



# Can She Quote You On That?

*After more than 40 years as an award-winning consumer affairs journalist, ace reporter Trudy Lieberman still gets her kicks by asking tough questions all along Main Street.*

**BY TOM NUGENT**

**T**rudy Lieberman (BA, '68) was back in Lincoln, Nebraska, the other day – and doing the thing she loves most.

Armed with a reporter's notebook and a Bic pen, she was pounding the downtown pavements in search of a good story.

For the 63-year-old Lieberman, a veteran consumer affairs journalist who's won 26 national and regional reporting awards over the past four decades, there is no joy like the joy of knocking on doors and button-holing strangers on the street ... in order to conduct interviews that will shed clarifying light on the urgent issues of the day.

Lieberman said she can't get enough of it.

For many journalists, of course, wandering the crowded streets of a city in a quest for revealing insights and killer-quotes would be regarded as work – as a tedious exercise in asking repetitive questions, scribbling down repetitive answers and wearing out your shoe leather.

But Lieberman doesn't see it that way.

"After 40 years of doing it, I still look at on-the-street reporting as great fun," said the longtime contributing editor at the highly regarded Columbia Journalism Review (CJR). "Whenever I can, I grab my notebook and hit the street.

"For a long time now, I've been convinced that news media coverage of healthcare reform has been leaving out ordinary folks – many of whom will tell you that they don't really have a clue about what the new healthcare reform act [the recently passed Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act] actually contains, or how it will affect their lives in the years ahead.

"In recent months, I've been doing a lot of on-the-street interviewing about healthcare reform in smaller towns like Scranton, Pa., and Columbia, Mo. So when I was invited back to Lincoln in early April [to receive the UNL College of Journalism and Mass Communications Outstanding Service to the Profession Award], I decided that I'd take some time to do some interviewing in the old Haymarket District downtown."

With her reporter's notebook at the ready, Lieberman spent several hours wandering around the Lincoln historic district near the old Burlington Train Station, which first opened for business way back in 1898. While drifting among the shops and restaurants that flank 9th and 10th Streets, she came upon several citizens who told her they were less than pleased by the March 23 enactment of healthcare reform.

Example: Near the Old Chicago "beer and pizza joint," Lieberman met up with a 50-year-old shopper named Cindy who was less than enchanted by the new healthcare legislation.

"She was eager to chat," Lieberman later reported on her "Campaign Desk" blog at the CJR (April 15, 2010), "and [she] didn't like the legislation one bit. Why, I asked? 'It doesn't fix the problem and will end up costing people more money. How can they pass something nobody read and is based on [similar healthcare reform in] Massachusetts,' she wondered. 'I know it's a fairly hot topic in Massachusetts, and it is not particularly well liked up there.'

"I pressed her on what would fix the problem," Lieberman went on to tell her CJR readers. "'Tort reform,' she replied. 'I don't think you are going to fix it [the high cost of healthcare] until you do that. Small towns can't get doctors. In rural Nebraska there's a doctor shortage. They can't afford malpractice insurance.'"

Good quotes! Once again, the intrepid reporter had found journalistic gold on a city street, simply by walking up to pedestrians and asking them questions. But this particular reporting foray also provided Lieberman with some pleasing nostalgia. As the roving journalist ambled



Lieberman met with UNL students when she returned to campus to receive the Outstanding Service to the Profession Award from the journalism alumni.

back and forth across the historic old market district, she was also remembering her own years in Lincoln ... four exciting years during the mid-1960s when she'd often passed through the old Burlington Station en route to the UNL campus from her family's home in Scottsbluff.

It was quite a homecoming, to be sure. As always, however, Lieberman's main focus was on her work ... and on the reporting she was determined to get done while she was in Lincoln.

"I felt some emotion, no question about it, and especially when I was in the area near the station," she told Nebraska Magazine during a recent interview in New York City. "As a kid growing up in Scottsbluff, I'd often taken the old Burlington line [the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad] to Lincoln for 4-H activities of one kind or another.

"And then later, at UNL, the station was a link between my life on campus and the world of my hometown. So that walk around town – more than 40 years after graduating and going on to my first consumer-reporting job in Detroit [at the morning Detroit Free Press, in 1968], was pretty special for me."

Lieberman was touched by her recent Lincoln odyssey, but she didn't let it get in the way of her journalism. After several hours of reporting in the Haymarket area, she sat down and wrote her column for the CJR. Along with quoting several highly critical Lincolinites on the costs and benefits of the new healthcare reform legislation, she reported how some of the citizens had disapproved of Senator Ben Nelson's so-called "Cornhusker Kickback" ... a controversial trade-off in which the veteran legislator arranged to secure \$100 million in federal funds for Nebraska's Medicaid program in return for his "yes" vote on the reform legislation package.

