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Project “K” Meets Project “A”

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30 years ago, journalists from dozens of news outlets joined hands (and pens) in Arizona after reporter Don Bolles was killed. A similar effort is underway after last year’s murder of Paul Klebnikov in Moscow.

The death of Paul Klebnikov, the *Forbes* magazine editor shot nine times as he left his Moscow office in July 2004, was a blow to press freedom and transparency in Russia. That his killing remains a mystery is an ongoing challenge for investigative journalism worldwide.

Times have changed since 1976, when Arizona investigative reporter Don Bolles was blown up in his car on the day of his eighth wedding anniversary. (He and his wife had planned to celebrate it by seeing a new movie called “All the President’s Men”). Journalists descended on that state in droves to pick up where Bolles had left off on his probes of organized crime and local politics. Led by *Newsday*’s investigative giant, Bob Greene, nearly 30 reporters from two dozen media outlets created a 23-part series. They were dubbed the Desert Rats. And their effort - the “Arizona Project” - was proposed for a special Pulitzer, led to major reforms in the state and, in the words of then attorney general Bruce Babbitt, “dragged Arizona kicking and screaming into the 20th century.” It also fueled a newly-formed national association of investigative reporters that now numbers in the

thousands.

The Arizona Project was “the finest hour in American journalism,” concluded the American Society of Journalists and Authors. But Phoenix is not Moscow, and the investigative spirit of the 1970s is today a faint memory inside the growing number of newsrooms that are under pressure to produce fluff to make money in today’s economy. Klebnikov, the 41-year-old top editor of the start-up Russian edition of *Forbes*, was one of the few journalists on the cutting edge of the nexus between Russian politics, big business and global organized crime. Unfortunately, for a society hooked on an endless stream of Laci’s and Jacko’s (note: Larry King’s August interrogation of Pamela Anderson’s breasts), the first American reporter killed in Russia was a story without a Nielsen audience.

The media is under plenty of attack these days - some of it warranted, some of it clearly not. But there was a time when serious investigative reporting seemed to matter more. It certainly did 30 years ago, when the Bolles case made headlines and the Arizona Project made sure to keep it there. In June of this year, a bust of Bolles (something that failed to attract King’s journalistic gaze) was unveiled at Phoenix’s newly-reopened Clarendon Hotel, the scene of the attack, while his bomb-ripped white Datsun will go on display at a journalism museum scheduled to open in Washington in 2007 - a tribute to the 1,500 journalists who have been murdered in the line of duty. But will the name of the former editor-in-chief of *Forbes-Russia* mean anything by 2007, let alone 30 years from now?

With these thoughts in mind, I rented a car in Manhattan recently and drove to the Old Street Pub in Smithtown, Long Island. Something needed to be done about Klebnikov, and in July of this year, a group of major media outlets and investigative reporters announced the launch of [Project Klebnikov](#). Project K — as we call it — is a global media alliance committed to shedding light on the murder and some of the complex stories that Klebnikov was trying to untangle when he was silenced. It’s a tough challenge, as all good challenges are, and I wanted to glean some insight and inspiration from Greene, the guru of Project A (as I will call it), who retired a decade ago as an assistant managing editor of

Newsday.

He limps from arthritis, and no longer has the 300 pounds that he carried in the days when he would obliterate steaks, lobsters and mobsters with equal relish. But, at 75, the man once dubbed the “Buddha with the computer mind” is as sharp as the day he led his people into the Arizona desert. “Nothing is insurmountable,” he said as we nibbled our Cobb salads at the pub. “Put the word out to the people on whom you’re working: ‘Your corrupt facet of the Russian society represents the kind of people who killed Klebnikov. We will continue to broadcast his work and expand it and multiply it and we don’t care what crooks fall into our net. And we won’t let up until those in your society who think it’s okay to kill a reporter get the message loud and clear: Never again! You tried to stop his work and that’s why we’re here.’ That’s what we did in Arizona.”

