

# **DEFAMERS**

**HOW FAKE NEWS TERRORIZED A COMMUNITY  
AND THOSE WHO DARED TO FIGHT IT**

**AARON OCHS**

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## INTRODUCTION

“Fake news” is a seemingly dismissive term to describe news that doesn’t align with someone’s worldview. We’ve seen President Donald Trump throw that term around on Twitter to describe news from sources he disapproves of. Reporting from the so-called “fake news” may be provably accurate, but, to Trump, “fake” remains his operative term.

Fake news really does exist. Not only that, but some of that “news” is used to incite contempt, ridicule and hatred. Sometimes it’s even used to alter the outcome of our elections, thereby posing an intrinsic threat to our democracy.

During the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, millions of Americans were bombarded with websites and social media posts containing false claims, which were embedded in deeply polarizing, hyper-partisan narratives. Fact-checkers were overworked and overwhelmed trying to separate fact from fiction. Fact-checkers are at a natural disadvantage because it takes more time to research the truth than to publish a falsehood. Because it’s remarkably easy to publish and amplify a falsehood to achieve “viral” success, fact-checking can sometimes feel like a virtuous act of futility.

Additionally, fake news was supplemented with “botnets” (a network of computers infected with malicious software and controlled without the owners’ knowledge, often used for spamming messages) and online trolls under anonymous pseudonyms. Armed with these propaganda tools, fake news purveyors used their content to intensify conversation among politically right-leaning websites. These purveyors would circulate

false claims about Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, including claims about her health and being involved in a shadowy coterie of global financiers.

While they worked tirelessly to impugn Clinton, fake news purveyors also helped widen the political divide by also stoking passion and outrage from the political left. They created Facebook pages that supported the Black Lives Matter movement and opposed police brutality. Twitter accounts urged Democratic voters to text their votes, vote for independent presidential candidate Jill Stein, or avoid voting all together. They engaged in extensive voter suppression efforts on various social platforms including Instagram.

Later, we learned a significant amount of the “fake news” proliferating online was from the Russian government, specifically the Russian Internet Research Agency. According to several U.S. government officials and congressional testimony, Russia launched a prolific, sophisticated misinformation and disinformation campaign to curtail the election of one of Russia's most vocal critics. This revelation led many to express concern about America's collective faith in democracy being eroded by a hostile foreign power.

It was surreal to watch this saga unfold. But it was even more unbelievable that similar efforts were underway in a small California county located halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco.

In San Luis Obispo County, CalCoastNews.com (CCN) was the website that people went to when they wanted to read the juiciest rumors, innuendo and scandals about local officials – subjects the mainstream news media reportedly didn't want to touch. They brewed the most salacious tabloid moonshine and served it to an audience that generally distrusted authority. Their

## DEFAMERS

readership openly resented left-leaning community leaders. They espoused conspiracy theories originating from their anonymous users. CCN developed a reputation for curating hyperventilating lynch mobs that strongly opposed anyone *they* opposed.

CalCoastNews started as a blog that published tantalizing “uncovered” exposés aimed at rattling the local establishment. Over time, however, a curious pattern emerged. Many of their exclusives were overwhelmingly personal and vindictive in tone, often times stretching and fabricating the truth to justify their vindictiveness or self-worth. They would later transcend the muckraking role by engaging in activity that no well-established, accredited news agencies would even dare to indulge in. They engaged in campaigns designed to defame and undermine community leaders and residents who criticized their “reporters” and reporting practices. Their campaigns – which included intimidation, criminal threats, stalking, false news, online trolling, frivolous lawsuits and restraining order requests – lasted for years.

When I read stories about the Russian government meddling in our elections, I couldn’t stop thinking about CalCoastNews. San Luis Obispo County residents were dealing with a parallel plague in our own backyard.

After reporting on their conduct and analyzing their “reporting,” CalCoastNews trained their cross hairs on me. I wasn’t part of any accredited news agency or wielded much influence locally. I was a twenty-something writer and columnist looking to garner enough experience to eventually be part of the journalism industry. Because I chose to be critical of them and be prolific in that criticism, I became a target. My employers, family, friends and acquaintances became targets by association. Their constant harassment birthed an obsession that seized control of my life, leading to a gradual downward spiral of my mental health. Against all odds, I survived to tell the tale.

AARON OCHS

This is my story. It started by looking at other people's stories and experiences not dissimilar to mine. To tell my story, I relied on contemporaneous notes, email correspondence, interviews, local news sources and eyewitnesses. What happened to me was so unbelievable and bizarre, I made a conscious effort early on to document everything as it happened.

Fake news has consequences. There are consequences when it's left unchecked and residents become complacent. In these politically polarizing times, nothing can be more dangerous than organizations that knowingly and gleefully sow seeds of discord in a community. It's even more egregious when these organizations pretend to educate and inform residents on matters of public interest and market themselves as ardent defenders of the free press.

So let's be clear: CalCoastNews has no legitimate purpose as a news organization.

Here's why.



## I

When it comes to local news, it's easier for most of us to accept what is reported as true than research to find the truth. Do you *really* find yourself asking, "How accurate are they?" while you watch a local news segment on TV, read the newspaper or an article published online?

We often don't have the time to be skeptical about the news. It comes at us fast, it's constantly changing, and it's easier for our minds to process the basic facts – who, what, when, where, why and how – than search for deeper context. We prefer information to be processed and fed to us. It's convenient.

That's why local news with strong political bias is so dangerous. If we're predisposed to a political perspective and the news we read "confirms" that perspective, we accept that reporting and don't question the facts as they're presented. But what if the "facts" aren't really facts at all? What if the claims made are half-true or completely false? As eager recipients of content – which is now frequently distributed and disseminated thanks to social media – we are uniquely susceptible to the pernicious threat of fake news.

This phenomenon reminds me of an old idiom, which is painfully relevant today: "A lie can travel half way around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes." That idiom is commonly attributed to Mark Twain.

The national fake news phenomenon has its local version. In San Luis Obispo County, fake news by the bushel has emanated from one highly controversial source: CalCoastNews.com.

CalCoastNews (CCN) billed itself as an online, independent and investigative news source that covered stories within the scope of public interest. Their writers described themselves as the "tip of the spear" that shined a light on injustice and abuse of power. However, in their self-righteous, self-aggrandizing editorial pursuits, they often published claims they knew were



untrue and refused to publish corrections. It would take one landmark defamation lawsuit for residents to uncover their deceptive practices.

CCN published news briefs daily that borrowed heavily from other competing local outlets, including *The Tribune* and *New Times*, but they were initially known for their “Uncovered SLO” stories: exclusive features showcasing their notion of investigative reporting.

CCN developed a trademark reporting style, which laid out outrageous and scandalous allegations – many of which were left unsubstantiated and uncorroborated, without known sources, quotes or supporting documentation. These allegations were levied mostly at politically left-leaning figures who they believed were corrupt, complicit, or actors in a vast conspiracy to silence them.

Their work was undeniably provocative, and successful at stirring outrage in the county. Readers would take their outrage and commence a call for action – from demanding other news media cover their supposedly intrepid reporting to contacting law enforcement and demanding investigations into their allegations.

While some dismissed CCN as a discredited online tabloid that thrived on gossip and innuendo, others felt a strong connection to their work and became loyal supporters. Loyalty for CCN arose from a groundswell of distrust for news media that many felt was hopelessly entrenched in the establishment, represented by the daily *San Luis Obispo Tribune* and weekly *New Times*. CCN rose to prominence by publishing allegations that the local media wouldn’t touch. CCN’s staff and their readers believed the mainstream media was ignoring their reporting because they wanted to protect to elite few and the truth was too inconvenient to publish.

After CCN’s articles were published, popular 920 KVEC radio talk-show host Dave Congalton – who once served as their Contributing Editor – would invite CCN’s writers onto his show to discuss their reporting. Congalton gave their writers *carte blanche* over their guest segments to discuss, accuse and ridicule people they reported on. Often times, these segments would

devolve into a jumbled potpourri of unsubstantiated allegations, on-air insults by Congalton and CCN writers, followed by breathless self-congratulations from the writers.

Congalton frequently prevented opposing views from being aired without interruption during these guest segments. Phone-in callers to the show expressing skepticism about CCN's reporting were cut off on air, or denied speaking at all. Congalton and CCN's targets were denied the opportunity to appear on the show in person to respond. Those who called into the show and wound up questioning CCN's reporting practices were angrily berated by Congalton. For the most part, Congalton offered no rebuttal for individuals and organizations CCN berated.

CCN staff's repeated and often controversial appearances on his show helped propel their website into mainstream prominence while remaining a journalistic anomaly.

Articles were referenced in public speeches by residents appearing at government meetings. Their claims were cited in political advertising and politically conservative movements throughout the county – all while the local media largely refrained from mentioning their name.

When their work was challenged by critics or the mainstream media, CCN vigorously lashed out with the same harsh intensity as their reporting. They have always been notoriously thin-skinned and vindictive. CCN would use their website and Congalton's show to discredit anyone who they felt tarnished their brand and business. As a member of the media, I took a stand against a lot of the questionable claims they made over the years, but I didn't anticipate the backlash or the ferocity of the relentless campaign they would wage against me.

In 2009, CCN first broke the story of former county deputy administrator Gail Wilcox and her alleged conflict of interest due to a personal relationship – an extramarital affair with the former executive director of the SLO County Deputy Sheriff's Association. Around the time their relationship was made known, the county was in contract negotiations with the Sheriff's Association. The allegations set off a firestorm in the community, and were ultimately addressed by the County Board of

Supervisors. Supervisors ultimately decided to fire Wilcox after determining the allegations were true.

CCN also published a story about Wilcox's boss and SLO County Administrative Officer David Edge, who they alleged was sexually harassing Wilcox and routinely discussed "intimate" matters with her in the workplace. The controversy became a distraction for the County Board of Supervisors, who voted to fire him soon after CCN's stories broke. Edge denied the sexual allegations published on the website, and county supervisors publicly denied that their decision to fire Edge had anything to do with "speculation on the blogs."

In 2010, CCN reported on former real estate developer and Atascadero Citizen of the Year Kelly Gearhart when his victims stepped forward to accuse him of fraud and money laundering. More than 250 of Gearhart's investors were bilked out of \$20 million for bogus real estate projects. Gearhart was later charged and convicted for his crimes.

I first came across CCN when they began reporting on Gearhart. I was in my mid-twenties at the time, working as the graphic designer and production manager for my family-run newspaper *The ROCK*. I began penning the publication's op-ed column called *The Razor* after the we went digital-only in 2008.

At that time, I dropped out of community college and gave up my pursuit of a journalism degree. I was disillusioned with the prospect of paying thousands in tuition and being saddled in student loan debt for a degree that might land me a reporter job that barely paid above minimum wage. This frustration was compounded by my cynicism toward the local news scene. After being offered a job at *The Tribune* writing obituaries part-time, I decided to shift my focus to entrepreneurship.

When I first discovered CCN in 2010, I saw them as a news site with a style and execution that was far different than anything I'd ever read. While they certainly lacked the mild-mannered, intellectual gravitas of real news organizations like *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*, CCN's confrontational, "shock and awe" reporting style garnered a strong cult following. They were taking on the establishment, naming names and afflicting the

comfortable – all things the local media wasn't doing. I admired that.

However, I wasn't their biggest fan. I noticed they had a “he said, she said” kind of ambiguity in their reporting, which left plenty of unanswered questions. To me, it wasn't clear if they thoroughly investigated the salacious allegations they published. They seemed to be on the right track, but I often left their site feeling like a lot of crucial details were missing. While they weren't necessarily producing Pulitzer Prize-winning material, I wasn't going to fault them for at least trying.

Occasionally, I was taken aback by their overtly repetitive, tired braggadocio. The *New Times*' “Shredder” column said it best when they once described CCN as having a “publish-first, brag-later approach.” They carried around an aura of superiority, which didn't make sense, especially when their work appeared unpolished and unfinished.

Like me, they were the new kids in town, making a name for themselves. Yet I found it intriguing that CCN was operated by people who portrayed themselves as non-partisan, seasoned reporters that “adhere to the strictest journalism ethics and standards.” Based on bios they provided on their site, CCN's team clearly had more journalism experience than I did. For all the accumulated experience they had in the journalism industry, CCN struggled to get a toehold in the public conversation. Due to their sensationalist tabloid nature, it took a while for them to be acknowledged by their peers.

Their awkward foray into the limelight was further complicated with their hostile fixation on the competition. While their site largely consisted of aggregated news stories from local sources, CCN spent copious amounts of time eviscerating the very same sources for not publishing the kind of quality news reporting they felt they alone offered. They published editorial after editorial, criticizing their competitors with fiery zeal, blissfully unaware of the irony. They may have come across to their readers as hard-nosed reporters calling for a resurrection of investigative journalism, but, to me, they came across as desperate for attention.

Their on-air temper tantrums and nauseatingly repetitive hubris led me to wonder if they were overcompensating for something. Were their stories really as air-tight as they claimed? Did they *really* investigate the allegations they published? Were their hearts in reporting the news or promoting CCN? I was suspicious, so I now read their work with skepticism and a small dose of cautious optimism.

*Maybe it's growing pains*, I thought.

## 2

In 2009, my family moved away from SLO County and spent two years in Ojai, about 125 miles south. We needed to regroup after living the seemingly inescapable daily grind of local politics we immediately found ourselves caught up in.

We moved from Los Osos, a SLO County community entrenched in a decades-long conflict over their wastewater. My mother, Pam, had launched a nonprofit group to protest the lack of a legally required Proposition 218 vote to fund the Los Osos Wastewater Project, and my father, who had worked decades as a magazine editor and writer, launched *The ROCK* with me to educate and inform the community. We even delivered newspapers door to the door in the middle of the night. It was incredibly difficult for us to separate the sleepy, seaside landscape from the hostile rifts in a politically divided community. It took its toll on our family.

During my two-year absence from SLO County, I remained in close contact with several Los Osos residents who read my columns online and regularly provided feedback. I relied on their tips and staying tuned into to the local media to keep *The Razor* going from Ojai. Now that I was no longer in the eye of the storm, I felt less conflicted and emotionally connected to the editorial. However, I increasingly depended on residents to provide me with a perspective I'd normally have had I stayed on the Central Coast. Occasionally, residents would mail me public records too voluminous to be scanned and delivered to me by email.

By the time I moved, SLO County government had taken over the design and construction of the \$165 million Los Osos sewer project (serving only 10,000 residents). Despite being three years into planning and development, county officials struggled to regularly update residents on project developments except when a

positive milestone was achieved. Critics of the project felt there was a lack of oversight and community input throughout the process. Residents who publicly complained were often met with icy glares, eye rolls and sharply-worded dismissals from county supervisors and staff; their three-minute public comment time at meetings was reduced and their microphones were unceremoniously cut from the audio feed. A few were escorted out of the chambers by a deputy.

Supporters of the county's efforts felt project opposition was a clear liability for all Los Osos residents. They felt critics were engaging in unnecessary delays and obstruction, which contributed to the escalation in construction costs. For years, I was referred to as an "obstructionist" by project supporters because I opposed the county-led project. On a weekly basis, I churned out columns that opined about project updates. In between columns, I'd leave wisecracks on a few Los Osos-centric blogs and tease the politicians involved. My comments didn't exactly advance the conversation in a productive way, but it made me feel like I was still connected to the community.

Like CCN, I was also critical of the local media for being dismissive of resident concerns. I shared the same visceral disdain as CCN, which occasionally oozed into my work. Sometimes, I ridiculed specific members of the press who I felt were praising the establishment more than reporting on it. This would put me at loggerheads with local journalists who would return the fire publicly and privately. We'd exchange salty salvos and swiftly return to our neutral corners when deadline was near.

Again, not productive, but I felt relevant.

In September 2010, residents called to complain about officials refusing to return their calls and emails. Some complained that then-county supervisor Bruce Gibson – who represented Los Osos as part of his 2nd District – was generally unresponsive to concerned residents. He'd already addressed their concerns, he argued, and felt no need to respond further to "repeated assertions." Similarly, County Public Works was largely non-responsive to residents who asked questions about the project when updates were not regularly provided. It struck me as odd

that the stakeholders for a \$165 million infrastructure project were not being updated on progress unless there was good news.

I spoke with residents on strategies to convince officials to be more accessible and transparent. One of my sources pitched an idea for a column encouraging residents to protest outside of county offices and the homes of officials overseeing the project.

The idea was inspired by protests against American banker and hedge-fund manager Steve Mnuchin, who later became the Treasury Secretary for the Trump administration. Before his tenure in the Trump cabinet, Mnuchin managed a bank that critics called a “foreclosure machine.” During the 2009-2010 Great Recession, protesters and fair-housing advocates challenged his bank’s housing and banking practices, which reportedly led to over 36,000 foreclosures that he profited from. Since his group bought its predecessor, residential lender IndyMac – and renamed it OneWest – in 2009, protesters began appearing outside of OneWest’s office and Mnuchin’s Bel Air mansion in California. After one protest outside his home in 2011, OneWest began offering qualifying homeowners a mortgage modification so they could keep their homes. A “rattled” Mnuchin told Bloomberg that the protests were “something I never want[ed] to experience again.”

Mnuchin would be one of many bankers who garnered large protests outside their homes. In 2010, the Chicago-based grassroots organization National People’s Action, in coordination with the Service Employees International Union, bused hundreds of workers from 20 states to protest outside of bank employees’ homes. The protests were designed to pressure banks lobbying against Wall Street and housing reform.

I devised a strategy to make it appear protests would take place; that residents would begin showing up at the door of county officials, demanding answers. I went through the phone book, looked for publicly listed addresses and phone numbers of officials directly involved with the Los Osos sewer project, and came across a few. In my October 13, 2010 column, I published three addresses I could find, and threatened to publish more to alarm these officials, but it was a bluff.



Frankly, I was uncomfortable pulling a stunt like that. I definitely wasn't taught this in my journalism courses. Against my better judgment, I thought my little stunt would drive more readers to my column and spur dialogue between officials and residents.

What could possibly go wrong?

Response to my column was initially positive as residents commended the gambit as "effective." However, despite receiving residents' praise, I felt caught in the strong undertow of political dissent. I was supported by readers who seemed to have understood my intentions and felt entrenched in the bubble. Deep down, though, I was feeling uneasy. I thought: Maybe I shouldn't have published that. Sending people to knock on doors of government officials? This isn't what I'm about. But the genie was out of the bottle. I decided to close my eyes and hold my breath.

A day after posting my column, I learned from one of my Los Osos sources that Dave Congalton read the column and thought I crossed the line. After going back and forth with him via email, Congalton threatened to "call [me] out" on his show. Assuming I'd have the opportunity to call into his talk show and defend myself, I told him I was looking forward to discussing it. Within minutes of sending the email, I received a panicked call from my source, who was scheduled to appear on his show.

"Dave doesn't want you on," she breathlessly told me. "He said something to me like, 'I'll take you down personally if I find you invited him on here.'" Despite feeling threatened by Congalton, the source insisted she'd still appear as his guest. "He's one of the only good platforms in the community," she explained.

I could understand the frustration one might have for public officials' contact information being published on a blog that wasn't widely read, but Congalton's foaming reaction was ridiculously over the top. After taking into consideration a controversy he was previously involved in, I found his response to my column hypocritical at best.

A few months earlier, Congalton was involved in the

dissemination of contact information for the adoptive owners of Annie, an eight-year-old Australian shepherd who got lost. Annie's original owner worked with Congalton, an avid animal lover, to help reunite him with his beloved pet. The adoptive owners, who wanted to keep Annie, had their names and address accidentally leaked to the public by the SLO County Counsel. Though Congalton pledged to not reveal the adoptive owner's identity, the information appeared in a public Facebook group that Congalton helped maintain. Annie's adoptive owners began receiving online harassment and threats, which led to increased police patrols throughout their neighborhood. Amid intense public pressure from Congalton, the adoptive owners relinquished Annie.

I listened to Congalton's show when he was supposed to address my "controversy" with my source. It was sure to be an odd segment when the columnist, me, was specifically prohibited from discussing his own column! To my surprise, my column was never addressed. When I asked my source later why it never arose, I was told Congalton threatened to ban any guest who mentioned my name.

Shortly after the show aired, CCN published an anonymously bylined article titled, "County demands blogger remove personal information," which quoted cherry-picked portions of my column and published text from a legal demand from the county I had yet to receive. I hadn't received the demand before CCN published the article, yet the article portrayed me as not only having received the demand, but also refusing to comply! That was completely wrong. CCN never contacted me to verify those false claims – despite claiming in the original draft of their article that I was reached for comment and didn't respond.

Their article took me by surprise. I shared the same real estate in their rotating headlines with public officials they accused of various felonies. Yet I was critical of the same officials they put under the microscope.

I was also curious as to how they intercepted a legal demand that was supposed to be delivered to me.

Eventually, I received the demand. I complied, removed the

three addresses and edited my column to transparently reflect the change. Afterwards, I submitted clarifications and corrections in an email to CCN along with my contact information. Within a few hours of sending that email, I received a call from CCN co-founder Karen Velie, who admitted to writing the article.

I calmly told her the facts, stated them plainly and provided time stamps of my emails to show her timeline and claims were incorrect. After discussing with her my evidence, Velie became combative, stating she wasn't going to change anything in the story because "you published their addresses and you admit to it." No, that was not the point. It never was.

I reiterated the corrections. Instead of addressing the claims I wanted her to correct, she spoke over me, rambling incoherently and bizarrely insisting I "lied" about publishing the addresses. Then she started screaming at me to the point where the sound of her voice clipped the audio. It sounded like Velie was constantly tripping over her own tongue while she gaggled on her slurred words.

I occasionally moved the phone away from my ear in complete disbelief when she told me I wasn't a journalist, falsely claimed I never took journalism courses, and "lacked training and credentials." Then she proceeded to compare what she thought my credentials were to hers and suddenly made the conversation about herself.

"I know about you. I know more about – I'm better than you. I'm a journalist," Velie declared.

This person is stark-raving nuts. Is she drunk?

I said to her, "I don't think you are a journalist. How can you say, 'I'm a journalist,' when you refuse to correct claims that can be easily refuted? How you call yourself a journalist when you spout a bunch of false claims, like saying I 'never' took journalism courses. You want my college transcripts? Or are you not interested?"

Velie doubled down, insisting she had "proof" that I was "never a journalist."

She was so far gone around the bend, I gave up reasoning with

her. “There’s no evidence of your so-called ‘proof,’” I told her. “But there’s plenty of evidence that you’re a shitty writer.”

The conversation I had with Velie was so peculiar, I took contemporaneous notes on my computer while we spoke. This wasn’t a normal person I was dealing with. I couldn’t recall any self-proclaimed journalist who acted the way Velie did. At first, I figured she was drunk. But the way she spoke to me and the way she threw out her recklessly rapid-fired accusations were similar to how she behaved on Congalton’s show. This is who she was.

After arguing back and forth, Velie said she would speak with her editor and told me she had to attend some meeting. After our conversation ended, Velie called me two minutes later. I answered, assuming she would apologize for her remarks and let cooler heads prevail.

“Aaron Ochs called me and threatened me if I didn’t change the story,” she said. She presumed she was speaking to a staffer. I didn’t threaten her.

“Fuck you,” I said and hung up.

Despite arguing and screaming about how she wouldn’t correct anything, Velie revised her article with corrections. But underneath her article were a number of comments, which contained false claims about me. One Los Osos resident, who once left me threatening voicemails after I blocked him from commenting on my website, falsely accused me of being a known shoplifter from Orange County (never lived there). The same person also falsely claimed I was “trolling” the family of Dystiny Myers, a young girl who was beaten to death by multiple people in 2010. I was contacted by bereaved members of her family, who came across the Los Osos resident’s comments on CalCoastNews.

Though she initially claimed these comments were “true,” Velie had them removed.

This was a teaching moment. I had no control over how my column would be disseminated and interpreted. Whether or not my intentions were good, I exposed officials I criticized and their families to potential harm, similar to the same harm I was exposed to on CCN. As a result of CCN’s article, I received harassing and

threatening messages on Facebook. The situation was completely blown out of proportion, but I was the one who initiated the snowball effect. In a subsequent column, I owned up to it.

Still, I didn't appreciate how Velie underhandedly got a legal demand that was meant for my eyes only. I submitted a public records request pertaining to the demand and learned how it fell into Velie's hands.

The day before Velie published her article, SLO County Counsel Warren Jensen reached out to Congalton and asked him to forward the confidential demand to me. Jensen noticed I conversed with Congalton due to an email exchange I made public. Unable to find my email address, Jensen asked Congalton to forward the confidential demand to me, but Congalton insisted he wanted nothing to do with me. Then he forwarded it to Velie, a person who clearly was not a privileged third party entitled to receive the email and she clearly wasn't me. Later I learned Congalton was listed on CCN's masthead as their Contributing Editor.

Congalton didn't particularly strike me as someone with a strong moral compass. For all the moral indignation and haranguing he did on-air, he was just a sanctimonious blowhard, as ethically adrift as the public figures he liked to criticize. Velie was no different.

## 3

I would cross paths with CalCoastNews again. This time, it was with their other co-founder, Daniel Blackburn.

In early 2011, Blackburn contacted my father Ed and requested an interview with him for a short documentary that focused on the Los Osos sewer controversy. Blackburn told Ed that the documentary would be an exclusive to Central Coast News Agency (CCNA), a small business venture he was developing. At the time, Blackburn claimed he “retired” from CCN. I interpreted the veteran reporter’s decision to step aside as an opportunity to separate himself from Velie.

Blackburn drove to Ojai to interview Ed for the documentary, which also featured interviews with known activists from Los Osos. Unsurprisingly, I had some trepidation inviting him to our home, but we figured the interview would be harmless. Blackburn seemed genuinely interested in the Los Osos sewer saga. We had no hostile relationship with him personally.

I didn’t know much about him, so I did some research prior to his arrival.

Blackburn started his career at the *Sacramento Union* newspaper before becoming sports editor for the *Roseville Press-Tribune*. After that, he was a staff writer with the *Orange County Register* from 1966 to 1973. By 1980, Blackburn became a Senior Consultant to the California State Senate’s Rules Committee and served as press liaison for then-President pro Tempore Sen. James R. Mills. Since then, Blackburn wrote and contributed to a number of news publications, including the local *New Times* where he worked as its news editor for a while. Under his editorial guidance, the *New Times* won recognition for its journalism from the California Newspaper Publishers’ Association (CNPA).

Before Velie was recruited, Blackburn wrote stories on the website UncoveredSLO.com. His dry, matter-of-fact editorial style reminded me of Garrison Keillor from “A Prairie Home

Companion,” but with more cynicism for the subject matter and fewer topical witticisms. What he lacked in brevity and balance, he made up for in specificity. He wrote his long-winded pieces like cautionary fables told by a man who’s seen and heard it all. His bitterness for his adversaries was genuinely palpable, not manufactured for clicks and tabloid fodder.

Blackburn hoped his reporting would encourage the local media to do their share of watchdog work. He wanted to fill the informational void with hard news. To Blackburn, the mainstream media was too soft – perhaps because they were complicit in covering for the corrupt elite. He decided that with UncoveredSLO, he was going to get deeper into the story unlike anyone else in the county. When the media didn’t recognize his efforts, Blackburn would fire a cantankerous, finger-wagging editorial to chide them. His bouts of pomposity got stale after a while. I set his personal issues aside to read and sometimes appreciate his content.

Then he brought Velie on board. Congalton, deeply invested in CCN, later bragged in an email he teamed up Velie and Blackburn to revitalize the site.

What did Blackburn see in her that I didn’t? After all, he did say on a number of occasions that Velie was hands down one of the best reporters he’d ever worked with. That was some serious praise, coming from a journalist with decades of experience under his belt – when she had basically none.

I looked into Velie’s background as well, but details from her past were more difficult to independently verify. Much of her past was shrouded in mystery. I could type in Blackburn’s name on Google and come across articles he wrote nearly 40 years earlier in various publications, but Velie’s written portfolio was hard to track.

According to several short bios she posted online, Velie graduated from Cal Poly with a bachelor’s degree in journalism and served as a staff writer for the *New Times* before joining Blackburn. Prior to her brief employment at the *New Times*, her journalism background was vague at best. At one point, Velie mentioned she interviewed famed billionaires Warren Buffet and

Bill Gates, but no such interviews appear online and there's no evidence she actually did them, which was odd considering an exclusive interview with Gates or Buffet could be a career maker.

However, the information I did find was intriguing.

Cal Poly students attending undergrad classes with Velie described her as “shaky,” erratic and incoherent. She reportedly showed up late to her classes, glassy-eyed, drowsy and distracted. Velie's Creative Writing teacher, Adam Hill, claimed she once suffered a nervous breakdown during class, allegedly crawling underneath her desk and sobbing during class. In an article published on CCN, Velie denied the incident happened, albeit writing about herself in the third person.

Despite her questionable behavior, Velie caught the eye of Cal Poly journalism professors George Ramos, a Pulitzer Prize-winning news reporter, and Cal Poly media law teacher Bill Loving. Both would eventually volunteer as editors for CCN. Loving took over as editor after Ramos passed away in 2011.

Velie's tenure at the *New Times* was rocky at best. Velie was chastised by *New Times* readers over her biased reporting and factual inaccuracies. Over the years, former staffers explained that Velie was a troubled writer who struggled with accuracy. At one point, the *New Times* top brass reportedly assigned a “babysitter,” former managing editor King Harris, to fact-check her reporting and provide more “editorial review” than other writers employed by the magazine. *New Times'* publishers declined to comment on Velie and her reported issues with staff.

Velie later left the magazine when they reportedly refused to publish one of her stories. Velie later explained that the story they wouldn't cover was her investigation into Kelly Gearhart's real estate dealings.

Former *New Times* staffers claimed publisher Bob Rucker reportedly convinced her to come back, but she was fired shortly after they learned Velie complained about the *New Times* to Congalton. Among other things, Velie claimed she was fired because she was a woman. This claim, which staff vigorously denied, was preceded by a 2010 editorial Congalton penned on



CCN. In his editorial, Congalton claimed that sexism “pervade[d] the male-dominated *New Times* newsroom.” For years, Velie complained about male writers stealing her work and not giving her credit because of her gender.

After joining Blackburn and UncoveredSLO in 2008, Velie doubled down on her abrasive reporting style and renamed the site CalCoastNews. Her stories were much more simplistic and less nuanced than Blackburn’s. She typically published stories about allegations made about public officials as opposed to publishing stories that investigated said allegations.

Velie’s allegations were specific, but context was difficult to discern. Words by sources were paraphrased, leaving readers unable to uncover the original meaning. Sources were almost never quoted. Sourcing was often based on “numerous,” “several,” “many” unnamed sources. It was up to the reader to speculate whether or not the sources had personal, direct knowledge pertaining to the allegations, or were even real. Though it’s not uncommon to use anonymous sources – especially when sources fear retaliation – she rarely described how they had direct knowledge of what they alleged. She would only go as far as to explain that the sources were “current and former” employees or individuals. Sources she did name were unable to definitively corroborate her allegations, opting instead to provide additional context to create the appearance that allegations were *likely* true. Velie also struggled to corroborate her sources’ allegations with physical documentation, which was largely absent, and not embedded or linked to in her reporting.

Instead of focusing on educating and informing readers, Velie used her reporting to inflate her self-worth. She was also fixated on turning CCN into a money-making venture. Velie, who had no full-time employment during her time at CCN, sought to monetize the site through various revenue streams, including increasing site advertising, selling t-shirts, and serializing novels and e-books as part of Ballot Press, one of her side businesses she co-founded with a Cayucos businessman.

She would regularly appear on Congalton’s show to promote CCN, the stories she reported on and ultimately herself;

underneath a thin veneer of objectivity, most of her stories were about her and her ambition – who got in her way and who didn't respond to her allegations. When she discussed her stories, Velie would make a number of unsubstantiated allegations about people she reported on. For the most part, Congalton allowed her to speak her mind. Occasionally he would urge her to be cautious about her statements and delicately coach her through segments, as if he was aware of her volatile tendencies.

“Let's not go there,” he would often tell Velie.

When Congalton asked her for proof to back her allegations, which was rare, Velie would quickly and enthusiastically say she had it, but she never actually provided it – not on the website, at least. When the occasional skeptic called into Congalton's show and asked her to provide evidence, Velie would refer callers to the authorities, including law enforcement and the district attorney. For all her bluster and cantankerous bravado, Velie struggled to connect the necessary dots.

For the life of me, I couldn't understand how Blackburn, a seasoned journalist with no clear record of controversy, would readily associate himself with Velie. On the surface, it didn't make sense. I decided to ask him about it.

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“What a nice place,” remarked a congenial Blackburn with thinning gray hair, dark bags under his eyes and bulldog dewlaps. He was well in his sixties. “You certainly got it made here.”

“If only I could afford it,” Ed half joked.

Blackburn sat in our living room with his camera bag and tripod beside him. I sat on the couch nearby. Seeing him in person was disarming. I had trouble matching the person sitting beside me with the reporter who co-founded one of the most incendiary online tabloids I'd come across. He struck me as cordial and professional, the polar opposite of his colleague.

I briefly spoke with him about the article Velie wrote about me months earlier. At the time, I made my peace with the article, but I was disturbed by how it was conceived. I wanted to know

from Blackburn whether or not he condoned her reporting practices. If he did, I wanted to find out why he thought her source-gathering methods were ethical.

He chuckled about it, shook his head and said, “Well, you know, she got most of it right. That’s what matters.”

What did he mean by that?

“We can’t get *everything* correct,” he said. “That’s not what we’re about.”

*Wait a minute. You’re investigative journalists. Being accurate is your responsibility. Part of that responsibility is supposed to be owning up to your mistakes.*

Blackburn didn’t want to discuss Velie any further. He seemed uncomfortable. I remember him looking around the top corners of our ceiling as if we had surveillance cameras trained on him – as if he was part of some sting operation.

“Talk to Karen about it,” he suggested.

“No thanks.”

“Hey, I’m not part of their operation anymore,” Blackburn said with a hint of exasperation in his otherwise lethargic tone. “I told her, ‘I don’t want to do what you’re doing, but keep up the good work,’ so we parted ways. I said adios.”

Ed came out to the living room and told Blackburn he was ready to be interviewed. He mentioned to Blackburn that he preferred to be interviewed outside where there was more light. Both left the house and returned a short time later. Ed and I thanked him for the interview. Before leaving, Blackburn promised the documentary would be a “doozy.”

In March that year, the 15-minute “THE \$CENT OF MONEY” documentary appeared on YouTube. As Blackburn told us, his self-narrated short documentary featured several Los Osos residents who opposed the county-led project and Supervisor Gibson. Their interviews were thrown in with hazy photos of various websites on a flickering computer screen, photos of Los Osos and random factoids. All of these elements were loosely assembled to the backdrop of an awkwardly played piano that sounded like a recording from a dusty, old Victrola.

It wasn't the most professional or painstakingly edited documentary, but it was certainly a conversation starter.

