

Feb. 23, 2018

To: Michener Awards Foundation

Re: Michener-Deacon Fellowship for Investigative Reporting, 2016

Many thanks to the Michener Awards Foundation for supporting this project, now known as *The Price of Oil* series.

In my proposal, I suggested that the later stages of this effort would create a network of journalism schools devoted to investigative journalism projects, to help media organizations with coverage in remote areas and those where news poverty has become an issue. Robert Cribb, the previous year's award winner, generously volunteered to help, and the two of us quickly assembled a coalition of universities and media companies to undertake a collaborative investigation. We have joined forces, and in essence, this is a report on the outcomes of both our Michener-Deacon grants.

To our surprise, this has become the largest project of its kind in Canadian history, bringing together more than 50 journalists, editors, students and teachers from four universities (Concordia University, Ryerson University, University of British Columbia and University of Regina) and three media companies (*Toronto Star*, Global News, and *National Observer*). The work by the students began in January 2017; this served as the nationwide launch of the [National Student Investigative Reporting Network](#) (NSIRN), an undertaking that Cribb had been working toward for years.

The series has been rolling out since October 2017 -- in print, online and in TV broadcasts, including a 30-minute documentary. The reporting continues.

How the network worked:

We decided to focus our efforts on the health and environmental impacts of the oil industry, which is among Canada's most economically powerful and politically connected sectors. We had found whistleblowers in Ontario and Saskatchewan who described experiencing severe health effects they believed were connected to unreported toxic leaks. We were concerned that residents were in harm's way, and believed that the code of silence in many oil towns, where the industry controls the economy and jobs, was worth breaking.

In both Ontario and Saskatchewan, it was clear that residents were being denied information. Those living near Sarnia's Chemical Valley had been requesting that the government fund a health study for more than 10 years. Long-outdated regulations for sulphur dioxide had been left in place, and the cumulative effect of the resulting toxic soup never calculated. Documents we obtained in Saskatchewan indicated there had been a series of closed-door meetings between government and industry about dangerous — and potentially deadly — emissions of hydrogen sulphide gas from oil facilities, in the wake of serious injuries and health incidents involving H₂S.

Our group tackled the challenges of conducting an investigation across Canada's vast distances and sparse population by creating a cohesive network that approached the reporting in a coordinated fashion, with the help of collaboration tools and group meetings. Our investigations involved terabytes of data, hundreds of hours of analysis, and altogether nearly 100 access-to-information requests. The work was divided in accordance with each university's and publication's resources — each handling a share of interviews, follow-ups, writing, costs and access-to-information requests.

During their four months of coursework in investigative journalism, the 34 students compiled and analyzed the data provided by the collaborating news organizations and researched information found in confidential documents that veteran journalists had shared, along with following up on leads and tips from other sources and those the students uncovered themselves. Working night

and day, we helped each other with everything from locating sources to fixing software glitches to carrying out data analysis. The students' shoelather reporting in their regions expanded our group's list of sources.

Once the university semester was over, the journalists at our partner news organizations took the lead on further production. Several students took part as paid researchers and interns.

The research for *The Price of Oil* was funded in part by the 2016 Michener-Deacon award to Sonntag, with additional support from the Corporate Mapping Project, neither of which had input or approval in the reporting or editorial process. Much of the funding, however, was donated by the professional journalists in their belief that the unique model of partnership would be a success.

The investigations:

Global News had spent years relationship-building in Sarnia, Ontario, and the neighboring Aamjiwnaang First Nation, persuading residents and workers who were dying or who had lost loved ones to discuss their concerns — despite fears of reprisal from industry.

A source had provided Global with more than 3,000 pages of government incident reports from Sarnia's "Chemical Valley," an industrial area with more than 50 registered polluters within a 25-kilometre radius. Our teams then built a database from scratch. This required weeks of manual input, data scraping and fact-checking. Researchers connected the dots between the frequency and severity of the spills in the reports, and after they cross-referenced those findings with videos, calendars and diaries kept by a whistleblower (who was using a camera provided by Global), discovered previously unreported incidents that had exposed the public to dangerous chemicals, including cancer-causing toxins.

Our research revealed that despite these dangerous incidents, Sarnia's state-of-the-art alert system — funded by industry — has only been used once in four years. Unaware of the substances wafting in the air around them, residents have been limited in their ability to protect themselves. Caught in the geographic centre of this toxic circle is the community of Aamjiwnaang, whose calls for environmental justice have long gone unanswered.

In Saskatchewan, our investigation zeroed in on leaks of a toxic and sometimes fatal gas called hydrogen sulphide (H₂S) affecting workers and rural residents. This portion of the investigation alone secured hundreds of interviews with impacted citizens and workers, along with experts, officials and scientists. Following up on these interviews, the team obtained access to the provincial government's Integrated Resource Information System (IRIS), a database containing a wealth of information its oil and gas facilities that in practice is only open to ministry officials, industry and academic researchers. The investigation combed, scraped and analyzed data from these incident and inspection reports in IRIS to find the most likely locations for H₂S hotspots in the province, conducted house-to-house surveys in those areas, and then unearthed more detailed findings through Freedom of Information requests.