During the drive to the meeting, I recalled that I had been one of Bob Greene’s many students — although we never met. As a kid in Levittown, where Greene lived in the 1950s, I was weaned on his work at *Newsday*, where in 1967 he had started the first permanent investigative team at a U.S. newspaper. The ‘Greene Team’ brought *Newsday* two Pulitzers in the early 1970s. I was just 10 when that decade began, and I carried *Newsday* into my backyard each day and summarized the best stories into a tape recorder - in an imaginary news program that only I would hear. Last week I turned 45, Greene’s age when he launched the Arizona Project.

The dearth of investigative reporting about the contract-style murder of reporters is something that has long concerned and interested me. In the autumn of 2001, I was one of a handful of reporters in Karachi, Pakistan, on the terrorism money trail. I returned to New York in early 2002, a few weeks before Daniel Pearl’s last trip to Karachi began. I’d never met Pearl. But his kidnapping and horrific beheading affected me profoundly — as it did so many reporters who worked in Pakistan after 9-11. Since then, with the exception of a few excellent pieces in the *Wall Street Journal*, I’ve watched sadly as the investigative reporting on the subject has slowed to a trickle — even as the murder case in Pakistan crawls forward, with increasing complexity,

government secretiveness, and an uncertain number of suspects still at large. "There are so many stories that need to be done about the Pearl case," says Abi Wright, the Asia coordinator of the Committee to Protect Journalists. "There is so much that we don't know." But these kinds of stories are often too difficult, cumbersome, expensive and risky for any one news outlet to pursue.

Two years after Pearl's murder, on July 9, 2004, I was taking a taxi to the Time-Life building to give notice to my managing editor that I'd be leaving *Fortune* magazine, when my cell phone rang. It was an FBI agent alerting me that Klebnikov had just been murdered in Moscow, and he wanted to make sure I wasn't there - or going anytime soon. I didn't realize it then, but my next job - Project K — was suddenly staring me in the face.

Paul and I were colleagues briefly in the late 1980s at *Forbes*, and we had become closer in recent years, as we battled similar libel suits in London for our Russia-related investigative reporting - he for *Forbes* and myself for *Fortune*. We were, in a sense, rivals on the same team. He helped steer our lawyers and investigators to key sources. And, two months before he was gunned down, I alerted Paul that I had special European law enforcement documents for him when I saw him next. We never had that meeting.

For Bob Greene, the murder of Bolles hit hard, too. It came just after the 1975 birth of the Investigative Reporters and Editors Association (IRE), of which both Greene and the 47-year-old Bolles were charter members. Like Klebnikov, Bolles was the kind of reporter who was always willing to assist other journalists with tips and sources. And, like Klebnikov, it took a lot to take him out. The six sticks of dynamite under his Datsun - detonated by remote control — blew Bolles 15 feet out of his car door. He survived for 11 days in a hospital, in excruciating agony, as doctors amputated his two legs and one arm in an effort to save him. Bolles "had suffered like no man I have seen before," said the chief homicide investigator on the scene. In Klebnikov's case, he was still conscious and able to speak after the nine bullets ripped through him. He survived a ride in an ambulance that wasn't equipped with functioning oxygen equipment, but

apparently died in a stuck elevator at a Moscow hospital. Both reporters left behind large families — and a plethora of unfinished work.

Despite the outrage in the journalism community over the Bolles murder, Project A was controversial. Some argued that it would distract from the fledgling IRE's larger mission. Others felt that it was wrong for a "posse" of reporters to engage in "revenge journalism." But Greene convinced most of the naysayers that the project made sense. "The reporters were not newsroom hotheads," one Arizona newspaper declared afterwards in an editorial. "They were motivated not by the glory and ego, but by the need to know who killed the reporter and why, and what the circumstances were that allowed it to happen - the same drive that makes a reporter a reporter." The assignment, said Greene, would also send a message that "when you kill a reporter you do not stop the work." It's a message that needs to be heard in Russia today, as well as in America — again.

The unofficial birth of Project K took place at an October 2004 memorial service for Paul in Manhattan. The murder had made the requisite headlines when it happened three months earlier, but there had been scant media follow-up. At an open-mike session in a church basement, I announced that I would lead the effort. *Bloomberg* investigative ace Allan Dodds Frank, also a former colleague of Paul's, walked over and signed up. On the sidewalk after the service, *Forbes* managing editor Bill Baldwin said he was intrigued at the idea of joint-venturing with other media entities. His concern, shared by us all, was how to make progress without endangering lives and sinking money into a black hole of reporting. Despite the successes of the Arizona Project, nothing like this had been attempted since.

