In the words of Fast Company magazine cofounder William C Taylor: "companies that aspire to do extraordinary things, leaders who aim to challenge the limits of what's possible in their fields, develop a "vocabulary of competition" that captures the impact they're trying to make, the difference they're trying to make, the future they're hoping to create".

Applying that observation to my work, "insight" has always been the watch-word I strive to extract from every interview. My quest is simple: uncover something viewers don't already know -- with no apologies for giving short-shift to those who fail to deliver on request.

I write this report with that same imperative in mind, focussing squarely on standout insights gleaned from key players in the news business. I have chosen not to regale you with asides -- or, even, take a "deep dive" (expression de jour in the U.S. right now amongst the chattering classes to define anything that goes beyond the cursory) into the political wrangling over immigration, Obamacare and homeland security. All these issues were traversed to some degree or other during my time in the U.S. and no one should dismiss their importance. Yet, I would, inevitably, be straying into partisan territory where I do not feel it is my place to tread. In that respect I defer to Guardian newspaper founder C.P. Scott: "comment is free, facts are sacred". I start with television, before transitioning into print, then online.

Being selected as a World Press Institute Fellow -- one of 10 recipients worldwide -- gave me the opportunity to move from theory to practice by visiting the U.S. for the first time, in the footsteps of celebrated journalist and author Max Hastings (WPI Class of 1967) who I have long admired. If that wasn't privilege enough, being in the company of passionate, genuinely decent colleagues proved an inspiration alongside. My thanks to WPI Executive Director David McDonald & WPI Program Director Doug Stone who endured -- and often partook in -- my incorrigible appetite for four cheese/deep pan pizzas (I somehow returned leaner than when I left -- go figure!), my ever-generous St. Paul host families Jack & Kathy Tunheim and Don Brunquell & Sally Scoggins and the US Studies Centre's indefatigable Nina Fudala. Thanks also to my employer, Sky News, for encouraging me to apply for the Fellowship, seeing the assignment's value. My understanding of all things U.S. has been sharpened as never before.

CONVERSATION WITH A ONE-TIME "VOICE OF GOD" (AKA DAN RATHER)

With 50 years passing since JFK's assassination, WPI fellows marked the moment in history with a masterclass from U.S. District Judge John R. Tunheim. From 1994-1998 he was appointed by President Clinton and served as the Chair of the U.S. Assassination Records Review Board -- an independent federal agency in charge of declassifying the government records concerning that fateful day.

Former CBS News Anchor Dan Rather featured in Judge Tunheim's account: a 32 yr-old White House correspondent at the time, he hailed from Dallas and had been assigned to set up and supervise coverage of the President's whistle-stop tour. Driving back to St. Paul from the Tunheim's bolt-hole in Stillwater (eyeing Wisconsin across the river from the balcony) I wondered aloud to Doug Stone at the chances of us meeting Rather on our pending trip to New York. Doug undertook to make inquiries and came up trumps. We were all the richer for the experience.

At 82, Rather is still going strong -- now Managing Editor and anchor of the TV news magazine Dan Rather Reports on the cable channel AXS TV (pronounced "access") aptly funded by Dallas investor Mark Cuban, alongside a consortium that includes Ryan Seacrest. There are 20 full-time and six part-time reporters on staff occupying a battery-henesque office: reporters perched with laptops on laps, legs splayed under desk filing cabinets doubling as leg-rests when drawers are pulled out. Rather occupies a more urbane corner office: his Vietnam War fatigue and binoculars are strung over a coat-rack, while a framed quote caught my eye: 'How to be Remembered: 'If you would not be forgotten, as soon as you are dead and rotten, either write things worth reading, or do things worth the writing" -- Benjamin Franklin.

On reporting Kennedy's assassination: "It sometimes plays like a videotape loop in my mind ... it's impossible to overstate the sense of chaos and confusion in the immediate aftermath". On news of his death: "It was a hammer to the heart and you wanted to weep". On reporting despite the anguish: "Midday Friday - Midnight
Monday were 'The Four Dark Days' … You had to press emotions down deep and focus on the story, drawing on an inner mechanism … the bigger the story, the more intense the focus. You have to be what tennis players call 'In the Zone'."