By uncovering hundreds of never-before-seen internal government emails, meeting notes and whistleblower leaks, we constructed an unprecedented timeline that revealed a disturbing trend over the past five years of regulatory infractions involving H₂S, botched safety audits, mysteriously unreported incidents, ignored safety protocols, and leaks resulting in serious injury or illness for both workers and unsuspecting members of the public in the southeastern part of the province.

We discovered that provincial regulators, industry leaders and lobbyists knew about these chronic problems, but after consulting many times with one another in private, declined to create new regulations. We found that even after a teenager's life-threatening encounter with deadly H₂S gas in their yard, dozens of complaints from residents and the death of an oil worker, provincial

regulators have failed to act. Despite multiple incidents since then where residents have fallen ill, not a single fine has been issued to an oil company in the past decade.

We arranged for a team of three researchers from Harvard and Northeastern Universities to join us onsite in southeastern Saskatchewan with high-tech measurement equipment to see if the problem remained. It did. Those findings provided further evidence of ongoing risk to human health.

Our publications and broadcasts:

Some of the initial stories and broadcasts that the students contributed to were:

Global News: "[Canada's Toxic Secret](#)" (30-minute documentary) (Oct. 14, 2017)

Toronto Star: "[In Sarnia's Chemical Valley, is 'toxic soup' making people sick?](#)" (Oct. 14, 2017)

Toronto Star: "[That rotten stench in the air? It's the smell of deadly gas and secrecy](#)" (Oct. 1, 2017) (Includes embedded video.)

National Observer: "[Fear and money breed silence in Saskatchewan](#)" (Oct. 1, 2017)

Global News: "[Is Saskatchewan ignoring the potentially deadly gas from oil wells?](#)" (Oct. 1, 2017)

Global News: "[Potentially dangerous emissions from oil wells, tanks in Saskatchewan](#)" (Oct. 2, 2017)

A listing of the entire collaborative series, which has resulted in more than 70 publications and broadcasts by the partners, can be viewed [here](#).

The results:

Forty-eight hours after the explosive results of our investigation in Ontario were brought to light, the provincial government, committed to funding a study examining the health impacts of industrial pollution in the region – a study the community had been asking for in vain, for nearly 10 years

The investigation had an immediate political effect, driving a week-long debate in Ontario's legislature, marked by calls for political resignations and prompting Ontario's ombudsman to examine the possibility of an independent investigation. Two weeks later, the government proposed new regulations for sulphur dioxide — which hadn't been updated in 43 years. Shortly afterward, it announced that following an eight-year delay, it would finally regulate the cumulative effects of air pollution in Chemical Valley.

The series broke a long-held silence within oil-dependent rural communities, as people began posting their own experiences with H₂S gas and other issues on social media, many for the first time. Opposition parties and prominent media columnists launched accusations that the government of Premier Brad Wall had failed in its duty to keep the people safe. Some also called for the release of all internal government documents pertaining to H₂S. Access-to-information requests then revealed that as the energy minister criticized the collaboration's work, inside Saskatchewan's environment ministry, at least one official praised it for being "thorough and impressive."

Although the Estevan-based PR magazine *Pipeline News* labelled the investigation "anti-oil," its editor admitted in a column that in the wake of the investigation, he had heard about a dangerous H₂S leak from a concerned area resident. He wrote, "We can't let these things slide. The greater public has no tolerance for it, and neither should we. After all, we live here."

Empowered and vindicated by the investigation's findings, more whistleblowers stepped forward, including former oil patch worker Jeff Crawford, who nearly died of H₂S exposure in 2014 and now copes with permanent disability. *The Price of Oil* team kept digging and learned that in

addition to placing Crawford in an unsafe situation against rules governing H2S, Crawford's employer never disclosed the incident to provincial regulators. As a result of that reporting, the government has issued a notice of contravention against the company.

Our reporting also drew attention to the fact that the federal government is planning to declare this deadly substance nontoxic, a ruling which would be difficult for workers and members of the public to challenge.

Whistleblowers – residents, oil industry workers, and sources within government -- have continued to contact our group, as seen in the growing list of follow-up stories. Our reporting continues.

Global's documentary "Canada's Toxic Secret" has since been nominated as a finalist in the 2018 New York Festivals World's Best TV & Films, in the Best Investigative Report category.

Public service:

At a time when newsroom budgets are shrinking, our group took on a project that required reporting in remote and underserved communities by creating a cohesive national network of approximately 50 journalists in total. This was a test run for an investigative project that paired a network of student journalists with working reporters in the field, and it worked. In consequence of this original and innovative approach, we together broke through a culture of silence and fear surrounding the oil and gas industry that has gone unchallenged for years, providing a voice for marginalized communities — including a First Nation — living in the shadow of industrial giants.