Frank and I, along with investigative editor Will Bourne formed the initial core. We were soon joined by Scott Armstrong and several prominent TV-news investigators who must remain anonymous. *Bloomberg*, *The Economist*, *Forbes* and *Vanity Fair* signed on as news-outlet members. The *BBC*'s John Sweeney extended the project's reach into the UK, while, just this week, Michael Isikoff, Chuck Lewis and Knut Royce became the alliance's newest participants. We are flanked by seasoned

investigative reporters with a wide spectrum of past media experience - at *Business Week*, *60 Minutes*, *Time* magazine, the *Washington Post*, and many other outlets. Pro- bono partnerships have been struck for legal counsel, PR and university internships. More announcements will come soon. There are a number of theories as to who ordered the murder, and within those theories are dozens of potential exposes and stories that need to be written and told. The hard work will begin this autumn.

It was clear from the outset that, for Project K to succeed and be welcomed by today's media world, it had to be structured differently than Project A. In Arizona, all of the journalists worked under one editor, Greene, and all signed agreements that they would not publish details until the entire series was printed. (Greene says that only one member violated the deal, but to little harm.) Objecting to the idea of collective journalism, the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* declined to take part. In fact, when the project was proposed for a special Pulitzer citation, the battle lines were sharp. Tom Winship, the late editor of the *Boston Globe* (and a former *MediaChannel* advisor) led the battle on the Pulitzer board in favor of the citation. Ben Bradlee of the *Washington Post* led the forces against it. "Bradlee said it would be a terrible thing because, if the prize was given, it would recognize collective journalism," recalls Greene, whose view was that the major newspapers engaged in collective journalism each time they ran an AP story. But Bradlee won the fight.

Despite the success of the Desert Rats, Bradlee's view didn't change very much. In 2003, after delivering the keynote speech at an IRE conference in Washington, Bradlee was questioned about Project A, as well as some comments he'd made in the 1970s about how investigative reporters could never work together amicably. "It seems to me that if you were going to work in a new town — a totally strange town where you didn't know anybody — and some big noise from Chicago or Washington or New York was gonna come down there, they were painting themselves in a very tough corner," Bradlee told the audience. "But I would have said that if Woodward and Bernstein would go down to some city in Mississippi, they'd eat 'em alive. And that takes some doing, but - look - I was wrong about what IRE was going to end up as, and I'm glad I'm wrong." The

audience of investigative reporters applauded.

Last week, I raised the subject again with Bradlee, now 84 and serving as the *Washington Post's* vice president at large. He doesn't recall the Pulitzer battle, but says he can't deny that it happened. He has nothing but praise for Greene: "Greene's got a pretty goddamn good record, for Christ's sake, one that I'd be proud to have. The story [Arizona Project series] was good." Even so, he adds, "to have part in a 23-part series — that seems to be unmanageable. I think it's impractical. And the people here would say, 'Bullshit - if it's worth doing, why don't we do it?'" Moreover, he dislikes the notion of loaning Washington Post reporters to serve on a cooperative venture under the command of an outside editor. "I'd still be worried about turning over editorial control," Bradlee says. "We'd never do that. On the other hand, we say we'd never do it, but we run *LA Times* stuff and *Boston Globe* stuff, and we run the *AP*, for Christ's sake. We don't check every goddamn word of *that*."

In the case of Project K, members are encouraged to publish or broadcast stories at any time, and they follow the dictates, policies and practices of their news outlets. What we will provide is back-up reporting and support, a database of information and sources, and assistance in the structuring of joint ventures and cost-sharing (when feasible). Project A proved expensive. It cost nearly \$250,000 — that's in 1977 dollars — even with some members working for free and digging into their own pockets during the nine months of the venture. Project K members have no funding requirements, and everyone is working voluntarily. Since our alliance is looser than Arizona's, it will take longer to achieve results.

