells you. The children were safely returned to their families while the protesters withdrew from the streets during the evening. The area was quiet around midnight. Nobody was injured, except a young girl who was hit and seriously injured by a black luxury car. The driver had fled the scene of the accident.

Another reporter has called the police. The message on the telephone answering machine is as follows:

"Until 4 p.m. today, no assistance from this office is available because all our staff will be attending the memorial service of a colleague who died tragically yesterday in Green Park."

A third reporter has called the town hall and talked to the mayor's secretary. She told him the mayor will issue a statement at 4 p.m.

* * * * *

Discuss how you plan to follow up on the Green Park case. Present your plan of action in 10 minutes.

FREEDONIA - 7

THURSDAY MORNING IN THE NEWSROOM.

Your reporter has just returned from police headquarters, where she had a long meeting with the police chief. The police now consider the unrest in Green Park a closed matter. On the mayor's request, police have agreed to assist in the relocation of the Green Park squatters to Flora, on the condition that the start of the hotel construction work is postponed at least one week.

The parties involved -- the mayor, Thonka Inc. and The Ministry of Planning -- have agreed that the relocation of the squatters should be conducted in an orderly manner that is acceptable to the community. Regarding the deceased policeman, his relatives have authorized the police chief to release a medical statement from the family's doctor. It says that Sam Lujak suffered from heart disturbances and was undergoing medical treatment at the time of his death.

The reporter has also been informed about the traffic accident, in which a black luxury car made off after hitting a young girl. After a thorough investigation of the case, police were able to identify the driver and passengers in the car. The driver was Miss Divine Lovejoy, who won the Miss Freedonia Beauty Contest of 1989. She is currently employed as hostess at the "Sexy London Club," Palisades's jet-set night club. On the back seat was Mr. Teddy Cramer, the eldest son of Palisades's mayor, and Miss Diana Wildlife.

The two young ladies had explained that after having a few drinks in the bar, Mr. Cramer had decided not to drive and handed over the car keys to Miss Lovejoy. The party left the "Sexy London Club" in the black Mercedes owned by Mr. Cramer's father just after midnight.

According to the two ladies' accounts to investigators, Mr. Cramer had fallen asleep on their way to Miss Lovejoy's home. In a dark, crowded street in Green Park, something hit the car. They believed it to be a stone or a piece of wood thrown by the protesters and left without checking what had happened. After being questioned, the three were released. According to police, they expressed deep regrets for having unwittingly caused the injuries to the young girl, and said they are prepared to offer her financial compensation. Police consider the case closed.

The driver arrives unexpectedly at the editorial meeting. He has the following message: "Somebody I know has acquired a complete survey of the expanded hotel construction plans, including the list of contractors. We can get that list - on two conditions: secrecy about the source of information, and 100 dollars in small notes to be delivered in an envelope. I have been instructed to pass the money on to the source."

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How do you act on these various pieces of information? What line of action will you pursue? And first of all: How do you respond to the driver's message? Discuss the issue and present a plan in 15 minutes.

FREEDONIA - 8***ONE HOUR LATER.***

Your editor arrives. He hears about the driver's offer and becomes furious. By no means will the editor accept to pay for the list. That would be against editorial policy. The driver is sacked immediately.

Before leaving the premises, the driver tells one of your colleagues in a low voice:

“You can get the document for free if you buy me lunch. Meet me at the Green Park Paradise in half an hour.”

* * * * * *

What is your next move?

FREEDONIA - 9***LUNCH TIME AT THE GREEN PARK PARADISE.***

The reporter meets the sacked driver, who tells him:

“You can get the document if you buy me lunch and never reveal where you got it.”

* * * * *

What do you do?

10-minute discussion: You are now expected to have gathered enough information to give your readers an overall insight into the Green Park affair. Have you done your best?

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STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL: The document shows that the hotel project has been expanded and now includes a country club with a huge golf course. The driver's brother (the owner of the Green Park Paradise) had been negotiating the contract to run the restaurant in the Country Club, but that contract has now been given to Mr. Highlife - the son of your editor!

* * * * *

Consider your next move - and tell us!

10 minutes

FREEDONIA - 11***THURSDAY AFTERNOON IN THE NEWSROOM.***

The editor has unexpectedly left the office. Your sub-editor enters and says:
"We are losing readers and our competitive edge. I want better and more interesting stories on the Green Park affair".

* * * * *

Divide your group into two teams.

One team writes:

(A) *One sheet for the front page - your main story, including headline, sub-heading, introduction and the crux of the story.*

The other team writes:

(B) *A maximum of two sheets for the feature section, giving the readers a full insight into the recent events, including headline, sub-heading, introduction and a comprehensive story.*

Deadline: 60 minutes from now.