Ed was featured in the video discussing the negative social and economic impacts of the sewer as it was proposed at the time. He also discussed how our family received death threats and harassment as a result of criticizing the county's handling of the project.

Two days after his video was uploaded onto YouTube, Blackburn called Ed.

"Guys, I need to ask you for a favor," Blackburn said. "I need you to respond to some negative comments on my website. I posted the video on there and I got all sorts of nasty, negative comments from people on there. I want you and your son to defend me."

Blackburn was breathless. He didn't seem to anticipate the fact that his documentary – which provided a particularly one-sided take of a controversial issue – would receive pushback. Ed and I scrolled through the comments Blackburn received and didn't see anything that rose to the level of hostility we endured when we lived in Los Osos. So who cares?

I'd imagine a professional journalist who did research and put together a documentary wouldn't be so easily intimidated by sewer project proponents taking aim at some of his talking points. He was acting on the phone like a fatwa was placed on him to be sentenced to death.

"You can post as yourselves, post anonymously. Just do something, please," he begged. "Karen [Velie] and CCN staff do that all the time under their articles. They add to the story. The idea is: the more comments you get on a story, the more eyes you get. In the end, it works out and it drowns out the bad comments."

Blackburn clearly didn't see a problem with creating fake accounts to gin up public engagement and bury criticism. I did. The more I gleaned from his glib throwaway remarks, the more I learned about how CCN truly operated – from admittedly publishing stories they knew weren't completely accurate to using

anonymous pseudonyms to engineer public opinion around their content. Would any respected news outlet engage in these deceptive practices?

We reluctantly agreed to help and held our noses. After all, Blackburn took the time to schedule our interview, drive down to see us, and took some time to present a different view of the situation. We owed him some support. Ed and I created two accounts and told the persnickety naysayers to get a life, though we both knew we had better things to do with our own lives.

Out of curiosity, I went on CCN and took a look at comments posted underneath their articles. Much of what I read lined up with Blackburn's description of his writers anonymously weighing in. There were a number of comments that read like content previously cut from their articles, followed by calls to action. After a cursory review, I came across about four accounts that reiterated allegations exclusively pushed by Velie in her reporting and on air. These accounts were telling their readers what to do and how to react from the shadows.

Their operation was sleazy, but their tampering of public opinion on their site was inconsequential. At least that's how I felt at the time.

## 4

Blackburn contacted us again in April 2011. He came up with an ambitious plan to form a news aggregate site. It would be similar to the *Huffington Post*, a popular liberal news aggregator and blog, but with local news and commentary. The content would come from a number of local alternative news sources, including *The ROCK*, *Rogue Voice* (literary magazine), *Calhoun's Can(n)ons* (blog), CCN and *SLO Coast Journal* (online magazine).

The project was tentatively code-named “The News Buoy.”

Blackburn had two goals in mind: To create a news media juggernaut that toppled the mainstream media and to properly monetize our content. In his original pitch to Ed and I, our content would appear in syndication on CCNR, or a teaser paragraph about our content would appear and readers would click on the teaser to access the full story on our site.

To launch the site, Blackburn proposed forming a limited liability corporation and an executive board consisting of Ed, myself, Blackburn, Velie, *Rogue Voice* publisher Stacey Warde, blogger Ann Calhoun, and *SLO Coast Journal* writers Jack McCurdy and Judy Sullivan. Paperwork for the corporation would be filed by San Luis Obispo attorney James Duenow.

I was intrigued with the idea, but not exactly intrigued with working alongside Velie. We could tolerate Blackburn. I figured it was worth a shot to study Blackburn’s proposal with cautious optimism. With more people involved, I assumed there would be more editorial oversight and tougher guidelines in place. In theory, there would be more accountability than there was on CCN. I figured this was ultimately a step in the right direction.

In May 2011, all of us met at Sullivan’s house in Los Osos.

I remember sitting beside Sullivan on a lounge seat, facing everyone else in the group, including Karen Velie. In her early fifties, broad-shouldered and heavyset, with disheveled short black

hair, Velie looked like she had been dragged to the meeting against her will. Her mouth was perpetually agape. There was a faint smell of alcohol on her breath.

She didn't want to make eye contact with anyone and nervously averted her eyes when anyone spoke to her. Velie sat at the end of Sullivan's long blue couch at an angle, facing a corner of the wall by Sullivan's front door. When she saw me, Velie crossed her arms and looked away.

"I see we're getting along so well," Ed quipped as he sat next to Anne Calhoun on the couch. Calhoun had previously published links to *The ROCK* on her blog – before attacking us for defending ourselves against misinformation about us she allowed.

"Indeed," said Blackburn, noticing the tension. "But if we all work together on this, I think any problems between us will blow over. Right, Karen?"

Karen didn't respond.

The meeting began with everyone introducing themselves. Velie introduced herself as a "professional journalist." She mentioned the word "professional" more than a few times, and every additional utterance sounded less convincing than the last. It was like she was trying to convince the room of her supposed prestige, yet no one blinked. Most of us weren't looking for accolades.

Ed mentioned *The ROCK* and his professional background as a writer and journalist with deep roots in the music industry. Calhoun mentioned her blog and her previous involvement with the *Sun Bulletin* newspaper as a columnist covering local issues. Sullivan mentioned that she co-founded *SLO Coast Journal* in July 2009 and brought McCurdy, a former *Los Angeles Times* reporter, on board to help her.

I was an admirer of McCurdy, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the 1965 Watts riot. As a young white man, McCurdy braved the streets of a predominantly black neighborhood of Los Angeles during one of the deadliest urban riots in decades and lived to tell the story. He was also the California correspondent for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*

news for 20 years. He was considered by many to be one of the more influential writers who lived in Morro Bay, and I was excited at the prospect of working with him on the news aggregate.

Warde spoke of his professional background as managing editor for the *New Times* and his tenure as publisher of *Rogue Voice*. I regularly read his magazine for his columns, poetry and gritty short stories. My cousin, Dave Ochs, occasionally submitted poetry to *Rogue Voice*.

Blackburn handed us copies of his proposal and we looked it over. According to his paperwork, Blackburn envisioned a news site that linked to articles from our respective publications. He left open the possibility of sites to collaborate on news stories exclusive to the aggregate. In addition to written content, Blackburn pushed for the website to be interactive with a strong social media presence, videos and podcasts. There were a lot of moving elements, which intrigued me.

As far as editorial oversight was concerned, Blackburn proposed to have multiple, reputable individuals oversee and fact-check reporting exclusively published on CCNR. This served in sharp contrast to how CCN handled oversight, which involved floating numerous drafts and revisions to an editor that Blackburn described at the time as “mostly absent.” The editor he was referring to at the time was Cal Poly journalism professor George Ramos.

I thought the concept was doable as long as content was thoroughly vetted and balanced.

As the meeting went on, everyone offered their visions for the aggregate.

For instance, McCurdy proposed focusing on investigative feature stories that didn't necessarily belong on an active news cycle. He brought up his coverage of the Morro Bay Power Plant, the city's wastewater project, and the Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant as examples of in-depth ongoing features.

“Readers don't give a shit about those things,” Velie snapped. “They're not going to click on those stories. They won't make us



money.”

Velie felt news should be breaking, current and controversial. Throughout the meeting, Velie repeatedly opined that the purpose of news, with regard to the aggregate, should revolve around how much advertising revenue each story makes. The more attention-grabbing the headline was, the more shocking the content was, the higher likelihood it was for readers to check out the article.

“I think readers should be educated and informed,” McCurdy countered. “We shouldn’t provide content as a way to line our pockets. It shouldn’t be about money.”

“This is a business, Jack,” she shot back.

Blackburn intervened. “I think both of you have your points,” he said. “We’re here, meeting right now, because we need to strike a balance between quality reporting and making sure we get compensated – that we get something out of it. I think we’ll get there. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon.”

Ed and I revisited McCurdy’s talking point by talking about our coverage of the Los Osos sewer controversy. This is an issue that spanned three decades. As tiresome as the subject was for longtime residents who lived through it, the sewer saga contained enough intrigue and suspense to sustain an investigative series. Yet the mainstream media hesitated to write about it and regularly update readers on breaking developments.

“I don’t give a shit about the sewer,” said Velie. “No one cares.”

“Karen, we got 14,000 residents in Osos,” Ed said sternly. “You can’t write off those people. A lot of them read what’s being put out there.”

“Besides, whatever we do will be one of many stories in rotation in this new format,” I added. “It’s not like it’s going to be just us.”

“Okay, I thought we were here to make money. Dan?” Velie was growing more irate. “Nobody cares!”

Blackburn shrugged his shoulders. He looked at Velie like she was a petulant child. “We will, Karen. We will.”

“And how many people visit your site monthly?” Velie asked Ed. “We have hundreds of thousands of readers a month.”

“That’s proprietary information,” Ed curtly replied. Because that’s what I had asked him to say in case she asked. Then I changed my mind on the spot.

I chimed in. “Actually, it’s around 12,000.”

“Bullshit,” Velie fired back.

To establish credence for her views on news reporting, Velie kept pointing to her “hundreds of thousands” of readers, and that her story series on Kelly Gearhart netted “hundreds of thousands of dollars” in advertising revenue. She bragged to all of us about how widely read her site was. Years later she told Congalton that CCN was worth \$5 million.

Given her penchant for hyperbole, I discounted her statistics.

“That’s great, but it was my understanding that all of us – not just you – will be part of this,” McCurdy said. “It’s not just about *you* and the stories you cover. We’re all pitching in,” McCurdy said. “We all benefit from each other’s reporting.”

“That’s correct,” Blackburn said. Velie grimaced at Blackburn and rolled her eyes.

Then Sullivan whispered in my right ear, “Sounds like she wants to be the boss.”

I whispered back, “If she wants to be the boss, what’s the point of having a news aggregate? Every story is going to be ‘allegations here, allegations there.’ What, *me* investigate? Can’t do that!”

Sullivan shrugged and chuckled. “I wouldn’t want to work for her.”

The meeting lasted for about an hour and a half. We agreed to have another meeting to discuss things like setting up the corporation, appointing board members and adopting editorial policy.

Now that I saw Velie in person and how she acted at the meeting, I was concerned, as were McCurdy and Sullivan. Velie seemed uncooperative, combative and arrogant. Her behavior didn’t make sense. If she was going to be part of the collaboration,

Velie would garner even more readership than she had before. Then again, perhaps she was inebriated.

On our way back home, Ed and I determined Blackburn's proposal was salvageable. The upside: We didn't have to work with Velie if we didn't want to. Blackburn suggested we could collaborate with Velie on some stories, but it wasn't mandatory. He was acutely aware what our feelings were about her. Yet we wanted to be a part of something that was much bigger than ourselves. I figured that in the survival of the fittest, Velie would eventually lose relevance in the partnership.

We made one thing clear to Blackburn: Should we be involved, it was obvious to us at least that Velie needed her own editor *and* lawyer looking over her shoulder at all times. Having someone like Velie publishing controversial content that wasn't thoroughly fact-checked may bring eyes to the site, but our overall credibility would diminish over time, and that was ominous. If the new site was ever sued for defamation, our collective reputation – as well as our individual reputations and finances – could take a serious hit.

## 5

“A vehicle crash into a San Luis Obispo creek has revealed the extent of a personal relationship between a top county official and a Los Osos Community Services District (LOCS D) board member—raising allegations of a possible conflict of interest,” wrote Karen Velie in a June 2011 article titled, “Sex and the Los Osos Sewer.”

Velie was referring to a near-fatal car accident involving the children of then-SLO County Public Works director Paavo Ogren and LOCS D director Maria Kelly. Velie bizarrely tried to link a car accident involving their children to “conspiring to help push through a \$200 million sewer project.” Then she alleged their kids smoked and drank at Ogren’s so-called “party house” after school.

The allegations were all over the place. Judging from their articles and how they were presented for public consumption, it didn’t appear CCN investigated anything. It looked as though they tried to attract readership from the seedy headline and improvised from there.

Their “investigative” feature sounded less like an investigation and more like a running commentary on personal lives of two local officials and their kids.

Velie’s sourcing was problematic, having quoted people with no direct knowledge of any conflict of interest or the conspiracy she exclusively alleged. One of the people Velie quoted was Los Osos developer and real estate broker Jeff Edwards, who ran against Kelly for a seat on the LOCS D and lost in 2006. Edwards had been a vocal critic of Kelly during the time she served on the LOCS D. Edwards’ partner and former LOCS D director Julie Tacker was an active contributor to the website and often criticized Kelly’s positions at every given opportunity.

A month before the article was published, I was contacted by Kelly’s ex-husband Sean, who attempted to offer me dirt on

Kelly while they were in the middle of a contentious divorce. He read where I was critical of Kelly's positions and thought I would be predisposed to publishing his allegations.

Velie's article mentioned their divorce and custody proceedings, even though much of it had nothing to do with their conflict of interest allegations. Velie cited snippets from court records that weren't publicly accessible. The records she cited appeared to be allegations from Kelly's ex-spouse. From the onset, it appeared Velie's articles were meant to be used as some sort of leverage in active divorce proceedings.

I knew Kelly. When Ed ran for a seat on the LOCSD in 2006, Kelly was also a candidate. At the time, I didn't agree with some of her politics. She was respectful to Ed, which I appreciated. It was true that I criticized her in some of my columns for her support of the controversial sewer project as proposed at the time, but I couldn't see how CCN's reporting about her personal life was relevant to her politics. If anything, it was an elaborate personal attack orchestrated by her ex-spouse and political opponents. Throwing her children in the fire made an already-sensationalized story look more tantalizing.

*Why bring her kids into it? I wanted to ask Velie. Why are you putting them on trial?*

After investigations were conducted by the LOCSD and the County government, both agencies were unable to uncover any conspiracy or conflict of interest between Kelly and Ogren. Kelly resigned from her district seat, but said she only did so to be with her family during a difficult time.

But Velie insinuated that Kelly resigned because she reportedly lived outside of the LOCSD boundaries and was therefore ineligible to serve; that she resigned her post as suspicions – from unnamed residents – grew in the community that she lived outside of Los Osos; and that “proof” of her supposed deceit was the fact her children attended school outside the district.

Inspired by Velie's allegation that Kelly resided outside of Los Osos during the time she served on the LOCSD, Congalton

threatened to broadcast his radio show live from her supposedly vacant home. Congalton attacked Kelly personally, mocking her parenting skills and family life. This was a low point for Congalton, who clearly diverged from his “Hometown Radio” brand by engaging in sexist condemnation.

At the end of the day, this seemingly endless witch-hunt only escalated the conflict.

After her first article about Kelly and Ogren was published, Velie was invited onto Congalton’s show to regurgitate the allegations CCN published without corroborating evidence. After Velie’s appearance, Facebook users and anonymous commenters on CCN published Kelly’s home address based on the flawed and wholly unsubstantiated notion that the home was vacant. Some also posted links to Facebook profiles of Kelly and Ogren’s children, encouraging others to harass them.

At a SLO County Board of Supervisors meeting, one Los Osos resident discussed Kelly and Ogren’s children allegedly using drugs. The resident’s comments earned a sharp rebuke from *Tribune* columnist Bob Cuddy. Describing the comments as being “way, way over the line,” Cuddy called on the resident to apologize. Publicly, she never did.

“Public discourse has become scabrous since the rise of the Internet and talk radio and television. Partisans routinely sling insults at one another, and invective hangs over too many discussions like a miasma,” wrote Cuddy. “But as low as public political discussion has sunk, there has traditionally been one line that even the most venomous partisans won’t cross, one unwritten rule: The kids are off limits.”

Ann Calhoun, who was part of the news aggregate talks, shared Velie’s article in its entirety on her blog, exclaiming in the headline, “Karen Velie of Cal Coast News Does it Again!”

In a statement to CCN, Kelly denied the conflict of interest and conspiracy allegations. Kelly reiterated her denial in the comments section on Calhoun’s blog. In comments posted on Calhoun’s blog, Kelly added that she, in fact, still resided in Los Osos and her children were enrolled in school outside the district

since 2005 as part of a dual-immersion program.

Kelly's pushback agitated Velie, who appeared on Calhoun's blog to pepper her with questions she probably *should* have asked before the article was published. Velie claimed she called and emailed Kelly with requests to comment, but Kelly adamantly denied hearing from her. Velie began to backtrack, stating that "many reporters and editors do not do email interviews" and accused her of "putting up a smokescreen." Then again, many reporters and editors don't personally berate people they've covered on someone else's blog, report first and ask questions later.

In June 2011, SLO County conducted an investigation into allegations of conflict of interest between Kelly and Ogren. By October, County Counsel cleared the two of conflict of interest, stating there was no factual basis. Enacted in 2006, state legislation AB 2701 transferred authority – to design, construct and operate a wastewater collection and treatment project – from the Los Osos CSD to the County. Kelly was elected to the CSD in November 2008. Kelly and Ogren were in a dating relationship since January 2011.

Ed and I had strong concerns about Velie's reporting and her behavior. As a charter member of what was to be called Central Coast Reporter, Velie's conduct as a self-styled "investigative reporter" affected every other stakeholder's reputation by association.

We expressed our disapproval to Blackburn over Velie's series of articles. Backed into a corner, Blackburn sided with Velie, insisting her reporting was accurate. He later admitted to coming up with the idea for the supposed exposé on Kelly and Ogren. He stated the facts as reported were "accurate," and admitted to being involved in the editing process. He revealed that he remained involved in CCN's day-to-day operations, despite telling us otherwise just weeks earlier.

Ed cited evidence of Velie's contradictory statements about her reporting, including comments she left on Calhoun's blog. Blackburn ignored Ed's findings and concerns. In addition to providing corrections, I sent Blackburn a more comprehensive

analysis. He offered a condescending “thanks” to me in an email.

We decided to part ways. Frustrated with our decision, Blackburn repeatedly begged Ed to reconsider in several phone calls, but was unsuccessful. Ed reiterated to him that Velie needed her own editor and a lawyer to oversee her work, and that wasn't a practical solution. He repeatedly warned that Velie would eventually get sued – and get us all sued – for her shoddy and clearly erroneous reporting.

There was no doubt Blackburn heard this criticism before. *New Times* wrote in 2009 that she was a “no-holds-barred, no-corrections-issued” reporter who “could get [CCN] sued, but that's her risk to take.” This observation was coming from Blackburn and Velie's former employer.

Blackburn tried to throw us a bone, proposing that three editors would endorse each article prior to it being published. As one of those editors, Blackburn felt Velie's reporting was fit to print. After Blackburn made those comments to us, Ed and I didn't want to be associated with him either. He was part of the problem. He was delusional.

After exhausting all our remedies internally, I criticized their “Sex and the Los Osos Sewer” reporting in a column. I did this for a few reasons. I wanted to make it abundantly clear that I wanted nothing to do with these people. I felt it was a matter of public interest to show their “investigative reporting” was deceptive and dangerous. This angered Blackburn, who lashed out in an email to the group – sharing Ed's confidential emails about his deep concerns with Velie – and announced we were bowing out.

“I'm sorry to report that two [Central Coast Reporter] participants have ankled.” Blackburn emailed the group in June 2011. “Ed and Aaron Ochs expressed extreme dismay over the Los Osos sewer story posted Friday by Karen Velie at CCN, and both have decided not to participate in our project.

“It was proposed that three editors endorse each article to be posted on CCR, but that was not enough to satisfy the Ochs. Both Stacey Warde and I spent a lot of time trying to change Ed's



mind, to no avail. I'm very discouraged.”

“If CentralCoastReporter.com was online today, this would have been a very damaging event. In this vein only, it's good this happened now,” wrote Blackburn. He called our critique “vitriolic, self-righteous and factually offbeat.” Then he went on to accuse me of a lapse in judgment.

I didn't regret standing up to them, not for a minute.

Blackburn could lecture me for my inexperience and lacking judgment – as I was fairly new to the journalism business – but he couldn't suppress reasonable concern. Velie's reporting naturally left more questions than answers, and there was no public indication she sought answers, until facts “surfaced” after her work was published.

Several months had passed since Ed and I left the stillborn partnership, when I came across comments made on *The Tribune* website by Velie and her supporters. I wasn't entirely sure why they chose to troll the comments section of one of their competitors. I could only assume they wanted as many eyes to read their allegations as possible.

Some comments were made by people with their real names disclosed. Other times the comments were posted under various pseudonyms. They discussed details about the aggregate that weren't made public. They asserted CCN had rejected *us* for a partnership. One of the recurring talking points was the claim that I was turned down by CCN for a job because I “didn't take journalism courses” and lacked credentials. I never applied.

It was petty.

I figured Velie was engaging in some low-level smear campaign, but the fact it was going on for days on *The Tribune* and social media was unnerving.

Then, in February 2012, I heard from Blackburn. The email subject read: “An item of interest.” He sent me a link to a website operated by the *Columbia Journalism Review*, a national magazine for professional journalists published by the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. The website featured a database of local and national news startups. Blackburn wanted to show

me that CCN was listed in the database and acknowledged by one of the most respected journalism institutions in the country.

I was doubtful. I contacted the magazine and asked about CCN's inclusion in their database. I learned Velie submitted her website to the listing using their survey form and provided them with a profile of the site. Organizers of the database told me they included any news startups that filled out a form, but they didn't personally review each news startup's reporting. Yet Velie stated on CCN she was gratified by their recognition – as if to say the *Columbia Journalism Review* came across their reporting one day and decided to include them in their prestigious database.

It was like they were giving an award to themselves.

Again, petty. If I was so young, inexperienced, lacked judgment and “credentials,” why should they care what I thought?

Blackburn and Velie did not have the temperament to run a news site. If my criticism bent them out of shape this much, how could they withstand any sort of public scrutiny? If they were so enamored with their reporting that they ignored easily verifiable facts, why should they be taken seriously? For all the narcissism, haughtiness and bluster, they could've spent that time improving themselves. How hard was it for them to admit they made mistakes?

They gave me no reason to take them seriously.

## 6

Every Tuesday, I'd tune into the SLO County Board of Supervisors meetings on a live online stream. I'd watch see how the board deliberated and voted on countywide issues and to observe public comment.

Public comment is a section of a public meeting which gives people the opportunity to address the board on items on and off the agenda. As a writer who kept a close eye on the news, I felt public comment was a great opportunity for me to determine what residents wanted to discuss as opposed to what the board wanted to address.

For most residents, the overarching goal of public comment is to advocate for or against a position on the record and lobby the board. Unless a controversial issue arose, public comment was typically mild.

However, some residents used their public comment to personally attack board members and staff or prattle about some political-ideological bone they wanted to pick. Their public comment made the meetings more acrimonious. As CCN rose to prominence in the community, more residents approached the board to cite the website's provocative headlines, recite their unchecked allegations in their speeches, and turn the public process into a rhetorical firing squad.

One of those individuals was Julie Tacker, a former elected official from Los Osos and regular contributor to CCN who also appeared on Congalton. She called herself a "government watchdog" and appeared at several board meetings throughout the county. She chided the board with comments flaunting her self-aggrandizing moral indignation, interrupted often by various verbal tics, dots and dashes.

In 2004, Tacker was elected to the Los Osos Community Services District. When she left four years later, the district was in worse shape than before she was elected. Under Tacker's

leadership, the district went bankrupt; it took nearly a decade for the district to resurface with settled debts and a balanced budget. A Grand Jury investigated the board for failing to disclose any timelogs or billing records for a law firm they retained. The board actively settled lawsuits with non-profit organizations Tacker was involved with or close to. The district and its individual members were also sued for public waste by residents. The case was later settled.

Tacker was embroiled in several conflict of interest allegations that she used her position to financially benefit her business and partner Jeff Edwards. In 2006, the district's legal counsel expressed concern about Tacker, who refused to recuse herself when she sat in on two closed-session discussions with Edwards. Closed session meant sharing confidential legal matters behind closed doors with town officials only – the public could not by law participate. The discussions pertained to the district selling town property to Edwards. While the LOCSO's legal counsel stopped short of asking Tacker to step down, they did prohibit the board from entering into any contract with Edwards. This would be one of many conflicts that Tacker got herself involved in.

According to the district's legal counsel at the time, there was concern that Tacker was using her government position to disclose to Edwards the district's real property interests and internal discussions that weren't public record.

The press took notice of Tacker's series of apparent ethical breaches and repeatedly criticized her in scathing editorials. Meanwhile, Tacker continued appearing at board meetings to lecture county supervisors about their governance, ethics and potential conflicts of interest – all while paying no mind to mounting criticism of her conflicts.

Publicly, Tacker spun her advocacy as benefiting the public good. Privately, she made it clear to me, at least, that her efforts were linked to her business interests with Edwards, who – according to her – she had a romantic and professional relationship with since February 2006.

I spoke with Tacker in early 2006 while parked in front of a private property that she wanted the Los Osos sewer to be built

on. The site was not previously vetted by her board or studied. Tacker served as a tour guide for Patricia Johanson, an internationally-known municipal artist who worked with engineers to build aesthetically appealing and practical infrastructure projects including water recycling facilities. Tacker touted the private property, known as the LOVE (“Los Osos Valley Equestrian”) Farm, as the ideal location for the sewer.

Tacker pushed the district to consider a number of sewer locations out of town, including sites she admitted were not viable. Tacker told residents that a location known as the “Andre Site” was a feasible location for the sewer. Privately, Tacker told me the site was a non-starter because it was covered with power lines and located in a flood zone bordering on wetlands, and that Pacific Gas & Electric, the owners of the power lines, would never agree to the site being used to host a treatment plant.

“I gave Pandora and her friends a Trojan horse so they didn’t catch on,” Tacker explained, pointing to the LOVE Farm. Tacker was referring to Pandora Nash-Karner, one of her political adversaries and a former LOCSD board member who once championed for constructing the sewer on prime viewshed in the middle of town. If the sewer was built in the middle of town, it would be located directly across the street from a site Edwards leased with the intent to erect a mixed-use development he called Sandhill Village. The project was scrapped after local investors learned the lease owners were unaware of his plans and refused to green-light any commercial development.

Owners of the LOVE Farm used their property to provide customers land for horseback riding and stables. They also sold equine apparel. The owners showed no desire to sell.

I asked her why she was insistent on building the sewer on property that wasn’t vetted by the district and the public, Her first answer was that the site was far enough from the wetlands to not pose a water discharge threat to the nearby Morro Bay Estuary. Tacker added the land was already graded so it wasn’t an environmentally sensitive habitat area.

Then she elaborated further with a second answer.

“Jeff wants it here.”

Tacker said she wanted the LOVE Farm owners to use Edwards as their broker and sell their property to the district for fair market value. At the time, Tacker said she was employed by Edwards' company. Should the owners decline her offer, Tacker claimed she could use the district to eminent domain their property. The goal was to goad the property owners into selling so Edwards could potentially profit and the district could pursue a project on, according to Tacker, the most viable site available.

When Edwards ran for the Los Osos CSD later that year, he ran on the platform of building the sewer on that property.

This conflict was significant for several reasons. For one, Tacker was exploiting a controversy that embroiled the community for over three decades to allegedly benefit her business and romantic partner, when she was elected to serve with paramount loyalty to the public. For those 30 years, design and construction costs increased per inflation. Any sort of delays, any unnecessary political maneuvers or tactics would prove costly. This was a frivolous delay.

If what Tacker said was true – that she was employed by Edwards in early 2006 – and Edwards was the broker of the sale, Tacker might have received direct monetary gain from her partner's commission on the sale.

I was well aware of her past when she communicated with me in various on-the-record phone conversations we had from 2009 through late 2012. Prior to that, we occasionally spoke in person. I was reluctant to speak with her after learning that Edwards called advertisers of The ROCK and attempted to dissuade them from advertising for then-undisclosed reasons. We spoke with two business owners who told us Edwards personally accosted them at their business, yelling over their advertising in the publication. When I pressed Tacker on the reasons Edwards was intimidating our advertisers, she refused to answer.

Tacker was intimately familiar with new developments in the community and provided me timely updates while I was away from the action. Though she was particularly unscrupulous and

shrewd, Tacker was knowledgeable, as far as town news and issues.

In return for her cooperation, Tacker wanted me to write columns that pushed her agenda. I didn't cater to what she demanded out of me. Instead, I offered her opportunities to provide a viewpoint and lent her my ear when she wanted to vent. And she vented extensively.

Tacker lamented the criticism she received over conflict of interest allegations. I didn't question her about them, yet she proactively refuted the allegations to me. She said the mounting allegations were part of a campaign to discredit her activism; her accusers wanted to stifle dissent. When we went over the allegations in detail, she often deflected by saying things like, "That's not the point," or point to some local official being accused of conflict of interest – as if to say, if someone else does it, she can do it too. She never took personal responsibility for any missteps or lapses in judgment.

But she persisted, despite the unflattering headlines.

In 2007, Tacker and Edwards set up 528-FLOW, a side business that sold and installed low-flow plumbing fixtures to residents. Around the time she and Edwards formed the business, Tacker publicly advocated for a county-led water conservation program that would provide low-flow fixtures to residents. Privately, Tacker expressed confidence that the county would reimburse them for their services. Tacker never publicly disclosed her business interests. Only when *The Tribune* rebuked her conflict-laden advocacy did she come forward, stating in part that she had a right to take a stand on that issue regardless of her involvement with Edwards.

In a stinging rebuke, *The Tribune* editorial board warned voters, "Should she run for re-election [...] voters in Los Osos should think twice about keeping Tacker in office."

In 2008, Tacker convinced the district to create a green-waste chipping event that benefited Edwards and his property. Edwards used the free service for one of his properties. *The Tribune* learned the green-waste chipping event wasn't advertised to the

public and only a few homeowners signed up for it. When she was pressed to address the conflict, Tacker said it was Edwards' right to take part in the public service, but she didn't address the appearance of conflict.

No matter how hard she tried, Tacker couldn't avoid public scrutiny.

In 2010, she called me one evening to discuss applying for a spot on the Los Osos Community Advisory Council. In a rare display of self-awareness, Tacker joked that she'd be voted down if she applied because of her record. She ultimately decided to apply, only to be rejected almost unanimously by the council. When they caught word of Tacker's application, several residents appeared to oppose her nomination. Shortly after the council vote was cast, a sobbing Tacker called me to describe what happened. She seemed genuinely shocked that the vote against her was one-sided.

"What did I do them?" Tacker asked.

I didn't answer her directly. Instead I countered, "What did you expect?"

I was hoping for Tacker to have that 'come-to-Jesus' moment and realize her conduct as a former public official, self-styled "government watchdog" and employee working for a controversial developer – all happening simultaneously – fell below commonly held standards for public decorum.

That never happened. Instead, Tacker showed seething contempt. She was outraged that residents would have the audacity to oppose her nomination in spite of all the hard work she claimed she did. The "hard work" included wastewater project delays so costly, state legislation had to be enacted to transfer authority from her district to the county.

Tacker asked me to dig up dirt on community members who voted against her nomination and said she was compiling a "hit list." She rattled off the names of residents who voted against her. She asked me to obtain their addresses and phone numbers. "Jeff can pay them a visit," she told me.

I told her no, half-jokingly adding that I didn't want to be an



accessory to murder.

It was that moment when I started to think Julie Tacker was a sociopath. She anticipated the outcome, yet she remained appalled by it to the point of being vengeful. How dare anyone question the mighty Tacker! I thought her comments were threatening and completely inappropriate. I didn't know what Edwards was capable of. I hoped she was being hyperbolic with her grievances. Fortunately, nothing happened.

This was part of her pattern of behavior to suppress criticism.

She would ask me to review the local blogs and social media to round up any criticism and “unmask” critics if they were anonymous. When an unflattering online comment about her was published by someone she didn't know, Tacker would ask me to research that person online and obtain their contact information. She wanted her critics to remove their “slandrous” comments from the Internet. This was akin to a royal decree that disregarded the First Amendment. Yet she often complained to me how her free speech was somehow marginalized or restricted by government officials she often criticized.

Tacker complained that allegations about her conflicts of interest were “slandrous” – and that she felt “harassed” by anyone making them. Tacker told me she reported this “slander” to law enforcement, though I couldn't understand why she felt criticism was illegal. I couldn't quite understand the logic behind that.

In late 2011, a website appeared called “Los Osos Sentinel.” The anonymously led website, which referred to the Los Osos sewer saga as the “30-Year Reign of Terror,” urged residents to support federal, civil action against local “terrorists.” The site listed several people who they defined as “villains.” Tacker and her partner Edwards were mentioned because, the site claimed, they used the anti-sewer movement to further pursue their economic ambitions. While this claim was demonstrably accurate, the criticism angered Tacker.

“Who the fuck wrote that?” Tacker asked me. I told her I didn't know.

In a fit of seething rage, she said about the website's author, "Dead men tell no tales, and when I'm through with him, he won't be telling any more of them." I found her comments threatening.

She asked me to help her "remove" the information about her, stating it was "slander and should be removed from the Internet." I advised her to hire a lawyer if she was that upset about it and go through the proper remedies. She discussed calling law enforcement because she felt she was being harassed, but I told her it was a civil matter, not a criminal one.

When she wasn't obsessively dwelling on dissent she had no business controlling, Tacker spent time calculating her political ambitions.

In 2010, Tacker called me with a request. She informed me that she was considering a run for county supervisor. Her reason? She wanted to "elevate the conversation." She asked if my father and I could lend her a thousand dollars so she could file for her candidacy. Tacker insisted the donation was legal, and that she didn't have to file anything with the state's Fair Political Practices Commission.

Given everything I knew about her, what the community knew about her, what she'd said to me, I didn't want to be involved with her campaign in any way. Without hesitation, we declined to donate, stating we simply didn't have the money she needed. She ultimately decided against running.

From that point on, I decided to keep her at arm's length.

That same year, I learned she was busy working with her partner in his pursuit to close an airport in the nearby town of Oceano so he could redevelop it. Edwards hoped to spur a mixed-use development on the 58-acre County-owned airport. Despite residents, various pilot associations and county officials overwhelmingly opposing his plans, Edwards refused to stand down, insisting he was merely presenting information as part of a fact-finding phase, and it wasn't about any decision to develop. Yet at a series of meetings he organized, there was no indication that residents were swayed by his proposal.

At that time, Tacker was his employee. *The Tribune* reported that Edwards hired Tacker as “an environmental-permit consultant on his estimated 12 development projects,” but those projects were never specified by Edwards.

After Edwards’ efforts failed, Tacker began showing up at public meetings in Oceano as a “government watchdog,” addressing issues with the airport alongside Edwards.

Tacker became a regular speaker at Oceano Community Services District meetings, appearing in a community over 20 miles south of her hometown. Public records show Tacker regularly communicated with the Oceano Community Services District using both her personal email address and Edwards’ business email address. Tacker signed a majority of her correspondence with the board as Edwards’ Administrative Assistant.

Her “activism” would expand to targeting Oceano officials that she wanted ousted.

In January 2012, Tacker called me to suggest that I should write about the dysfunction going on with the Oceano Community Services District. She took issue with their district manager Tom Geaslan and his alleged mismanagement. She told me Geaslan was instructed by his board to put together a timeline of water issues in Oceano. Tacker claimed the board’s intent behind the request was to discredit a 2009 report by the County, claiming that seawater intrusion was contaminating Oceano’s groundwater supply. Geaslan was unable to provide that timeline, claiming the district’s computers were hacked.