Soon after the column ran on the CJR

blog, angry readers began to take potshots at the U.S. Congress, the U.S. news media and Lieberman's Columbia Journalism Review. Snapped one especially irate blogger named Hartley Lord: "The lack of intellect expressed by the health care commentary of the 'man on the street' [in Lincoln] ... is the fault of a terrible presentation by congress coupled with a 'lazy' media.

"Today's journalist accepts balanced reporting of sound bites as a panacea – paying no attention that a lie told often enough often becomes gospel."

For the delighted Lieberman, the snappish commentary by the miffed bloggers was sweet music, indeed. Far from being offended by a blogger who described her as "lost in CJR-land" and totally out of touch with the kind of down-home, anti-Washington sentiment that has been galvanizing the "Tea Party" movement of late, she was actually quite pleased to read the acerbic commentary that followed her April 15th column.

"Those kinds of comments are fine with me," she said with a cheerful laugh. "I mean that's the whole point of journalism, isn't it – to get people talking and thinking about public issues of the day, and then to report that discussion as clearly and insightfully as possible?"

As a journalism professor who's taught the craft at several New York City-area universities in recent years (while also publishing scores of health columns in the Los Angeles Times and in-depth stories and commentary for The Nation, along with five books on consumer and media topics), Trudy Lieberman said she's still a huge fan of that famously simple definition of journalism which was reportedly first uttered by the immortal William Allen White:

"Find out what's going on – and then tell people!"

## INTERVIEWING PHIL SORENSEN: 'I WAS PRETTY SCARED'

She was born and raised in Scottsbluff, and she said she will be forever grateful to her Polish-immigrant-father (Abe Lieberman) and her first generation-American mother (Belle Appel Lieberman, whose background was also East European) for teaching her what may have been the most important lesson of her life.

"Both of my parents were very thoughtful,

very open-minded people who encouraged me to think for myself," Lieberman recalled. "My father was a junk peddler who'd come through Ellis Island [as a recently landed immigrant], and he didn't have a great deal of formal education.

"But he was an extremely intelligent man who was also wonderfully supportive of his daughter, and he was always telling me to go for it, and that I could be anything I wanted to be, if only I would work hard enough. When I was a kid he would always say, 'You need to be seen and be heard,' and I grew up believing that I could have a significant impact on the world.

"I can remember wanting to be a newspaper reporter by the time I was in junior high school ... and then later, listening to JFK's inauguration speech [1961] as a freshman at Scottsbluff High School and vowing that I was going to do something in my life that would make the world a little better place."

After landing on the UNL campus in the fall of 1964 ("My mother heard they had a really good journalism program"), Lieberman moved into Raymond Hall and began studying the craft of newspaper reporting in earnest. "I remember taking these really demanding journalism courses from Bill Hall [later the dean of journalism at The Ohio State University, and now deceased] and [the late] Neale Copple [R. Neale Copple, former UNL journalism dean]," she said, "and the two of them really challenged me. They taught me how to report, and I still use a lot of the lessons they taught me today.

"On one occasion – I was taking an in-depth reporting class with Neale – and he assigned me to write a profile of the then-lieutenant-governor, Phil Sorensen. I was 20 years old, and I didn't have the faintest idea how to proceed. So I asked Neale what I should do, and he just said: 'Why, call him up and ask for an interview!'

"So I did. And then I walked on over to the [Nebraska] State Capitol with my notebook and did the interview. I was pretty scared ... but Sorensen was very patient with me, and I wrote the story and it wasn't too bad. And I soon realized that I could do this stuff. I was going to be a journalist, and I could hardly wait to get started."

She didn't have to wait long, either. By the time the fleet-of-foot scribe graduated from UNL (May, 1968), she had already landed a fabulous job as one of the nation's first-ever "consumer affairs" reporters ... at the 650,000-circulation morning paper in Detroit, the Free Press.

## ON HEALTHCARE REFORM: 'I DON'T HAVE A CRYSTAL BALL'

During the next eight years, the remarkably hard-working Lieberman earned a growing national reputation as one of the country's most accurate and effective reporters. By 1977 – after spending a year studying economics and business at Columbia University as the winner of a prestigious Knight-Bagehot Fellowship – she was firmly ensconced at Consumer Reports, the hugely popular (as in, “4 million regular subscribers”) general circulation magazine dedicated to helping readers make informed decisions on such crucial financial topics as life insurance, real estate, retirement planning and health insurance.

She was fully launched. Having spent several months studying healthcare in Japan as a Fulbright Senior Scholar (1993) and now playing at the top of her game, Lieberman in 1994 signed on as a contributing editor at the CJR ... and also became a regular contributor to such esteemed publications as *The Nation* and the *Los Angeles Times*. Along the way, she won ten different National Press Club awards for her contributions to consumer reporting, in addition to seven citations from the Society of Professional Journalists and two National Magazine Awards.