After decades of a slow transference in reporting, licensing and other oversight responsibilities from government to industry, officials in both provinces insisted that corporate social responsibility would prevent any failures that would jeopardize public health. Our investigation showed that in areas where news coverage is rare, this compact is being broken, and the work of journalists is vital to bringing about substantial change as it fosters care for all members of a community -- including residents and workers who have been injured, or are quietly enduring the consequences of industrial activity.

Our reporting provided national audiences with an in-depth look at the industrial activities' effects on public health, holding both government and the leaders of an industry worth \$45 billion accountable and prompting multiple legislative changes. But above all, it has emboldened members of these communities to speak up.

It launched weeks of debate in Saskatchewan and Ontario, and since then, in the face of extreme pressure to remain silent, members of the public, workers and internal government sources have been speaking candidly about their experiences, hoping to protect others from all that they have endured.

Our collaborative's work on this series continues, with further installments expected to roll out in 2018.

Next steps:

(Embargoed information: We're very pleased to share the news that Concordia University is launching an Institute for Investigative Journalism in June 2018, which will provide the national headquarters for NSIRN and support other investigative endeavors in the public service. Sonntag has been asked to serve as director. Our next project will include those schools that took part in 2017, and we hope more will join us.)

We could not have accomplished the launch of the national student network without the support of the Michener Foundation. We are profoundly grateful.

Patti Sonntag
Michener-Deacon Fellow, 2016

Rob Cribb
Michener-Deacon Fellow, 2015

Testimonials about the collaborative model:

Not only did we as students get a chance to apply everything we were learning in our textbooks to a real world investigation, but we made contacts and connections with people across the country — an essential part of a journalist's career. But perhaps most importantly, this model of journalism ... allowed a large-scale investigation to happen. We were able to tell give people with important stories a voice, which is what journalism is really all about.

— Jennifer Ackerman, undergraduate student, University of Regina, School of Journalism

The project we put together is the type of meaningful, public interest reporting I never dreamed I'd be able to accomplish in my entire career, let alone as a student. My work led me to a summer internship at the *Star*. Editors at the paper then asked me to take on the follow-stories to the second part of *The Price of Oil*, knowing I had the skills to do so based on my work with Ms. Sonntag and Mr. Cribb. Six made the front page in a space of three weeks. The investigation was career-making for many of the students involved.

— Emma McIntosh, undergraduate student, Ryerson University, School of Journalism

The most valuable experience I had as a journalism student was getting to take part in the *Price of Oil* collaboration. The network linking students from across the country in one common goal is beyond any learning opportunity available. I not only had the mentorship of my professor at Ryerson but I had the guidance from reporters at Global News, Patti Sonntag and fellow students at Concordia University. Everyone brought a key person or piece of information to this investigation that had we might not have had otherwise. I have come out of this project with a list of references and a keen understanding of story development.

— Sawyer Bogdan, undergraduate student, Ryerson University, School of Journalism

In my experience, group projects are often "group projects" in name only — team members divide the tasks to be completed amongst themselves and then go about working on them independently. NSIRN students behave as an investigative unit, with the project's leader identifying and building on team members' strengths while simultaneously working to improve upon their weaknesses.

— Michael Wrobel, undergraduate student, Concordia University, Department of Journalism

The role that academic institutions can have in ...assisting with investigative work, I think is very interesting: the fact that with a very small budget we were able to put together such a large group of people. ... It wouldn't have been really possible to do something of this scale without the help of the universities, and also the determination of the people who really had the vision to put this sort of project together.

— Matt Gilmour, diploma student, Concordia University, Department of Journalism

As I embark on my career in journalism, I am acutely aware that my CV sits alongside those of veteran journalists – victims of consolidation in Canadian legacy media. Competition is fierce, but what makes me stand out is my experience reporting and producing investigative pieces built in collaboration with journalists from coast to coast, using new data and communication technologies.

— Lauren Kaljur, graduate student, University of British Columbia, School of Journalism

The project has fostered dozens of bonds between young journalists across this country. It motivated us to keep pushing and digging deeper to seek injustices in the public interest. This

collaborative national model is the future of journalism schools and journalism investigations in the country.

— Olivia Chandler, graduate student, Ryerson University, School of Journalism

Our students received a rare opportunity to take part in a major investigation that uncovered serious lapses in public safety and government oversight of the oil industry in Saskatchewan. They had a quality classroom experience, and an opportunity to continue working with the partnership beyond the semester. ... This approach has helped pioneer a model that may well be the lifeline investigative journalism badly needs in this country.

— Patricia W. Elliott, Associate Professor, University of Regina, School of Journalism

Our newsrooms knew that we could count on the quality of the journalism that was being done in the classroom, under the guidance of experienced instructors. I wish I had the opportunity to participate in this type of project when I was in journalism school as I think it provides real-time newsroom experience about how to do investigative reporting. We've learned that readers have an appetite for this type of in-depth reporting, particularly when it exposes important public health and safety issues. And this project has pioneered a new digital form of journalism, across multiple digital platforms, that can deliver this.

— Mike De Souza, managing editor, *National Observer*