On "the trivialisation of news": "sometimes I think I'm shouting into a wind-tunnel … everyone seems frozen in reporting patterns of yesterday than reality today. Content has, I think, improved but I wouldn't want to debate anyone who took the other side of the debate … What's not debatable is the dumbing-down of news. We've lowered the standards of what is news. You'll find little investigative reporting and more trivialisation. One reason: owners don't get in trouble reporting on gossip/trivial matters versus claims of corruption."

On the implications of technology on news: "One can make the case I'm the luckiest journalist on the face of the planet. I got a break in the 1960s and technology allowed us to do it then. Luck definitely played its part: technology allowed me to become a mobile anchor -- in many ways an oxymoron. The free-flow effect of news and information and anonymity of internet means material can now be completely false and malicious, spreading quickly like a virus. That's one of the challenges we're trying to meet".

On replacing Walter Cronkite and beyond: "I was not a natural anchor: I was considered too intense/stiff with not enough range or sense of humour. But presenting is the least important part. What's key is credibility and authenticity. If it's an addiction it's more powerful than crack cocaine. It's great - only if you have a deep and abiding passion to do it well: virtually 'I can't do anything else'. You have to burn with a hot hard flame.”

On covering the big events, getting the big names: "At least half the time my prayer is: 'God give me the big story -- and if you give it to me can I be at my best'. I've had God's grace to have had some great interviews: Dr Martin Luther King, Mother Theresa, Nelson Mandela -- I saw and interviewed him the night he was released, Zhou Enlai (Mao's right-hand man). I've Interviewed every US President since Truman … Saddam Hussein: in 1990 and 72hrs before the 2nd Gulf War."

On news that matters: "Man's exploration of the cosmos is one of the greatest running stories of our time -- and the greatest under-reported story."

On consuming news: "I check the internet for tomorrow's headlines before bed, before reading books and newspapers (6 newspapers - 3 regular, 3 change regularly). Check the internet when I get up. Use Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. But social networking must be authentic: your audience have an automatic tuning fork to know if you're real."

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Dan Rather: one-time CBS Voice of God & still making headlines at AXS TV

**WALL STREET JOURNAL: WIRED FOR THE 21ST CENTURY**

On Tuesday September 11, 2001 at 9.23AM, Jim Pensiero emailed staff advising production of the paper was moving to their South Brunswick offices: "from what it looks like here, it was a bomb in each tower". That email is now preserved for the ages in Washington's Newseum; Pensiero's fast-thinking cementing his stature inside the WSJ where he will have clocked up 30 years of service come 2014. Earlier this year, the Journal's Managing Editor Gerard Baker appointed Pensiero Editor, Talent to "lead the investment in human capital that will be crucial to our continued success".
Pensiero rightly exudes confidence and takes pride in a newsroom pulsating with action, pointing out the giant ‘heat map’ of most-read-Journal-stories-worldwide rising above a doughnut-layout newsroom, aka the ‘NewsHub’: senior scribes occupy the centre, with their proteges on the perimeter. Plasma TV screens overhead bristling with breaking news augment the lineup.

On “the stupidity of being so busy your head is so down you never look up: "we [print] missed the web portal, missed search, missed social, missed Craigslist in 2004”.

On the WSJ’s profile: “We’d rather be 2nd on a story than wrong. We’re not arrogant but neither are we timid.”

On transforming the WSJ’s under Murdoch: “The paper was originally not pretty -- it was first and foremost designed to be serious and solid. In 2006 the Journal underwent a major redesign, going Live in 2007. Murdoch believed it could be the primary read for a lot of people and that design should be good front to back. Like a lot of bold ideas, compromise was inevitable ... Murdoch is an opportunist, not an ideologue. Our decline has been the slowest of all: from 2.1 million readers in 1984 to 1.7 million in 2013 -- 600k of them web-only subscribers”.

On the role of consultants in shaping the business: “There’s good reasons to have consultants if they tell you something you don’t already know”.

On Robert Thompson’s elevation to News Corp CEO: “He was sad when he left the newsroom. He’s not a consulting guy but instinctive, like Rupert”.

On the challenge of being consumer-focussed versus B2B: “Bloomberg have a 35% profit margin, with news the cherry on the top. By contrast, consumers can change their mind any time they want. A paywall is the baseline of steady income and we’ve charged from the day it went up”. There is a caveat to that, of course -- articulated in a separate meeting with NY Times Managing Editor Dean Baquet: “Not everyone should do a paywall: you’ve got to have something people want to pay for”. As Britain’s Daily Mail prepares to launch an Australian online version in 2014, vowing to make all content free, Baquet’s remarks are thoroughly timely.