The Arizona Project set up their offices on a floor of the Adams Hotel in downtown Phoenix. "The windows looked onto space, and all surrounding buildings were below us," Greene recalls. "So someone couldn't get a good sight-line with a gun." *Newsday* supplied Greene, as well as organized crime reporter Tom Renner. Two local colleges provided eight interns, while the two Phoenix dailies supplied three local reporters and full access to their newspaper morgues. Greene slept in a bedroom that adjoined the makeshift city room (where a dartboard with Ben

Bradlee's photo hung on a wall) and there were eight additional rooms for reporters coming and going - on loan from newspapers ranging from the *Washington Star*, *Boston Globe* and *Miami Herald* to the *Chicago Tribune*, *Denver Post* and *Indianapolis Star*, among many others. TV and radio reporters also visited and worked for varying lengths of time. The project had four rental cars, each the same make and color, with the keys kept in one drawer. Explains Greene: "If you were leaving the office, you just pulled a set of keys at random from the drawer, so a potential killer couldn't single out one particular person from our group to put a bomb under his or her car."

Greene's team determined that there would be little point in publishing individual stories because they would not have the impact of a series. "We were trying to put enormous pressure on the corrupt aspects of Arizona society with two thoughts in mind. First, we wanted to deliver an object lesson that you don't fuck around with the lives of reporters, because everyone with dirty hands will suffer - including the mob. If you kill a reporter, the work will multiply. In this way, the project was also an insurance policy for other investigative reporters. Second, if all this pressure is put on, maybe something will pop up out of it — some major revelation or reform."

Greene recalls that the project accumulated nearly 50,000 index cards, as well as "file cabinets the entire length of the city room, back to back." It was, after all, 1976. There were no computers. "We used the old FBI filing system," says Greene, who had worked briefly in the 1950s as a staffer on Sen. Robert F. Kennedy's labor rackets committee. "All individual names and places had to be capitalized."

Today, Project Klebnikov would be inconceivable without technology. We are, in essence, a virtual news bureau. Our file cabinets will have cyberkeys. As Greene remembers: "We had to literally send someone to Missouri just to get military records. Now it's all on computer."

The A Team had one reporter - *Newsday's* Renner - who operated undercover. "He never walked inside our city room," says Greene. "The other reporters on the project didn't even

know what he looked like until the very end. We wanted to keep one person 'deep and dirty.' It was very effective. Nobody thought he was connected to the project. And he could come to us with the feelings of the top cops, etc. He could say, 'Watch for this. Watch for that.' And he had great contacts to begin with."

In a less dramatic fashion, the K Team is growing with the assistance of certain news outlets, reporters and stringers - from Moscow to London to Washington - who are anonymously assisting in the effort.

Since the Arizona Project, the closest the American media has come to a collaborative venture was the 2001 recount of the Florida election ballots, when many of the nation's largest news outlets laid down their swords and shields and banded together. Even so, and despite the loose structure of our alliance, not every invited media outlet has accepted the offer to join Project K. One senior editor at a major newspaper explained to us that it wouldn't engage in collective journalism. Nor, the editor added, will it do in-depth investigation of stories involving Russian organized crime. Reason: The newspaper won't put its Moscow staffers at risk, and it needs them there to do other big stories.

While it's not known if organized crime was responsible for the hit on Paul, in my view one cannot adequately cover Russia today without unraveling the activities of the numerous *mafija* groups and *siloviki* (old KGB 'structures of force'). Indeed, the position of that senior editor only confirms the need for such a media alliance. A decade ago, Boris Yeltsin called Russia "the biggest mafia state in the world" and the "superpower of crime." Since Putin came to power, more than 12 reporters have been killed contract-style and not one case has been solved.

In some ways, the Russia of today resembles 1970s Arizona, which Bolles himself described as "a mafia encampment." Indeed, the Project A series concluded that organized crime was "staging a blitzkrieg invasion" of Arizona, which had become a "haven for white-collar criminals" in cahoots with corrupt public officials. "We laid out [Sen. Barry] Goldwater's mob connections," recalls Greene. "We laid out a prostitution ring orchestrated by the state GOP chairman. Many of the Democrats and Republicans

were bad. Goldwater said that there is not a single organized crime person in Arizona. The state crawled with them. And some of them were Goldwater's friends."

