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Final Edition

**Burris scoops show how much newspapers matter**

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES EDITORIAL

Forgive us for sounding self-congratulatory, but we have a suspicion as to one reason Chicago and Illinois are reputed to be among the most corrupt cities and states in the nation -- a vigorously competitive press in this town likes to dig up the bodies.

Other cities and states are plenty corrupt, no doubt, although we perversely like to flatter ourselves that we stand apart. But few other towns enjoy such an aggressive get-the-story-first culture of newspaper reporting. Nobody in those supposed bastions of integrity seems to do much digging.

We raise this point today because it's no secret the newspaper business in Chicago is facing challenging times, but also because two front-page Sun-Times stories in the last three days -- two old-fashioned newspaper scoops -- serve as a reminder of what Chicago gains daily from being a hotly competitive, for-profit, two-newspaper town, in print and online.

No army of bloggers, no TV or radio station, no nonprofit journalism collective, no foundation-supported task force of political and government reporters will ever do the job so well.

The first Sun-Times exclusive hit the front page on Sunday: "Blago hit up Burris for cash." The reporters were Natasha Korecki, who covers the federal courts for the Sun-Times, and Dave McKinney, our Springfield bureau chief.

The real significance of that story was not that the brother of former Gov. Rod Blagojevich had asked Sen. Roland Burris for a sizable campaign contribution shortly before Blagojevich appointed Burris to Barack Obama's former Senate seat. No surprise there. That would be Blago's style.

The real story was that Burris had stated earlier in a Jan. 5 affidavit that he had talked to no one in the Blagojevich camp, and he had testified three days later at Blagojevich's impeachment trial that he had talked to just one person. More troubling, he never said a word about talk of money.

The real story, that is to say, is that Burris looks like a liar.

The second Sun-Times exclusive hit the front page Monday: "After being contacted by federal agents, U.S. Sen. Roland Burris changed his testimony." This story was written by Korecki, McKinney and general assignment reporter Jordan Wilson.

That scoop was the second shoe dropping. Now Sun-Times readers had a plausible explanation for why Burris might have changed his story about who he had talked to and why -- he had since learned the feds were asking questions and may have recorded a phone conversation or two.

Those two exclusive Sun-Times stories sent the rest of Chicago's journalism world scrambling to catch up. Radio reporters referred all day to "published reports" -- that would be us -- while Chicago Tribune reporters ran down their cell phone batteries calling sources.

Our purpose here is only in passing to toot our own horn, as much fun as that is.

Truth be told, the next big exclusive in this story might very well come from the Tribune or another paper. It has happened before, and it will happen again -- we break a story and the Trib tops us, or they break a story and we top them.

Competition brings out the best in everybody.

What matters most to the people of Chicago is that professional reporters are finding out stuff people ought to know. It matters that Burris, a U.S. senator, was less than honest when questioned under oath. And that kind of stuff -- unearthed by skilled reporters working beats day in and day out -- will never be dug up by bloggers in pajamas.

On Monday, when the Editorial Board talked about what to write for today, the obvious choice was Burris, assuming we could settle on something thoughtful to say.

We knew it would be useless to call on Burris to resign -- he won't. We were reluctant to call for a state investigation into whether he committed perjury, our guess being that his deceptions fall short of that. And while we thought about calling on the Senate ethics committee to investigate, we know they won't. The Democrats don't want the grief.

It may be enough, as it happens, that Korecki and McKinney got the story. It may be enough that Burris was found out. It may be enough that, thanks to good reporting, the voters of Illinois will know that much more about Burris when he runs to retain his Senate seat in 2010.

The heart of a newspaper is a good newsroom. The heart of a city is good newspapers.