Tacker asked me to write about it, but I declined, stating I didn’t know enough about Oceano politics to provide an informed opinion. Disappointed in my response, Tacker said she’d “commission” Karen Velie to write a story. A CCN story about the hacking incident and Geaslan’s alleged misconduct appeared shortly after our conversation.

This was the first time I learned about Tacker’s close association with CCN. I was curious with the terminology she used in association of the site. She talked about “assigning” and

“commissioning” stories as if she was part of their editorial staff or was a benefactor. Out of curiosity, I asked her about her relationship with CCN. She told me Velie babysat her children and declined to elaborate further.

Ever persistent, Tacker felt I could help her and Velie by retrieving some documentation. She asked if I was good with computers. I told her yes. Then she asked me if I had the know-how to hack into Geaslan's computer to retrieve the water report, which he claimed was inaccessible. I turned down her request, stating it was highly illegal to hack a government computer. When I told her that her request made me feel uncomfortable, Tacker claimed she was joking.

Tacker went on to explain that she had lost “access” to district information. By “access,” Tacker was referring to Oceano Community Services District chair Jim Hill. Hill abruptly resigned from the board in 2011, citing disagreements with the district manager over his accounting practices and his alleged inability to follow board direction. She described Hill as one of her and Edwards' supporters. I didn't know if Hill provided Tacker with public records, confidential closed session information or both. However, Tacker indicated Hill “was always helpful from the inside.”

Tacker's “watchdog” purview slowly expanded over time.

She regularly briefed me on staff she had trouble with, namely district and city managers throughout the county. She would go over with me their employment contracts, complain about their high salaries and float allegations of misconduct. She hoped I'd report on people she targeted for scrutiny, but I repeatedly and politely declined. When I asked her to provide evidence of misconduct, Tacker suggested that I “look into it,” adding she didn't have enough evidence on hand.

She developed a method for undermining and discrediting her adversaries, which she described to me in vivid detail.

Tacker would start by seeking public records of her target's résumé, their qualifications and the process leading to their hiring. When she got the information she needed, Tacker would reach

out to residents who were either suspicious or outright opposed the official's job performance. Tacker would build her case by conducting more public records requests for information about the official's alleged misconduct. If she found evidence of wrongdoing, she peddled it to CCN for a news story. If she was unable to find empirical evidence of wrongdoing, she would stoke suspicions by publishing allegations in CCN op-eds and establish perception of guilt.

She knew her audience. Most of CCN's vocal supporters distrusted SLO County and city government. On their website, the prevailing belief expressed by CCN's supporters was that public employees were feeding from the public trough without oversight and didn't demonstrate enough professionalism to justify their exorbitant salaries and large pensions. Clerical errors were spun as catastrophic blunders. Off-the-cuff comments by officials were promoted as incorrigible acts of incivility that necessitated extensive public shaming and criminal investigations. Yet when Tacker was caught in the cross hairs of public scrutiny, CCN was noticeably silent.

With CCN, there was always an underlying political agenda. Contributors like Tacker helped mold their reporting to generate distrust and play with reader gullibility. If a government official provably erred in their duties, then it was likely the allegations CCN published about them were true – not that they were proven true. The perception of guilt was sufficient.

In most cases Tacker was involved in, the official she targeted would leave their position with a settlement agreement in place, which included severance pay. This meant the governing body was unable to find cause for termination.

“What exactly do you gain from pushing these 'bad' people out?” I once asked her.

“Opportunity,” she said.

When the tide of public opinion on CCN began shifting in her favor, Tacker privately lobbied some of the embattled municipalities to hire her as district or general manager.

In the case of former Oceano CSD manager Tom Geaslen, he

was fired for cause in April 2013 after a district audit identified poor accounting practices. Geaslen reportedly paid himself at least \$36,000 more than his base salary as stipulated in his employment contract. Due to a nondisclosure requirement as part of a settlement agreement with Geaslen, district officials couldn't specifically comment on why he was fired. However, three district sources reported seeing a job application from Tacker and Edwards for the interim general manager position shortly after he was dismissed.

Tacker and Edwards's bid was unsuccessful.

In 2014, the district tapped Paavo Ogren to replace Geaslan. This angered Tacker, who published an op-ed on CCN that revisited long-debunked allegations CCN made about Ogren in 2011. Tacker also played a role in the "Sex and the Los Osos Sewer" series as one of Velie's sources.

"The [Oceano CSD] is foolish to fall for Ogren's puffed up résumé and overinflated price," Tacker wrote in her May 14, 2014 op-ed. Tacker also criticized the district for not being transparent with the public for their hiring process, but at no point did she disclose to the public her application for the position.

Tacker also applied for the general manager position in Los Osos amid a constant turnover of district staff. In 2013, Tacker applied for the position after then-general manager Susan Morrow was terminated without cause. Tacker was one of the leading proponents of her termination and publicly took credit for her ouster. According to two sources familiar with the Los Osos CSD's hiring practices in 2013, Tacker reportedly claimed the district sexually discriminated against her when she learned that she would not get the job.

She was passed over for Kathy Kivley, female, who Tacker would later accuse of misappropriating district funds three years later. Kivley was criticized by Tacker and others for compiling a bad audit report and making it difficult for independent auditors to independently verify her numbers, but were unable to find criminal wrongdoing. After Kivley settled with the district and parted ways, Tacker used the Kivley controversy she helped generate to launch her comeback bid for the district seat in 2016.

Eventually, I had a breaking point. Tacker's unapologetically amoral nature vastly outweighed her usefulness as a source for information. I had held my nose as long as I could.

In December 2013, I decided to cut any ties. Tacker tipped me off that she learned Los Osos CSD board member David Vogel moved outside the district boundaries and was therefore ineligible to serve. Tacker told me she had access to a multiple-listing service accessible only to realtors and researched Vogel's property records. She asked me if I wanted to write about the story. I declined. I asked her if she was going to inform Vogel about her discovery. She said, "Maybe."

About a week after we talked, CCN ran a story about Vogel stepping down. In comments published on the website, Vogel stated he was clearly unaware that he moved outside the district boundaries, stating in jest, "I won't have to go to all those meetings." Vogel, who was dismayed with how his circumstances were presented, wrote, "I was shocked that within less than two days after closing escrow, I was being accused of some sort of misconduct."

Tacker was quoted in the article wishing him well. She wasn't identified as the source for CCN's story on Vogel.

On Facebook, I publicly took aim at Tacker for being manipulative by using CCN to unnecessarily make an example out of him. Had she simply informed Vogel of the circumstances she exclusively learned about, there wouldn't be a "scandal." I figured she had additional ulterior motive. I accused her of using the story as an opportunity to inject herself into the headlines and run for Vogel's now-vacated seat. Tacker denied having these motives, but I didn't believe her. There was no reason to.

I ended my communication with Tacker. I had enough.

Tacker was the kind of corrupt politician that I once expected CCN to scrutinize, but they never did. Instead she was one of their listed contributors and featured opinion writers. She was protected at the expense of CCN's journalistic integrity. It struck me as bizarre that a controversial, scandal-ridden public figure would have extensive editorial control over a site that prided itself

on investigate journalism.



## 7

I was hired for a writer position with a local monthly magazine on September 11, 2012. My new employer Sandra Marshall, who ran *Information Press* (IP) with her daughter/assistant Kristi Hogue, said to me, “I know it’s weird to give you such joyous news on a terrible anniversary, but welcome aboard!”

This was the beginning of what I hoped was a transition out of covering local politics. After years of being my own boss and living too comfortably with my unstained editorial guidelines, I was excited to be part of someone else’s publication.

Nearly a year had passed since I moved back to the Central Coast, and I was looking for a fresh start.

*IP* was a magazine geared toward local political progressives with a targeted demographic of eco-friendly businesses, organizations and individuals. *IP* covered SLO County news and national politics, as well as social, environmental and health topics. Some of our articles were originals from paid and guest contributors, while others were syndicated from other news sources. The magazine also featured local events and a classifieds section. The theme of the magazine revolved around personal empowerment. Its official slogan was, “The good of the whole begins with the individual.”

By the time I was brought on board, the independently-owned *IP* was celebrating over 20 years in print. I started out writing and editing articles while assisting their social media manager. After a few months, I took over their social media accounts and helped lay out the magazine every month. Marshall slowly eased me into writing for the magazine. Most of the work I did was published with a “staff” byline, which I didn’t mind. Occasionally, I was assigned stories and had work published under my name.

When I started working for *IP*, I worked in a modestly-sized open office, located in an industrial area roughly two miles south of downtown San Luis Obispo. The office shared the same small

parking lot with a popular auto detailing business. *IP* shared the same office space with the Environmental Center of San Luis Obispo (ECOSLO), a local non-profit. Marshall was also chair of ECOSLO and was hands-on in their daily operations. ECOSLO events and programs were regularly featured in *IP* and blended seamlessly with our environmentally-conscious narrative.

Often times, we'd hurriedly put the magazine together before the printer's camera-ready deadline at the end of the month. It was stressful but exhilarating. After all the magazine's files were slowly sent to the printer, we'd wait with bated breath for confirmation that all our files were successfully transferred. Sometimes we experienced complications, but we always managed. Marshall would occasionally treat the staff to lunch or a relaxing get-together after our work was done on the issue.

We had a period of rest for about a week and a half after an issue was sent to the printer. During our downtime, I was assigned to write small news articles covering daily politics and news developments Marshall was interested in. When I wasn't writing, Marshall asked me to find links to topical articles, write a teaser about the subject, and share them on our website. The goal was to keep our online presence active with fresh content, even if that content was sometimes purloined from other sources. Once in a while, Marshall assigned me a larger story for the website, but out of consideration for time and labor spent, Marshall kept that kind of workload at a bare minimum.

I was still producing columns for *The ROCK*, but not on a full-time basis and when I wasn't on paid time. Ed wanted to continue cultivating the publication. I wanted to continue with investigative analysis and reporting.

Because she infrequently assigned me short stories, Marshall didn't see an issue with me publishing columns on the side as long as I didn't do work for *The ROCK* on company time. I told her *The ROCK* wasn't competition. My publication wasn't competing for the same ad dollars, our reader demographic didn't overlap, and we had a stylistically different approach to news coverage. We focused exclusively on local news. For all intents and purposes, *IP* was largely a "feel-good" publication with national/

political undertones.

Marshall and I talked about local news during periods of downtime. She asked me about stories we were doing in *The ROCK*. Eventually, we started talking about CCN and the conversations they were generating around their “news.”

She told me CCN went after a friend of hers who used to contribute to *IP*. Karen Velie once accused one of her contributors of running an unlicensed private consulting business that advised clients on water conservation, while being employed by the city of San Luis Obispo as a utilities conservation technician. Velie cited an unnamed city employee who claimed he conducted his private consultant business “for several years” using information he obtained from city computers. According to Marshall, the contributor ran workshops and provided free advice to those who were interested, but stated that didn’t interfere with city business.

Velie also accused her contributor of receiving free advertising in exchange for articles in *IP*. Marshall flatly denied the allegation in a comment she left underneath Velie’s article.

“My gosh, I can’t believe you would waste your time on attacking people without doing some fact checking first,” wrote an exasperated Marshall. “But that is your MO, isn’t it. Speak first, get the facts later. Great journalism.”

Marshall told me Velie’s article was circulated around the city government and her contributor’s job was negatively impacted by what she called “complete fabrications.” Velie never actually provided evidence that the contributor was illegally running a side business, but the perception that he did caused problems for him.

Marshall reminded me that Maria Kelly, the same person at the epicenter of CCN’s “Sex and the Los Osos Sewer” series, used to work for ECOSLO as their office coordinator. She told me about how the “news” about Kelly spread its way around the community and became an item of discussion during a handful of ECOSLO board meetings. She mentioned that one of ECOSLO’s board members regularly read CCN’s reporting and developed negative views about Kelly as a result of CCN’s coverage.

She lamented CCN's negative impact on the community, yet she cautioned me about scrutinizing them any further than I already had. She warned me a number of times, yet appreciated that I took a public stand against them.

Two weeks after I started working for *IP*, I saw a man in his fifties walk into our office, looking disoriented and disheveled. He carried a crumpled piece of paper, which he kept looking and squinting at. ECOSLO volunteers were busy coordinating for Coastal Cleanup Day, an annual beach and inland waterway clean-up event, and were out of the office. Since I was the only person inside at that moment, I got up from my desk and walked over to assist him.

“Can I help you?” I asked.

“I wanted to drop off my résumé for ECOSLO, I think that's what they're called. I'm looking for a job.”

“You can leave your résumé on their desk,” I told him. “I'll let them know you stopped by. They're busy with an event, so –”

“Alright. I gotcha.”

I glanced at his résumé briefly after he left it on the desk. I noticed his name: Randall Reed.

In June 2012, Velie wrote on CCN that a local homeless man, Randall Reed, was barred from local homeless services because shelter volunteers spotted his bike outside the shelter after curfew hours. Curfew hours were placed on recipients of homeless services to prevent loitering after the shelter's operating hours. According to two active volunteers and two staffers for Community Action Partnership of San Luis Obispo (CAPSLO), a non-profit organization managing the shelter Reed was reportedly barred from, no protocols were in place barring the homeless from the shelter for violating curfew. Shelter occupants needed a number of infractions before they were completely banned from accessing their resources.

Velie initially claimed Reed was a Purple Heart and Navy Cross recipient, but readers were skeptical. Some eagle-eyed readers searched through databases of military honor recipients and learned he never received the Purple Heart or the Navy Cross.

Velie could've easily checked to verify, but didn't.

By the time people started expressing skepticism about Reed's military status, Velie quickly edited her story and claimed Reed told her of his military accolades. When it became clear that Reed did not even serve in the military, Velie hastily issued a correction. Instead of her taking responsibility for not fact-checking his alleged claims, Velie blamed Reed, stating that he “apologized for trying to embellish his past and asked that the story be corrected.”

I remembered his name immediately and asked him about the medals. He denied mentioning anything about his alleged military honors to her and left, but he did admit to being reprimanded by shelter volunteers.

I tried tracking down Reed to elaborate on his interview with Velie, but he had no known address. The only thing listed on his barely legible résumé was a phone number, which was disconnected. When I attempted to contact him for this book, I learned Reed passed away in August 2017.

A homeless man appeared to be used by Velie as a prop for a sensationalized story that attacked a respected non-profit organization that provided homeless services. When the facts came to light, she immediately cast aspersions on Reed, portraying him as an unscrupulous braggart and liar in lieu of simply making corrections. It was never her fault for reporting inaccurate, unverified claims. It was always someone else's fault – and what better way to cover up for her mistakes than to blame a homeless man who likely didn't have the resources to defend himself.

This story would be the beginning of crazier things to come.

## 8

I sat in *IP's* new downtown office, working quietly on a number of stories Marshall assigned to me for the website. I was at my desk, typing away when I heard someone walk into our lobby.

I heard a young man's voice. "Hello? Is anyone here?"

An ECOSLO volunteer emerged from his office, which shared the lobby with us, and asked the man if he needed help. The man simply replied, "Work."

Marshall was in a meeting behind closed doors with Hogue in her office and didn't hear the man come in. Hogue eventually noticed him and came out to greet him. I walked into the lobby to see if anyone was assisting him.

He was a young black man around 17. I distinctly remember him carrying his résumé, which was printed on antique gold parchment card stock. He wanted to make a lasting first impression. He was well-groomed, wore dark corduroy pants and a slightly over-sized tan sports jacket. He revealed to Hogue and I that he was homeless. He used the Prado Day Center, a CAPSLO-operated homeless shelter located one mile south of us, as his personal address on his resume. He told us that he lived there with his mother, had nowhere else to go, and wanted a job to pay the rent for an apartment. We took his résumé, thanked him for stopping by and he left.

Our office was close to the shelter, so I often saw homeless people walking up and down the sidewalk. Some would loiter outside our front doors, find a shady tree to sit under and doze quietly with cars whizzing past them on a busy street. Others would drunkenly stumble into our parking lot and aimlessly wander around in a stupor. I once had to walk around a homeless man who slept on the concrete pathway to our office.

Marshall and I commiserated over the issue of homelessness. It was clear she was bothered by the abundance of homeless people

wandering through downtown. Many residents were. They noticed the influx of homeless, but didn't take into account how limited their resources are.

It was 2013. SLO County mental health, drug and alcohol services were underfunded. Rehabilitation and detox services were nonexistent. There was a shortage of available housing for the homeless and low-income residents. Homeless services volunteers noted a sharp increase of occupants at their shelters. Volunteers and staffers were overworked and overwhelmed.

My mind wandered to CCN's reporting on Randall Reed. I felt they were making a bad problem worse by disparaging one of the only resources available for our homeless population – all for ad clicks, page views and attention. As much as I didn't want to admit it, people were buying their flimsy goods. Friends were sharing their articles on social media and expressed concern about CAPSLO without skepticism. No one had the time to look at these articles and fact-check them. Frankly, it wasn't others' job to do.

At the start of 2013, CCN launched a series called “Keeping Them Homeless,” which was the theme of several articles about local homeless services. Their basic premise: SLO County's homeless population is severely mistreated by taxpayer-funded homeless services. Mistreatment ranged from embezzlement of homeless client funds for case management services, to petty donation theft, to needlessly placing children of homeless clients in extremely perilous situations.

Because of CCN's highly questionable track record, I couldn't in good conscience take their allegations at face value.

In early 2013, I decided to independently investigate their reporting on homeless services. I enlisted Ed to assist me in unraveling the complex web CCN weaved for their readers. There was a lot to sort through. Having one person on the case wasn't enough.

CCN started their series by focusing on a homeless man named Cliff Anderson, who lost his home in 2008 after a fire broke out in his apartment. According to CCN, Anderson was required to be

part of a case management program operated by CAPSLO that paves the way for clients to obtain temporary and permanent housing. CCN initially alleged the case management program received Anderson's government checks and failed to give him anything in return for three and a half years. They also claimed case management kept 50% to 70% of a client's money in a secure account allocated for housing expenses, and if the client is unable to make payments, they are barred from homeless services. They repeated this claim without verifiable source attribution.

When their stories started gaining traction in the community, Ed and I reached out to CAPSLO to learn more about their policies. Ed contacted CAPSLO staff and I spoke with volunteers involved in day-to-day operations at the Prado Day Shelter. I also spoke with shelter occupants on and off the record to get a sense of how they felt they were treated at the shelter.

I learned case management was completely voluntary. Clients could voluntarily opt for a savings plan that went toward housing if they wanted, and each plan was based on a client's income level and expenses. No staffer, volunteer or shelter occupant I spoke to said they were forced into case management or was threatened with banishment from the shelter for not participating. Because CCN didn't provide the names of CAPSLO's alleged victims, there was no way for me to independently corroborate their accounts. I was unable to find evidence of any deviation from that policy.

CAPSLO also adamantly denied they were the payee responsible for withholding Anderson's disability checks. Publicly accessible records and audits from CAPSLO revealed the organization did not withhold or has withheld client funds without the client's consent. According to two high-ranking CAPSLO officials that I spoke to at Prado Day Center, the organization offers refunds to clients who opted out of the program. I couldn't find evidence showing the contrary.

According to their own investigation from 2013, CAPSLO maintained that Anderson briefly provided the organization with funds when he was a sub-tenant in a housing unit where they served as a tenant on the master lease. This contradicted CCN's



claim that he was never housed when he was on case management, and that they personally withheld part of his benefits without providing any sort of meaningful assistance. When CAPSLO brought to their attention that Anderson was previously housed, CCN revised their claim. According to CCN, non-profit organization Family Ties was designated by CAPSLO to be Anderson's payee and unlawfully handled his funds, reportedly withholding more than \$2,000 of his Supplemental Security Income benefits. CCN claimed their mismanagement of his funds resulted in Anderson's benefits getting suspended.

With regard to Anderson, CCN wasn't able to prove CAPSLO did anything wrong. Their "investigative reporting" was more or less a repetitious exercise in publishing dubious allegations. I found no evidence that they investigated the allegations. CAPSLO said they investigated the allegations by CCN and determined there was no merit. Ultimately, it boiled down to a "he said, she said, they said" scenario that left me with more questions than answers.

The only person holding the key was Anderson himself, but his publicly listed phone number was disconnected and his whereabouts were unknown.

I looked into Family Ties, one of several organizations CAPSLO referred clients to for structured savings plans. CCN alleged CAPSLO and Family Ties worked in tandem to withhold client funds.

Family Ties CEO Lisa Niesen denied any wrongdoing. However, Niesen provided out-of-date information about her organization's board of directors, which CCN pointed out. Yet I found no evidence she "pocketed" Anderson or any other client's funds. I checked with local law enforcement to see if there any criminal investigations into Family Ties and Niesen. There wasn't any. CCN claimed the Social Security Administration (SSA) referred the case on Family Ties to the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) for further investigation. I checked with the OIG to see if any investigation of Family Ties was underway, but they denied any investigation was underway.

Niesen's accounting of Anderson's finances weren't as clear as

they could have been, but that lack of clarity wasn't proof of criminality. I couldn't find any motive or criminal intent. Despite CCN's reporting, Family Ties remained on the SSA's recommended list of representative payees for disabled clients until Niesen retired three years later. No local, regional or state agency took action that would validate the salacious allegations CCN published.

This led me to a growing frustration with CCN's anonymous sources, which they often described as "former and current CAPSLO employees." Journalists often use sources that prefer to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation. In a whistleblower situation, I understood the need to preserve anonymity. But as more information came to light that refuted CCN's claims about CAPSLO, I questioned the anonymous' credibility. What kind of employees were they? Were they involved in case management? Did they work at the shelter? Did they have a workplace dispute with CAPSLO? Were they disciplined, suspended or fired from their positions?

There was no way to know these answers. I reached out to CCN in early 2013 for comment, but they didn't respond.

Readers had difficulty deciphering whether or not the anonymous sources had personal knowledge of misconduct or heard from someone else about the misconduct. Sources they did identify by name – some of them being former employees – offered anecdotes that made CCN's allegations appear believable, but not provable.

Records provided by CAPSLO revealed CCN told their anonymous sources not to communicate or provide information for any investigation. According to CAPSLO, the sources CCN used were four former employees of their organization who left around 2010, three years before CCN's articles about homeless mistreatment were published. These former employees refused to cooperate in turning over any documentation for their investigation.

CCN claimed their "whistleblowers" were threatened with a lawsuit by CAPSLO. The website insisted they were simply protecting their sources as any journalist protecting their

anonymous sources would. As the only published source of criminal allegations against CAPSLO, CCN was obstructing the investigation they alone were allegedly conducting.

When then-San Luis Obispo councilman Dan Carpenter called into “The Dave Congalton Show” and urged Karen Velie to turn over evidence, Velie told him to call the Social Security Administration to determine if any fraud occurred. Frustrated with Carpenter asking for proof, Congalton disconnected him from the conversation. I spoke to Carpenter on the phone shortly after he called into the show to discuss his reaction to Velie and Congalton.

“It sounded to me like [Velie] made the whole thing up,” he said.

Cliff Anderson eventually disappeared from their lead. I started to wonder what happened to him. My curiosity reached a fever pitch when Velie revealed on Congalton's show that she convinced Anderson to give her power of attorney and designate her as his ombudsman. Why would a self-proclaimed investigative reporter for a site practicing the “strictest journalism ethics and standards” get so personally involved?

On Congalton's show, Velie recounted an incident when she drove with Anderson to the Social Security office in San Luis Obispo to pick up his disability checks.

None of this sat well with me. Velie was fixated on the idea of being financially successful as a direct result of her reporting. Could Velie possibly be exploiting an elderly homeless man for financial gain?

Velie also revealed that Anderson retained local attorney Stew Jenkins. Jenkins previously represented homeless clients that he believed were unconstitutionally harmed by San Luis Obispo's ordinances, including ticketing homeless who slept in their vehicles. As the legal representative for San Luis Obispo Homeless Alliance, Jenkins believed policies the city enacted were criminalizing people because they were poor. The City contended their policies were enacted to reduce loitering, suspicious and criminal activity. In Jan. 2013, Superior Court Judge Charles

Crandall ruled in Jenkins' favor to dismiss 99 criminal citations for people living and sleeping in their vehicles on public streets. CCN covered the lawsuit.

According to a letter he sent to Anderson in October 2013, Jenkins also managed to restore Anderson's SSI benefits and remove Family Ties as the representative payee. However, Jenkins informed Anderson that his firm would be unable to help in a civil case against Family Ties due to a lack of resources to pursue it further. Jenkins also expressed concern about his client's health issues, which were disclosed in detail by CCN. Anderson struggled with chronic alcohol abuse, which reportedly led to him developing a neurological condition called "wet brain."

Jenkins concluded his letter by stating that he "enjoyed" securing a positive relationship with his new landlord by sending him rent money monthly.

I learned Anderson's situation rapidly deteriorated from there.

After his benefits were restored, Anderson lived in a mobile home park fraught with problems. In 2012, *The Tribune* published a report about Mission Trailer Park's poor conditions. Craig Steffens, a tenant who lived in the park for over two decades, told *The Tribune* about the 33-space park's deteriorating conditions, with several amenities being closed off and tenant trailers being uninhabitable. The trailers would eventually be removed in 2015 and replaced with manufactured homes.

In February 2014, Steffens compiled a report about park nuisance issues and health hazards for two sites on Mission Trailer Park. Anderson's trailer was on one of the sites identified as highly problematic. Steffens described Anderson as an elderly disabled occupant living in "wretched squalor." The complaints were forwarded to Jenkins, the office of the mobile home park ombudsman and the City of San Luis Obispo's Code Enforcement department, among others.

Caregiver Desire Gallo assessed Anderson's trailer, noting it was possible that Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA), a bacterium that causes infections in different parts of the body, was present inside. Gallo mentioned Anderson had no

liquid petroleum gas (LPG) for cooking, space heat or hot water. Anderson was unable to drive and had no transportation, so he was confined to living quarters without essential amenities. He had a small electric space heater, which – when placed in a small area – was a fire hazard. His indoor lighting was inoperable and wiring exposed, which created an electrical hazard.

Anderson was revealed to have broken his right hip as a result of stumbling down unsecured front steps. He also broke his left hip by tripping over an exposed, unsecured park main water line that ran directly in front of the steps. He broke his left ankle from tripping on a loose tile in the bathroom. He also broke multiple ribs by tripping on the uneven ground in front of his house.

According to Gallo and a number of park tenants, Anderson had several vagrants loitering loudly and drunkenly on his site. According to the San Luis Obispo Police Dept., several of Anderson's neighbors complained about a heavy traffic of vagrants visiting Anderson.

One of the Mission Trailer Park tenants, who did not want to be identified in this book for fears of retaliation by Jenkins, reported seeing a woman in her mid-fifties with short brown hair and green eyes regularly driving up to Anderson's trailer in a white pickup truck. This description appeared to match Velie. The tenant claimed to have seen the woman reportedly providing alcohol to Anderson.

None of these details were published on CCN.

CCN said CAPSLO couldn't be trusted to provide housing for the homeless, but their alternative to CAPSLO's case management was clearly worse. On top of that, Velie was personally involved in this man's life. CCN made no attempt to be transparent about their involvement, opting instead to pivot to another barrage of allegations.

I felt Velie unjustly used an elderly disabled man as a disposable prop for clickbait. When he no longer served a purpose for their "reporting," Anderson was left in squalor by the same people who claimed to support the homeless. Shameful.

Jenkins also shares responsibility. As someone with homeless

clients, as someone who facilitated the payments to Anderson's landlord, who was well aware of his client's living conditions, Jenkins was uniquely responsible for Anderson. Prior to making payments to Anderson's landlord, Jenkins should have read *The Tribune's* coverage of the park's inhospitable conditions. His letter to Anderson indicated a strong concern for Anderson, yet Jenkins placed him in "housing" that was demonstrably worse than the kind of housing CAPSLO was able to find for their other clients – especially when Anderson was literally unable to access vital resources that homeless services provided or could readily refer him to.

I never thought CAPSLO was perfect. By their own admission, they weren't. Services weren't always readily available due to limited donations and volunteers. Housing wasn't always available to clients because of various economic conditions. They readily admitted to the existence of internal disputes between staffers. However, there was little dispute in the community that they provided vital services to the most vulnerable members of society.

Without exercising proper care or due process, CCN was reckless in publishing unsubstantiated and demonstrably false allegations about CAPSLO's handling of their clients. Anyone in need of assistance could be deterred from using their services if they were made aware of the allegations, and they were. In mid-2013, I spoke with two CAPSLO staffers and one volunteer who informed me that copies of CCN articles were placed around the Prado Day Shelter, neatly stapled and collated by chronological order of date published. No one knew for sure who distributed copies around the shelter, but it was clear from the onset that a coordinated smear campaign against homeless services was in play.

## 9

Since 2012, the vast majority of Karen Velie's reporting was, in some way, connected to one man: SLO County Supervisor Adam Hill.

Hill was an outspoken supervisor who represented SLO County's 3rd District, which includes around 60% of the City of San Luis Obispo, the communities of Edna Valley, Avila Beach, and the cities of Pismo Beach and Grover Beach. Hill was elected to the County Board of Supervisors in 2009 and won three consecutive terms. A New Jersey native, Hill moved to SLO County in 1995 and taught in Cal Poly San Luis Obispo's English department through 2010. During that period, one of his students was Karen Velie.

"For a couple of years, I would talk to [Velie]," said Hill in his April 2012 interview with the *New Times*. "I would hear her say things that I knew were fabrications or, you know, the axes being grinded for somebody who had some problem with whoever it was she was trying to write a story."

In the interview, Hill mentioned her and CCN because he disagreed with their critical reporting on him. Hill referred to Velie's article on an incident in which he jokingly identified himself as the person he was campaigning against in a voicemail to one of his supporters. Unsure of who left the voicemail, the supporter contacted Ed Waage, Hill's opponent in the 2012 race, who recorded the voicemail and sent it to CCN. According to emails provided by Hill, Velie vaguely asked him about some sort of tape and if he was the voice on it. Hill wasn't sure what she was referring to, and found out after her article was published that she was referring to his voicemail. Velie accused him of denying that he was the voice behind the voicemail.

"So I'm OK when people criticize me on [local issues]," Hill said in his *New Times* interview, "but that seemed like you've really got to be on the side of trying to humiliate me just for the

sake of humiliating me to think of that as a story.”

CCN never addressed Hill's specific contentions with his former student's reporting. Since Hill's interview was published, Velie published over one hundred articles about her former teacher, dwelling often about his physical and mental characteristics, mannerisms, verbal quips and minor eccentricities that other news sources didn't cover. These observations were interwoven with several conspiracy theory claims involving the supervisor.

Four months later, CCN would accuse Hill of campaigning to “cripple” and shut down the website. They accused him of threatening their reporters, advertisers and radio personalities that supported CCN; that Hill's “manufactured” claims were echoed by other public officials; that he claimed CCN reporters committed crimes and were paid to write false news stories; and that he threatened unnamed radio personalities with a “denial of access to public officials.”

Court records provided by Velie in 2017 show Hill discussed “push back” against Congalton if he allowed Velie on his show to continue “defam[ing] people in malicious attempts to damage their reputations.” This comment was made in May 2012, two months before CCN accused Hill of campaigning to shut down CCN. In the same email thread, Hill said Velie declared war on his personal life, adding, “Karen Velie is a mean, vindictive, and dishonest person who seeks to lower the discourse of the community and make herself feel important by humiliating people who actually give back to the community.”

An exhaustive review of public records between Velie and Hill since 2012 showed the supervisor, who was at times combative with Velie, made no personal threats against her or the website. In her CCN article, Velie pluralized “reporters” to indicate he reportedly threatened more than one CCN reporter, though the only relevant evidence she provided was correspondence between her and Hill. Similarly, Velie implied Hill “bullied” multiple advertisers when she only provided one email between Hill and an advertiser.

In a June 2012 email to an advertiser, Hill forwarded a



comment left on the website Topix.com about Randall Reed, the man Velie claimed was the recipient of several military honors.

“To claim and solicit donations to a phony site with phony stories is a crime,” wrote an anonymous user named “NAVYVETS.” The user also said, “Those families and fellow veterans we urge all of you to no longer support any advertisers on the calcoastnews.com site, how many other stories are false, fake and imposters.”

CCN falsely claimed Hill personally made those remarks.

Ron Yukelson from Sierra Vista Hospital, the advertiser Velie was in contact with, cited a phone call from a veterans organization that threatened to divert their business elsewhere if they continued supporting CCN. Yukelson asked for the advertising campaign to be suspended, but expressed his continued support for the website and offered to resume advertising with CCN at the “right time.”

CCN falsely claimed the advertising “contract” was canceled, and that Hill was solely responsible for that cancellation.

An anonymous user named “PaulJones” commented underneath Velie’s article, “As it’s rather obvious that I will be bringing a suit against Hill as a person and probably the County as well (since Hill is using his position as a personal platform to attack this media venue).” The comment was later taken down and reinstated, replacing the first person “I” with “CCN” and switched to third person.

It was fairly obvious Velie was commenting anonymously under her own articles.

Velie played on a known fact, which was that Hill was a particularly outspoken member of the community and wasn’t afraid to confront people he felt crossed the line. Some residents were certainly intimidated by his abrasiveness, but CCN strongly insinuated that his abrasiveness had a far deeper, more nefarious purpose without any corroborating evidence.

I got to know Hill years after I criticized him in my columns for his tone and heavy-handed approach to governing. Early on, he was personally critical of some of my work, calling it “cheap”

and “tawdry.” I bore the bluntness of his words, but never felt in danger of being shut down. I spoke to *Tribune* and *New Times* reporters who were occasionally on the receiving end of his Jersey-flavored ire, but didn’t feel intimidated or threatened. While he was sometimes brash, they admitted he was knowledgeable and passionate about the issues in his district.

By late 2012, as we were winding up our investigation into CCN, Ed and I reached out to him to get his thoughts on their voluminous allegations made against him. He was skeptical about speaking to us on the record at first, but we persisted and got his side of the story.

Hill denied the existence of a conspiracy to “cripple” and shut down CCN. We requested emails between him, Velie, Congalton and advertisers, which he turned over. There was obviously a history between Velie and Hill – dating back to when he was a teacher and she was his student – but the acrimony didn’t match the allegations she was making on CCN as a supposedly unbiased “investigative reporter.”

Hill became part of CCN’s coverage on homeless services because at the time he was in a relationship with CAPSLO’s then-homeless services director Dee Torres. Hill was also the founding chair of the Homeless Services Oversight Council, a group formed in 2008 to improve SLO County’s approach to homelessness. Throughout his campaigns and tenure as supervisor, Hill regularly discussed homelessness countywide and measures to reduce it.

CCN accused Hill of having a conflict of interest because he occasionally voted to support county funding for CAPSLO while being in a relationship with Torres. Hill said recusal wasn’t necessary because Torres didn’t personally or financially benefit from his vote.