Despite the success of the Desert Rats, some major publications that didn't join the Arizona Project proceeded to do "knock stories" about the project's work, says Greene, in part by detailing the libel suits that were filed against the reporters and IRE. [Goldwater himself had promised "the biggest libel suit of all time," but didn't follow through.] "We didn't lose any [suits]," says Greene. "We did a damn good job." As researcher James Aucoin wrote in the *Columbia Journalism Review* in 1996, the Arizona Project proved that "the people who said that lone wolves could never work together were wrong."

Keeping egos in check was not the problem, but exhaustion and stress were major obstacles. Most of the Project A staffers were working a minimum of 12 hours a day, seven days a week. Greene required the reporters to submit memos of their progress each night, which he would read until midnight. And each morning, the participants would gather for an 8:00 meeting to plan the new day. "Most of the reporters coming in and out were working in a new environment and were constantly looking over their shoulders to avoid being compromised - or worse," Greene says. "They were away from their families for long stretches. My wife came out for a week at Christmas and I put her to work filing. That's the only time I saw her or my kids in that entire nine months. Renner faced the same problem, and developed a series of physical ailments that eventually killed him many years later."

Project A had one key advantage over Project K: Despite a justice system in Arizona that moved at a snail's pace, a judicial infrastructure existed that would ultimately get the job done on tracking down Bolles' killers. Thus, Greene's team could focus primarily on the subjects that Bolles was trying to unravel. There were many twists and turns in the murder case: Numerous trials, convictions set aside, death sentences overturned, with some witnesses and targets eventually dying of natural causes. While some questions remain about the Bolles case, the man who planted the bomb and one of his accomplices have served prison

time. Much of the credit for the government's pursuit of the case lies with an Arizona lawman named George Weisz, who wouldn't let the case die. And before joining the AG's office, Weisz was a student volunteer on the Arizona Project.

Project K has yet to find its own George Weisz. And in Russia, while the team of eight prosecutors assigned full-time to the Klebnikov case are reportedly excellent investigators, there is far less confidence that the government agencies have enough independence and experience to see that justice gets done. Two suspects who were quickly arrested and linked to the murder of Klebnikov were subsequently released - a situation that remains murky. In June, the Prosecutor General announced that the case was solved and closed, and that Khozh-Akhmed Nukhayev — a Chechen rebel leader and onetime Moscow gang boss - was the mastermind. Two new suspects are under arrest, while two more remain fugitives — including Nukhayev, who some believe died even before Klebnikov was murdered. The Bolles case stretched from 1976 to 1994. The Klebnikov case could last even longer. "In Russia, contract murders have as many as ten layers between the people who order the hit and the men who ultimately pull the trigger," says retired FBI agent William Kinane, who served as Legal Attache at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow from 1994-99. "It can be impossible to untangle. The hit men almost never know who hired them or why."

After Project K's launch, I discovered that one of our obstacles was misinformation in articles that were being written about our mission and activities. One account says we are confident the killers will be prosecuted, while another says we are "vigorously" challenging the Kremlin. Some stories in the Russian press even maintain that exiled oligarch Boris Berezovsky is our main target. (These accounts are all incorrect, and no such information was suggested to outside media, either on or off-record.) When asked if Greene faced similar problems, he burst out laughing. "You never felt so scared about the quality of the American press as when we saw how they covered us," he recalls. "You'd read this stuff and say, 'Holy Christ!' And these people are 'us'! We learned to just tell the outside press that we 'are grateful of the press attention, but we won't disclose the identity of our targets or what we have learned about them until our investigation is

completed.' Every day, we'd have the press calling us and asking, 'What are you doing? Tell us.'

When Project A was ready to roll with its series, it kicked up dust all over the desert state. "Three days before the series ran, the *Arizona Republic* — Bolles' newspaper — suddenly announced it wasn't going to run it," says Greene. "They said there was not enough verification, even though we had given the paper all of our files. And this was an outfit that wouldn't even send a lawyer just around the corner to check on the stories beforehand. [Note: Greene had invited all the media-outlet lawyers to Phoenix for a pre-publication 'libel read.'].]

