

Under Pressure

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BGA



Better Government Association President and CEO Andy Shaw

In his previous life as a political reporter, Better Government Association President and CEO Andy Shaw stood on the media front lines for 33 years. He worked his way up through the City News Bureau and the Chicago Sun-Times before entering television news and eventually working at ABC 7 for 26 years. During that time, journalism changed dramatically and not necessarily for the better.

“There are still a lot of good reporters out there, but the resources have become

stretched so thin that some of the basic principles of journalism are no longer followed. I was interviewed by a television station yesterday for a story and they just sent a cameraperson. They didn't even send anyone to ask questions. I essentially asked myself the questions. That's something that never could have happened before."

He saw the writing on the wall when he stepped away from the television news business back in 2009. Decreasing budgets, increasing workloads for those who remained, even the impending trend of reporters having to shoot and edit their own stories all factored into his decision, but none of those were the main reason he left the station behind.

"I spent 33 years on television covering news, and during that time I did approximately 15,000 television stories. I don't say that to impress you. I say that to suggest that I was getting tired. I loved broadcasting, but I knew there were other things that I could or should do, and the only way that was going to happen was if I just broke the chain."

His final story at ABC 7 also happened to be his biggest story.

"I tried to time my departure to coincide with the completion of the first Obama presidential campaign - and I spent most of that year on the road. It was perhaps the most exciting and complicated story I had ever done, and it was just a good way to end it. It was also a good bookend because I started at ABC 7 covering the first African-American mayor in Chicago, Harold Washington, and left after the inauguration of the first African-American president, Barack Obama."

But Shaw didn't leave ABC with the BGA job in mind.

"The BGA job came about accidentally," he admits. "In fact, I didn't even know there was an opening. I left the country for a month after ABC, and the vacancy occurred when I was gone. The only way I found out was during a chance conversation with someone. The BGA has a glorious history; it's 90 years old. It's been at the forefront of some of the most prominent investigations in Chicago history, but it had fallen on hard times and was struggling, so I saw an opportunity to pump new life into it."

In some ways it was a natural transition from journalist to BGA CEO.

“There are a lot of similarities in that I still write and communicate and broadcast and follow the news closely, but that’s where it stops, really. Just the freedom from the pressure and constraints of daily news is enormous – time pressure, performance pressure, cosmetic pressure, story gathering and storytelling pressure. I don’t have that daily pressure here. The other thing is that I spend at least half my time fundraising because we’re a nonprofit, and I never would have done that at ABC. The only similarity really is that ABC and BGA both have three large letters. ABC is a very wealthy media company, BGA was a tiny, struggling nonprofit, and so even though the content areas have similarities, the job of running and rebuilding the organization was light years removed from my old job.”

And the rebuilding of the BGA has gone incredibly well. Shaw has assembled a talented team of investigators.

“We’ve done about 250 investigations in the last four years. Of the 250 investigations, 60 of them have led to tangible change in the form of employees disciplined or fired, policies changed, money saved. I estimate conservatively that the value of our reporting and our advocacy will be over \$50 million to the taxpayers over the next few years. I don’t think too many other watchdog groups can claim those kind of results.”

Shaw admits to missing the excitement of the broadcasting business, but he doesn’t have to look far to live vicariously through others. His son-in-law, Chris Hayes, anchors a nightly show on MSNBC.

“We talk about the business all the time,” he says. “It’s been a great ride and fun to watch.”

As for the future of the media, he offers this assessment:

“The seminal event of recent times was Jeff Bezos buying the Washington Post. When the head of Amazon buys one of our country’s iconic newspapers, you know that things have changed forever. I’m not saying that’s bad. Digital communication is reality. The irony is that there is more content than ever out there, but it’s in a thousand places rather than just a few, so it’s not vetted nearly as much. Its accuracy is much more suspect. I don’t think it will ever change back to the way it was. You can’t un-ring that bell.”