According to CCN, Hill threatened to “destroy” the website if they continued to investigate allegations concerning the mistreatment of homeless in SLO County, including allegations against Torres. There was no evidence Hill specifically threatened to undermine the website over their reporting, though he was clearly irate over coverage he felt was misleading and defamatory.

We reached out to Torres to get her side of the story around the same time we reached out to Hill. Around the end of 2012, Torres was the linchpin of their homeless coverage, portrayed as someone who oversaw and was directly involved in the mistreatment of several homeless individuals. Some of the individuals were named, others weren't. Torres wasn't able to comment on specific cases due to client confidentiality. I was unable to corroborate the allegations about Torres with CCN. Neither they nor their sources would respond after being contacted.

Torres initially corrected CCN's reporting in comments underneath their "Keeping Them Homeless" articles, but was rebuffed with a torrent of misogynistic attacks and thinly veiled threats from the anonymous lynch mob. Velie and staff insisted Torres declined to comment when they reached out to her, yet emails provided by Torres showed she responded to their repeated inquiries.

Some of her comments were scrubbed by the website for undisclosed reasons. I believed they removed her comments to prevent their scandalous narrative from being diluted with a reasonable counterpoint.

Every time they published one of their articles on Hill and Torres, CCN staffers would appear on Congalton's show to reiterate what they wrote about. Instead of adding anything to their story that would make them appear credible, CCN writers would talk about how popular they were, how widely read they were, and how hundreds of thousands of users visited their site monthly. Then they would joke and speculate about Hill and Torres' personal lives, speculate about their ex-partners and ex-spouses. They would sometimes joke about Hill and Torres' personal looks and rant about their sex lives.

It was strange to tune into a show named "Hometown Radio," which featured a non-profit that empowered women in one segment and berated a female homeless advocate for reportedly having several ex-boyfriends in another.

Conversations taking place on Congalton's show did not bring anyone closer to the truth. There was no intellectual curiosity or

enlightenment – nothing that motivated people into taking constructive steps toward a satisfying solution. Personally, it was infuriating to listen to, yet I constantly observed a large influx of people calling into the show to support CCN and their reporting on Hill and Torres.

Congalton was particularly fixated on both of them. He regularly claimed Hill, who he used to be friends with, repeatedly threatened him. He talked about receiving threatening emails from him and being “physically confronted” by Hill in an elevator, once implying he was assaulted. The anecdotes, which Congalton said were examples of Hill’s “behavioral problems,” were ambiguous and undocumented. Congalton alleged the threats were made because of his support for CCN and Velie.

Though he liked to talk about Hill’s behavior, Congalton’s on-air antics led me to question his behavioral issues. There was so much moral indignation coming out of this self-righteous windbag, I had to wonder if he was hiding something. I decided to investigate his past record.

After reading his book, *Three Cats, Two Dogs: One Journey Through Multiple Pet Loss*, I learned Congalton had a tumultuous tenure working for *The Tribune*, especially after five of his pets tragically lost their lives in a house fire. I tracked down former *Tribune* staffers who worked with Congalton before, during and after the accident. Four *Tribune* staffers described Congalton as irate, self-centered, combative and difficult to work with. They described Congalton as having a “breakdown” because he felt *The Tribune* leadership didn’t console him enough over the loss of his pets. He reportedly clashed with female staffers, including former *Tribune* publisher Julia Aguilar and former executive editor Sandra Duerr, over what he reportedly felt was a lack of compassion for his grief and not allowing him to publish columns about losing his pets.

*Tribune* staff was keenly aware of columns penned by Congalton, which appeared on his now-defunct blogs, attacking the newspaper’s leadership for over a decade and spreading rumors about staffers’ private lives.

Tensions between *The Tribune* and Congalton boiled over

when in 2010, Congalton dished about some of his early experiences with *The Tribune* on CCN, musing about the alleged infidelity of an unnamed “Publisher,” who was replaced with Aguilar in 1990. In several comments posted underneath his CCN column, Congalton was subsequently criticized for spreading “office gossip” about staff by *Tribune* alum. Their comments were reportedly removed by CCN and commenters were banned. This led to *Tribune* staff publicly distancing themselves from the hot-headed town gossip.

Congalton also had an adversarial relationship with the *New Times*, accusing them of sexism in the newsroom and failing to publish investigative reporting. Staffers occasionally debated Congalton on various blogs he maintained, but ultimately felt a public debate with the radio host was unnecessary. He ratcheted up criticism of the magazine after Karen Velie left the *New Times*. He parroted her allegations, both on CCN and his personal blog, that sexism was the primary reason why she was fired. He also claimed the *New Times* had growing frustration over Velie's “success,” and that their frustration was fueled by “pervasive sexism.”

Similar to how he aired his grievances about *The Tribune*, Congalton used CCN as a platform to criticize *New Times* staffers.

His juvenile rambunctiousness would soon land him in legal hot water with *New Times*. In 2014, an anonymous CCN account accused then-managing editor Ashley Schwallenbach of having sexual relations with multiple men in the office. The account making those comments, “PaulJones,” was the same person who discussed filing a lawsuit against Hill for conspiring to shut down CCN.

Schwallenbach and her partner Colin Rigley contacted Velie to have the comment removed. She reportedly refused. Velie relayed her experience to Congalton, who later reiterated the allegation on-air as statements of fact. Two *New Times* staffers employed at the time claimed the publication reportedly threatened Congalton with legal action if he didn't retract his comments. Congalton later recanted his comments, but not before screaming at the *New*

*Times* on air in a high-pitched squeal, demanding they “go after the bad guys,” not Velie.

Congalton’s lengthy obsession with the media became part of his legacy. It was one thing to analyze and criticize reporting from the perspective of a former *Tribune* columnist, it was another to recklessly spread innuendo about reporters and editorial staff to hundreds if not thousands of SLO County residents, unabated.

By the beginning of 2013, I had a firmer understanding of who CCN was, who their support network was and the vendetta-driven atmosphere they thrived in. Clearly, CCN and Congalton had a tumultuous relationship with the media and critics, but they dishonestly spun their clearly observed vindictiveness as a righteous crusade against the establishment.

Ed and I converted all our findings and observations into our own feature series in *The ROCK*. In Feb. 2013, *The ROCK* published its three-part feature series on CCN and Congalton. The series was named “V is for Vendetta: Inside the CalCoastNews, Congalton Chaos Machine.”

It wouldn’t be long before we heard from the Chaos Machine itself.

IO

Ed received a call from Blackburn in Feb. 2013, the day after he published his “V is for Vendetta” feature story.

“Ed!” Blackburn stammered breathlessly. “Ed, are you there?”

“Yes I am, Dan.”

Ed waved me over. When Blackburn called, I was seated in Ed's office. He mouthed the words to me, “Dan is mad, mad, mad.” I remember smirking and whispering to him, “Oh good,” before opening up my laptop and taking notes of the conversation. This is a reaction we anticipated.

“I thought we were cool,” Blackburn said. “I thought we were – oh, I can't believe this. I'm so upset, my hands are shaking, Ed. They're shaking. I can't breathe!”

Ed looked at me and rolled his eyes. “No, we're not 'cool,' Dan,” he deadpanned.

“I'm so upset. I'm having my wife reading your so-called 'article' to me. Can't stand to read it.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“This is a disaster,” Blackburn wailed. “A total disaster. Media don't attack other media. It's unprofessional.”

I thought Blackburn was joking. Ed and I read column after column on CCN, taking aim at mainstream media by name for over three years. He couldn't be serious.

No, he was serious.

“Yes, totally 'unprofessional' Dan. Okay.”

“And what your mentally ill son wrote about Karen, it's just –”

Ed and I started laughing loudly. “Anything else, Dan?”

“I guess a couple of assholes can start a news site.” Blackburn referred to us.

“They sure can,” Ed said with a wide grin.

The conversation quickly ended. When it was all over, Ed and I

looked at each other. We arrived at the same conclusion: Blackburn was so upset he'd lost his bearings. He was barely coherent, had trouble speaking without stammering into breathlessness; he couldn't remember the fact that we publicly disavowed his reporting three years earlier; he couldn't articulate what he felt we got wrong and never tried to. This was the rambling of an aging, crestfallen journalist, vastly ill-equipped to defend his indefensible smear campaigns.

Our feature series included extensive investigative reporting and forensic analysis of their reporting practices, not dissimilar to online analysis of politically charged media outlets like *FOX NEWS* or *Breitbart*. In our reporting, we concluded CCN misled their readers by misstating CAPSLO's policies and using potentially biased, unnamed sources to push through an editorial narrative that couldn't be independently verified – not by writers like me, law enforcement or federal agencies with a compelling public interest in investigating homeless abuse.

To corroborate our conclusions, we released a series of email communications between Velie and CAPSLO. The organization had responded to Velie's accusatory and ambiguous questions at length, but her reporting did not accurately reflect their responses. Instead, CCN and Velie chose to pursue their sensationalized narrative with a wanton and reckless disregard for the truth.

Blackburn was upset with us for our analysis, but I felt his frustration should've focused on his controversial protégé and himself. Had I spoken to Blackburn, I would've simply told him to do better. While news media criticizing other media is sometimes considered unproductive, Ed and I believed our reporting and analysis was a matter of public interest.

Within days after Ed and I published our feature series, Dave Congalton went on a 45-minute-long rant about us. He didn't refer to us by name, but called us the “father and son bloggers from Los Osos.” At the time, we had been Morro Bay residents for two years.

He referred to me as “boy blogger” among other names, insisting my reporting on his tumultuous tenure at *The Tribune* was not accurate. He told his listeners that few people read us, yet



because he mentioned us – and did so repeatedly, to our delight – our web traffic quadrupled within a few days.

Around the end of his segment, Congalton invited me onto his show and challenged me to a confrontation, which sounded like he wanted a physical one. This was coming from the same person who often whined about Hill’s allegedly threatening behavior toward him. I couldn’t resist these tasty, creamy morsels of irony, so I wrote him an email and accepted his invitation to appear on air. In typical Congalton fashion, he immediately responded and rescinded his invitation.

Was he was afraid of the “boy blogger”?

One month after our articles were published, Karen Velie appeared on Congalton’s show and referred to our work as “diatribes.” Then she falsely accused me on air of being hired by Hill to criticize her reporting practices. To my knowledge, this was the first time she accused me of conspiring with the county supervisor to discredit her. This was coming from Velie, the same person who scoffed at Hill’s allegation that she was paid to write fake news stories.

Frustrated I was falsely accused of being paid off to criticize her, I sent corrections to Velie, Congalton and 920 KVEC station management. I received no response. No on-air correction was made. After running out of remedies to exercise, I documented Velie’s allegation in a column.

Shortly after our feature stories were published, I personally heard from people who were targeted by CCN. I reached out to several of them for this book, but some did not want to be identified citing fears of retaliation. Most of the people who reached out to us back in 2013 also wanted to remain anonymous because they feared retaliation – not from adversaries, but from CCN’s reporters. One common method of retaliation they deployed was angry, harassing calls that were similar to the one we received from Blackburn.

Some were concerned about being stalked, as Velie often bragged on the radio about personally going through her target’s garbage or hiring professional “dumpster divers” to obtain

revealing information, potentially trespassing on private property.

One of the first people I spoke to about his experiences with CCN was Kenny McCarthy.

McCarthy lived in Santa Margarita and was raising three children since his wife passed away from an inherited heart disease in 2010. Before the facts were known about her cause of death, Velie published an article claiming his wife was planning to “take flight” from a tumultuous marriage. She cited unnamed “friends” of his wife. The article insinuated McCarthy was somehow involved or was responsible for his wife's untimely death. Readers began to speculate and point fingers at McCarthy. Some even went to share their concerns about the “murder” on *The Tribune*. McCarthy claimed his neighbors worked closely with Velie to portray him as dangerous and a threat to his children.

As a result of CCN's reporting, the SLO County Sheriff's Dept. and the District Attorney launched a personal investigation into McCarthy, which he said “tore my life apart.” McCarthy claimed investigators accused him of being involved in his wife's death, which he vigorously denied. As a result of the heightened scrutiny that CCN helped foment, McCarthy said he lost clients from his digital marketing agency. He claimed he was shunned by his in-laws at his wife's funeral and was isolated from relatives.

A CCN user named “stoptheinsanity,” who posted on *The Tribune* using the same moniker, threatened to report his family to Child Welfare Services if he didn't “practice anger management.” Three months after CCN's article was published, McCarthy received a letter from CAPSLO. The letter stated that a “report of concern” was filed about his children.

Though the report was dismissed, McCarthy and his family struggled to rebuild their lives, which was now made public and not by choice. He decided to take control of the dialogue by presenting his side of the story on his personal blog, SLOKenny.com. He published documentation showing the backlash he endured as a result of CCN's coverage.

McCarthy's story was heartbreaking and eye-opening. This was the first story I came across from someone who was able to

painstakingly document evidence of their emotional distress as a direct result of CCN's reporting. His story showed me how powerful words were, especially when used on a "news site" and weaponized to make someone personally suffer.

Other victims I communicated with shared similar stories of their personal and professional lives torn asunder. I heard from government officials throughout the county who claimed they experienced personal hardship because of CCN's reporting, but what fascinated me was the stories I heard from private citizens who weren't accustomed to being digitally disemboweled on a local news site that thousands of people read daily.

I came across a CCN article from 2012 that reported on two local waste management officials: William Worrell, who served as a manager for SLO County's Integrated Waste Management Authority (IWMA), and Arroyo Grande businessman Charles Tenborg. Worrell was accused of awarding an illegal no-bid contract to Tenborg, a local IWMA contractor who specialized in electronic waste recycling. Writers Blackburn and Velie accused Tenborg of encouraging his clients to skirt state law by illegally transporting hazardous waste, and of being fired from his previous position with the county. No specific sources were cited in the article. Velie referred to her sources as unnamed "city employees" and "city officials."

Records show Tenborg and Worrell sent a detailed retraction demand letter, which provided several corrections. They never received a reply.

The 2012 CCN article was spread among several of Tenborg's professional contacts in an industry mailing list. Additionally, the article was shared hundreds of times throughout the county and state. Tenborg said he lost clients and had to sell his business as a result of the article being published. According to two sources with personal ties to him, Tenborg and his family were emotionally devastated by the article. He went from being a well-respected and reliable waste recycling contractor to a stereotypical caricature of an unapologetically corrupt government employee.

By early 2013, I learned Tenborg was considering legal action against CCN for defamation. As a result of anticipated litigation,

I decided to follow Tenborg's case closely and monitor ongoing developments.

In May 2013, Tenborg filed his defamation lawsuit against Velie, Blackburn and CCN. Following *The Tribune's* reporting on the case filing, I published an article on *IP* about it, stating in part that the website was controversial for publishing unsubstantiated allegations of wrongdoing.

This was not the first time Velie was sued for defamation.

In 2010, the former dean of Cal Poly's College of Engineering sued Velie for defamation. In court records filed in December that year, Mohammad Noori claimed he was subjected to racial and defamatory attacks by Velie and conservative blogger Roger Freberg. Noori claimed he was falsely accused by CCN of spearheading a proposed engineering program based out of Jubail, Saudi Arabia that reportedly discriminated against women, Jews and gays. There was no evidence Noori approved of the Saudi's discriminatory policies, but CCN strongly insinuated he did because of his Middle Eastern heritage. After CCN's reporting on Noori was published, the Jubail program was canceled.

"I have been portrayed as bin Laden, being anti-Jew, anti-gay and anti-women, all of which are completely false," Noori told Cal Poly's *Mustang News*. "These hateful, defamatory and libelous attacks are un-American and have resulted in a lot of stress, emotional suffering and have destroyed my entire career and reputation."

CCN also wrote that university faculty was generally dissatisfied with the "increasingly unpopular" Noori, and building resentment led to the Cal Poly administration forcing him to step down. They also claimed "widespread dissatisfaction" was the reason Noori was fired from his previous position as mechanical and aeronautical engineering department head from North Carolina State University, though they were unable to show records of dissatisfaction.

When their articles were published, CCN readers accused Noori of being a terrorist. The site was deluged with anti-Muslim rhetoric and criminal threats against Noori. On Facebook, CCN

readers called for the “terrorist” Noori to be deported, imprisoned and violently executed. On his blog, Freberg placed former Islamic terrorist leader Osama bin Laden’s head on top of a Cal Poly jersey and associated Noori with that image. Freberg eventually took the image down.

In 2011, the court ruled that Freberg’s criticism of Noori was constitutionally protected and he was dismissed from the suit. However, Velie remained listed as a defendant. Though the website claimed she was never served with legal papers, Velie bragged on “the Dave Congalton Show” that she was skilled at avoiding process servers, particularly the ones who attempted to serve her with Noori’s court papers. According to Noori, his attorney withdrew from his case, leaving him unable to continue his case against Velie.

I was frustrated with the lack of recourse available for people who felt they were defamed and tarnished by CCN’s reporting. Even if legal options were readily available, defamation lawsuits in California were rarely successful – that is, unless plaintiffs were financially able to sustain the case through all the legal processes. Often times, defamation cases were dropped because the publicity surrounding them would naturally re-victimize the victims involved.

Yet none of that would happen if the defamation source reviewed the claims, clarified, corrected and apologized. But for CCN, the preservation of their fragile, undignified ego was more important than the preservation of journalistic integrity.

In 2014, *Rolling Stone* commissioned the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism to independently review one of their investigative news articles that centered around a University of Virginia student’s alleged gang rape at a campus fraternity house. The facts as reported by *Rolling Stone* were sharply contested by the *Washington Post*, *Boston Herald* and several individuals mentioned in the article. Columbia University’s report uncovered significant lapses in journalistic judgment and institutional problems with *Rolling Stone*’s reporting in general. The report was published in its entirety by *Rolling Stone* along with an apology from managing editor Will Dana. Though they

## DEFAMERS

were hit with defamation lawsuits, *Rolling Stone* felt accountability was painful but necessary.

CCN desperately needed an independent review of their reporting.

If there was anything I learned from the *Rolling Stone* controversy, it's that bad reporting is completely avoidable if reporters exercised a reasonable standard of care and took reasonable measures to correct the record when necessary. When it came to their most controversial work, CCN did neither.

## II

With *IP* publisher Sandra Marshall's permission, I provided links to *The ROCK* feature series on *IP*. She liked what we wrote so much that she wrote a ringing endorsement in her March 2013 Publisher's Note.

"Media: Respect the power you have been given – whether working in print, radio or internet," Marshall wrote. "*IP* is privy to many potentially juicy stories; without full facts we avoid reporting them. *IP* has experienced false allegations without the source calling to verify the facts. I have been witness to the unfair accusations and torment of an employee who was never given a chance to be heard. Recently, I learned of screaming phone calls and name calling by so [sic] called news sources to another source. Is this journalism?"

"Due to these so-called facts, when I read reports from Cal Coast News I have to wonder what the truth is. Our local reporter, Aaron Ochs, has been following the lead reporter Karen Velie, and has recently posted a story on her style of reporting. I have reviewed it and concur: the facts are correct."

Marshall didn't have to write that. I was grateful that Marshall recognized the work we did. I was floored to see that recognition in print. She took a bold risk in endorsing my work, knowing the kind of retaliation they engaged in. It wasn't the *Tribune* or *New Times*, but at least my work was publicly acknowledged in a meaningful way.

Since March 2013, I regularly briefed Marshall on tips I was reviewing. She encouraged me to continue my investigations while regularly reminding me to maintain my focus on *IP* during work hours.

During my time at *IP*, I befriended Allyson Nakasone, who served on the ECOSLO Board of Directors. Nakasone read my work and occasionally asked me questions about CCN. She reluctantly admitted to me that she was an avid reader of CCN

and believed some of their allegations were true. Nakasone thought I was overly critical of the website.

I remember her telling me, “Don’t ever donate gift cards to CAPSLO.”

“Why is that?” I asked her.

“[Dee] Torres steals them, apparently.”

In mid-March 2013, CCN published an article accusing Dee Torres of routinely taking gift cards and personally using them. They based their allegations on claims by “a number of former homeless services employees and ex-boyfriends,” yet they only named one of Torres’ ex-boyfriends. The ex-boyfriend alleged Torres kept gift cards in her purse and used them for family outings, errands and Christmas gifts for her friends.

I thought it was suspicious and unethical for CCN to rely heavily on biased “ex-boyfriends” to confirm allegations of theft. I reached out to Torres, who vehemently denied the allegations. She revealed the ex-boyfriend, who is the father of her middle child, physically abused her. Torres also had an active restraining order filed against him. She also claimed the ex-boyfriend wanted custody of their daughter. Torres provided me with his criminal record and the restraining order, which had been renewed at least three times since 2005. CCN didn’t disclose any of this information about their primary source.

When the article about Torres’ alleged gift card theft was published, the ex-boyfriend shared the story on his Facebook with the comment, “Wow! My Ex the one who did not want to work with me and let me go to China!” According to Torres, the ex-boyfriend was prohibited from traveling to China for a business trip because his passport was denied.

During my lunch break, I called a local toy store that the ex-boyfriend claimed Torres purchased toys from using donated gift cards. I asked for the manager and pretended to be a customer who had a gift card from 2000 and was wondering if it could still be redeemed (Torres said the ex-boyfriend was in a relationship with her from 1998 to 2001, but he served time in jail in 1999 after being convicted of assault and battery against her). The manager



told me I might be mistaken because they offered personalized gift certificates around that time, not gift cards.

From there, I called the San Luis Obispo Police Dept. to determine if the ex-boyfriend made any attempt to report Torres' alleged theft of donated gift cards from the time they were together to the present. They confirmed he never reached out to them and they had nothing on file. It was odd timing for him to suddenly have a conscience and speak out about Torres' alleged criminal theft during a time when CCN was targeting her and Hill. It appeared as though the ex-boyfriend was using CCN's reporting as leverage against Torres – to use it as a bargaining chip for custody and passport renewal.

Later in March 2013, I published my findings in a column. The column was cited by Velie on “the Dave Congalton Show,” but she dismissed my reporting as “rants.” However, Velie refused to disclose to listeners the ex-boyfriend's criminal history. She and Congalton proceeded to mock Torres for having “multiple” ex-boyfriends and accused her of being promiscuous.

Eventually, Torres fought back. In April 2013, Torres filed a lawsuit against a private investigator for defamation. Former Atascadero mayor Michael Brennler worked with CCN to look into allegations against Torres for alleged mistreatment of the homeless. In her lawsuit filing, Torres sued Brennler after learning he contacted her ex-husband and made false statements about her. According to Torres' attorney, Brennler reportedly told her ex-husband that she stole money from the homeless shelter she worked at and stole money from Cliff Anderson.

I thought it was strange for so-called “investigative reporters” to outsource their investigations to a private investigator. Why couldn't they investigate the matter themselves? And why was the former mayor of a city working with CCN?

Brennler previously served as a law enforcement official with the San Luis Obispo Police Dept. for 32 years. Brennler retired from the department in 2003, emphasizing in court documents that he retired honorably with several awards and accolades.

I reached out to the Police Dept. to get more information

about Brennler and his investigative methods. According to high-ranking SLOPD officers who worked closely with him, Brennler was known for having an explosive temper and received citizen complaints for it. It was unclear what those complaints were. Brennler has denied receiving complaints or facing disciplinary action during his tenure at the department.

Prior to publishing what I learned, I attempted to reach out to Brennler to comment, but the phone number listed for his investigative services rang through.

Brennler responded to Torres' complaint, stating it was his constitutional right to investigate the allegations because the claims were well within the scope of public interest. Brennler claimed his comments were protected by the First Amendment.

Brennler submitted into the record a handful of declarations from Torres' ex-boyfriend, a former CAPSLO employee, a former shelter user, Velie and himself. Brennler claimed the list of potential witnesses to Torres' alleged mistreatment of homeless and misappropriation of donated goods exceeded 25 people, but he'd interviewed a "minimum" of 10 people. I was unable to find the complete list of people he interviewed.

In her declaration, Velie claimed over a dozen – many current and former CAPSLO officials – came forward with allegations against Torres, and that Brennler was simply assigned to confirm or debunk their allegations. Yet Brennler could only provide witness statements from four people that couldn't affirmatively confirm the allegations against Torres without the appearance of personal bias or hearsay. An extensive review of Brennler's exhibits revealed no physical evidence of theft was obtained. No police reports were filed.

On "the Dave Congalton Show," CCN's reclusive editor Bill Loving made a rare guest appearance, surmising that Torres' minor children could be deposed as part of Torres' lawsuit. Loving claimed Torres' children were also accused of using donated gift cards. He didn't reveal the source of those allegations.

In August 2013, Velie appeared on the show and discussed the ex-boyfriend's credibility as a witness. Months after I revealed his

troubled past with Torres, Velie officially acknowledged his record but insisted he only hit Torres once, downplaying allegations of domestic violence.

Congalton helped raise funds for the Women's Shelter Program of SLO County (WSPSLO), a non-profit organization known for providing domestic violence services. There was clear cognitive dissonance between his *laissez faire* approach to domestic violence and his support of WPSLO. I made sure to raise that issue in my columns.

In September 2013, Torres' case was dismissed. The court ruled Torres was a limited-purpose public figure, and failed to show clear and convincing evidence that Brennler acted maliciously with his investigation. I didn't get the impression Brennler acted maliciously, but the people he worked for did.

The declarations Brennler obtained contained allegations about Torres, which CCN often stated as fact without additional verification.

In spite of the allegations and the spectacle CCN created, Torres was cleared of wrongdoing by CAPSLO. According to the SLOPD, there were no criminal investigations into Torres as a result of CCN's reporting on Torres.

Nothing CCN did amounted to positive change. Ultimately, in the end, readers were left empty-handed with lingering resentment of the plutocratic elite once again getting away with corruption so readily apparent that not a single local or state law enforcement agency decided to take the case.

## 12

It was Summer 2013. I joined the Morro Bay Eco Rotary Club. At 28, it was my first time being part of a non-profit organization. I didn't know much about Rotary, but I appreciated the people involved.

The truth is: I needed a distraction. My investigative work was becoming a seemingly endless and unfulfilling grind. I felt like the work I had done achieved a purpose, but it was nauseatingly repetitive nonetheless. Having been inspired by ECOSLO, I wanted to volunteer for an organization that was close to home, easy to get into and fun. I quickly got assimilated into the club and was immediately acquainted with their board of directors. My club role was to assist in marketing and promotional efforts. As a musician, I would also perform at Rotary fundraisers throughout the county.

“Service above self,” the Rotary motto, strongly resonated with me.

The club also focused on Rotary International's signature causes, including polio eradication, ending homelessness, and providing opportunities for girls and young women around the world to get an education. Even though I was a member of a small local club, I felt connected to the rest of the world – at least, more connected to much larger global issues than what I was reporting on.

I significantly reduced my editorial output, now that I was involved in Rotary, and continued working for *IP* on a full-time basis. I was satisfied with my reduced role and confident that the local media would scrutinize CCN more, now that they were being sued for defamation and the case was inching forward. *The Tribune* was the first to report the defamation lawsuit Tenborg filed. I subsequently published an article on *IP* about it..

In a press release, Tenborg's attorney, Kevin Clune, said, “When a news publication makes the type of serious allegations

that Cal Coast News made about Tenborg and his company, it is really important that the publication gets the facts right before making those statements. The reporter had the opportunity to speak to Tenborg and others to confirm the facts beforehand and what was reported was very different then the facts given to Velie.”

Their pattern of deceit was now on printed record. Finally it wasn't just me saying it or writing about it.

Shortly after Tenborg's lawsuit was filed, I attended a Rotary club meeting where Tenborg's name was brought up. On the agenda there was a discussion about suggestions for future programs. A program would invite a community member or business to talk about their ecological causes. Specifically, we looked at organizations that focused on recycling and reducing waste. One club member suggested inviting Tenborg to talk about electronic waste recycling. When I heard his name mentioned, I perked up.

“I'm not sure about inviting *that guy*,” said one of the board of directors. “I believe he's under investigation or something like that. I read an article about him on CalCoastNews.”

I interjected, “I read some unverified allegations about him, but I didn't see anything about an investigation.”

“Look, I'm not comfortable with him, so why don't we focus on someone else, alright?” the agitated board director quickly shot back.

Perception is reality. Creating the perception of impropriety was easy, especially when it was done under the guise of investigative journalism. The hard and costly part is defending yourself from it. Because he decided to go to court, Tenborg risked the reputation he had left to vindicate himself – even at the cost of being scrutinized by the community and being labeled “that guy,” or the person people wanted to avoid.

Tenborg was a private figure, so he had a lot more to lose compared to a public figure like supervisor Hill, who was bombarded with allegations by CCN on a continuous basis. A political public figure is usually expected to have a thicker skin

and take the licks they get, whether it's from the media or citizens.

At SLO County Board of Supervisors meetings, a handful of residents spoke during public comment to express their displeasure with Hill over allegations published by CCN. Displeasure would often escalate into personal attacks, outbursts and rants deviating from the board's purview.

In addition to regurgitating headlines from CCN and presenting their allegations as fact, some politically right-leaning residents accused liberal supervisors Bruce Gibson and Hill of conspiring to confiscate their private property and civil liberties, and undermine U.S. sovereignty in accordance with policies set by the United Nations. They pointed to a pledge signed by the supervisors to support sustainable development and environmental protection policies. The petition was created by the International Council For Local Environmental Initiative (ICLEI), an international association founded by a coalition of local governments from several countries. These local governments were brought together at a summit organized by the United Nations in 1990.

The conspiracy theorists were unable to show examples of any significant impacts on their lives as a result of Gibson and Hill signing that pledge. Instead, they claimed the petition set the agenda for enacting far-reaching socialist policies.

Members of the public forged ahead and asked for a discussion on ICLEI to be agendaized by the board. In September 2013, District 5 Supervisor Debbie Arnold requested the board to schedule a presentation by ICLEI based on concerns expressed by conspiracy theorists. Hill and Gibson pushed back against Arnold's motion, suggesting that she request a staff briefing to discuss ICLEI and the validity of the conspiracies being presented during public comment.

Though Arnold's motion was unsuccessful, the conversation continued on CCN and was presented as a matter of public interest that the liberal supervisors tried to quash. CCN made no attempt to fact-check the conspiracy theory claims or explain to readers where the conspiracy theories came from. The *New York Times* was one of the earliest publications to report on the United

Nations conspiracy theory, which started circulating nationwide among members of the Tea Party movement around 2012. Yet CCN portrayed the conspiracy theory as if it was somehow a local phenomenon that Hill was, once again, exclusively part of.

CCN readers worshiped the idea that liberalism, as a political ideology, posed a constant threat to their way of life; and that any ordinances or policies focused on environmental protection and land-use regulation were changes spurred by the United Nations' Agenda 21 resolution, which reportedly served as the foundation for ICLEI. Agenda 21 is a U.N. non-binding action plan focusing on environmentally sustainable development. In their 2012 CCN viewpoint, Atascadero residents Tom and Elsa Dawson described Agenda 21 as the “enviro-socialist juggernaut which will eventually destroy all property rights.”

At the center of these conspiracy theories was a young writer named Josh Friedman.

Friedman, who described himself as a journalist with a libertarian bent, was recruited to CCN by then-editor George Ramos in June 2011 and worked as their reporting intern. Prior to that, he served as a writer for Cal Poly's *Mustang Daily* newspaper.

He later left CCN to start his own libertarian news site FreeSLO.com, which focused on promoting conspiracy theories and articles from other libertarian sources. In addition to publishing original content, FreeSLO shared articles from CCN, far-right militia groups and political organizations associated with white supremacy, the 9/11 Truther movement and anti-environmentalist ideology.

Friedman idolized far-right conspiracy theorists including author and film producer G. Edward Griffin. A longtime member and officer of the John Birch Society (JBS), Griffin pushed numerous far-right conspiracy theories. He claimed the September 11 attacks were an inside job perpetrated by the U.S. Government; denied the existence of HIV, AIDS and cancer; and depicted the Federal Reserve as an illegitimate, nefarious campaign by a Jewish cabal to destroy white America. He also claimed cancer is a dietary deficiency that can be cured with “an

essential food compound.”

Griffin is also a founder of Freedom Force International (FFI), a network of people who are concerned over loss of personal liberty and growth of government power. FFI has organized several conventions that critics, including Rachel Carroll Rivas, co-director of the Montana Human Rights Network, claim are venues purposefully designed to recruit people to white supremacist or “alt-right” causes.

In December 2015, CCN's Dan Blackburn appeared as a featured speaker at FFI's Paso Robles event “The Second Congress of Freedom Force” along with supervisor Arnold.

Friedman also shared links to groups with ties to white nationalism and neo-Nazis, including Oath Keepers. The Oath Keepers claimed to be a non-partisan association of current and formerly serving military, police and first responders who serve the oath to “defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic.” Oath Keeper members have appeared on white supremacist message boards such as Stormfront – a Holocaust-denying, white nationalist, white supremacist, antisemitic neo-Nazi Internet forum – to recruit members.

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) describes the Oath Keepers as “heavily armed extremists with a conspiratorial and anti-government mindset looking for potential showdowns with the government.”

Friedman identified himself as a special correspondent for InfoWars, a widely controversial conspiracy and fake news website. On his college journalism blog, Friedman was effusive in his praise of InfoWars, though he never detailed the extent of his relationship with the controversial website. An email to InfoWars asking them about Friedman was unanswered.

InfoWars was founded by Alex Jones, an American radio host and conspiracy theorist, who famously claimed that American mass shootings were hoaxes by the U.S. government; that Democrats are “going to be killing people”; and that protesting NFL players who took the knee during the national anthem were “kneeling to white genocide,” among other things. Jones is



considered to be one of the most prolific and polarizing conspiracy theorists in the country.

In one video from 2012, Friedman is shown at the Earth Day Festival, an annual event organized by Sandra Marshall, reporting as an InfoWars correspondent. At the festival, Friedman discussed what he called the “eco tyranny” movement. At one point, Friedman accused volunteers from the California Conservation Corp. of being “literal brownshirts” for stopping people driving to the event in their cars. Later on, Friedman is seen repeatedly asking one of the Earth Day vendors if Earth is “god.” Around the end of the video, Friedman confronts local environmentally-conscious rapper Mr. Eco, who Friedman claimed was part of the “eco tyranny” movement in SLO County. Mr. Eco appeared uncomfortable with Friedman's approach and repeatedly declined to be interviewed.

In his other videos, Friedman is seen speaking at public meetings and protesting ecological measures, and aggressively confronting and occasionally standing in front of former congresswoman Lois Capps when she declined to answer his long-winded, factually-offbeat questions; promoting a news segment he called “Freedom Report”; and promoting various local and national conspiracy theories with the assistance of InfoWars correspondent “Kim M,” who is never seen on camera. I was unable to track down “Kim” for the book and have no knowledge of her true identity.