The *Tucson Star*, armed with the same files, had no such problems and ran the series in its entirety. Most other papers didn't back out. *CBS Radio* broadcast a daily capsule, and the wire services ran their versions. "There was huge impact, and immediate questions about the *Republic's* action," says Greene, who believes that the paper's decision stemmed from its owners being part of an Arizona power structure (the "Phoenix 40") that the series was, in part, attacking. The *Republic's* decision caused irate protests outside the newspaper's offices, and reportedly fueled a union drive by the newspaper's reporters. It also led to widespread fears that certain power brokers were trying to topple the project. "In fact, the *Boston Globe* skipped one part of the series for just one day and its switchboard lit up with calls from readers asking, 'What - did they *get* to you? They *get* to you?,' recalls Greene. A radio station in Phoenix read each installment at a set time each evening; cars lined up at the curbs of Phoenix streets to park and listen during rush hour. "Because the *Republic* wouldn't run it, the *Denver Post* was flying or trucking thousands of copies a day down to Phoenix," says Greene. "Tucson was sending up copies too, but it [the *Star*] couldn't print enough."

Today, Greene laments the state of investigative reporting in America and at *Newsday*, which has suffered severe staff cuts over the past few years - with more announced this month. "Most publications are risk-averse today," he adds. "They figure, why should they risk lawsuits. But a good investigative reporter is gonna provoke suits, while a good corporate lawyer - and I

don't mean a libel lawyer - is gonna say, 'Let's not have suits.' They don't appreciate the position the press maintains in a free society. We're the last resort for the people. We're serving our constituency and our function in society by tackling crime, corruption and incompetence. Why have a First Amendment right if they (nation's founders) didn't think that we needed protection when we sought to reveal problems in society? We don't need it to publish apple pie recipes."

Greene had brought criminal investigative techniques to *Newsday* (and to Project A) that he learned as a government investigator. They built and used databases, chronologies and charts — things common in newsrooms today but rare in the 1960s and 70s. *Newsday* editor Tony Marro once wrote that Greene took reporters "who had been keeping notes on the backsides of envelopes and the insides of matchbook covers and taught them how to gather and organize large amounts of information." He has a rare ability to connect seemingly unrelated facts to make connections that few others see. Investigative journalism and public service journalism became part of *Newsday's* core mission. "Andy Hughes was *Newsday's* lawyer, and his attitude was, 'If it's true, we should print it, and figure a way to say it without incurring unnecessary trouble — but you can't avoid all trouble,' says Greene. "He was a great guy, and one of the three lawyers on the [Arizona] project."

Similarly, Greene recounts an insurance executive whose behavior probably warranted its own journalism award. One target of the series had sued for libel and was offering to settle the case for \$50,000 and a written apology. "Several of our lawyers warned that the insurance company wouldn't spend hundreds of thousands of dollars if it could get away with this cheap settlement," recalls Greene. "The key guy at the insurer was a former Marine general who headed the company. I said to the general, 'You sold us the policy because you believed in us. Here are all the files. [The plaintiff] is a very bad guy. I won't sign the apology. And we'll say that you all wimped out.' He said to me, 'You don't have to do that. I don't care if it costs us \$1 million. We're going with the suit.' I never saw an insurance company do that. He was a great, gutsy marine."

Great and gutsy, just like Greene. His former colleague, Marro, likes to tell stories about how Greene once protested a *Newsday* ban on first-class travel by measuring coach seats and then measuring his own butt and informing his bosses that he would continue to fly in the front of the plane. Or about the time he fell asleep at his desk with a cigarette in his hand and caught his pants on fire. Or how he pounded on a wall so hard during fights with editors that he once sent pictures crashing off the wall of the publisher's office.

While Greene was showing me around Smithtown in his car, an irate driver honked at him. Greene leaned on his horn four times in return. I was delighted to see that he's still full of piss and vinegar. Towards the end of our visit, Greene agreed to serve as an advisor for Project K. He needed no convincing. When I couldn't hold back my glee and told him how honored I was, Greene - true to form - cut me off with a wave of his hand. "Awww, come on," he said. "We're in the same business. It's what we do."

- By Richard Behar, www.projectklebnikov.org