A note re. Bloomberg: in a separate meeting, NY Bureau Chief Karen Toulon insisted all remarks be “off the record”, although I doubt she will take umbrage at my reproducing one quip on the cost/benefit of social media: “You can tweet 1,000 times a day but at the end of the day how well are you doing what you set out to do?”.

WASHINGTON POST: PAST VENERATION NO INDICATOR OF FUTURE GLORY

I first saw All the President’s Men flying back from the U.S. to Sydney post-WPI fellowship, yet events coinciding with our visit to the Washington Post’s newsroom where Bob Woodward still keeps a desk (even if Carl Bernstein has long since decamped to NY) could prove as pivotal as the stories that helped topple Nixon from his perch. In August this year, Amazon.com founder and CEO Jeff Bezos paid USD250 million cash via his Nash Holdings company to buy the Post and, once again, according to Executive Editor Martin Baron, the paper was “centre of the media universe for a while”.  

WSJ newsroom: the NewsHub
Those last three words though are telling: with a new proprietor who, by Baron's own admission "doesn't know anything about the news business", what happens once the hype of Bezos’s flirtation as media baron settles down and the fundamentals are laid bare: "a business model that's broken and needs to be fixed ... not innovating quickly enough or anticipating the impact of the web" (Baron). Yet consider this (quoting William C Taylor): "Almost none of these companies or leaders [who aim to challenge the limits of what's possible in their fields] use the word "innovation" to describe their strategy -- implicitly or explicitly, they understand that it has been sapped of all substance. Instead, they offer rich and vivid descriptions of what they hope to do, where they hope to get, and why it matters".

Baron trotted out a shopping list of known knowns: "classifieds snatched away overnight by Craigslist, all signature events on the web have taken place in the last 12 years ... more disruption to come, particularly in the area of video," but his only riposte: "We expect to disrupt, rather than being disrupted". That sounds like doing journalism properly, not truly innovating.

I detoured during the newsroom walkabout to sit at the Post's only visible attempt at disruption: a new but darkened TV set where, one imagines, Beltway self-appointed know-it-alls will soon line up to pontificate on news the Post's online rival Politico has already told you about via targeted, tailor-made hyperlinked stories and video-rich content. Not disruption, rather "share taking" -- tweaking at the margins to win a little more business. To be truly innovative you have to be a "market maker" -- creating a one-of-a-kind presence: a unique offering, unlike what anyone else can do. Better to say nothing at all rather than spout empty buzz-words which, to date, show little sign of moving the needle. Adapting in order to avoid getting crushed is all well and good, but there's little new about any of the above.

Right now, Bezos is busy building the world's largest online retailer, running a space travel company, constructing an atomic clock that will last 10,000 years, and dabbling in drones. Until he adds changing the Post to his to-do list, one suspects the dividing line between the company sinking or swimming will continue to fray.

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**POLITICO: DEEP POCKETS AND NOT DISTRACTED**

Launched in 2007, POLITICO is the Mini of news where the Post is the Bentley: its breakneck online political reporting (alongside a free print version when Congress is sitting) enraging incumbents (Baron: "I think we need a reality check: POLITICO is great at PR but they don't do investigative reporting"), growing to a staff of almost 300, augmenting its free site with a USD5000p.a. POLITICOPro offering and now expanding beyond D.C. to the other destination almost as obsessed with itself as the Capital: New York.

How's it been possible to fund journalism this way? For starters, Politico counts Post alumni Jim VanderHei as co-founder, Executive Editor and now CEO as its driving-force. But the money man is pivotal alongside: Robert Allbritton, parlaying POLITICO's way lashings of his inheritance, as son of the late billionaire Joe Allbritton (who made a matzoh in real estate in banking).