As a self-proclaimed “nomad journalist,” Friedman's social interactions on his videos were consistently awkward and combative, sometimes slipping into physically aggressive and threatening behavior. In videos he published on the website YouTube, Friedman often babbled incoherently and in circles about subjects that interested him. Friedman's conspiracy theory-laden stream-of-consciousness rants appeared on his YouTube, which averaged about 40 subscribers.

In 2013, Friedman returned to CCN, working with Velie and Blackburn on the homeless series. According to Blackburn, Friedman was the lead moderator for CCN. Velie once described Friedman as her “tech person.” As soon as he was returned to the

website full-time, Friedman relinquished his FreeSLO.com domain, but he left his earlier FreeSLO videos online for confused conspiracy theorists to decode.

Friedman's written work was easier to decipher than his videos. With Blackburn and Velie's oversight, Friedman was able to adapt to their format. However, he regressed into publishing conspiracy theories in a similar fashion to his colleagues and published unsubstantiated claims about CAPSLO's homeless services.

With his reporting, Friedman was in danger of repeating his father's mistakes.

According to his online bio, Arnold Friedman is an award-winning writer with more than 30 years' experience, specializing in the criminal justice system and political reporting. What he left out of his bio, however, was his involvement in a landmark defamation lawsuit that triggered a national debate on journalism in the 1980s.

Jerry Plotkin, one of 52 Americans held hostage for 444 days in the United States Embassy in Iran from 1979 to 1981, filed a \$60 million libel lawsuit over an article published by the *Los Angeles Daily News* on the day he was released. The senior Friedman shared a byline with writer Adam Dawson on an article that cited unnamed law-enforcement personnel that claimed he was under police investigation before he left Iran and federal agents wanted to question him about being involved in drug trafficking.

The court ordered Friedman and Dawson to reveal their unnamed sources for the story, a move widely condemned by journalists and news executives across the country. Friedman complied with the court order and revealed the names of two agents of the federal Drug Enforcement Agency. However, the police and the FDA later denied Plotkin was under investigation. In 1988, Plotkin settled the suit for an undisclosed amount. Plotkin dismissed Friedman and Dawson from the libel lawsuit prior to reaching a settlement.

Now Friedman's son was part in a website involved in their own libel lawsuit under circumstances eerily similar to his own.

CCN had a cast of wild characters and misfits. To me, it was

glaringly obvious that the more interesting public interest story was not the work they published, rather it was all about them. They certainly made it that way after whining about a vast conspiracy to “cripple” and shut them down. Every time they complained about being oppressed while simultaneously espousing their journalistic genius – especially when their track record was evidently less than brilliant – I couldn't stop wondering: *Who are they, really?*

## 13

By mid-2013, I took a step back from my investigative work. It became repetitive. I didn't feel entirely comfortably pigeonholing myself into a "media watchdog" label, though the work I did on *The ROCK* that year garnered significant readership. I wanted to report actual news, investigate different issues in SLO County, and become a more versatile writer.

My working relationship with Sandra Marshall steadily improved. Marshall felt it was in my best interest to stop dividing myself between publications while placing a target on my back.

"You know too much," Marshall told me "These people... they won't change. Your efforts are better suited for changing the world, not them."

Marshall was right. They weren't going to change. Nothing I'd say or do would affect them, their steadfastly loyal readers, the rabid conspiracy theorists, or the perception that they published "non-partisan" news that "adhere[d] to the strictest journalism ethics and standards." Their articles were now syndicated by Google as a Google-verified news source alongside mainstream media sources. Their appearances on the "Dave Congalton Show" only increased their following over time. More than 10,000 residents were following them on Facebook.

What else could I possibly do?

I proposed to Marshall that we work together with my father on some features for *IP*. Marshall agreed to bring Ed on board for a few months. In April 2013, the magazine reached out to some of the top environmentalists and environmental organizations in the county, state and across the country and asked them, "What do you think should be our environmental priorities?" We received responses from several local, state and national environmentalists – from state employees to local activists.

I remember compiling a list of local environmentalists for the

feature and doing some research on each person. I typed in their names on Google to look them up. To my surprise, the first search results retrieved were CCN articles about them. None of the articles I read on them were flattering.

Then in May, we focused on profiling the most influential women in SLO County.

“By acknowledging these women of influence we hope to inspire by example, promoting achievement and spotlighting the individual and collective progress of dedicated professional women active today in SLO County,” wrote Marshall.

When I researched several influential women in SLO County, I was bombarded with CCN articles as top-level search results. In addition to CCN articles, Google also picked up some of the negative comments posted by their anonymous commenters.

I came across a lot of sexual and graphic commentary about local female figures. The depth of their vitriol was something I never thought existed in my community. The vast majority of vitriol came from CCN and their cesspool of mostly anonymous trolls.

One of the women I was interested in learning about was Dr. Nell Langford, a retired psychology professor turned activist who sought to combat dust pollution on the Nipomo Mesa. Langford attributed air pollution in the area to off-roading vehicles riding through the Oceano Dunes, a major Central Coast attraction. Langford put herself at odds with off-roading enthusiasts who fought against restricted access to the dunes.

Kevin P. Rice stood above the rest as Langford's most vocal opponent.

Rice was a full-time Los Angeles Country firefighter who lived in San Luis Obispo. He was an off-roading activist who went by the online pseudonym “SLORider.” On his personal website that went by the same name, Rice wrote about the bikes he owned and places he liked to ride in. If someone wanted to find out what off-roading enthusiasts thought about the Oceano Dunes, Rice was the person to speak to. He was deeply knowledgeable and passionate about the subject matter. There was no disputing his

expertise in vehicular off-roading.

However, those who disagreed with Rice's positions felt he blurred the lines between passion and obsession.

In addition to being an activist, Rice was also a self-proclaimed government watchdog, libertarian and a noted contributor to CCN. He regularly spoke at city and county meetings, urging local officials to adopt policies that lessened government interference and increased transparency. He considered himself an expert on the California Brown Act, which guarantees the public's right to access, attend and participate in meetings of legislative bodies.

Rice was known for filing legal and non-legal complaints. He occasionally filed legal challenges against local agencies, including SLO County Air Pollution Control District (APCD), which regulates air quality at the Dunes. Rice attempted legal action against the agency three times, but lost each time. Rice claimed his legal challenges helped set public policy, but Jeff Minnery, who represented the APCD in his lawsuit, argued in *New Times* that his legal challenges were “frivolous” and a “waste of resources.”

Rice sharply rebuked left-leaning politicians, including supervisors Hill and Gibson. He felt the supervisors posed a threat to off-roading access at the Dunes. He was concerned that liberal bureaucrats would use their clout and policies to chip away access with the eventual goal of a full prohibition of off-roading vehicles. Rice regularly rode on the Oceano Dunes and networked with other off-roading enthusiasts in the area.

To discredit off-roading opposition, Rice led and supported character attacks against leading opponents, including supervisors and critics alike. To Rice, private citizens were fair game.

Rice's feuding with Langford was well known in the media and the community. I first read about the feud on an off-roading message board Rice used to frequent.

“There is sooooo much I could tell you about this old woman that you experienced, but not here, except that she is one of the biggest hypocrite liars I have ever met,” Rice wrote about Langford in 2008. He then accused her of having psychosis and

dementia. In another post, he referred to her as a “sick, close-minded liar” and published a letter to the editor in response to a letter she submitted to *The Tribune*. Rice added several editorial brackets in her letter as a way to fact-check her. Next to her letter signature, Rice added the word “death,” strongly insinuating he longed for her demise.

In 2009, Rice went after Langford's vacation rental business by creating a site similar to hers with a similar name, but a different domain extension. On his site, Rice claimed Langford was in favor of closing the Oceano Dunes all together and was politically active. He went on to disparage Langford's vacation rental properties, write about her property conditions, and told potential customers to rent elsewhere. He also posted about her rentals on classified advertisement site Craigslist.

Rice also reported her properties to county code enforcement, who investigated but later dismissed his claims.

Langford claimed Rice also trespassed on her property on several occasions, an allegation Rice vehemently denied. Yet he couldn't explain how he was able to describe the interior conditions of her property.

Rice targeted people associated with Langford. He methodically contacted, confronted and/or personally attacked individuals who publicly expressed concerns about off-roading vehicle use at the Oceano Dunes. Sometimes he would target individuals who submitted letters to the editor supporting dust control measures or further restriction of off-roading access.

In 2007, he traveled to Blairsden, California, more than 400 miles north of San Luis Obispo, to visit environmental activist Dr. Robert Baiocchi at his home. His address was unlisted.

Known as a “water warrior” for dedicating 30 years of his life to preserving water rights, Baiocchi was contacted by Langford for his input on the Oceano Dunes and how off-roading activity could adversely impact nearby surface-flow water quality. Baiocchi contacted regional and state regulatory agencies with his concerns, which caught Rice's attention.

Explaining why he visited an elderly activist he never met on a

whim, Rice claimed he was in the area because of work-related business. In a phone interview, Rice claimed he was participating in a training exercise with the L.A. County Fire Department. However, the LAFD was unable to confirm any training exercises took place in the Blairsden area around the time Rice visited Baiocchi.

According to Rice, he wanted to speak with Baiocchi about his opinions on the Oceano Dunes. I asked Rice why he decided to personally visit him as opposed to making a phone call or sending an email. He told me he wanted “to confront him [and] set the record straight.”

Rice claimed the conversations he had were cordial. As evidence, Rice supplied email correspondence between himself and Baiocchi where they discussed their hobbies.

But Baiocchi told investigators a different story. I got in touch with one of the investigators who claimed Baiocchi feared for his life. The investigator claimed Rice broached the subject about the Dunes and tried convincing the activist to change his position. But when Rice was unsuccessful, he reportedly threatened to visit Baiocchi again.

As one source close to the late environmental activist explained, Baiocchi felt Rice's surprise visit was a bullying tactic.

According to Baiocchi's son, Baiocchi purchased two baseball bats – one for the living room and one for his bedroom. He wasn't going to take any more chances with Rice. He felt physically intimidated by him. Rice argued the conversations he had with the senior Baiocchi were cordial, as evidenced by friendly email correspondence the two had exchanged.

Local environmental activist William Denneen was also targeted. Denneen, a World War II veteran, was a widely respected and influential biology professor who became an environmental activist. The outspoken, self-described “eco-terrorist” and self-sustainability advocate's extensive legacy inspired The Bill Denneen Environmental Award program, which recognizes individuals who made significant environmental contributions to the Central Coast.



Denneen regularly spoke in opposition to off-roading vehicle riding on the Oceano and Nipomo Dunes. In response to Denneen, Rice publicly questioned whether he should be allowed near children. He also accused Denneen of hosting “illegal hikes,” violating environmental laws and possessing an illegal collection of marine mammal parts. According to a close friend of Denneen, Rice attempted to befriend the environmentalist, went hiking with him, and reportedly called the police on him as soon as he saw Denneen walk his dog without a leash.

Dr. Norman Murphy was a retired forensic psychologist who specialized in full psycho-diagnostic testings for at-risk youth, the brain damaged and the mentally ill. He too was caught in Rice's cross hairs after criticizing him online and expressing his support for a ban on off-roading vehicles at the Oceano Dunes. In his comments, Murphy claimed Rice was a sociopath who bragged about illegal activity online. Rice vehemently denied the allegations and responded by sending him a 21-page fake legal document that threatened a lawsuit. He included Murphy's social security number and date of birth on the first page. Rice, who claimed he found Murphy's SSN on an unredacted public document obtained from microfiche, stated he wanted to “send a message” to Murphy.

According to former *Tribune* columnist Bob Cuddy, who wrote about the Rice-Langford feud in a 2010 column, the self-proclaimed activist targeted an unnamed Santa Maria teacher and Arroyo Grande doctor who opposed off-roading vehicles on the Dunes. He reportedly contacted their employers to complain about them. Rice claimed the two individuals were “fair game” because they expressed an opinion he disagreed with.

Rice was reportedly incensed over Cuddy's column and threatened to sue *The Tribune* for libel. Two sources employed by *The Tribune* at the time confirmed Rice's lawsuit, but they also stated he backed away from filing.

Rice escalated his personal attacks on Langford in 2009 when he attempted to usurp the name of her organization Safe Beach Now by filing a trademark infringement lawsuit against her. He intended to use the lawsuit to force Langford to remove all con-

tent from her website, which contained her positions and literature documenting the downsides of off-roading vehicle use at the Dunes. After a drawn out and costly court battle that lasted for a year, Langford prevailed and the court canceled Rice's trademark.

His attacks weren't always reserved for off-roading critics.

In a 2011 op-ed published on CCN, Rice published an edited photo of then-state senator Sam Blakeslee and Assemblyman Katcho Achadjian's decapitated heads on two pikes. This image was a literal reference to an expression crafted by two Los Angeles-based conservative radio-show hosts who criticized the two politicians for not committing to opposing state tax extension measures. They referred to Blakeslee and Achadjian as "heads on a stick."

In a now-removed CCN editorial, Rice claimed he attended a party organized by then-congresswoman Lois Capps and overheard her drunkenly say that she wished old conservative congressmen would die sooner so the Affordable Care Act could be passed. According to one of Capps' staffers, CCN was contacted by Capps' team and the editorial was quickly removed. CCN acknowledged the removal of Rice's editorial due to factual inaccuracies only to later remove their acknowledgment entirely.

After announcing his candidacy for San Luis Obispo City Council in 2013, CCN published an article about a young woman who reportedly stole one of his yard signs, several of which were placed on his lawn. Assuming the signs was free, the woman claimed she took a sign because her last name was also Rice and thought the yard sign would make a fun souvenir. CCN speculated in their article, which is no longer online, that the woman had ulterior motives.

Rice supplied footage of the alleged perpetrator, who he filmed on camera while chasing her through the neighborhood. He uploaded the video on YouTube.

"Rice threatened her," one of her friends told me. "It didn't look good to have someone – who just announced they were running for city council – to be chasing a female college student down the street like a maniac."

CCN later removed the article, but never disclosed why. Rice removed the video from his YouTube channel without explanation.

Like Velie, Rice was also obsessed with supervisor Adam Hill, who sometimes expressed health and safety concerns pertaining to off-roading vehicles at the Dunes. In 2012, Rice launched a negative campaign against the supervisor during his re-election bid by creating a website that appeared similar to Hill's. On his website, Rice accused Hill of paying for a mailer that falsely depicted him as a Republican. Without evidence, CCN echoed Rice's assertions, claiming Hill paid an advertising firm to produce and distribute the misleading mailer.

Rice paid for robocalls that went throughout Hill's district, falsely asserting Hill was backing a Republican challenger to then-congresswoman Capps. In the robocall, residents were encouraged to visit Rice's website for more information. The website used a web address that sounded like an official site for Hill's campaign.

Also in 2012, Rice published a "Special Election Edition" newsletter and distributed it throughout Hill's district. It was filled with negative stories about him and praise for his challenger, Ed Waage. The California Fair Political Practices Commission (FPPC) sent Rice a warning letter after learning that he failed to properly disclose his political committee on his newsletter.

After Hill criticized Rice in an email sent to *The Tribune* and Congalton, Rice went to the supervisor's home to hand-deliver a retraction demand. Rice demanded a personally-signed retraction and apology to be delivered to him by midnight June 10, 2012. Hill declined to respond.

The problem with Rice was his sheer inability to properly articulate disagreement, which was strange because he was clearly passionate and demonstrated knowledge of issues he cared about. Yet he resorted to childish, intimidating tactics to not only diminish opponents' political integrity, but also their personal and professional character. At one point, it was unclear what Rice wanted more – to denigrate the opposition or to ruin an opponent's life.

When *The Tribune* or *New Times* evaluated the political issues Rice was involved in, they often touched on his controversial intimidation tactics, which is what he was largely known for – not his activism, which is what he wanted to be known for. Clearly there was cognitive dissonance.

What shocked me more than his actions was his attitude toward others discussing his tactics. Rice was overly sensitive about people criticizing his behavior. He often discussed the importance of protecting freedom of speech while engaging in extraordinary, retaliatory tactics against dissenters, which ironically included libel lawsuit threats.

When Congalton repeatedly invited him onto his show, Rice appeared calm and often charming with his on-air chivalry. It struck me as odd that one of Rice's favorite topics of discussion on Congalton's show was civility. After Rice made a guest appearance in 2013 to discuss the importance of civility, I published a column on *Razor Online* that reviewed his harassment, intimidation, manipulation and threats.

Three months after the column was published, Rice called me. I wasn't sure how he got my number, which was unlisted. This would lead to an impromptu phone interview.

Before we started with the interview, Rice referred to my column as “full of lies” and demanded corrections. Instead of immediately bowing to his demands, I asked him questions about his conduct. I also asked him to explain in detail the reasons why he aggressively targeted individuals with opposing viewpoints.

Throughout the conversation, Rice oscillated between calmly-delivered compliments and terse, sharp-tongued insults, all articulated in a ghoulishly monotonous tone. He said he appreciated my past criticism of Hill and Gibson, yet he thought my criticism of his conduct was “something like some retard would write.”

Rice and I went over my column paragraph by paragraph. He admitted the facts I cited about him were correct, but he disagreed with my opinions. Rice felt my column lacked context, which he indeed provided and I gladly updated the column with it. He

resented the portrayal that his actions were malicious, and he couldn't fathom why anyone would think he was controversial. In his defense, Rice said, he was simply doing what activists normally do.

"I simply wanted to tell [off-roading critics] that – okay, look – they're not the 'environmentalists' they claim they are, and when they talked about closing off the [Oceano] Dunes to riders, I wanted to show people the hypocrisy," he explained.

"When disagreeing with someone's publicly expressed political views, most people respond in ways that don't personally encroach on the person they disagree with," I said to Rice. "What is your response to people who have criticized your 'activism'?"

"This is *my* activism," Rice said. "Nobody has the right to dictate what I can or cannot say, can or cannot do as an activist."

"I mean, you took someone to court to sue them for trademark infringement over a name they originally had," I said. "You make a surprise visit to an elderly activist's house because he was concerned about off-roading vehicles at the Dunes – your admission. You put a social security number on a hand-delivered legal demand."

"Aaron, I had to," he said. "I'm an activist."

According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, "activism" is defined as "a doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue." Rice liberally interpreted "direct vigorous action" to mean personal intimidation and harassment, but there was no doubt – based on conduct he personally admitted to – that he was more enamored with the infliction of emotional and physical distress on individuals more than applying direct vigorous action to support a cause on a holistic level.

I didn't think Rice did enough good things to justify the "activist" label. One could make the argument that Rice stirred a lot of controversy to raise awareness, but I felt that awareness didn't matter when his conduct reeked of personal, self-indulgent retribution. He didn't have to take his political opponent to court with a frivolous lawsuit. He didn't have to randomly show up on

the doorstep of an elderly man – he hadn't previously met – to confront him over his views. There was no practical or ethical purpose for targeting individuals he disagreed with.

This wasn't normal.

Congalton brought Rice onto his radio show several times throughout the years, knowing he was controversial for harassing residents and critics alike, most notably women and seniors. On his public Facebook profile, Congalton occasionally noted Rice's various controversies, but admired his tenacity. Congalton strove to not only normalize Rice's outlandish behavior, but also promote him to a mainstream audience.

CCN followed Congalton's lead. CCN was a place Rice regularly contributed to and commented on. Had an elected official acted the way Rice did on a regular basis, CCN would've ostracized him or her and psychoanalyzed their behavior. CCN was critical of officials for far lesser infractions.

From the onset, it was clear CCN promoted and readily encouraged "activism" that fell well outside mainstream acceptance. Julie Tacker used CCN as a platform to push conflict-laden, noticeably ironic campaigns to tarnish reportedly incompetent, corrupt officials whose ineptitude mirrored her own. Josh Friedman fervently peddled hard-right conspiracy theories that widened the political divide between liberals and conservatives. Kevin P. Rice's sociopathic appetite for destruction of dissent was marketed by CCN as virtuous pursuits for justice.

## 14

Not often do we read about journalists brazenly injecting themselves into the news cycle unless they received some accolade, the publication reached a crucial milestone or they became the news – and not by choice. In 2018, a reporter for the *Capital Gazette* newspaper (based out of Annapolis, Maryland) was assigned to cover the trial of Jarrod Ramos, the man accused of gunning down five of his colleagues at the newspaper's office. Reporter Chase Cook told the *New Yorker*, “I don't even know if [covering the Ramos trial] is ethical. I think it is. I'm gonna treat it as unbiasedly as possible.”

There was no question of journalism ethics when CCN published an article titled, “CCN reporter arrested on DUI charge for .06 blood alcohol level” in August 2013. The “reporter” in question was Karen Velie.

Around the time their article was published, I was busy laying out the upcoming issue for *Information Press* when I was alerted to the CCN-exclusive news. I remember receiving a text message from a number I didn't recognize. The sender simply wrote, “Aaron, look,” and sent me a link to CCN's article.

When I got home from work, I logged onto Facebook and saw my friends – some of whom followed and supported CCN – share the article and express outrage that a reporter was arrested because of her reporting on local officials. They immediately pointed the finger at supervisor Hill for somehow conspiring to have Velie arrested and possibly framed.

Penned by Blackburn and Friedman, the CCN article strongly insinuated Velie's arrest was linked to her reporting on homeless services, supervisor Hill and his wife Dee Torres, Tenborg and their reporting on his his alleged wrongdoing.

They claimed that on August 13, Velie had finished teaching a bridge class at a San Luis Obispo restaurant and left without appearing intoxicated. According to CCN, Velie was later arrested

on suspicion of driving under the influence with a .06 blood alcohol level (the legal level is .08). The article went on to say that the website's opponents including Hill were using Velie's DUI arrest as part of a "smear campaign" against CCN.

Congalton backed CCN, advertising an upcoming segment on his show as Velie "responds to recent attacks on her personal life." For the segment, Velie and Friedman appeared as a guest to discuss her arrest, which she claimed was politically motivated. Congalton believed Velie's account, stating he felt there was a conspiracy to undermine her reputation and business. Friedman agreed that a conspiracy existed to undermine Velie's credibility.

Congalton claimed supervisor Hill and an anonymous email account named "Marie Marie" spread Velie's arrest mugshot around the county. He offered no evidence to back his claim.

He later commented under CCN's article, stating his belief that Velie was not drunk that night; the facts would come out shortly and she would be victorious in court.

Velie offered different accounts of how much alcohol she consumed at her bridge class. Velie claimed in the police report she had two "big" glasses. One of Velie's witnesses, attorney Stew Jenkins, claimed she only had one. On Congalton's show, Velie described drinking a "couple" of glasses of wine and wasn't exactly sure of how many.

Following Velie and Friedman's appearance on Congalton's show, then-San Luis Obispo police chief Stephen Gesell issued a city memorandum about the arrest and released Velie's police report to the media.

According to the police report, on August 13, 2013, officer Josh Walsh pulled Velie over in SLO after she abruptly merged into his traffic lane while turning left. This caused Walsh to immediately brake in order to avoid a collision.

After he pulled her over, Walsh noted objective indications of alcohol intoxication, which included slurred speech, bloodshot and watery eyes, and an odor of alcohol consumption. Velie claimed the slurred speech was part of a medical condition called *thrust tongue*. She also told the officer that her phone rang and she



wanted to pull over at the nearby liquor store to answer it.

Despite Velie's explanation, Walsh determined further DUI investigation was necessary. He asked her standardized questions and conducted physical field tests, which she appeared unable to successfully perform. Walsh noted she had unsteady balance, swayed from side to side, stumbled while walking and grabbed a street sign. This appeared to contradict witness testimony claiming she didn't appear intoxicated shortly before she got on the road.

At one point, Velie asked him questions, which he described in his report.

“She asked me if I knew who she was. I said ‘no,’” he wrote. “She asked me if I was familiar with Cal Coast News. I told her that I think it is a newspaper of some kind. She asked me if I read it and I said ‘no’ and I do not know much about it. [She] then said she has three attorneys that work for her for free.”

Velie volunteered to blow into a Preliminary Alcohol Screening (PAS) device, which is a non-evidentiary tool officers use to determine if a driver operating a vehicle is impaired. With this device, Velie blew a .079 BAC at the scene of the stop. The .06 blood alcohol level CCN cited was from the second time she took a breathalyzer test while in custody, which took place nearly an hour after she was arrested. CCN made no mention of any other breathalyzer test.

After Velie was taken into custody, she was allowed to make a call. She reportedly yelled to the call recipient that she was falsely arrested, that she was arrested because she had a large tongue, and that she only blew a .06. Overhearing her conversation, the officer corrected her, stating the majority of what she was claiming wasn't true.

“I told her I could explain to her why I did everything I did and she said she was not interested,” he wrote.

“I hope she fucking sues them for harassment and false arrest/imprisonment,” wrote a user named JordanJ, who commented underneath CCN's article. “Oh yeah and public humiliation.” According to three SLOPD officials with direct

knowledge of her case, Velie made those specific allegations in her phone call to the unknown recipient.

“This arrest was done with clear malice,” the anonymous user added. “Not everything has come out yet, check this cops phone and see who he called over the next 12 hours. I know somebody he called and why he called them. What a vindictive, trouble making a-hole.”

Several times, JordanJ’s comments oscillated between referring to Velie in third person and speaking about the arrest as if they were arrested. The account also published information and opinions as someone who was intimately familiar with the case.

“This cop lied on his report and then a phone call was made early the next morning,” the user wrote. “The cops know who they called and so do I. They know the damage that they did with that phone call and it was severe, more than anyone here can imagine or guess about. Eventually it will all be told, I wish I could reveal it now.”

Three minutes after that comment was made, JordanJ said, “I will be vindicated.” That comment was removed within a few hours.

I had no doubt Velie was managing that account. At one point, I was reading those comments in her voice. The lashing out at her arresting officer, the conspiracy theories and rambling cries of innocence were prevalent in the conversation.

I figured the *New Times* had an idea of who JordanJ was. They quoted the anonymous account’s “trouble making a-hole” comment in their August 29, 2013 article on Velie’s DUI arrest alongside the official accounts of all the involved parties.

A cursory review of JordanJ comments reveal the user was effusive in their praise of CCN, specifically Velie. The user seemed obsessed with the idea that CCN was better than the other news media. The user also sharply criticized *New Times* and *The Tribune* for being inferior to CCN’s investigative reporting. As herself, Velie was fixated on comparing CCN to mainstream media outlets and chiding them for riding on her coattails.

The account was also used to spread conspiracy theories, which

were seamlessly interwoven into CCN's articles. In one comment from April 2013, JordanJ claimed supervisor Hill, Dee Torres and the CAPSLO board hired "some PR media guns" to promote CAPSLO and trash CCN and its journalists." Velie claimed an advertisement was posted on Craigslist in search of individuals to counter CCN. This claim, which was never substantiated, resurfaced three years later in an editorial penned by Blackburn.

I had to rack my brain to think of other self-proclaimed "investigative reporters" who anonymously provided color commentary and incited outrage under their own articles. In my opinion, it certainly wasn't ethical.

At her arraignment, Velie pled not guilty and the case went to trial.

According to Velie's defense attorney Jeffrey D. Stulberg, the trial focused on challenging the credibility of her breathalyzer test results and showing her arrest was intricately linked to her reporting. However, two sources familiar with Velie's legal strategy said she reportedly forced Stulberg into citing her conspiracy theories as a defense, despite having no evidence to show for it. Stulberg, who reportedly was referred to Velie by Congalton, was concerned about his professional reputation for having Velie as a client.

Kim M., the mysterious InfoWars correspondent who previously worked alongside Friedman, covered Velie's criminal trial as a supporter for CCN. On InfoWars.com, Kim alleged that "rogue officer" Walsh admitted under oath that he lied, committed perjury, and stated that it was okay to lie while performing his duties. She didn't cite any examples or statements by Walsh to back her claims.

John Seiler of CalWatchdog.com revealed that state senator Sam Blakeslee was one of Velie's witnesses who claimed she wasn't visibly impaired during her bridge class.

In March 2014, Velie was found guilty of driving under the influence by an unanimous SLO County Superior Court jury. She was sentenced to pay a fine, serve three years of unsupervised bench probation, complete a three-month DUI class, and serve

one day in the SLO County Sheriff's "alternative work program." She served no jail time.

Velie offered no statement regarding the verdict. CCN never updated their coverage with news of her guilty verdict, opting instead to ignore the outcome completely.

On his show, Congalton offered an apology on her behalf. Congalton, who publicly admitted that he used to be a heavy drinker and nearly had a fatal accident with a drunk driver, downplayed his friend's arrest. He rattled off names of local and national public figures who were arrested for DUI. He then characterized her drunk driving arrest as insignificant.

He went further, stating he would rather be in the car with an intoxicated Velie than in a room with Adam Hill.

After listening to his show, I transcribed Congalton's comments and published them along with commentary. I subsequently informed Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), an organization that ran public service ads during Congalton's commercial breaks, about his on-air comments to see if they had a response. I copied Congalton on the email. Congalton flatly denied making comments that I transcribed. He forwarded my email correspondence and article about his comments to Jenkins.

Shortly after news broke of Velie's arrest, supervisor Hill stated that CCN was personally blaming Hill for being in a conspiracy to orchestrate Velie's arrest. Jenkins, on Velie's behalf, issued Hill a letter, demanding that he retract his comments or face litigation. Hill responded to Jenkins' letter with a copy of the *New Times* article, which touched on CCN's conspiracy theory take.

There was no conspiracy.

Don't get me wrong: I believe the free press should be supported when government officials try to undermine their work and credibility. Hell, for everything that Velie has said and done, I'd raise cane if there was any evidence her arrest was planned. But no, she got drunk. She got behind the wheel, endangered other people on the road with her reckless driving and was arrested. That was her choice. Supervisor Hill didn't tell her to drink more

wine. No one else put a glass of wine in her hand. Her personal choice to drive drunk didn't help expose the dark recesses of SLO County. No, all readers got was an unsavory mix of boozy self-denial and conspiratorial clickbait foolishly masquerading as an objective, investigative endeavor.

I wanted readers to get a glimpse into CCN and who they really were. This was a defining, all-encompassing moment in their history as a publication. I was also hoping for CCN to realize they were in serious need of course correction, whether it meant dropping Velie or having a serious, though uncomfortable conversation with their readers about their lapses in journalism ethics and editorial judgment. I wanted them to convey the desire to do better, but I wasn't going to hold my breath.

## 15

The first indication they didn't learn their lesson was an article CCN published only a few months later. The December 2, 2013 article was predictably titled, "Grandchildren of CCN publisher spend holidays in county hands." The first thing I saw in the article was a photo of one of Velie's grandchildren wearing shoes that were reportedly so small, the child was forced to walk on the heels tucked down.

"Karen Velie's grandchildren [names redacted by author] were seized July 18 by child protective services. The youngsters have been kept by San Luis Obispo County Child Welfare Services in foster care ever since. All three of the children have suffered varied states of depression since being taken from their family, Child Welfare officials have reported," wrote Friedman and Blackburn.

"The county's involvement stems from an incident that started when Velie's middle child, Cristin Powers, mother of [the children], returned home to find her roommates having an argument. Police were called. Though no report was filed because no crime was committed, Child Welfare removed the three grandchildren because the house was 'dirty,' according to Child Welfare."

CCN didn't publish any reports from Child Welfare Services. Instead, they liberally paraphrased what their issues allegedly were. Because it was a case involving minor children, Child Welfare Services – working under the County Dept. of Social Services – details were confidential. My sources connected to Social Services would not comment on the case except to say it was ongoing.

The article went into detail about the mental and physical deterioration of Velie's grandchildren as a result of being in foster care. Juxtaposed with a small photo of their smiling faces at the Children's Museum were vivid descriptions of the grandchildren's medical issues. They revealed the names of case workers who, they

claimed, prevented Velie and her daughter from reuniting with the children. Again, these allegations could not be verified due to case confidentiality.

Much like their report on her DUI arrest, CCN strongly insinuated the children were taken into custody as retaliation for Velie's reporting. They cited a former employee of CAPSLO who alleged Dee Torres often contacted Child Welfare Services to report abuse and "sometimes doing so in a retaliatory manner." It was clear CCN intended to cast blame on Torres for what happened while not directly pointing to her as the culprit. They also mentioned supervisor Hill, who was engaged to Torres at the time, as someone who told "numerous people" he intends to put CCN out of business.

I'd read stories before from families whose kids were taken into protective custody, but this was a story published by a website that made money from featuring stories like these. Once again, at the core of their story were the conspiracy theories involving two people Velie was madly obsessed with. I remember the observations I made after reading the article for the first time: the way they felt to disclose medical records of minors was grossly exploitative; the sickness in my stomach from knowing this information was made public to thousands of strangers on the Internet; and the shock from realizing their loyal readers stuck by their side despite everything that transpired months earlier.

It was tacky. It was downright cruel.

One week after the article was published, around 30 residents protested across the street from the SLO County Government Center. In footage uploaded to YouTube by CCN, residents were seen huddled in front of the courthouse with various signs. Blackburn was there with his camera, recording the protest. One resident yelled out to the street, "Where's the news? Where's KSBY? Where's Channel 4? Where's FOX NEWS? Where's KCOY? Too hot for 'em?"

The next scene shows residents holding up a large red sign that read, "FREE THE KIDS, REFORM CPS." CPS stood for Child Protective Services.

## DEFAMERS

District 5 Supervisor Debbie Arnold is shown addressing the crowd to thank them for engaging in protest. She also let them know that she was listening to their concerns. The next scene showed former congresswoman Andrea Seastrand being interviewed by an unidentified camerawoman.

“The perception of an underlying issue is that it’s retaliation on Karen Velie, who is the grandmother of the children,” Seastrand said, adding, “I have no proof of that. It’s just the perception, and I think the county needs to investigate their own [Child Welfare Services].”

Though there was absolutely no proof of a conspiracy, more than 60 residents appeared at the County Board of Supervisors later that day, demanding action because of the perception CCN custom-tailored. That perception was based solely on an account published by a demonstrably unreliable source with unverifiable claims – a source previously condemned for invoking similar conspiracy claims just months earlier.

Social Services Director Lee Collins addressed the board to discuss how Child Welfare Services handles cases. He also discussed the importance of keeping case details confidential as a way to protect the welfare of children involved. Yet Collins was the recipient of several thinly-veiled death threats on CCN and social media because CCN readers believed he was part of the conspiracy against Velie. The *New Times'* Shredder, the paper's anonymous critic, noted the threats, laying their inspiration at the doorstep of CCN, “[b]ecause asking [Velie’s] buddies to write an article championing [her] cause is the dictionary definition of ethical journalism.”

There was pushback from residents who questioned why CCN would not follow HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996), which is legislation that safeguards medical information. At the time, Velie’s grandchildren were not at the age of consent to voluntarily disclose their medical records. Some readers criticized CCN’s decision to publish the grandchildren’s names and their photos.

For weeks, their article was constantly shared among local residents on social media. I quickly became bored with the



hysteria, which eventually trickled into my Facebook news feed: “Someone help these poor kids. Shame on you, Adam Hill!” As much as I didn’t want to admit it at the time, the callousness of their story resonated with me, furrowing my brow with contempt for turning innocent children into hapless tabloid fodder.