Having published five books (including her 2000 study of modern journalism, “Slanting The Story,” already regarded as a classic by many print reporters for its incisive assessment of the impact of conservative think-tanks and lobbying organizations on contemporary news reporting), Lieberman these days divides her time between reporting for CJR, teaching university courses on journalism and giving frequent talks and lectures around the country on such subjects as healthcare reform. She is completing her sixth book – this one about health reform, to be published by the University of California Press – and has recently stepped down after five years as president of the Association of Health Care Journalists, which she helped build into one of the leading professional journalism organizations.

So what's her bottom-line take on the groundbreaking new measure that Barack Obama signed into law late last March?

“At this point, it's very hard to be sure exactly what will flow from healthcare reform,” she said. “I think the best thing

about the bill was the Medicaid expansion, which will undoubtedly make healthcare much more available for about 15 million lower-income people. And I think it's also good that the law will apparently make it much more difficult for insurance companies to arbitrarily cancel policies on people who are ill.

“On the other hand, there are a lot of related issues that haven't really been addressed yet – such as affordability and taming the cost of medical care. I think the economics of healthcare reform are an open question, and it's by no means clear whether or not the ultimate costs of reform will be manageable. And at the end of the decade, 23 million people will still be uninsured. The system is not really universal.

“On balance, I think it's probably better to have passed it than not to have passed it, but there are some very troubling questions that haven't been answered. I don't think anyone knows how it's all going to play out at this point – and I certainly don't have a crystal ball, either.”

As for her own future ... Trudy Lieberman at 63 says she has “no plans whatsoever” for retirement, and that she hopes to “go right on doing what I've been doing for the past 40 years, which is just trying to shed a little light here and there, so that people can make better choices about the things that affect their lives.”

Happily married for the past 36 years to Andrew Eiler, currently the director of legislative affairs at the New York City Department of Consumer Affairs, Lieberman has a 25-year-old daughter (Kirsten) who works for NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg's Office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability. She's also a totally committed New Yorker, these days. “I loved growing up in Scottsbluff,” she said with a smile of quiet nostalgia. “People in the town were very supportive and encouraging. But I've been living here in New York for so long [she and Andy inhabit a rent-stabilized two-bedroom apartment located just off fabled Union Square] that I can't imagine any other lifestyle.

“As a journalist, I'm grateful that I wake up eager to learn new things each day. After all these years, I'm still charged up about reporting and I'm still eager to hit the street with my notebook, whenever I can. Having a reporter's window on the world is the best job someone can have.” ■

“Trudy Lieberman is one of the leading investigative journalists writing on health-care issues in America today. Many of her reports have had wide national impact, attracting the attention of policymakers, academics and the media.” — *Business Wire*

## Lieberman Blasts “Incoherent” News Media For Lousy Reporting On Healthcare Reform

During her 40-year career as a consumer affairs reporter, Trudy Lieberman has published thousands of articles and authored five books (now working on a sixth) aimed at helping ordinary readers to understand key issues that affect their wallets and pocketbooks.

Along the way, the indefatigable Lieberman has also nailed down 26 different national and regional journalism awards for her clear, precise, accurate reporting.

As a longtime contributing editor at the *Columbia Journalism Review* (CJR) – the gold standard for news media criticism in this country – the former UNL student often writes in-depth critiques of mainstream print and electronic coverage of major issues.

So how would this feisty, tell-it-like-it-is news analyst grade the U.S. media for their reporting on the recent struggle to pass healthcare reform?

Her answer doesn't require a whole lot of space on the page:

“F!”

To understand why she gave the newsies a flunk on this issue, all you have to do is read the first three grafs in “An Rx for Reporting” – an essay by Trudy Lieberman in the March/April issue of the CJR. ([http://www.cjr.org/feature/an\\_rx\\_for\\_reporting\\_1.php](http://www.cjr.org/feature/an_rx_for_reporting_1.php))

### An Rx for Reporting

“Press coverage of the effort to reform health care has been largely incoherent to the man on the street. The three hundred or so posts I have written about health-care reform for CJR.org over the past two years tell the story of media coverage that failed to illuminate the crucial issues, quoted special interest groups and politicians without giving consumers enough information to judge if their claims were fact or fiction, did not dig deeply into the pros and cons of the proposals, and gave tons of ink and air time to the same handful of sources.

“By now it's a familiar critique – the press did not connect the dots, there were too many he said-she said stories, not enough analysis, and so on. And yet, after a decade in which the inadequacies of traditional press strategies – objectivity, top-down coverage, the primacy of the ‘scoop,’ etc. – became ever more apparent to those of us who care about these things, those very strategies failed the country again on a story of monumental importance to every citizen.

“Traditional journalism as practiced by the nation's major news outlets, even as it has been recreated on the Web, is just not good enough for a story as big and complex as health care. ■