Allbritton's just added USD985 million to his media mogul war chest -- his eponymous Allbritton Communications selling its long-held TV stations in July (deal still subject to regulatory approval). In a recent Business Week article, VanderHei declared: "There has never been a single thing that we have brought to Robert where we said, 'We need more money to spend on X,' that he has said no to ... Now, we have never gone to him without a business rationale for it. But he is an aggressive guy who has big ambitions." According to VanderHei,
Allbritton's attitude is: "If you come up with a good idea, I'm going to fund it. If you don't, I'm not going to. It's not like there's the personal bank account and the Politico bank account. It's all the same damn thing."

**Politico**: Henry Bacon's Lincoln Memorial in the corridor – half-complete, an apt metaphor for a company with plenty more growth to come.

**TEXAS TRIBUNE: AN APPETITE FOR REPORTING NEWS OTHER OUTLETS IGNORE**

Two years after Politico burst on the scene, the Texas Tribune launched a similar business -- albeit nonprofit so not re-selling eyeballs to advertisers. According to CEO and Editor-in-Chief Evan Smith: "when your enemy (old media covering sport, traffic and weather with a sprinkling of local crime alongside) is self-destructing, stand out of the way." Part of the Tribune's secret sauce became a commitment to intensely covering state politics in Austin online -- half the Capitol's press corps being Tribune reporters in less than four years of existence.

Smith has unquestionably moved the needle when it comes to getting the Tribune eyeballed by readers nationwide: since 2010, the Tribune has been content partner every Friday and Sunday inside the New York Times: "It's a wonderful megaphone for our best stuff and we did it because I persuaded them Texas is the centre of the universe. We are the People's Republic of Anti-Obama."

Where the Tribune lacks an Allbritton benefactor, Smith preaches survival by "collaboration": live events (more than 60 a year), corporate sponsorships buttressing subscriptions and charitable donations. The venture has a staff of 40 (roughly what Politico is aiming for in New York), 23 of whom are journalists. In 2012, that financed a budget of USD5 million.

He also declares, disingenuously: "young people in journalism today have hope because of organisations like ours." But do the maths: allowing for Smith's salary, there's slim pickings to divvy up amongst their touted "impressive array of veteran reporters, young stars, and ambitious newcomers, plus some pretty terrific tech and business development folks". Hope for Subway, maybe, but scant chance of Whole Foods for those in the trenches. All proof that hope remains a relative concept.

Austin, TX: half the Capitol's press corps hail from the Texas Tribune
In a quest to tackle head-on Dan Rather's lament over the dearth of investigative reporting, non-profit ProPublica opened for business in June 2008, led by former Managing Editor of the WSJ Paul Steiger: 1400 resumes landed on his desk, with 17 reporters hired: "I could have filled the room with Pulitzer Prize-winners but we wanted a range of age and experience." Its mission: "shine a spotlight on abuse of power and failure to uphold the public interest. Any place there is power is fair game for us."

Funding flowed in, with the Sadler Foundation (a wealthy Californian couple) committing USD10 million every year for three years. By the end of 2013, the launch funders account for 30% of donations, alongside public/private foundations/high net-worth individuals and, since 2011, advertising adding to the revenue stream.

When it comes to a business model, Steiger is the first to admit "we don't have one, since we're not seeking to make a profit ... the Journal has an annual budget of USD100 million, spending between USD50k-400k of that on up to 35 investigative stories a year".

"The rise of the web shattered that model. It's gone in the US and isn't coming back. The ecosystem in the U.S. has forced people to adapt ... now, more than ever, it's important that not all but a certain amount of this reporting comes from the non-profit sector. You then turn to persuading the philanthropic community this type of reporting is worthy of support."

The rationale works like this: everything ProPublica publishes online is free, with bigger stories made available to larger news organisations for free: "selling stories slows things down as you're forced to deal with a publisher as well as an editor". ProPublica's 1st partner was 60 Minutes -- an audience of anywhere between 15mln-25mln.

Follow-up a major part of the model. Steiger cites a two-year project launched culminating in a front page lead in the Washington Post: "If a white person is convicted of a felony, the US Constitution grants the President the right to pardon. Our investigations found your chances are four times as great if you're white than a person of colour". Nothing happened after the story was published -- Obama was running for re-election so didn't want to be associated with either side. But ProPublica stuck with the story, continuing to analyse trends on pardons/commuting sentences. One year later, the Obama administration announced a USD435k study into the issue. Changes are expected to follow.