By the time 2014 rolled around, I received an email about an anonymous CCN account named “Longarm” that published a series of videos on YouTube relevant to the case. The user claimed supervisor Hill and his “girlfriends” were being investigated by an organization called the Knights Templar. “Longarm” claimed they were posting 100 YouTube videos, as well as distributing articles, a documentary, fliers and posters all over California.

One of their videos in particular revealed specific information about the case, some of which was not published by CCN. Longarm’s video identified several individuals involved in the case and labeled them “child kidnappers.” In a chilling message under the video, a user named “Sir Robert Bacon” called for their “blood on the walls” and shared a link to a photo of an assault rifle.

Clicking on Bacon’s name revealed a series of videos featuring supervisor Hill and a dispute he had with *Forbes* magazine columnist Steven Hayward. Hayward criticized Hill over a *New Times* editorial the supervisor published that vividly described people who were susceptible to conspiracy-theory thinking. Hill, an avid reader and part-time writer with a penchant for colorful language, began his piece by identifying the conspirators in a stream of consciousness as:

“Not only the superficially educated and narrow-minded, not only bumpkins with bad breath and worse teeth, not only the gullible and aggrieved, not only those who are nostalgic for a past that never was, not only those who are afraid of losing control—the fire-breathers, the weapons-collectors, wearers of bespoke body armor, anonymous online trollers, lovers of Ayn Rand novels for whom the gift of literacy is truly wasted, not only the teacher’s pets from cardio-prayer class, and the self-appointed scolds of free speech and the memorizers of parables about power ...”

Longarm was one of several YouTube accounts with videos that fixated on supervisor Hill. One of the accounts was named “NewsBreak77,” which pretended to be a news station owned and operated by someone named Erik Goodblood. I could not find any records of a station named “NewsBreak77” or anyone local who went by the name “Erik Goodblood.”

I came across a Facebook page operated by these anonymous accounts called “Citizens Protecting Children,” which contained several stock photos of young people with cameras juxtaposed with historic imagery from the Knights Templar, a Catholic military order that was active over 800 years ago. The photos of people with cameras were borrowed from other websites, none of which shared any relevance to CCN or San Luis Obispo County.

The page was frequented by only one person: Alan Blackburn.

Alan was one of Daniel Blackburn's sons. Alan, a filmmaker, shared Longarm's video about Velie's CWS case throughout a number of non-profit organizations he was involved with. I took a screenshot of his posts, one of them revealing that a video he made was “coming soon.” The video in question was the one that revealed specific information about Velie's case that wasn't made public.

When the video was uploaded, he declared, “Here it is!”

After publishing a column revealing my findings along with the screenshots, Blackburn deleted his posts. Blackburn also scrubbed the shares he made promoting the “Citizens Protecting Children” Facebook page.

I didn't know who else was involved with this anonymous mass-media campaign spread among multiple fake accounts. What I did know was: each account uploaded a video featuring Josh Friedman interviewing former state assemblyman Tim Donnelly. The interview touched on Velie's case. Donnelly, whose district encompassed most of South Los Angeles, reiterated the conspiracy claims from CCN. The video originated from CCN's YouTube channel, but the anonymous version featured a watermark for “News77” and named the “alleged kidnappers” of Velie's grandchildren.

Velie and her daughter eventually reunited with the children. On CCN, Congalton attributed the reunification to CCN's reporting and the subsequent outpouring of outrage, but that was his opinion. There was no evidence indicating the reunification happened because of CCN's reporting.

The 2003-04 SLO County grand jury looked into SLO County Child Welfare Services and revealed in a 39-page report that the department didn't effectively implement policies to protect the best interests of children. CWS officials vowed to make the necessary reforms, but it's difficult to show how effective those reforms are on a case-by-case basis, especially cases bound by confidentiality. Over the years, there have been a number of cases involving local parents who stepped forward to complain about the way their cases were handled.

But this case was different. This was pain published for profit.

There is only so much I can say about this CCN article because verifiable details were scarce, but I was largely unimpressed with it. They hit all the predictable marks of the typical CCN hit piece. For all the conspiracy theory claims, protests, rallies, death threats and anonymous smear campaigns, the totality of these efforts resulted in a resoundingly dull thud. If anything, I learned to never trust a "reporter" willing to throw their own grandchildren under the bus for pageclicks.

In late 2013, I attended a party in Morro Bay. The party was held on the second floor of a building previously owned by the *Sun Bulletin*, a defunct local newspaper that served Morro Bay, Cayucos, Baywood Park, Los Osos, Cambria and San Simeon. After sunset I walked up creaky, unstable wooden stairs to a side entrance on the second floor. I opened the door and saw about 100 people packed into a large space that formerly hosted the *Sun Bulletin's* printing press. The interior of the single, open room had been turned into a makeshift speakeasy. There was concrete flooring sparsely covered with area rugs, dusty brick walls that were given a hipster's finesse with spot, colored lighting. Two flat-screen televisions were hung on the walls, with one running cartoons for kids. In one corner of the space was a fully-furnished kitchen area. Food, wine and beer was served to attendees. Patrons were given a menu of high-priced offerings. Children helped serve patrons platters of food and drinks, including alcohol. Not exactly legal.

Several local musicians performed on a large stage covered in decorative floor rugs. Most of the acts were comprised of local jazz musicians with an occasional folk singer-songwriter performing a handful of songs. The loud drums rattled the room. The bass generated a loud low-frequency hum. I was there to listen to some music and unwind, but my mind was constantly fighting with the buzzing of florescent light fixtures above me. I twisted in my plastic chair, my eyes wandering aimlessly around the room.

James Davis, who co-signed on a lease for the building with his business partner Rick Holliday, approached me, welcoming me to his club and asking for a donation. Surprised, since I had been invited as local media, I declined. Davis admitted to me that the operation – which he originally advertised as a one-off “preview” prior to securing the necessary permits – was part of a business he set up to host concerts and video production. He planned to

operate his business without city oversight, despite receiving complaints from nearby neighbors and inviting attention from law enforcement. I offered to write a feature on the venue once Davis secured a business license and all the necessary permits.

Soon after, the Morro Bay Police Department shut down one of his speakeasy events. This led to the city red-tagging the *Sun Bulletin* building as unsafe, effectively barring Davis from hosting future events there. According to city officials, the second-story space was originally permitted for storage. The building was also permitted as office space. Changing the use of an existing building triggered a number of issues that Davis seemed particularly unwilling to overcome.

But according to CCN's Josh Friedman, the city shutting down Davis' speakeasy was part of an elaborate conspiracy concocted by city officials and local businesses to stifle competition.

Friedman's reporting from February 2014 was dominated with hearsay and unsubstantiated allegations about business owners who conducted business near Davis's speakeasy events. Friedman identified one business owner who had a store next to the *Sun Bulletin* building, and accused her of illegally living in her building. The owner complained to law enforcement about the noise Davis's parties created after nearby residents expressed concern and frustration. The owner flatly denied allegations Friedman published about her.

As a result of Friedman's article, the owner was besieged with death threats on CCN and accused by readers of being part of a conspiracy with other business owners to shut down Davis's events. Several business owners were named by anonymous readers as being involved in the conspiracy. Many of the business owners who were identified sought police protection. For over a month, Morro Bay city officials, business owners and residents were on edge.

In March 2014, Friedman reappeared with a new article that focused on city staff and a new alleged victim of business competition suppression. Friedman claimed an owner of an antique store, Jeffrey Specht, spent months clearing out, cleaning and painting a shop that he couldn't open because city staff

refused to grant him operating permits. Friedman didn't ask the business owner why he invested time and money in setting up the business prior to obtaining permits.

When I checked with the city in 2014 and asked for Specht's permit applications, they were unable to find any. Friedman claimed Specht wanted to serve ice cream, candy and taffy, though I was unable to find any health permit applications from him for food service. When Specht's business was closed down by the city, a sign was placed on the door stating that the business did not have any permits to legally operate. The Morro Bay Police Dept. found evidence Specht was illegally sleeping in his leased space and had engaged in similar practices in San Diego.

In August, Friedman went after the police officer that assisted the city in shutting down Davis's operation and Specht's business. He accused the officer, who he didn't name in his story, of sleeping in his vehicle at three in the morning. The officer maintained he was briefly resting his eyes and remained on call. In video recorded by Specht, the officer was seen speaking to him and appeared to be lucid. Without evidence, Friedman claimed CCN personally observed police officers sleeping in their cars during the night shift on "multiple occasions," though he never cited any specific instances when he allegedly made those observations or provided additional evidence.

The officer was later identified by CCN readers. The officer was accused of dereliction of duty and was personally threatened by one of Friedman's named sources in a series of online comments.

Police investigated the matter internally and decided to take no reportable action.

I wrote about Friedman's haphazard, potentially dangerous and shoddy reporting on Morro Bay. As a result, I was the recipient of several threats communicated by one of Friedman's sources. Accounts impersonating and mocking me started appearing on CCN. One anonymous user told me to kill myself and provided instructions. My father, who attended the party with me, was also threatened. Some of the more graphic comments were removed by moderators. I endured the slings and

arrows, but not silently. I fired back at the threat-maker and told him to back off in an email. He hurled a few epithets my way, but eventually faded into the obscurity of his own making.

I took exception to the community being terrorized by CCN. Now, it was *my* community. My home. My friends. I couldn't stop wondering: *Why were they picking on random private citizens?* This was a fake news assault on the community. I remembered my frustration boiling over, the residual disdain I accumulated from poring over stacks of documents looking for evidence substantiating a city-wide conspiracy to shut down business competition, and the bitterness I felt from watching patrol units frequently circling around the "conspiring" businesses. Why should a community have their public safety jeopardized by baseless reporting?

Fortunately, nothing bad happened. Despite the conspiracy theories and the vilification of law enforcement, nothing changed. But, frankly, I was goddamn sick of the relentless abuse.

First of all, it pained me to realize that I put more effort investigating allegations than they did publishing them. When I exercised my due diligence and looked into their allegations, I was attacked for for basically doing the job they're supposed to be doing.

I found it bizarre to even be part of their conversation. What difference did my reporting and opinions truly make to CCN? They didn't seem to care before. Why did they care now? It wasn't like I was reporting for the *Tribune*, *New Times* or any well-recognized publication of record. Yet their readership felt it was incumbent on them to attack and threaten me for my columns.

Perhaps their visceral reaction was a testament to my effectiveness. Perhaps I could harness the power in it.

## 17

It was March 6, 2014. I came back home from *Information Press* later that afternoon feeling tired. I swiveled around in my desk chair, my mind blank and scattered. My attention was fixed on my flickering computer screen. My email inbox was open. I perused through emails from people targeted and maligned by CCN, asking me to correct the record on my blog.

There was a moment, I recall, when throwing my hands in the air I started typing the words “Cal Coast Fraud” in response to one of CCN’s alleged victims.

Why “fraud”? Tabloids like the *National Enquirer* and the *National Examiner* published stories most people knew were sensational by design. Those publishers knew they were a tabloid, not a reputable news source – not something that people would cite as a primary source for information. In comparison, CCN knowingly published false and defamatory claims under the guise of investigative journalism. I felt they were defrauding tens of thousands of readers by publishing “news” with the intent to deceive and shape their editorial narrative to a vindictive, personal and political agenda – for profit.

When facts were made known to them and the public, CCN largely refused to take corrective action or acknowledge any fault. In fact, their reporters bristled at the notion that they *might* be wrong or that their editorial standards were lacking in any way. Taking into consideration all the claims they alleged and were unable to prove, CCN projected a sense of invulnerability that I found fraudulent.

Yet there was a sizable amount of SLO County residents reading them and believing in their reporting. There were people who were willing to show up at public meetings to not only reiterate their baseless allegations, but also risk their personal reputations to express their support for CCN by name. These people sincerely believed CCN was a beacon of light that



successfully shined on the graft and corruption of local government. I wanted nothing more than to tell them: *You were duped.*

CCN took advantage of the gullibility of their readership by asking for donations. While asking for donations isn't a crime, they justified their pleas by pointing to their successes. However, they were unable to demonstrate how their reporting was "successful," especially when much of it yielded no positive return for the community. If anything, their reporting created more chaos and confusion, leaving readers with a lack of clarity and an abundance of distrust.

That March I created a Facebook page called Cal Coast Fraud (CCF), hastily assembled a logo and crafted organization policies. It was a ridiculously terse and incendiary name, but it got the point across. Policies were published on a website hosted by Tumblr, a microblogging and social networking site, because I didn't want to invest money into purchasing a web domain and hosting.

Word quickly spread on local social media that I launched CCF. This generated enough buzz to garner contributors, which I kept anonymous to protect them from retaliation. The contributors I brought on board were residents that volunteered their time to write posts and columns that scrutinized CCN. I was comfortable being the namesake and face of the operation. By then, I was CCN's most prolific critic. Hiding in anonymity served no helpful purpose.

After casting a wide net by publishing a 'help wanted' ad on Craigslist, I chose four local people to work with me on a purely volunteer basis. They were given the option of moderating the page, or creating Facebook posts or content on our Tumblr page. None of the individuals I selected were targeted by CCN or were involved with the publication. Some of the contributors had commented regularly on *The ROCK* prior to applying.

The short-term goal was to create an organization that comprehensively monitored and scrutinized CCN reporting. The long-term goal was to expand beyond CCN and form a tax-exempt, nonprofit organization to combat right-wing

misinformation, hypocrisy and fake news in SLO County. I had the vision of expanding into a local, progressive research and information center.

Around the time we launched, CCF would not accept any donations. I figured we would start asking for donations in late 2014 and ultimately switch to an advertising-friendly revenue model. We were more interested in developing a strong content platform prior to becoming a business venture, which was ultimately my goal. I wanted to develop the brand, change the name to something less terse and become a reputable media watchdog platform.

But there were issues I needed to overcome.

I was still an employee of *Information Press*. Around the time I started CCF, I received a small raise but my hours were reduced. I wanted to be a part of something new, something hard-hitting and deeply satisfying, and remain committed to the work I was hired to do. I decided to take a less active role on CCF and delegated authority to my contributors. I'd spend the free time I had developing policies that helped govern the site more efficiently. I decided to tell Marshall about my new Facebook page, but I promised to keep *IP* separate from it.

The second issue was my lack of objectivity. I couldn't write about these people anymore without despising them further, yet when I made an effort to fact-check them, readers noticed. People were looking to me to separate fact from fiction in their controversial reporting, but my exasperation kept reaching the surface, ironically making quips and posts with my own brand of spiteful panache. I heard from professional journalists in the community, who occasionally pulled me aside and reminded me to take a step back when I lapsed in demonstrating balance. This, I knew, was the challenge that would take some time to overcome.

I quickly embraced that I had an ethical, journalistic and stylistic responsibility to be straight-forward, reliable and transparent. I had tapped into a vast, voiceless reservoir of CCN detractors. Now I had *power* in the form of digital ink. People were reading my work to get the actual story, not half of a story – occasionally based perhaps on a kernel of truth – and certainly

not a story that read more like a lengthy complaint from a self-righteous blogger. In order to provide quality reporting and analysis, I had to treat CCF as a full-time job, not a part-time hobby. But I struggled to find the time to process information we kept receiving while balancing my workload with *IP*. There were times I had trouble following up on tips, so I'd occasionally ask my readers for leads. Not a great idea.

After two months of growing pains, we developed a formula, which consisted of simple fact-checking on Facebook with a dash of mocking humor. The claims CCN made were often so ridiculous and absurd, we couldn't help but lampoon them. We could intrigue, shock, frighten and amaze readers with information we were able to uncover that quickly stripped away all their claims of being "reporters" writing "news," but one of the most effective tools in our arsenal was satire. We wanted to show the trembling, little wizards behind the curtain. To a large extent, we were effective. As CCN spread, so did CCF, fueled by their blunders and flagrant abuse.

One of our frequent targets was Congalton, who wouldn't give the people CCN attacked any sort of recourse to respond in equal time. Privately, I'd email him various barbs, childish insults and tasteless jokes. It was the least I can do for someone who used his public microphone to demean private citizens, mock women over their looks and sex lives, and rip reputable community leaders on his show without consequence. Frankly, it was cathartic. Publicly, I mocked Congalton for denying making comments on air that recordings show he made (his station often uploaded his radio segments daily onto their website). Around the time CCF launched, Congalton's 2014 film "Authors Anonymous," which he wrote, was awarded with a hilariously low score of 7% by online review aggregate *Rotten Tomatoes*. I remember creating a graphic, which quoted negative reviews from major film critics around the country. This graphic was later reported and removed by Facebook for "violating community standards."

I'd create posts and graphics that mocked CCN's penchant for conspiracy theory peddling: "*o days since Karen Velie blamed Adam Hill for something wrong.*" The counter would reset daily.

As time went on, I flung insults back and forth with Congalton via email, believing he deserved no respect for the way he treated others. I didn't have the tolerance or the patience to be a professional journalist, ask him questions, and give him the kind of due process that he routinely refused to provide for those he accused of wrongdoing. After being personally and repeatedly attacked on his show without a chance to respond, I found no reason to be polite.

I had as yet no short-term vision for CCF and no time to develop one. But I constantly tinkered with our message, studying what worked, what didn't, and the best ways we could carve out a niche for ourselves. In our own way, we were having fun. We were addressing CCN the same way comedian Jon Stewart addressed *FOX NEWS* on "The Daily Show" – with an admittedly imperfect blend of analysis and humor. Suffice to say, we were undisciplined and spontaneous, but unique. No one could predict what CCN controversy we would take on or how we'd tackle it.

By Spring 2014, CCN developed a reputation for being a countywide clearinghouse for misinformation and disinformation, frequently publishing controversial articles with dubious claims at a feverish pace. Because we had trouble keeping up with the volume of questionable claims, we decided to roll out our analysis by publishing short posts on Facebook with spot analysis. Eventually, we got around to covering their more controversial work in longer posts.

In the beginning, we focused on Velie's DUI guilty verdict. After a short trial, a 12-member SLO County Superior Court jury unanimously found her guilty. Everything her site threw on the wall meant absolutely nothing: the conspiracy theory that her reporting was a factor in her arrest; witness testimony that she didn't appear visibly appeared before she got behind the wheel; and the relentless attacks on her arresting officer. Many of us felt the verdict was a clear, well-deserved rebuke of her website's reporting and the anonymous allegations she likely promulgated among multiple fake accounts. The fact she never publicly took responsibility for her actions spoke volumes about her lack of

personal and professional accountability.

Then we witnessed a tragic illustration of the real pain that bad tabloid reporting can cause. In April 2014, CCF first reported on community outrage over an article Velie published about a Los Osos middle school student who committed suicide. Velie claimed the suicide of 13-year-old resident Nailani Buchholz followed “years of torment” from bullying. Velie pointed to social media comments Nailani made about her self-image, but couldn't identify who and where she learned about the alleged bullying. Velie was unable to identify specific instances of bullying and claimed her parents were unaware of it.

Family and friends of Nailani overwhelmingly rejected Velie's characterization of her suicide, stating unequivocally that bullying was not a factor in her suicide. According to her father Bill, in a journal she left behind, Nailani specifically stated depression was the sole factor. Velie also claimed Mr. Buchholz described her as being a “chunky little girl,” which he denied saying.

Velie never updated the article to reflect the dozens of comments from Nailani's family. Comments from her relatives, which included calls for the article to be taken down, were removed underneath the article and on CCN's Facebook page. Some of Nailani's relatives complained they were reportedly blocked from commenting further on CCN. Velie responded to the blowback, insisting “several” Los Osos parents contacted her about the alleged bullying, but she couldn't explain why she chose to believe “several” parents other than Nailani's. Velie insisted the family confirmed allegations of bullying, though her statement came after several critical comments from her family were removed. Velie then denied alleging that bullying was the cause of her suicide, though the headline of her article literally read, “Bullied Los Osos teen commits suicide.” The implication was there.

Then Velie took aim at Nailani's father, claiming he would say her story was “made up” and deny he was interviewed by her if she refused to take the story down. Mr. Buchholz later denied her allegations. In a phone conversation I had with Mr. Buchholz, he admitted to being interviewed by Velie, adding he was responsive

to her questions after Velie revealed her daughter died and was empathetic to his situation as a grieving parent.

Shortly after Velie's article was published, Mr. Buchholz reached out to the *Tribune* to correct the record since Velie wouldn't. Despite repeatedly providing corrections and being ignored by CCN, the family looked for some relief. Velie's article went viral in Los Osos and was distributed among her middle school's faculty. The article also went viral on website BullyVille.com, having garnered millions of views around the country. Several parents contacted Nailani's school with concerns about their children's safety after reading Velie's article, triggering a panic among the faculty.

The *Tribune* published the family's side of the story and had their account corroborated by the County Sheriff's Dept. and San Luis Coastal Superintendent Eric Prater. Prater revealed he drafted a letter to refute Velie's claims. The letter was distributed to parents district-wide. Despite an overwhelming group of people refuting her article, Velie never updated it to reflect all the contentions. CCN's shadow editor, Bill Loving, never stepped forward to explain why CCN left up claims that were demonstrably false. There was no apology for the pain and suffering CCN caused to Nailani's family.

Later, I discovered Velie lifted the opening line and premise of her article from another article about a bullied teen suicide posted two days earlier in *The Daily Mirror*, a British national tabloid. The opening line of the *Daily Mirror's* April 5, 2014 article read, "A bullied teenage boy has died after an apparent suicide bid following years of torment." In her article from April 7, Velie wrote, "A bullied 13-year-old Los Osos girl died Thursday after a suicide bid following years of torment."

Velie clearly plagiarized the bullying claim and wrote a sensationalized narrative around it.

I was angry at CCN, especially Velie, for displaying the same reckless disregard for Nailani that her site displayed for her own grandchildren. Who, in the right mind, would exploit a child this way?

A lot of people were asking that same question on CCF. Tired of the pathological lying, conspiracy theories and obsessive vendettas, readers began to wonder if Velie was fit to run a news site. Her work was marred with inaccuracies, typos, excuses, and refusals to correct what clearly needed correcting, among a myriad of other deficiencies. She expounded on her work with incoherent and loud rambling on air. There were reports of her screaming and threatening people over the phone. How could that behavior be reasonably explained? At the same time, as someone with a mentally disabled relative, I felt uncomfortable being the host of that conversation, especially when users resorted to derogatory labels and unsubstantiated allegations of a medical diagnosis.

Nevertheless, I experimented with ways to discuss the subject, albeit on other platforms. I commented on the *Tribune* website underneath their article on Buchholz and discussed whether it was ethical for CCN to feature a “reporter” who was unable to properly recognize fact from fiction. I was promptly chided by two self-described close friends of Velie’s who felt my comments were mean-spirited and inappropriate. Both claimed she had an unspecified personality disorder and unspecified “personality issues” that shouldn’t be a disqualifying trait to run a news site. The attitude they showed me was: *How dare you stigmatize mental illness by implying someone shouldn’t publish news if they’re mentally disabled!*

On May 4, 2014, I decided to tackle the subject head on. “Given the people that support and operate CalCoastNews, do you believe that their [reporters’] mental state is relevant? Or do you believe that it’s off limits?” I wrote. We revealed that we were made aware of an alleged diagnosis for Velie [in the post’s first version, “actual” was written instead of “alleged”] in light of concerns about her erratic writing and behavior.

I added, “In our westernized civilization, people with mental illnesses are demonized as if their illnesses define and limit who they are. Evidence of this is the prominent usage of the ‘r-word.’ We believe that if you’re going to reveal someone’s diagnosis, it’s important to do so under the condition of providing that person help; it should never be used as an exercise in shaming or

discrediting their work.”

Looking back, my word choices could've been better. The fact was: I scrambled to delete comments that speculated on Velie's mental health. Instead of constantly deleting critique that was speculative, I wanted to reshape the conversation and address the issue as a moral dilemma. Should someone who regularly publishes and sincerely believes in falsehoods – and defiantly leave them unchecked when corrected – be considered a legitimate source? In hindsight, that was the question I should have asked.

Since I was busy working my full-time job at *Information Press*, I didn't have time to peruse the discussion and remove derogatory comments in an expeditious manner. So I felt I had to say something that acknowledged a discussion was taking place while trying to set appropriate parameters for it. It was awkward. Then again, lying about the circumstances surrounding a young girl's suicide was even more awkward. Many of us were at a loss for words. I certainly was.

From that point, I walked away from the conversation, perfectly content with never broaching that sensitive subject again. I wasn't qualified to talk about her mental state, but her bad behavior was surely egregious. Something was seriously wrong with Karen Velie, a “reporter” who showed an egregious pattern of child exploitation.



May 2014 was a relative period of calm. There were no major controversies to cover – no arrests, exploitative articles or conspiracy allegations that embroiled an entire community. I put CCF on the back burner to focus on *Information Press* and somehow smoothly transitioning out of that job. There wasn't going to be any fireworks, no utterances of profanity or expressions of exasperation, no hard feelings. The publication was hemorrhaging money on a monthly basis. We couldn't hold down a sales person to sell advertising. Our advertiser base was dwindling. It was unlikely I'd be able to hold onto the job after the end of the year.

Complicating matters, Sandra Marshall announced her long-shot, low-budget run for Congress. Marshall used our office space to work on campaign materials and shoot video for short political ads. We were excited about her congressional run, but we were undoubtedly distracted. I was genuinely excited that she would enter the race as it proved to be a brief morale boost for *IP* employees. However, that enthusiasm would soon turn to frustration.

Marshall would regularly leave the office for speaking engagements and endorsement meetings that took place throughout the congressional district, so we were left to manage the publication with limited staff and resources. Though we now had an editor, a second-in-command, Marshall continued to have her final say as publisher. However, getting her permission on editorial changes proved challenging.

Given the chaos swirling around the workplace, weekends became a more welcomed respite. No one was calling or texting me with a story assignment. I was able to sleep in until 11 in the morning, feeling the rest was well earned. However, not *everything* was peace and quiet. On one quiet Saturday morning, as I was getting ready to walk around downtown Morro Bay, I

received a frantic call from Sandra Marshall.

“Karen Velie called me yesterday,” Marshall told me. “I spoke with her for two and a half hours. She says she’s coming after you and your family.”

Several reactions ran through my mind: shock, anger, paranoia, confusion. I remember standing in my bathroom, looking at myself in the mirror with the phone firmly pressed against my ear, mouth agape.

“What do you mean?”

“She threatened you. She said she would go after me, your family. Then she said she would go after me and my family if I didn’t do something about you.”

“Threatened how?”

“I don’t, I can’t – listen,” she said. “She says that if I don’t fire you, she’s going to write a hit piece about me, you and my campaign because she said, and I quote, you were ‘shifting her revenues.’ Then she said she would go after you and your family because you have money.” Then her voice began to quiver. “Then she said my family was next because we had money.”

“That sounds like blackmail and extortion.”

Of course I had a feeling my Cal Coast Fraud would ruffle her feathers, but it had nothing to do with *Information Press*. I couldn’t figure out the logic of Velie contacting my employer because of words and opinions expressed outside the scope of my employment. Had she contacted me, the author, to express her displeasure, I’d understand that.

“She threatened to write an article because about me and my campaign – and I’m paraphrasing here – that I’m paying you to do Cal Coast Fraud, that she had proof you were doing it on the clock, and that you were working with Kenny McCarthy and Scott Barnes on Cal Coast Fraud to attack her and shut down her business...”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “That’s bullshit.”

Completely made up. All of it. First I was accused by Velie of being paid by supervisor Hill to criticize her. Now I was accused

of being in a conspiracy with people I barely interacted with to shut down her website using a social media page that I didn't publicly advertise. I spent a lot of time doing mental gymnastics to figure out how she came up with such an elaborate conspiracy theory. Why did she believe I was specifically working with two people on a Facebook page that they had nothing to do with? What was the connection between McCarthy and Barnes?

Velie reportedly pushed a nonsensical legal theory that my employer was responsible for my personal opinions because I allegedly wrote them on company time. Did Velie have a copy of my work schedule? Did she know that most of my Facebook posts were automatically scheduled to be published throughout the day? Did she know I had contributors who posted at various times throughout the day, even while I was working? No way. Did she truly have proof? Nope. The accusations were completely, it seemed, a part of her wild imagination – she was imagining herself looking over my shoulder at work, watching every keystroke every minute of my work day.

“I know it is. If you did anything that she was accusing you of doing, I would've fired you.”

“Thanks?” I said, chuckling softly. “But if you know she's making things up, why did you continue to talk to her...?”

“She claimed you accused her of murdering her daughter,” Marshall told me.

Again, bullshit. This was now the second time – that I could recall – she weaponized her family's suffering to demonize her perceived adversaries. I made no such allegation. It was terrifying to be accused of falsely claiming a mother murdered her child. I remember pausing on the phone for what felt like eternity, searching for words to say.

According to Marshall, Velie revealed to her that she reportedly got the idea to call her from Congalton. Velie reportedly described having dinner with Congalton one evening and he broached the subject about some of *Information Press* coverage of CCN. The last article to mention CCN was a feature *IP* published in March 2013, more than one year before Velie

contacted Marshall. Velie was reportedly upset with a portion of the feature, which mentioned CCN publishing a “series of unsubstantiated allegations against Supervisor Hill, CAPSLO Homeless Services Director Dee Torres and CAPSLO itself.” She also reportedly expressed frustration over my coverage of the defamation lawsuit filed against her by Tenborg – a story that other publications covered. Velie also referred to a tweet I made on *IP*'s Twitter account, stating that her reporting was being “investigated.” The link, which was posted with Marshall's expressed permission, was directed to coverage on *The ROCK*, where we investigated her reported claims on CAPSLO.

How involved was Congalton in this drama?

In an email sent to Marshall from May 9, Velie wrote that I falsely accused CCN of publishing “many untruths in stories.” She claimed my opinion was “libel,” but failed to specify my allegedly libelous allegations about her... potentially libelous reporting. While her frustration was palpable, her allegations were absurd. She also had no legal standing to pursue the matter in court. The *IP* content she believed was “libelous” was published a year before she contacted Marshall. California's statute of limitations for defamation is one year after publication date. Apart from her frivolous allegations, Velie was effectively time-barred from making a defamation claim on that basis alone.

Marshall replied to Velie in an email, briefly forgetting I posted some of my reporting on CCN on *IP* social media. She told Velie she was “disturbed” *IP* would be linked to any stories related to CCN or her. After reading Marshall's response, I immediately reminded her of her March 2013 Publisher's Note, which specifically addressed CCN's reporting and my coverage.

My conversation with Marshall would last for about 45 minutes. Marshall went over Velie's dissertation of all the things I was reportedly involved with, including but not limited to a conspiracy to shut down her website; publishing “untruths” on company time; forcing her to move from place to place because my coverage somehow put her and her family in danger; being somehow involved in the poisoning of her beloved family dog; and being somehow involved in leaving some unspecified device

underneath her porch. She also claimed my father physically hurt her, and that she was sexually assaulted.

Then she reportedly accused me of claiming she was diagnosed mentally ill. Of course, she was referring to my CCF post where I questioned whether or not her alleged mental issues were relevant to her reporting and her ability to report accurately. But that conversation did not take place on *Information Press*. She claimed my “source” for the diagnosis was Scott Barnes, a conspiracy theorist who peddled fanciful stories about espionage, rescue missions and government corruption.

In the early 1990s, Barnes made national headlines when he alleged George H.W. Bush’s reelection campaign intended to sabotage then-presidential candidate Ross Perot by releasing a doctored photo of his daughter performing a lesbian act and by wiretapping his phones. According to *Newsweek*, Perot identified Barnes as a source of those allegations. A federal investigation revealed the allegations were false. Barnes, who repeatedly portrayed himself as a military and federal official – but never was – was blamed for the dissolution of Perot’s presidential campaign.

When Daniel Blackburn was the news editor for *New Times*, he wrote a detailed and somewhat glorified cover story on Barnes, at one point describing him as a “freelance soldier of fortune.” In 2004, Barnes appeared in San Luis Obispo at a citizens oversight committee that formed to evaluate SLO County Sheriff’s Department’s policies. In 2009, he was named as a defendant in a libel suit filed by a local developer. He was unmasked as an anonymous online poster who allegedly made false claims about the developer. The developer, Ed Palmer, passed away before the case could go to trial.

In an email to Marshall, Velie provided screenshots of posts that she believed came from Barnes. The posts were published on a site called Topix.com, a news aggregator with local message boards. In those posts, users accused Velie of having “many DSM IV with many personality disorders” and having undergone years of mental evaluations. A list of her alleged disorders were provided, but there was no corroborating evidence – no medical records or testimony from medical professionals. There was no

physical evidence Barnes was the author of those anonymous allegations. This was the first time I was made aware of these posts, which I never used as a source.

“[Barnes] regularly posts [to] appear claiming criminal acts and other things on Topix and then Ochs claims he has sources for the same claim[sic],” wrote Velie. “I have never been diagnosed mentally ill, hospitalized, or even seen a counselor or mental health doctor. Oachs [sic] never calls he just writes complete untruths.”

Now I was being held responsible for allegedly using anonymous claims on some message board as a source. These claims originated from a person she couldn't prove made them. On top of that, Velie claimed I echoed these specific allegations about her on company time on a Facebook page my employer wasn't involved with.

In April 2014, Barnes did write on my page and criticized CCN's “false, misleading” story on Randall Reed. He accused the “hate-related” blog of actively soliciting monies under false and fraudulent pretenses, adding they were once “caught never refund[ing] the stolen monies.” I never responded to Barnes' post.

After hearing the exhaustive totality of Velie's false and disgusting allegations, I lost my patience.

“We need to call the police,” I said. “This is harassment.”

“No, let's not.”

“She's harassing me, you, and she's threatened both our families based on nothing!” I exclaimed. “Everything she's saying is absolute bullshit.”

“I believe you,” said Marshall. “I want to get to the bottom of this.”

Marshall asked me to compile any *IP* work mentioning CCN or Velie for her to review. She told me her daughter and *IP* editor Heather Young would perform a review of any links or articles mentioning CCN. I agreed to the review and volunteered to fully cooperate. However, I wished Marshall would've told Velie to never call again, hang up and walk away from the ordeal without

prolonging our stress. Marshall had a campaign to run. I was busy with work. None of us needed to entertain the melodramatic ramblings of a babbling basket case, especially when she contacted the wrong person to express her hysterical grievances to – especially when the truthfulness of her allegations existed only in the confines of her troubled mind.

Marshall suggested that she keep the conversation ongoing with Velie so she could properly archive all the allegations for potential litigation or a civil harassment order against her. Marshall described her plan as a way to “trap” Velie. Whatever. If she wasn’t going to contact the police, this was the next best option. I reluctantly agreed to play along, though I didn’t believe it was the best strategy.

I was concerned for my personal safety, my family's safety, and didn't feel comfortable coming into work. Based on what Marshall told me about her conversation with Velie, I could see a scenario involving Velie showing up at my workplace and causing a violent confrontation. But Marshall told me not to worry, insisting she was adept at de-escalating conflicts as a seasoned “peacemaker.” How does someone make peace with Velie? Tranquilizers? Tasers?

