FREEDONIA

A Case Study in Investigative Journalism

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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 - 1

MONDAY MORNING IN THE NEWSROOM.

A press release has arrived shortly before deadline from the London-based firm Thonka Inc., whose managing director is Mr. Leonard Singer, a native of Freedonia. You have confirmed that this is a genuine press release from the company. It reads:

“PRESS RELEASE: A NEW BEGINNING FOR GREEN PARK”

Last week in London, Thonka Inc. signed a letter of understanding with Amari Hotels on the financing and construction of a five-star luxury hotel in the Palisades suburb known as Green Park.

A site has now been designated for the hotel, but needs formal approval from Mr. David Suzdal, Minister of Planning. The site formerly served as location for the now defunct Tigers Battalion of Freedonia’s Defense Forces and was recently acquired by Thonka Inc. from Bombay Traders Ltd.

“Our company’s negotiations with the Ministry of Planning are progressing, and we expect the documents of approval to be finalized early next month,” said Mr. Leonard Singer, managing director of Thonka Inc.

“We are happy to announce that this development project is likely to create at least 800 jobs at the construction site. This will make the project the single largest contribution to the development of the tourism industry in Freedonia, and thus will be perfectly in line with the internationally acclaimed priorities of the Government of Freedonia,” Mr. Singer added.

Work will commence immediately. Applicants, mainly masons, bulldozer drivers, concrete workers and carpenters, are kindly requested to turn up at our recruitment office on 14 Willow Street, starting Monday.

* * * * *

How do you deal with this piece of information?

(1) On your own, take 10 minutes to draw up two lists -- one of the newsworthy information in the press release about which you are not in doubt, and a second outlining the things you need to check.

(2) Discuss the issue and write a news article including headline, sub-head and the lead paragraph, to be delivered in 20 minutes.
TUESDAY MORNING IN THE NEWSROOM.

You are checking information on the Green Park case. Your editor arrives one hour late. His car was blocked on his way to the office by angry protesters in Green Park. On his arrival, the editor is furious because today’s story about the hotel project does not give the full picture.

While in Green Park, the editor saw a handful of armed policemen who had been called to the area to protect two bulldozers parked near the designated construction site. When passing a parked fire engine, the editor’s brand new Toyota Corolla was hit by a couple of stones thrown by some of the protesters.

The news meeting starts. The editor complains: “Look at today’s papers: “Freedonia tourism in for major boost,” “Hotel Project Stalls as Minister Suzdal Drags Feet,” “Five Star Hotel for Green Park.” Nobody got the real story! Why did you not stress that work starts on Monday? Everybody in Green Park knows that. It is a well known fact. Activists are throwing stones out there!”

One of your colleagues replies: “We had planned to do the follow-up story today. We would focus on the fact that the work is starting before formal approval of the project, as mentioned in the press release.”

Your editor: “That will not do. We cannot leave the hard news to our competitors. I want the full story, and I want it now!”

Meanwhile, Thonka Inc. has announced an executive press briefing on the new hotel project at 2 p.m. at Grand Imperial Hotel. Extensive information on the project will be presented. Present will be, among others: Mr. Leonard Singer, managing director of Thonka Inc.; Mr. Paddington Rich, director of development, Amari Hotels; Mr. Jimmy Wong, the hotel company’s chief technical director; and a representative of the Ministry of Planning.

* * * * *

Discuss your journalistic approach to the Green Park case as it develops now. What is your main story? How do you catch up with the competitors? In 20 minutes, come up with a detailed plan of action listing your main priorities and the most important questions you want answered. Who will do what?
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).
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?”

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Time is running. Deadline is approaching. Write the full story, including the headline and subhead. You now have 20 minutes to deadline.
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.
5 P.M. IN THE NEWSROOM

Radio Freedonia has just broadcast a speech made by Mr. Peter Lusso, the chief of police, at the memorial service of the deceased policeman. He fiercely attacks the media for their reporting on the unrest in Green Park, describing the reports as “a complete distortion of facts.”

He quotes selected paragraphs from today’s papers: “Policeman killed by riotous crowd,” “Policemen go mad,” “Unconfirmed reports say policeman killed,” “Fighting in streets as police rampage,” “Cop killed in Green Park disturbances.”

Mr. Lusso continues: “This is a disgrace to the nation and a personal agony to the family and friends of a respected and beloved colleague. While we are gathered here in common grief, the public has been presented with a distorted picture of yesterday’s unfortunate events. The police had complete control of the situation in Green Park. There was no violence. Our respected colleague, Sam Lujak, died of a sudden and unprovoked heart attack. Why do the national media resort to such practices of irresponsible, tabloid slandering by publishing what they refer to as “unconfirmed reports” about a killing that never took place?”

End of broadcast. A few minutes later, Freedonia’s News Agency sends out Mr. Lusso’s speech word by word.

Meanwhile, Palisades’s mayor, Mr. Michael Cramer, has completed his press conference at the Town Hall. His message is the following:

An attractive piece of land in the district of Flora, 20 kilometers south of Palisades, has been designated to be given to the Green Park squatters. They are free to move out there immediately. Each family will be given a fertile plot of land there and a sum of money. Otherwise, families will be offered an apartment elsewhere in the city. Which ever they choose, these families will be enabled to join Freedonia’s transformation to a prosperous democratic society.

Regarding the hotel project, the plans will continue. Work will start on Monday, and will provide at least 1100 jobs for the community.

Call a news meeting and discuss possible follow-up stories for tomorrow’s edition. Write the frame of your main story (headline, sub-head and lead) in 20 minutes.
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.”
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.
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?
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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?
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
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".

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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.