Board members cannot influence content and don't know what's being written until it appears: "we've written stories on donors that are critical ... one thought Hezbollah were misunderstood and pulled funding because our story didn't align with that belief." And yet there have been notable wins which see the losers pale: two Pulitzer Prize-winning stories have been nabbed -- one, with two reporters spending seven months and some $400k investigating financial misbehaviour that contributed to the GFC; another, a hospital in New Orleans post-Hurricane Katrina, where lethal does of morphine were wantonly being administered. That story was on the cover of the Sunday NYT Magazine, winning a National Magazine Award alongside a Pulitzer. The hospital filed a lawsuit, but it was dismissed before going to trial (the judge ruling there was no case to answer).

And in case you were wondering, there's scope to eat properly: "salaries range from $50k-$210k ... it's a market. We're not looking for the cheapest but the best -- and we're actively head-hunting all the time".
CONCLUSION
In his memoir *Editor: An Inside Story of Newspapers*, Max Hastings writes: “Nothing in life stays the same in our business ... and if it does so, it should not”. Twenty years ago I only ever wanted to be a newspaper reporter and got my first break in local newspapers. I moved to London, carving out a niche as an occasional feature writer for a news magazine published in New Zealand, whereupon opportunities inside television opened up first in London, then Moscow, before Sydney beckoned. Around me, the pace of change has been immense and yet, as I have hopefully demonstrated, care of the vignettes outlined, the challenge to remain relevant and true to one’s calling -- to produce journalism that shines a light on truth -- flourishes where the will to invest in new methods of delivery coexists. That is possible where a culture of philanthropy is celebrated and harnessed in equal measure. The fact it is a work-in-progress in the U.S. is gratifying; that it is nigh-on defunct in Australia and other bastions of democracy, gives me cause for grave concern.

WPI Class of 2013:
Back: Carson Scott (Australia), Spas Spasov (Bulgaria)
Middle: Paul Henson (Philippines), Ami Kaufman (Israel), Fu Tao (China), Vera Krichevskaya (Russia)
Front: Diana Duran (Colombia), Elina Lappalainen (Finland), Veronica Kwabia (Ghana), Shakir Reshamwala (Kuwait)

Carson Scott
December 11 2013

TRAVEL SCHEDULE
Minneapolis & St. Paul
New York
Washington D.C.
Tampa
Miami
Atlanta
Austin
Chicago
San Francisco
Seattle
MEDIA VISITS
Minnesota Public Radio, St Paul, MN
The Star Tribune, Minneapolis, MN
Bloomberg News, New York
ProPublica, New York
Thomson Reuters, New York
Wall Street Journal, New York
Politico, Arlington, Virginia
National Public Radio, Washington, D.C.
The Washington Post, Washington, D.C.
PEW Research, Washington, D.C.
The Miami Herald, Florida
Univision Broadcasting, Miami, Florida
CNN, Atlanta, Georgia
Texas Tribune, Austin Texas
Center of Investigative Reporting, Berkeley, CA
Facebook, CA
MN Hubbard Broadcasting, St Paul, MN

ARTICLES PUBLISHED ON WPI WEBSITE / US STUDIES CENTRE BLOG / SKY NEWS ONLINE

* Immigration 2.1: Who Wants an Upgrade?  
 http://www.worldpressinstitute.org/wpi-reports/blogs/carson-scott/2013/10/04/immigration-21-who-wants-upgrade

* Ignore the Founding Fathers and Friends at Your Peril  

* David vs Goliath: Politico looks to steal a march on once-venerable Post  

* Rather Unplugged: Conversations with a one-time "voice of God"  

* In Politics the Unexpected Always Happens … Crafting the Right Response Remains the Greatest Challenge  

* Eschewing Subway and Lovin’ It  

* One country, 53 cultures  
 http://www.worldpressinstitute.org/wpi-reports/blogs/carson-scott/2013/08/22/one-country-53-cultures

* "Transparency" with Strings Attached  
 http://www.worldpressinstitute.org/wpi-reports/blogs/carson-scott/2013/08/18/transparency-strings-attached

* In a world where everyone is a publisher, no one is an editor. And that is the danger we face today.  
 http://www.worldpressinstitute.org/wpi-reports/blogs/carson-scott/2013/08/14/world-where-everyone-publisher-no-one-editor-and-danger-we

* The Credibility Quotient: AWOL on a Robust Code of Ethics  