When Monday came around, I prepared for the worst. The office was actually quiet and uneventful. I met with Marshall in her office. She let me read some of the emails she received from Velie, a gesture that I appreciated. I read Velie’s emails like I was reading an anonymous ransom note made with letters cut from magazine. I remember joking how letters from the Zodiac Killer were more subtle and easier to decipher.

In one of the emails Marshall showed me, Velie encouraged her to contact her attorney James Duenow, who would explain how she was legally liable for posts on CCF. Velie provided Duenow's personal phone number. Marshall insisted she never followed through with Velie's suggestion. There was no indication Duenow was aware of the situation as it unfolded. But the prospect of a once-reputable local attorney being involved in a potential blackmail scheme was frightening.

What struck Marshall was Velie's obsession with money. Velie

reportedly told Marshall that she was desperate for income and filing lawsuits was a source for income. Velie reportedly confessed to being a transient, having moved from home to home because she was harassed and stalked by unnamed, nefarious forces. She said she relied heavily on advertising revenue and donations from loyal readers to survive. Velie reportedly indicated my criticism of her reporting helped exacerbate her fiscal hardship, but didn't explain how.

Marshall assured me the false allegations and hysterics would all come to pass, but she asked me to lay low, not publish anything until she was done communicating with Velie. I agreed. Though I felt better coming out of the meeting, I remained frustrated with Marshall that she wanted to communicate with Velie for an undetermined period of time. But Marshall insisted she would cease communications entirely once Velie turned over her supposed evidence of my reprehensible acts and she was able to review any documentation Velie turned over.

She would later receive links to my published content from Velie and Josh Friedman, Velie's "tech person." Marshall asked me to remove one of my *IP* posts, which was an unfinished, one-line teaser linking to my coverage on *The ROCK*, and asked me to remove it. I complied, agreeing that the teaser, which described CCN as a "gossip site," didn't have to remain online. We were essentially throwing Velie a bone so she felt like her frustration wasn't completely unwarranted.

For the next couple of days, work started to resemble a degree of normalcy. The office spent time processing and editing copy for the upcoming issue. I kept my head down, stayed quiet and pounded the keys with my usual pace and rhythm. I credited Marshall for keeping the peace. *Maybe she went away*, I thought. Finally. Maybe we didn't have to call law enforcement or go through the restraining order process. Maybe Velie was just venting. Maybe she realized her conduct was a mistake and was moving forward.

Around the end of my work shift one afternoon, the office phone rang. I was editing a story for the magazine when Young answered the phone. I thought nothing of it. The caller asked for



Marshall. Young took the cordless phone and headed toward Marshall's office. Young flashed a look of concern as she walked past me. I whispered to her, "Who is it?" She answered, "Karen Clay." From the corner of my eye, I could see the phone's LED screen light up. The caller ID read "Karen Clay." Clay was one of Velie's previous surnames. I suddenly bolted out of my chair and followed Young. My heart was pounding.

As I made my way to Marshall's office, I walked stiffly and slowly, hoping I could eavesdrop on some of the conversation without being discovered. I quietly stood by Marshall's glass doors, tilted my ear toward an opening in the door and listened. What I heard was more than I could bargain for.

"He's hurting me, he's hurting me, he's hurting me!" Velie screamed.

I could hear her demonic, blood-curdling wail. She was screaming, crying, coughing and wailing like an angry, rabid moose. I stood beside Marshall's door, staring at the wall with a dead fish-eyed gaze, struggling to comprehend the insanity I was hearing.

"Oh God! Make it stop! Aaron Ochs is hurting me!" Velie screeched. "No, no, no! Oh no!"

I could hear Marshall telling Velie to calm down repeatedly over her loud sobbing. I could barely hear what Velie was saying after that. It sounded like she was saying, "My daughter, my poor daughter," but I wasn't sure. If this was an indication of what Marshall had to endure on the phone for nearly three hours, I'd completely understand Marshall's dread and unwillingness to hang up. I felt my stomach churning and turning into knots, unable to figure out how I'd handle the situation if I was in Marshall's shoes.

Suddenly, the sobbing stopped. I heard Marshall ask, "Did Aaron do something to you recently...?"

Then Velie's mood changed. There was a long pause. She started to chuckle... delightfully. The chuckling slowly evolved into puckish laughter. "How are you, Sandra?" I heard Velie calmly ask. "Are you going to take care of my problem or should

I?”

“I told you, Karen. I’m looking into it,” Marshall tersely replied as she slowly pulled the phone away from the side of her face, looking petrified. “What more could you possibly want?”

“This could affect your campaign, you know,” I heard Velie say.

I stood out of Marshall’s view, situated only a foot away from Marshall’s open door. I walked out from where I was hiding, darted through the lobby and went outside. Shaking, I reached into my pants pocket and brought out my cell phone. I dialed my father’s cell. He answered. I contemporaneously detailed what I overheard and what she alleged I did. I remember telling him about her sudden emotional changes on the phone – from inaudible screeching and babbling to calm and jovial. He told me to take a deep breath and go home. I slowly slid down the side of the building’s exterior wall and landed on concrete, staring emptily at the busy road nearby. Here, I was gasping for air, looking for a refreshingly cool breeze to caress my face. That breeze never came.

By the time I walked back into the office, Marshall was wrapping up her conversation with Velie. Marshall looked at me, exasperated. She quietly asked me to sit in her office. She pushed her short hair back and sighed heavily. “That woman is fucking crazy,” Marshall lippped to me. I nodded.

I was baffled that she would continue speaking with her. With the cacophony of Velie’s loud, lengthy and sometimes unintelligible outbursts still ringing in her mind, Marshall raised her finger before I could say a word. I quietly sat down across from her, trying to process what I heard, with my arms crossed and countless thoughts darting around my brain, not going anywhere. I didn’t know what else Velie said to Marshall. I didn’t bother to ask.

“She’s crazy,” Marshall said. “You really messed with a crazy person. It’s not what I should be doing. I’m really busy. I have things to do. I’ll address her and leave it at that.”

“Maybe we should talk to a lawyer about this because

obviously she's obsessed..."

"No, no." Marshall dismissively waved away the suggestion. "I'd hold off on that until my campaign is over. After that, fine. I just – I just need to figure out what to do."

I stood up and walked across the office, rubbing my chin, looking out her window as if the solutions were available out there. I understood she wanted to maintain her focus on her candidacy. I understood the stress she was under. But we were dealing with someone who showed no signs of stopping or slowing down. I didn't feel Velie would be satisfied until I was fired, fed into a wood chipper or both. I was concerned she was the type of person to walk into the office and start shooting. Marshall was concerned about her husband and kids. I was concerned for my parents, especially Ed, who Velie falsely accused of "hurting" her. We didn't know what was going to happen next. We felt the likelihood of a heinous act was high.

"Okay, then can you send me your emails between you and Velie?" I asked her. "Can you at least do that?"

Marshall reluctantly agreed on the condition that I would share those emails with no one else and nowhere else. I promised not to write anything about what transpired, though I felt it was in the public interest to reveal what happened. I didn't want to sit and tremble with fear while brooding in silence. All I wanted to do was to take the path of least resistance and work with Marshall to reach the end of this conflict. Anything she wanted to do, I was going to say "yes" and cooperate. To be very honest, I was undeniably frustrated with Marshall for not taking a stand early on. I wanted her to tell Velie, "Enough is enough. If you call here again I will contact the police," but I figured Marshall feared a violent escalation if she played that card.

I walked to my car with the breeze now blowing against my face. I could hear the office front door clattering as it closed behind me with a loud *ka-thump*. The slightest noise rattled me. I thought: *Are you kidding me?*

I made my way to the parking lot, hopped into my car and sat in the driver's seat. I closed my eyes, tried to inhale, exhale and

calm down. No luck. I rolled the windows up and loudly yelled, “Fuck me!” while angrily slapping the steering wheel.

Yes, I was angry at myself. Three years worth of critique of a controversial website that made controversial, misleading and false claims had made me an easy target. Yet they felt they were blameless, infallible, and anyone who dared criticize them was part of some elaborate conspiracy. While I was aware of Velie's volatile tendencies, I persisted, wrongly assuming she no longer cared what some so-called “boy blogger” in some podunk fishing village had to say. On the surface, it appeared she largely ignored my content on Cal Coast Fraud, which was generated to populate the page and wasn't yet promoted to a wide audience.

I made a miscalculation in starting Cal Coast Fraud, an organization with a provocative premise, while I was still employed by *Information Press*. By directly taking on another media entity, my decision to start the page set me apart from other writers in the industry, making me a unique target. This move, which was meant to incentivize a seamless transition out of my job, inadvertently ensnared Marshall in inconceivable ways – threats, screaming and babbling phone calls, wild allegations, money demands. By now I knew I had to accept responsibility.

But my wild, irresponsible gambit had inadvertently unveiled a dark side to CalCoastNews. Unlike our local publications of record like *The Tribune* and *New Times*, CCN was publishing content with the intent to destroy, and anyone questioning their reporting practices or motives were considered their mortal enemies. Based on what she told Marshall, Velie felt their controversial vendetta-based format helped pave the way for financial success. For Velie, money, not the public interest, was the sole motivator for their operations, “exposing” people was a higher priority to reporting the truth – and extortion may be the underlying inspiration for their most toxic work.

Burning with a desire to stop the harassment, I contacted several attorneys throughout California. My family and friends – who were intimately familiar with my coverage – thought I needed some security at first, but then they figured Velie would lose everything if she committed any sort of violent act (she was

well into her unsupervised bench probation as part of her DUI sentencing). We believed a civil action, possibly a civil harassment order or defamation lawsuit would be the most effective remedy.

One attorney I spoke to, who was familiar with Tenborg's defamation case against Velie, expressed concern that Velie would use her pro bono counsel to wear me down with strategic delays, draining my bank account as I went through the court system. They also told me her behavior was so irreconcilable, it was more likely than not she would defy any judgment order against her, assuming I was able to successfully endure a potentially lengthy and costly court battle. As for damages, the attorney told me Velie reportedly was broke, had virtually no assets in her name, so chances were high that I wouldn't see a penny from her if I prevailed.

When I suggested contacting law enforcement, they expressed concern that doing so could lead to Marshall being uncooperative as a witness. I explained Marshall resisted taking any action against Velie during her campaign due to retaliation concerns.

The only option I had was to lay low until Marshall decided it was time to act, despite feeling unsafe at work. I felt like a sitting duck. For the first time in my life, I felt truly helpless.

Despite Marshall's advice to swear to secrecy, I was more determined than ever to detail everything that was happening. I started writing notes and documenting what I overheard, what Velie alleged, my real-time reactions – anything I could put together for a legal case. While compiling my materials, I started drafting an article. I may have thought I had a shot in court, but I realized the court of public opinion was my most immediate, least expensive recourse.

## 19

I was supposed to be working at the office. Instead I went to the movies.

It was early June 2014. Marshall lost the Democratic primary, effectively ending her campaign. I called in sick and told Marshall I would write and publish assigned articles from home.

My relationship with Marshall was very different than the relationship I had during my first year at *Information Press*. Back then, I respected her as a strong, progressive voice for the voiceless. I respected her moral convictions, though I didn't always agree with how those convictions were applied. As someone who never had a more relatable boss, I spent lots of time cultivating a professional relationship with someone I largely agreed with politically. She was headstrong and a bit of a narcissist, but I could tolerate it. I had fun. By mid-2014, our relationship was cold and distant.

She insisted I let everything go. By everything she meant Velie and CCN. Because of the anguish my family and I had to endure, I had absolutely no intention of letting go. After some persuading, Marshall eventually sent me some of the emails she received from Velie and replies she sent back. However, Marshall withheld some of the emails that she showed me in her office. While forwarding me some of her correspondence with Velie, Marshall repeatedly insisted the correspondence had “nothing of interest” and were for my eyes only. Though I thanked her for sending me at least some of what I asked for, I resented her for not trusting me and failing to send me all their correspondence she promised.

The emails she did send me painted a different picture than I expected. Marshall was surprisingly cordial and accommodating toward Velie. Initially, Marshall led me to believe she was more defiant and pushed back against her. Something was amiss.

Velie claimed I was “continu[ing] to defame CCN and attempt

to ruin the business and shift our revenues.” Velie offered no evidence. She added, “You said you would take appropriate action. Please inform when you do.” The “appropriate action” wasn’t described.

Marshall informed Velie that I was ordered to remove one “offensive” post, though she never explained what that post was or why it was offensive.

“I made it clear to Aaron that any further postings would be reason for termination,” Marshall wrote. Yet it wasn’t clear what “further postings” she was referring to. It was true she told me to refrain from sharing any future articles related to CCN on her website, but that was something we mutually agreed on months earlier. Was she talking about further postings on my Facebook page or *Information Press*? Marshall was ambiguous.

But what came next surprised me.

“Please tell me more about any action Aaron has taken in the last 48 hours,” Marshall wrote to Velie. She added, “I cannot watch him during his time off; I am curious to learn about what you are finding.”

After reading her encouraging Velie to stalk me online – after I promised Marshall to lay low and not write anything to escalate the situation – I felt an electric sense of betrayal. A sinking feeling of dread washed over me. Behind my back, Marshall was colluding with someone who threatened my family and caused them to live in fear. That was inexcusable.

After speaking with my family, I decided to quit *Information Press*. After coming to my senses and processing everything I could, I sent Marshall a text message and told her my decision. Marshall followed up with a series of phone calls, attempting to explain her emails. I went over everything she wrote, but her explanations didn’t hold water. She told me she was trying to “pull [Velie] in and get tangible info,” but to what end? In case I took Velie to court, Marshall said.

Marshall saw herself, I think, as a peacemaker who listened to both sides and provided solutions that every conflicting party could agree to. In reality, she played both sides, telling me

privately that she believed me while telling Velie that I was one post away from being fired, and that I was so untrustworthy my online activity had to be monitored. Instead of deescalating the conflict, Marshall helped exacerbate it by fueling Velie's purely unhinged hysteria.

Despite my boiling rage, I told her I'd consider returning to work if she turned over the rest of her correspondence with Velie to me, cooperated with law enforcement, and let me publish what transpired. But Marshall said she got "too involved" and asked me to submit my final timesheet. It was over. No apologies for the suffering my family and I had to endure.

A couple of hours after I sent in my final timesheet, I finalized the article, detailing some of what happened with Velie at *Information Press*. I waited a few days before publishing the article, which I forwarded to every media outlet in San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara County. While the article was widely shared on social media among readers and county residents, the local media never got back to me – well, except for one person.

"Genuine insanity," Daniel Blackburn wrote me after I sent him the article.

*That's it?*

I wanted him to say more. I wanted the article to give him pause. I don't think he had the courage to do so. Blackburn was proud to be a self-styled investigative reporter. Why wouldn't he ask questions? Did he believe what Velie said was true? Did he believe Velie, whose fondness for hyperbole and deception was justified by her actions? If he truly believed he was an investigative journalist, Blackburn would have taken a stand to uncover the whole truth. But he chose to ignore a fully-realized inconvenient truth: that Velie was a menace and a danger to herself and others.

I also published the article because I suspected Velie had done this before. Through the grapevine, I heard of instances when Velie initiated similar communications with critics, but no one she reportedly contacted wanted to go on the record and publicly corroborate the details. People were afraid of Velie. They didn't want additional retaliation for speaking out. At the risk of



incurring more problems, I decided to go public.

CCN and Velie complained bitterly about how other people tried to shut them – the so-called “free press” – down. CCN went as far as to crow that *they* were the defenders of free press, and appealed for unity with the local media that shunned them. Yet they couldn't reconcile their rigorous defense of free press with Velie's crusade to shut me down.

They never once addressed what just happened. The cowards wouldn't dare.

I was determined to make Cal Coast Fraud a success in spite of Velie's threats. The problem was: I didn't know how. Frustrated, paranoid, I was appalled by the lack of action and response to my story. I created an online petition called "Drop Karen Velie," which urged Blackburn and Loving to distance themselves from CCN's controversial co-founder. The petition garnered a little over 40 signatures, but nothing happened. I heard from staffers from local media outlets who shared similar stories to mine, but didn't want to discuss the details publicly. After reading my account, they decided to keep to themselves and not stir the hornet's nest. Honestly, I couldn't blame them.

With an uncooperative, now-former boss, and attorneys cautioning me against pursuing legal action for completely logical reasons, I completely ran out of options. Now I had to move on.

My effort to speak out, however, had its upsides. CCF experienced a sharp rise in readership and social media engagement. I spent a day scheduling posts to go out and relied on contributors to fill in the gaps. Still, I didn't have a plan to move forward. Fact-checking became repetitive and unrewarding. But nobody else was actively doing that, despite the overwhelming amount of local controversy they were generating. The contributors and I decided to pick and choose our battles more carefully and post regularly between our analysis of CCN's bigger stories.

In August 2014, Velie and Blackburn revealed a "sex scandal" was unfolding in Arroyo Grande between then-city manager Steve Adams and a female subordinate. CCN reported that two staffers were found by police officers, partially dressed and in the middle of an "intimate situation" within a darkened City Hall after hours. They alleged the city was conspiring to cover up the incident by appointing their city attorney – who CCN claimed

had a “close relationship” with Adams – to oversee an internal investigation.

The “scandal” splintered into a number of other related controversies. The Arroyo Grande police union reportedly felt they were disrespected by the city attorney during his investigation. Later, they unanimously backed a vote of no confidence against Mayor Tony Ferrara and Adams. CCN also published allegations of city staff impropriety – from accusing Ferrara of improperly using staff to remove a tree that fell in his front yard, to a former councilman reportedly threatening a local printer over printing anti-Ferrara pamphlets for a customer, to he said-she said allegations from local developers claiming city staff impeded their work plans.

Frustrations led to a write-in candidate entering the Arroyo Grande mayoral candidate. Jim Hill, who previously served as president of neighboring Oceano’s Community Services District, launched a write-in mayoral campaign. Hill, who abruptly resigned from his Oceano post in 2011 **and moved**, sought a chance to run for mayor in a city he only lived in for two years. Until the “sex scandal” controversy was indoctrinated into the news cycle, Hill was not actively involved in Arroyo Grande politics. CCN feverishly supported Hill’s candidacy, which was unsurprising. He was one of CCN’s listed contributors. One of Hill’s prominent campaign donors, Beatrice Spencer, was a longtime advertiser on CCN as the business owner of Spencer’s Fresh Markets, a local grocery chain.

After deciding to investigate the allegations, I obtained photos of several hand-written, neon-green campaign signs for Hill. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary at first until the signs were turned around. On the back of each sign I saw, there was a message urging residents to visit CCN for more information. It was unusual to see a news site being promoted on campaign yard signs. On Hill’s campaign Facebook page, photos were posted of campaign volunteers dressed in all black, creating campaign signs inside Hill’s garage. Arroyo Grande police officers had shown up to city council meetings dressed all black in protest. They had a vested interest in Hill’s campaign. Why?

The attorney representing Arroyo Grande's police union was Michael McGill, formerly a partner in the now-defunct Lackie, Dammeier, McGill & Ethir law firm. The firm dissolved in 2013 amid misconduct allegations. The firm produced a “cop playbook” advising law enforcement unions to “storm city council,” make public appearances to showcase the association's displeasure, and publicly ridicule officials like the city manager. They even encouraged officers to call in sick as part of a “blue flu,” a type of absenteeism from duty to support union contract demands or negotiations. “Blue flu” was a controversial tactic because it also negatively impacted residents. These “tools” of action were suggested in case negotiations between the city and the police union reached an impasse.

*The Tribune* reported that in 2013 there were contentious salary negotiations between Steve Adams and the police union. According to one city staffer familiar with the police union negotiations, Adams was reportedly agitated that the union retained McGill to intervene in the dispute. Publicly, the union claimed Adams expressed dismay over their decision to retain an attorney, not who was retained.

CCN claimed they were citing unspecified “city documents” for their story, but evidence indicates they obtained records from a third party. According to public records, prior to CCN publishing its first article about the “scandal,” neither Velie nor Blackburn filed requests for information pertaining to the July 2014 incident. The first and only public records request between the time they unveiled the “sex scandal” and the date CCN published their article was issued by McGill. I reached out to the city to determine if any employee at City Hall spoke with CCN regarding the incident prior to their first exclusive. Officials flatly denied speaking to CCN. To corroborate this detail, I spoke with other reporters covering the incident and asked them to check with their city sources, but the end result was the same.

I collaborated with other reporters covering the Arroyo Grande story to review hours of surveillance footage taken on the night the incident occurred. I read all the personal memorandums from the officers on-scene and used their comments as a reference

point, and I couldn't find any evidence of conduct of a sexual nature between Adams and the subordinate. To ensure I didn't overlook any details, I reached out to my reporter contacts again to verify the lack of evidence. None of them could find any evidence of an "intimate situation" occurring. I saw Adams and his subordinate stumbling through a darkened city hall, clearly intoxicated. Embarrassing? Yes. Unprofessional? Definitely. Sex scandal? Highly unlikely.

As for the allegations of a "cover-up," I saw no evidence of that either.

Both Adams and the subordinate admitted to improperly using city resources by walking into City Hall to sober up after a night of drinking and took responsibility from the onset. The internal investigation validated their version of events, though officers weren't satisfied with the way the investigation was handled. An independent investigation – which was conducted later after several residents believed the internal investigation was biased – reiterated the same findings, but reprimanded Adams. Adams later resigned.

Nearly a year after Adams resigned from his position in Arroyo Grande, King City officials ran a comprehensive background check on him when he applied for city manager there. City staff found no substantial wrongdoing. King City ultimately tapped Adams to be their new city manager.

In November 2014, Hill beat incumbent Ferrara in a historically unprecedented and successful write-in campaign for mayor.

It was concerning to me the campaign was spurred to a great extent by several untruths and unsubstantiated allegations from CCN. Though they mostly published allegations and showed no indication of any investigation into them, CCN created the perception that something was rotten in the state of Arroyo Grande, and that perception alone was more than enough to establish guilt in the court of public opinion without actually showing proof.

CCN thrived on resident frustrations that Ferrara served as a

mayor for too long. They used city management concerns as a starting point. From there, they widened the political divide and created a sense of desperate hostility that could only be remedied by electing someone with no prior leadership experience in Arroyo Grande – someone with close ties to CCN.

I published what I learned about the “scandal” on CCF and was immediately the subject of ridicule and thinly-veiled death threats from Hill's supporters. They felt my reporting was a way to discredit resident concerns about the incumbent mayor and his leadership. Some CCN readers went on extended self-serving soliloquies about me, questioning my personal credibility and attacking my “delusional” readers who dared to “like” my Facebook posts. This was par for the course at this point. Since their long-winded critiques were so prolific, I shared their posts and hate mail I received from them. I was fascinated with their cult-like behavior, placing their blind trust in believing in a series of bold allegations that couldn't be verified.

Now a self-styled “activist,” Julie Tacker was heavily involved in pushing the Arroyo Grande “cover-up” conspiracy, at one point teaming with an elderly Arroyo Grande citizen to submit a complaint to the SLO County Grand Jury. The complaint was based on mere suspicion, but offered no physical evidence for the Grand Jury to review. The Grand Jury turned down Tacker's complaint.

Previously embroiled in a number of her own government scandals, Tacker injected herself into this scandal by appearing at council meetings, pushing for Adams to be fired and Ferrara to be overthrown. As someone intimately familiar with her political history, I couldn't help but wonder why she was insistent on being the moral arbiter in a city she didn't live in, especially when her morality and government ethics continued to be heavily scrutinized in her own hometown. She came with serious baggage, which she never bothered to address with Arroyo Grande residents.

But she wasn't the only CCN contributor and public figure to exacerbate the “sex scandal.”

On his radio show, Dave Congalton regularly touted CCN's

Arroyo Grande coverage, but didn't change course when the website's editorial narrative started showing cracks.

Congalton was particularly focused on the Arroyo Grande police union. He believed city officials and residents expressing skepticism over the controversy showed disdain for law enforcement. In a Facebook comment directed at real estate broker Michael Byrd, who served as treasurer for Hill's write-in campaign, Congalton asked him to write a list of people who "didn't stand up on behalf of the police" and read off the list over the air. This caused a panic in the community. Arroyo Grande residents supporting the mayor and council were concerned they would be outed on the radio and marked for harassment if they continued publicly expressing their opinions.

I took aim at Congalton for expressing a desire to publicly expose private citizens on his show for expressing differing views than him. I compared his actions to Joseph McCarthy, an American congressman famously known for his witch-hunt of high-profile individuals he believed were members of the Communist Party. McCarthy would later expand on his crusade against suspected communists inside and outside of government. On Cal Coast Fraud, I published a photoshopped graphic of Congalton seated beside McCarthy to further emphasize the comparison. The caption read:

Using the name of his organization, Integrity SLO, Kevin P. Rice helped promote CCN's allegations in the form of glossy mailers delivered to Arroyo Grande voters. The mailers contained copy from CCN's article and urged voters to oust Ferrara. Rice was also behind a series of robo-calls that went out to voters. One call featured a police officer endorsing Hill for mayor, and another featured the write-in candidate himself. At no point did Rice disclose he was a contributor to CCN.

Hill won by only 95 votes. It was a historic victory for Hill, whose write-in candidacy was once considered a long-shot. Though Hill called for healing after the contentious race, the divisiveness remained.

Ferrara penned a viewpoint in the *New Times* to discuss the "perfect storm," which led to his ouster. "The public is being

programmed to accept as fact any accusation of wrongdoing,” wrote Ferrara. “The true facts are not important. If it’s on the Internet or blaring out on the radio waves, it must be true.”

He went further: “There are no words to describe the despicable behavior of the writers at Cal Coast News along with their colleague on ‘hometown radio.’ Together, they form what some call the SLO County ‘Sleaze Team.’ It’s not accurate to say they have ‘lost their moral compass.’ These individuals never had one. Without conscience or any semblance of fact, they have intentionally ruined reputations, careers, and attacked the character of so many public figures. They have brought pain and suffering into the lives of those they have attacked and destroyed the fabric of families and friendships. What sets them apart from other purveyors of misinformation is their motivation. For them, it’s a ‘business.’ They make money from the sensationalism they create.

“A few years ago, I asked [Dave Congalton] why he intentionally generated bias and promoted controversy on his programs. His response was, ‘It makes for good radio.’ It doesn’t get any lower on the food chain than this.”

To be fair, Ferrara’s comments were made soon after he lost the election, so some could say, “Maybe he’s a sore loser.” CCN readers were quick to pounce on his viewpoint by spinning his comments as simply being ungracious in defeat. But Ferrara wasn’t wrong. His sentiment among government officials wasn’t uncommon. Private citizens who were swept into CCN’s various controversies were echoing similar views.

CCN’s coverage made its way to local news broadcasts. Their allegations were cited in reporting by the *Los Angeles Times*. They reached the upper stratosphere of mainstream public consciousness with allegations that couldn’t be independently verified by other journalists. In the end, what mattered to them was the outcome: those accused of corruption were defeated by the little write-in mayoral campaign that could.

I wouldn’t say Hill’s write-in campaign and the resentment fueling it weren’t legitimate. Based on conversations I’ve had with Arroyo Grande residents, there were concerns – detailed,



thoroughly layered concerns – about the city's leadership predating the “sex scandal.” But there was no doubt in my mind that CCN exploited these concerns for attention, donations and advertising revenue. They aspired to be that one investigative source that shook an entire community to its core and succeeded. I never expected a purported “news site” with severe credibility issues to wield that much influence over local elections.

Other than the *Tribune* and *New Times* occasionally opining about the “scandal,” there wasn't any rigorous pursuit for journalistic accountability. Who else was going to do that? I closely observed the local media landscape: they didn't want to engage in some flame war with CalCoastNews, potentially receiving threatening emails and calls from Velie. Would it be worth it? Probably not. Reporting the news – and not reporting on someone else's “news” – was their top priority. But it was undeniable how influential CCN was in meddling with the Arroyo Grande mayoral race.

## 21

“You will never work again, I promise you.”

This was a comment posted on the Cal Coast Fraud Facebook page by a user named “Robert Mason.” It would be one of several comments Mason left.

We had our share of anonymous Facebook users, appearing periodically on my page to leave ominously-worded, threatening messages and comments. I normally wouldn't know about their comments, but I would receive notifications on my phone like they were text messages. I was so busy working it never occurred to me to actually see who they were. I found it strange how oddly personal these comments were – as if they were penned by Velie herself or people close to her. The general vibe I got from these comments was, “You tried messing with Velie’s livelihood. We’re going to mess with yours.”

One week after Mason left that comment, I was hired for a new job. It was November 2014. Due to concern that Velie would once again contact my workplace and harass them, I kept the name of my employer anonymous except to some of my closest friends. I was a customer service representative and graphic designer for a local printing and copying business. The retail job required precision, efficiency and endurance. A good employee was careful with his measurements, knew where to make the cuts, and prioritize jobs during busy hours as nimbly as possible. The job ended up being more public than I expected. Customers watched me dart from place to place, trying not to sweat profusely in a room with hot, heavy machinery and an industrial laminator that doubled as a bulky, invasive heater from Hell. I'd finish my job, approach the customer with the finished product, a wide smile on my face and a sweat-drenched shirt. Mission accomplished.

Every other employee was hard-working, professional and courteous. Me? I found myself gasping for air, at times feeling overwhelmed and occasionally completely useless. Having been

hired during an active holiday period – with my on-the-job training sporadically taking place only when my co-workers were able to catch a breath – I was a klutz pretending to be a Whirling Dervish. Having been involved in the printing of *The ROCK* from the customer side, I slowly developed an appreciation and understanding of the printing business from the ground up. As someone who typically worked behind the computer, writing and designing for publications, I also developed a newfound respect for the physical labor involved.

Honestly, I was grateful – the job helped me multitask better. The busyness prevented me from standing still for long periods, which kept me from being spotted – at least, for a while. There were times when I wondered what it would be like to wear a prosthetic nose and mustache, pretending to be someone else on the off chance I was discovered by one of CCN's vengeful gremlins.

Some of my readers eventually recognized me. An artist pal of mine approached the store counter and asked for assistance. I spun around like a malfunctioning robot to greet her. When she recognized me she asked, “Aaron, is that you?”

“No, I get that all the time.”

Friends were curious to see me in a job that didn't involve news writing or reporting. I explained that I wanted to get away from the tedium of reporting and focus instead on being more hands-on with other skills in my arsenal. In my spare time, I continued to write, but not as extensively as before. In fact, it was a relief to not think about my written work, though I dabbled with some occasional commentary.

My time that used to be devoted to writing was increasingly going to volunteerism. In early 2014, I applied for the Morro Bay Recreation & Parks Commission and was voted in by council. In addition to serving in Rotary, I was also volunteering for Morro Bay in Bloom, a volunteer organization involved in landscaping and maintaining public spaces. I figured the added responsibility would help mature me, reduce my testosterone-heavy derision of local political happenings and keep me focused on more productive activities.

But it took some adjustment. I made some snarky public comments on the *Tribune* that were critical of CCN readers using my personal Facebook account, not knowing the “City of Morro Bay” was listed beside my name. I erroneously listed my volunteer status as a commissioner as an actual job. Mayor Jamie Irons informed me of this faux pas after receiving an anonymous complaint. Irons graciously reminded me of the responsibility I now had.

It was time to grow up.

Because of my demanding schedule, I didn't take much time to formulate content, investigate stories or opine at length about the ills of fake news. By then, I had one contributor remaining, and he was understandably tired of my bickering. Short-staffed and short on momentum, I had to figure out what I was going to do with Cal Coast Fraud. It felt more like an anchor than a news and analysis outlet, yet readers continued to engage with the site and email us tips. There was always something going on, but I had distanced myself from the near-daily controversies enough to walk away for extended periods without feeling guilty.

It was long established CCN wasn't credible. I didn't have to scream that from the mountaintops anymore. There was nothing more to prove, nothing more to gain. But the one thing that continued to bother me was how residents continued bringing their allegations up at public government meetings and use the podium as a bully pulpit to attack people. I knew a few of those residents, a few self-proclaimed activists who turned meetings into contentious, verbal boxing matches. Dismayed by the clear degradation of public discourse, I referred to some of their public comments as “dumb.” I took aim at the ease of throwing out allegations without a scintilla of evidence or explanation by mimicking their approach and throwing the allegations back at them. How would they feel if the shoe was on the other foot? How would they feel if they were on the receiving end?

Then, on Thanksgiving 2014, I received a private Facebook message from a friend who actively read my work on CCF. She brought to my attention a Facebook group that Julie Tacker started promoting in other Facebook groups my friend also

belonged to. The name of the group she promoted was “Block Aaron Ochs.”

“Block Aaron Ochs” was created by Kevin P. Rice, who took a personal photo of my face from my Facebook profile, placed a red stripe across it and aligned it beside instructions on how to block the “harasser” For them, it was “harassment.” To me, it was sharply-worded but civil disagreement.

On their group page, there was already an active discussion with members – some of whom I never met or personally interacted with – swapping stories about harrowing encounters they had with me online. Some of the stories were real, some were exaggerated and others were completely made up. Half of the group members were people I didn’t recognize and never met; their stories were the best.

They had extensive discussions about how much of a “liar” I was, how I needed to be “gagged” and “muzzled.” It read like something out of some eerily obsessive bondage fiction. These people clearly felt I wielded enough influence in the community to call for my censorship. They also had a disturbing, personal fixation about me as they discussed various ways to ruin my personal and professional reputation – postcards, robo-calls, emails and phone calls to co-workers or anyone that’s on my Facebook friends list. Tacker, who Rice appointed to help co-administrate the group, suggested I receive some sort of “Christmas present.” Something involving turkeys would have been topical, in my unblocked opinion.

I recognized some of the members as vocal supporters of Jim Hill’s write-in mayoral campaign. Obviously they were thrilled with my coverage. Then there were members associated with CalCoastNews: private investigator Mike Brennler and Karen Velie. Neither Brennler nor Velie participated in the discussions, but they were certainly aware of them.

As the conversation on “Block Aaron Ochs” continued to intensify, I took screenshots. The conversation went from Rice calling me a random assortment of names, to people I didn’t know claiming I harassed and threatened them. Intertwined with these stories were comments laced with particularly homoerotic,

pornographic innuendo about me. Best of all, they all congregated in a public setting where anyone could see their comments in real time. I had the pleasure of bearing witness to one of the creepiest displays of hate I've ever seen directed at a private citizen online.

There was no legitimate reason for this group to exist, of course. If they wanted to block my personal account, they could. If they wanted to not read my posts, they could not read them. If they wanted to take the high road and ignore everything I say and write, they could. But they were unable to. Based on pages and pages of conversations I've read, they didn't really want to. And the most chilling part? Most of the members were self-branded "government activists," public figures and politicians – people with extraordinarily public personas that wouldn't dare to conduct this sort of business out in the open.

The day after Thanksgiving, I published screenshots of "Block Aaron Ochs" on CCF for my readers, with satirical suggestions on how to "improve" the group's outreach. Readers were convinced the group was a clear conspiracy to silence me. I agreed. Their behavior was self-explanatory.

After the screenshots were published, Tacker wrote to group members, "Well, I'll be the first to call me stupid." Explaining how she thought I discovered the page, Tacker said, "I apparently had freinded [sic] Aaron in the past and failed to block him when the page was created," she wrote. "He's been watching my [Facebook] feed for a long time." Great story.

Had it not been for my friend, I wouldn't have known anything about it. Having read the conversations that took place on "Block Aaron Ochs," she remarked she hadn't seen anything like it.

What got to me was their lack of remorse for being exposed. The best they could come up with was an allegation that I only found out about their ridiculous group page because I was allegedly stalking Tacker. Did it ever occur to them that maybe, just maybe creating a group to conspire against and bully a citizen wasn't a great idea?

The group was eventually removed by Facebook for violating Facebook's community standards. Oddly enough, the screenshots I took of their conversations were removed by Facebook for the same reasons. I could only speculate that their efforts to censor me had begun.

This was surreal. So what the hell, exactly, was I supposed to do now? Conversations among members sounded like they were planning to take imminent action. After discussing the situation with family and friends, I decided to lay low, not write anything for a while. Stay busy.

On December 26, one month after “Block Aaron Ochs” was formed, I received an email from a concerned Morro Bay resident, alerting me that he received a postcard with “really nasty” accusations about me. The postcard was reportedly delivered by direct mail. Without looking at it, I figured Rice was involved. Of course he was. He had the motive, the expertise and past experiences of engaging in similar negative propaganda about his adversaries. I didn't think it was a coincidence.

The postcard featured the same photo of my face featured on “Block Aaron Ochs.” On top of the postcard, it read, “Meet your Morro Bay Recreation & Parks Commissioner.” Underneath that text was my name and photo, aligned on the left. To the right were the words “Liar. Reprobate. Unfit for public office. Publisher of slander and lies targeting private citizens. Contact your Mayor/Council for more information,” followed by the phone number for Morro Bay City Hall. The other side was blank.

There was no information leading to the source of the postcard. The source clearly didn't want to be identified or scrutinized. Perhaps they didn't want to be identified because of their record. The card didn't identify the “private citizens” I reportedly lied about or what these supposed “lies” were. I also remembered Rice, a connoisseur of antiquated synonyms, repeatedly referring to me as a “reprobate” on the group page.

The postcard was severely misleading. Instead of asking residents to call the city council to complain about me, the postcard asked residents to call *them* for “more information.” Did

the city put out the postcard? Fat chance. I contacted city officials about the postcard. Every city employee I spoke to vehemently denied being involved and didn't know who was behind it. Most of them I spoke to told me they haven't seen anything like it. Sounded familiar.

I proactively went to the Eco Rotary Club board of directors to talk about the postcard. At the time, I was president-elect. They were understandably concerned their incoming board president was being anonymously attacked and how that mudslinging would negatively impact the club. They were perturbed by the situation, but expressed their support for me. We were going to weather the storm.

On CCF, I put out a statement about the postcard and named Rice as the most logical culprit.

I wasn't running for public office, but I was astounded by the extent of the negative campaign against me. I never imagined I'd have people campaigning to unseat me from a volunteer position on an advisory body, but I was dealing with Rice now. I was getting a taste of the intense harassment and intimidation his adversaries endured. As a community volunteer, I made sure to fight back while remaining even-keeled. Yet I felt my grip on my emotions was loosening as soon as I began speculating on what could happen next. What could happen to my family, my friends, co-workers, the people I care about? I could feel it: something bad was about to happen. How was I going to fight back?



“Pam, give me a call. Got on hearing a bunch of bad shit about your kid. If I was you, I'd get him a gun because I'm afraid somebody's gonna kill his ass.”

That was a voicemail left on my mother's phone by a former acquaintance of hers from Los Osos, Sandra Hedges. Her ex-husband, Pat Hedges, was a former SLO County Sheriff.

It was January 16, 2015. After an evening of drinking at a Morro Bay wine bar, I happily and drunkenly stumbled my way up the stairs to my front door, feeling the refreshingly cool wind on my face. I was about to call it a night and fall face-down into bed when my parents notified me about the voicemail. They said, “You need to hear this.”

I listened to the message a couple of times, thinking I misheard Hedges when she suggested I get a gun. I was waiting for her to say something like, “I'm just kidding.” We knew Hedges had a dark, wry sense of humor. But it was unusual to leave a voicemail like that, especially late at night. There was no punchline, no elaboration or context. My parents weren't laughing. Neither was I.

In the voicemail, Hedges was clearly referring to my written work. She mentioned she couldn't get online and had computer issues, so she wasn't entirely sure what I wrote that angered the person who communicated threatening remarks about me. She said she only heard “bits and pieces.” What was she talking about?

My father called Hedges around 10 in the evening. I sat in his office, trying to clear my head and forcing sobriety to reach the surface. I remember thinking: *Shit, someone is going to try to kill me and I can't fucking think to save my life.* I'd like to think I had a grasp of the circumstances, but I was emotionally numb and had no choice but to listen to Ed's conversation with Hedges.

“Who the *hell* are you?” Hedges answered the phone with her

low, smoke-scarred gravelly voice of Death.

“It’s Ed, Sandy.”

“Ed who? I don’t know – I don’t know any shithead named Ed, callin’ me this late. Shit.”

“I’m Aaron’s father,” Ed said tersely, “and I want to know if someone threatened Aaron. Tell me right now.”

Hedges laughed nervously. “Oh, your kid is in so much trouble. Man, oh man! He is so *fucked*.”

“Who threatened him, Sandy?” Ed started raising his voice.

“I ain’t gonna tell you jack shit. All I’ll say – all I’m going to say – is he’s going to die. He talked some bad shit and it’s gonna get him good.”

Ed was furious. “Tell me who threatened Aaron. Who threatened my son?”

Hedges laughed.

“You think this is funny?” Ed yelled. “I’m not playing games! No one is laughing. Pam is upset. Aaron doesn’t know what’s going on and – we’re all upset, Sandy, because of you.”

“Oh, me? Really? Wow.”

“Hey,” he snapped, “I’ll call the cops if you don’t tell us.” Ed doesn’t talk this way to anyone, ever. He was visibly upset.

“I ain’t a fuckin’ snitch. Go ahead and call the fuckin’ cops,” Hedges taunted. “See if I care! He’s fuckin’ dead either way.”

The conversation was going nowhere fast. Both of them cursed each other out. I left the room, feeling angry, disappointed and helpless. It was nearing midnight and I was about to scream. For nearly a year I was living on the edge. I wanted to fight back, but didn’t know how. I reached out for advice and counsel, but received little to no response. I published the craziness I had to endure for public consumption, but the exposure didn’t deter the wild-eyed, self-righteous sociopaths from being themselves; it only infuriated them. I wanted to stay silent, but didn’t feel it was right to. I had my convictions, but expressing them was becoming a liability for everyone around me. What could I do?

At first, Hedges wasn’t forthcoming with details. She was

protecting whoever expressed a lethal displeasure with my work, and made it abundantly clear that something bad was about to go down and it would happen soon.

My mother later spoke with Hedges.

I missed most of their conversation, but it appeared Hedges was willing to explain the nature of the threat and who communicated it to her. Hedges explained that a “friend” of hers complained about “all the shit [I] talked about on the Internet” about them, and how this “friend” wanted to do something about it. Wanting to know who her “friend” was, Pam rattled off a list of names to Hedges. Some of the names were members of “Block Aaron Ochs.”

Then Pam asked her, “Did Julie Tacker threaten Aaron?”

Hedges simply replied, “Yes.”

Hedges talked about how Tacker and “someone named Karen” didn’t like how I was talking about them and CCN. My mother couldn’t extrapolate any more details out of Hedges, who started to return to her belligerent and uncooperative self. I signaled to mom that she should end the conversation.

It was late. I was tired and the alcohol continued weighing my mind down. Just like I did every time a CCN-related incident took place, I went public. This time, I surrendered to fear. I posted on CCF that I was a recipient of a threat communicated by Tacker and Velie. To underscore the seriousness of the threat, I revealed that someone urged me to purchase a firearm. I didn’t disclose that the ambiguous threat was left on my mother’s voicemail. Because I didn’t know what could happen next, I decided to temporarily halt any scheduled posts until the nature of the threat was fully assessed.

The next day, someone flagged my Facebook post for removal. Facebook took it down, citing a violation of their community standards. Who reported that post?

Hedges later walked back the seriousness of the threat, insisting its nature wasn’t “gory” and that CCN was going to “go after [me]” because they thought my family had money. This was undoubtedly the same threat Velie reportedly communicated to

my employer the year before. But how would someone, who didn't have Internet access, come across this information?

My mother spoke to Hedges several times over the course of two days in order to uncover more information about what Tacker allegedly communicated to her. Hedges described what Tacker said was “shuck and jive” and “trash talk.” Instead of clarifying what she originally meant on the voicemail or specific communications she received from Tacker, Hedges suggested that I “cut the crap” and stop writing negatively about people like Tacker, or else.

During her conversation with Pam, Hedges asked her who picked me up on January 16, the night she left the now-infamous voicemail. According to someone else she spoke to, Hedges learned that I left the wine bar around eight in the evening, walked down the street, up a flight of stairs and waited to be picked up by a designated driver. Hedges accurately and specifically described my whereabouts that night, which was bizarre. Hedges was mostly housebound due to medical issues.

On top of everything else, I was being followed. Now, the one thing I remembered that night was standing patiently between two restaurants, waiting for my ride at around eight at night. There was a dark-colored sedan with its brights on. I turned to face the sedan, put my right hand over my eyes, and the sedan's lights suddenly dimmed. I didn't think much of the car, given there were a number of hotels nearby. Maybe they were guests that secured a parking spot. But then again, there were no other cars around in the immediate area and its engine was idling.

My mother also vaguely recalled a dark vehicle with a driver inside, idling and facing her with its brights on. The same vehicle suddenly took off around the time I got in the car. Obviously, I didn't notice anything suspicious, but she did. It was one thing for someone to spot me leaving a place, but to follow me for about a quarter mile and three blocks was another.

I updated CCF and dismissed the “threat” as trash talk from Tacker, but didn't disclose any additional details. There was obviously more going on, but I started having reservations about posting the general threat I supposedly received. I meant to write

something like, “I’m aware of your threats. Cut the bullshit,” and take a defiant tone. But I wrote out of fear and displayed vulnerability. I could feel my mental grip slipping.

Shortly after I posted, I received a call on my personal cell from a SLO County Sheriff’s deputy. He was checking in with me to see if I was safe. This was odd. I didn’t call the police. The deputy informed me that someone read my post about the threat and contacted law enforcement, which I appreciated. I thought: *Great, someone cared.* Whoever contacted the police knew my cell phone number, which was unlisted. I rarely gave the number out to anyone. I assumed whoever called was a personal friend.

I let him know everything was fine.

By the time I ended my call with the deputy, my updated post was removed by Facebook. Again, the reason was violation of community standards. My personal account, which was linked to CCF, was now temporarily blocked from posting.

Frustrated with Facebook, I made contact with them through the Better Business Bureau (BBB), a nonprofit organization that acts as a third party arbitrator to handle disputes between customers and businesses. Because the social media giant was inundated with thousands of monthly complaints, the BBB assigned a Facebook liaison to determine whether or not certain complaints met enough criteria to be sent to Facebook. Mine did. According to the liaison, the removed posts were reported for “harassment” by the person I mentioned in them: Julie Tacker.

Tacker didn’t want me to be candid about what happened. Her actions were indicative of someone who had something to hide, not someone who wanted to clear the air or issue a *mea culpa*.

I wanted to know who was stalking me, but Hedges wasn’t going to tell me, my parents or anyone else. Instead of trying to find answers, I was determined to never speak to Hedges again. The situation escalated and got so complicated, I no longer cared about finding the truth. I just wanted to bury my head in a pillow, go to sleep, go to work and have a life. I wasn’t going to live in fear, but I was already resigned to the possibility of being

## DEFAMERS

attacked again – maybe not violently, but psychologically.

Through all the multitasking I had to do every day, I found order in my life again. As 2015 rolled around, I started writing again, but my work was frayed with withering-hot takes on those I held responsible for the harassment. Friends pointed out to me that I was uncharacteristically cocky, shredding anyone and everyone I felt was involved and holding them to account. Did I have a responsibility to maintain my poise? Sure. Was it my responsibility to protect people who placed their faith in me to represent them? Absolutely. But there was growing cognitive dissonance between my personal obligations and my desires. As much as I didn't want to admit, I was on the verge of a breakdown.

Around the beginning of the year, I received a comment from this Robert Mason person that read, "It will be over soon for you, Ochs." I received comments similar to that from people who didn't like my criticism of CCN, but this Mason person was more prolific, personally charged and threatening than most. But Mason wasn't the only user that seemed to have a personal ax to grind.

In mid-2014, I was an active user of Reddit, a social news aggregation and discussion site. Reddit featured "subreddits," or specified categories that cover a variety of topics. I came across comments made by a user named "lightsofslo," who targeted another user I knew: Kenny McCarthy.

McCarthy related a story about himself in a discussion thread that asked Reddit users, "Has anyone ever been a murder suspect? What happened?" McCarthy wrote candidly about how he was once a suspect in his wife's death and how community suspicions were exacerbated by what he described as "gossip [that] became downright toxic." In his comments, he linked to Velie's article about him on CCN. He never mentioned Velie or CCN by name. Three days after he posted, "lightsofslo" responded to him,

accusing McCarthy of being an administrator of a Facebook page that was set up to “defame and shutdown” CCN. This account also claimed the page accused Velie of “murdering her daughter and worse” and being “diagnosed with many mental conditions.” Naturally, these were allegations Velie made to my employer word for word. I found it interesting that this account – which sounded a lot like Velie – had created an account the same day just to respond to McCarthy while adamantly defending CCN.

McCarthy speculated the account was likely operated by Velie, given sites like CalCoastNews monitor “backlinks,” which are links posted from some other website that links back to them. I recalled Velie's fixation with web traffic. I figured she subscribed to a service that monitored web traffic. I dug through some of her website's source code – whatever was publicly accessible – and discovered that she had Google Analytics, an online tool that monitored inbound and outbound web traffic, including backlinks. Only webmasters were able to access the analytics, which show when someone links to their website.

This account left harassing comments about me, at one point accusing me of “sucking dick for coke” in a subreddit dedicated to SLO County residents. The user also accused me of “lacking training and credentials (and a job).” This was another accusation Velie made to me personally and my employer. It was also an accusation made by “Robert Mason,” who I started to suspect wasn't a tattooed, menacing-looking middle-aged man after all.

I decided to take advantage of this user's uniquely identifiable anger and form a Q&A discussion topic about CCF on Reddit. I made sure the topic was posted on the SLO County subreddit so “lightsofslo” could see it. McCarthy discussed his prior exchange with “lightsofslo,” surmising the user “probably was Karen Velie.” He added, “I hope I never meet her in public because it probably won't end well. For her, that is. She's scum.”

The user vehemently denied being Velie, but couldn't explain how they came across McCarthy's comments and why they were echoing specific allegations Velie made to Marshall.

Later, I received an anonymous email from someone who claimed to be a moderator of the SLO County subreddit and sent



me a screenshot with Velie's personal email address aligned to the right of the "lightsofslo" nickname on Reddit. At this point, I figured it was her; I had enough reasonable suspicion to call it. Without checking its authenticity, I posted the screenshot on my personal Facebook profile and wrote that she should find an attorney.

I was harassed by accounts like "Mason" on my Facebook page for months, each one demonstrating a similar pattern of behavior with uniquely similar allegations that originated from Velie. It all sounded like it was coming from the same person, but I couldn't prove it for sure. I decided to take a look at "Robert Mason," an account that repeatedly harassed and threatened me on my Facebook page for months, to see if there was any clues about the user's true identity.

Around the time I first reviewed Mason's account in 2014, Karen Velie was listed as one of only two accounts on Mason's friends list. Beside Velie was an account named "Summer Antoinette." In 2011, Mason regularly interacted with Antoinette in a Facebook game called Farmville. Mason created a character for the game named "Summer," which received digital gifts and supplies from Antoinette and at least 12 other accounts. Each of these Facebook accounts providing digital gifts to Mason had Velie and Antoinette as friends. Each account interacting as Mason had a Farmville character with the name "Summer." Around the time Farmville was popular, it wasn't uncommon for players to create additional Facebook accounts as a way to gift themselves digital items to progress further in the game.

On her Facebook profile, Antoinette revealed her real last name was Awbrey, a last name once used by Velie from a previous marriage. I ran a background check on Awbrey and discovered she was one of Velie's three daughters.

With that information in mind, I looked up Awbrey on Facebook and came across four anonymous accounts that had "Summer" as a Farmville character and Velie as a mutual friend. Each of these accounts contained posts sharing CCN articles on their personal profiles, various Facebook pages, groups and websites including the *Tribune*. When they weren't sharing

articles, these accounts shared allegations from CCN, stating them as undisputed facts to county residents they added en masse as Facebook friends. It looked as though comments and links to CCN were published strategically to promote the website's reporting as concerned citizens.

This was an elaborate effort. Looking back, I found these tactics reminiscent of fake Russian Facebook accounts that were used to meddle in the 2016 Presidential election. These fake Russian accounts were used as tools to incite hate, using incendiary allegations and language to further widen the political divide. In 2018, the Justice Department charged 13 Russians and three companies with executing a strategy to influence the 2016 Presidential election using stolen identities to pose as Americans. Here, accounts were populated with photos of individuals that couldn't be independently verified as residents residing in the county.

Similarly, "Robert Mason" was not Robert Mason at all.

The "Mason" account uploaded a handful of old photos showing a white male in his late thirties to early forties. "Mason" claimed to be a resident who was born in Paso Robles, lived in San Luis Obispo and studied at Cuesta College. I used search engines with facial recognition technology in an attempt to track down Mason, but was unable to find anyone with an online presence that resembled him. Because "Mason" claimed to be a graduate of Paso Robles High School, I checked with school officials to determine if anyone with that name graduated from there around the time "Mason" would be a senior (around 17-18 years old). No match. I also checked with Cuesta College and found no record of anyone with that name, age and likeness in attendance (the account provided a specific birth date, December 20, 1980). There were also no birth records of anyone named Mason born that day, that year, residing in San Luis Obispo.

Based on my findings, I determined the "Mason" account was impersonating someone who had no other social media profile or online presence, and that it was a strong probability Velie and/or her daughter was involved with the operation and maintenance of these accounts. There was no way to gauge how effective these

accounts were, but I noticed they were rapidly adding hundreds of SLO County residents to their friends list. I contacted several of my Facebook friends who accepted their friend requests and asked if they personally met or interacted with those accounts. Everyone I spoke to said no.

In addition to promoting CCN's exclusively reported allegations, Velie-linked anonymous accounts were used to incite hatred toward specific individuals, including local political consultant/columnist Tom Fulks, District 3 supervisor Adam Hill and Pacific Gas & Electric employee Tom Jones. These individuals were accused of being involved in a conspiracy to shut down CCN and trash anyone who questioned Hill. No evidence was provided. Some of these accounts occasionally accused me of being part of the conspiracy, but offered no evidence. The same accounts also personally addressed Fulks, but there was no indication he read or responded to their remarks.

So I was being cyberbullied and threatened by anonymous accounts directly associated with Velie or someone close to her who clearly lacked genteel sensibilities. These accounts, originally purposed for social media gaming, were calculated in the way they disseminated propaganda. The people they added to their Facebook had no idea who was behind those accounts. Before Russian election meddling and fake accounts became newsworthy topics, county residents largely didn't care who they accepted into their social media dynamic. They didn't care what misinformation and disinformation they were exposed to. To them, it was just another post, another conspiracy, another day.

It was pathetic yet elaborate.

Soon enough, fake accounts would become the least of my problems.

## 24

“How do you respond to allegations you are a government troll?”

That was a question Velie emailed me in February 2015.

*How would I answer something like that?*

Her typically minimalist email didn't offer any additional context. Who accused me of being a “government troll,” exactly? Why were they accusing me of being a “government troll”? What did a “government troll” even mean? Is it ethical or professional to assert that someone is a “government troll”? The biased question she asked me was akin to asking someone, “How do you respond to allegations that you beat your wife?” I wasn't sure if she was writing an article, trying to provoke me into a conversation or both. In any event, I wasn't going to answer.

The next day, I woke to a flurry of emails, phone calls and text messages about a robo-call that went out to Morro Bay residents.

Here's the content of the robo-call: “Bad news, Morro Bay has a vindictive liar on a parks commission making remarks on women, local businesses and individuals,” said an unidentified, barely audible older woman. “Parks commissioner Aaron Ochs has a website that labeled one local woman a donkey, labeled a local business illegal, called another local woman, quote, a vindictive bitch. This is a city official. Aaron Ochs does not belong on Morro Bay's parks commission. Aaron Ochs is arrogant and does not listen to you. Aaron Ochs once wrote, ‘What is said during public comment is quite dumb.’ Aaron, you have posted this about buying a gun. Ask Mayor Jamie Irons and the city council why they put Aaron Ochs on a parks commission.”

When I heard the robo-call for the first time, I could feel – not literally, I think – my heart drop down to the soles of my shoes. I couldn't think, feel, breathe or believe any of this was happening. I sat at my desk, listening to the robo-call over and over on my

headphones with my head buried in my hands as the emails, phone calls and text messages came rolling in like a tsunami of pure disbelief. The message was a smattering of words taken out of context, accusations I've never made and desires I never communicated – all rolled up into this demented rant unlike anything I've heard in political robo-calls.

Merely minutes after I first heard the robo-call, my employer called me. He sounded shaken. He told me my services were no longer required. I asked him if the reason was related to CalCoastNews or the robo-calls. He flatly denied it, adding, "I don't have to tell you anything." He was unusually rude. As much as I wanted to pepper him with questions, I figured he wasn't going to give me an inch. I quietly gave in and told him to mail me my final check. Though it wasn't my dream job, the call was still devastating at that moment, and I had no idea how to process it.

Word of the robo-call spread to social media. On Nextdoor, a private social networking service for local neighborhoods, residents expressed concern about receiving the robo-call. Some could barely hear the message while others were asking who I was and what the call was about. Residents complained receiving the "distressing" and "scary" robo-call twice – sometimes three times – a day. The caller left no option to opt out of the message and showed no signs of stopping. Sure enough, the calls approximately lasted for two weeks.

An elderly woman who was involved in local politics called me after receiving the robo-call. She asked me fearfully, "I speak at public comment. Why would you want to shoot me?" Right there, that's when I felt my heart breaking. It certainly wouldn't be the last time someone made similar remarks. I heard from parents who told me one of their children picked up the phone, heard the message and started crying after hearing the word "gun."

"Is he going to hurt us, mommy? Why does he not like us? I hope he doesn't shoot me."

But I also heard from residents who recognized the robo-call for what it truly was: a deeply depraved, defamatory attack on a

private citizen. I received a generous outpouring of support from residents, including members of the city council. I also heard from residents who asked me questions, which I was more than happy to answer. Aside from the contents of the robo-call, residents asked me, “How can I get them to stop calling me?”

The call was accompanied with a February 23, 2015 CCN article titled, “Is Morro Bay parks official a government troll?”

“Ochs is arguably the most frequent online commenter about politics in San Luis Obispo County. He contributes to multiple social media pages that give him carte blanche to post just about anything having to with his favorite subjects — CalCoastNews and any community activist who questions the actions of San Luis Obispo County Supervisors Bruce Gibson or Adam Hill,” wrote CCN under their anonymous “CCN Staff” byline. However, CCN later admitted in their article that they had “no concrete evidence” that I posted online on behalf of certain government officials, but added that “many county residents allege that his actions resemble those of government trolls.” CCN didn’t disclose the identifies of those county residents nor could they explain how mere suspicions was “news” worth publishing.

Nearly two weeks before the article was published, “Robert Mason” accused me of being brought in by *Tribune* columnist/political consultant Tom Fulks to “trash” anyone who disagrees with him, Gibson and Hill. Two days after that comment was made, anonymous user JordanJ commented on CCN, accusing me of being Fulks’ “puppet” who was used to “trash” anyone who questioned Hill.

“Following a recent string of profanity-laden personal attacks on South Bay citizens, a robo-call made its way around Morro Bay this weekend suggesting residents ask their local representatives why a city official’s public Facebook page, calls a woman a ‘vindictive bitch,’” wrote CCN.

I never called anyone a “vindictive bitch” and didn’t know what CCN was referring to by “profanity-laden personal attacks.” However, in January 2015, I criticized four Los Osos residents – North Coast, not South Bay – who frequently appeared before the SLO County board of supervisors – as part of a column. I

took each of their comments, identified the irony behind their statements, or threw out one-line allegations similar to the accusations they've levied at others from behind the podium. One of the residents was Tacker, a person one of my readers referred to as a “vindictive bitch.”

One Los Osos resident – who was prone to public outbursts, nonsensical rants and showed short videos about the BOS with dramatic orchestral music – had threatened to file a citizen's complaint because supervisor Hill once used the word “ass.” I jokingly referred to her as a donkey. This was my way of telling her to look in the mirror.

Known for his rambling, politically hard-right screeds at the podium, one Los Osos resident often accused the board of engaging in unlawful business and regurgitating allegations from CCN. Without mentioning his name, I wrote under a photo of him speaking at the BOS, “runs an illegal business.” I personally knew this resident and could attest to the fact he was a successful real estate broker. But as I mentioned in my column that accompanied the photo, I asked the accusers to put themselves in the shoes of the accused. Now, how does it feel to have your likeness associated with false allegations?

I criticized a third Los Osos resident, Linde Owen, for regularly reminding the board that her comments gave her community “value.” I reminded readers that the resident had a long history of personally attacking board members and staff – at one point suggesting the children of two public officials get drug tested. I also wrote about how she argued for various tactics to delay construction of the Los Osos wastewater project, thus increasing the project's overall cost. Not exactly profanity-laden.

Tacker, who helped coordinate the multi-pronged verbal assault from these residents, once accused Hill of “sending sweet nothings” to his wife, Dee Torres, during public meetings, thus violating closed session rules. I found that ironic given she was once reprimanded for failing to recuse herself when her partner was negotiating a property sale involving the district board that she served on. I also took aim at comments Tacker made about accusing the board of marginalizing her when she had a record of

badgering people who criticized her record.

“Since then, Ochs, through Facebook and several websites, has made numerous false claims alleging specific people are felons, or diagnosed mentally ill,” CCN wrote. “He has impersonated reporters. He also has frequently manipulated photos of journalists and activists on his website in order to demean them.”

CCN never specified who these specific people were, what felonies I allegedly accused them of committing or who I called a “felon.” The mental illness portion of that claim was clearly in reference to my earlier comments about Velie’s mental health.

But I was intrigued mostly in their false allegation that I impersonated reporters. Without evidence, CCN claimed that I manipulated a screenshot that I previously posted on my personal Facebook profile, which showed Velie’s email address beside the anonymous Reddit nickname “lightsofslo.” As “proof” of their false claim, they pointed to comments I clearly made in jest about “forging documents in Photoshop,” an allegation that came from an anonymous user that I suspected was Velie: Robert Mason. The user accused me on my Facebook page of forgery. I responded to them, sarcastically admitting to the practice while stating my intent to partner with Walter White, the fictional protagonist from the critically-acclaimed TV show *Breaking Bad*. CCN didn’t reveal the satirical context of my post.

It was surreal to see a supposed “news” site declaring clearly identified satire as fact.

Two weeks before CCN debuted their article, JordanJ made the same forgery allegation. “Aaron Ochs went as far as criminal impersonation by photo shopping Velie’s name on Reddit posts then posting around the web claiming [sic] it was Velie,” she wrote. Two days before JordanJ made those comments, “Robert Mason” made similar allegations on the *Tribune*: “Ochs has gone as far as criminal impersonation. Ochs has photo shopped a reporters name on a Reddit post then posted it around the web claiming it was the reporter.”

Lastly, the article accused me of stating that I personally considered purchasing a firearm, an allegation that originated



from the robo-call. Immediately, I remembered the “get him a gun” threat communicated to my mother by Hedges and when I documented that on Facebook. At the time, I made it profoundly clear that the threat was from the voicemail itself, not me. The false allegation was worded as if I’d purchase a firearm to deal with public comment that I disagreed with.

CCN claimed they were unable to track the source of the robo-call, despite the fact Velie once belonged to the group called “Block Aaron Ochs” that openly discussed smearing my reputation by various means, including robo-calls. Velie never disclosed her affiliation with that Facebook group, though the article alluded to some unspecified “organized push” to unseat me.

Quoted in the article was Julie Tacker, co-leader of “Block Aaron Ochs.” She said, “Ochs’ belittling the public in this way is not only extremely unprofessional and unbecoming of a public official, it may deter people from speaking out on real issues. I hope the City of Morro Bay takes a good look at their choice of representatives on the Parks Commission.” Naturally, CCN’s article didn’t address Tacker’s apparent involvement in the publicly discussed conspiracy to attack me.

CCN’s article was poorly written, libelous and downright bizarre. These “investigative journalists” threw out several false claims in a heavily opinionated and personal rant, deprived of context or intellectual curiosity. It read like something out of a typo-ridden conspiracy theory blog.

Though Velie reached out to me, she never asked once about the claims mentioned in the robo-call, the claim I was supposedly impersonating reporters, about my reported “profanity-laden” attacks on private citizens, or what I wrote on my site. There was no intellectual curiosity, no balance or desire to investigate objectively. It was clear Velie set the editorial narrative in advance, pairing words and images with the intent to vilify and defame. It was obvious she anonymously wrote the article. This wasn’t investigative reporting. If anything, it was flagrant abuse of journalism saturated in a delusional and unbridled rage from a severely disturbed individual who tried to get me fired from my

previous job and threatened my family – someone who, in my opinion, had no business operating a news site.

Reactions to the article were swift and unrelenting.

For weeks, CCN supporters inundated my Facebook page and email with hostile messages and death threats.

On CCN, Congalton reminded readers that I was president-elect of the Eco Rotary Club. Merely minutes after his comments were made, CCN revised their article with that factoid and linked to the club's website. On social media, CCN readers published the names, addresses and phone numbers of the club's board of directors. This was a practice called "doxing," which involves researching and broadcasting private, personally identifiable information about certain individuals or organizations. Congalton spearheaded and condoned the effort to target people who had absolutely nothing to do with my personal opinions.

Soon after CCN's article went live, I was walking through Morro Bay to clear my head, keeping my head low with my hands in my pockets, when I crossed paths with two of the Rotary club's board members. I waved to them, but they darted past me without saying a word. They look frightened, as if they saw a ghost. The other board member, who was walking with her daughter, spotted me and suddenly jaywalked across the street. The daughter innocently looked back at me, but her mother turned her head and grabbed her tiny hand. I could only speculate on why they acted that way. None of the board members communicated to me that they were contacted. However, I spoke to one of the club leaders who said Congalton's involvement in the dissemination of Rotary club information was "highly problematic."

A number of anonymous accounts on CCN parroted the allegation that I either worked for or was promoted by Adam Hill, Tom Fulks and Tom Jones to harm reputations. The same anonymous accounts expanded the conspiracy theory to include anyone who "liked" my page or put a "thumbs up" on my posts. Names of Facebook users participating on my page were disclosed. Whoever was maintaining these accounts was actively monitoring user activity on my Facebook page and holding

readers personally accountable for words they didn't write. These attacks led to a noticeable drop of active users on my Facebook page – and that was precisely their goal.

Several readers wrote me privately, stating they continued reading my posts but were concerned about Velie and Congalton. Both contacted some of my readers. At the time, Congalton wrote on CCN: “This isn't going to end well for [Aaron].”

On CCN, there was a bizarre fixation among the anonymous that I was “unemployable,” specifically referring to my former employers.

In mid-February, JordanJ – the account I believe Velie maintained – falsely claimed I was hired by Morro Bay mayor Jamie Irons' wife to do computer-related work for the City of SLO. Other anonymous accounts “confirmed” the account's claim, though it was completely baseless. According to public records I requested from the City of SLO, a person named “Andres Guzman” (another anonymous account) wrote an email to SLO's human resources director Monica Irons and accused me of spending years on an effort to shut down CCN, “spreading lies of mental illness” and “fake Photoshop.” The allegations “Guzman” made were the same ones CCN made days later. This led me to believe “Guzman” was none other than Velie herself. Irons responded, correctly denying that I was employed by the City.

One week after I was laid off by my actual employer, I walked into my former workplace. According to the manager on duty, a woman identifying herself only as “Karen” had repeatedly called asking about me. The business owner reportedly informed this person that I was no longer employed by his business. It sounded like history repeating itself, except this time I was already gone. After learning she called, I instantly remembered Velie screaming to Marshall, “He's hurting me, he's hurting me, he's hurting me!” I didn't want anyone, friends, colleagues or co-workers, to endure the same hysteria.

Going into the second week of robo-calls, I met with law enforcement to discuss options available to residents who felt they were being harassed. An official informed me that residents could

call the police department if they felt they were being harassed as long as the calls went on for an unspecified “prolonged period.” After speaking with the police, I went on Facebook and provided readers with a phone number for the Morro Bay Police Department, stating in part that I felt the calls constituted criminal harassment. Then “Robert Mason,” the same anonymous account that peppered my Facebook page with ominous threats, appeared to rebut my comment, stating, “It’s his First Amendment right. I will be filing a complaint against you for trying to take away his rights.” Following the complaint threat, I heard from the official I met with earlier, who walked back his comments. He informed me the repeated robo-calls didn’t fall under criminal harassment statutes. He also expressed concern about the department being investigated for undermining someone’s First Amendment rights. Out of respect for the department, I modified my post and removed my opinion that the calls were criminal harassment.

Before I did anything else, I needed additional feedback from community leaders, but they proved ill-equipped to address a phenomenon they never experienced before. I explained the circumstances in various phone calls and heard deafening silence from the other end. Then I reached out to city officials, who CCN claimed received “multiple calls” about my position on the recreation & parks commission. In a meeting, then-city manager David Buckingham told me the “multiple calls” were an exaggeration and encouraged me to remain as commissioner. He denied CCN’s claim that he told them the council was looking into the allegations, adding, “If they decide to investigate, I’ll let you know.”

I reached out to members of the city council for advice and to express my willingness to cooperate with an investigation.

One morning, councilwoman Christine Johnson called me to discuss CCN’s article. As I recall, Johnson was the only councilperson to have a serious conversation with me about it.

“When you’re in a leadership position, you are essentially the face of that organization and a representative of that institution,” she said. “When you write about people critically, you may think

that criticism is well earned and feel like it has to be expressed. But then it creates an opening for those people to attack organizations you're a part of. You can't be a journalist-slash-columnist and serve in public position. Generally that doesn't work," she said. Johnson stopped short of suggesting that I resign from my position as commissioner, but advised that I consider those close to me when I write content that's critical of others, even if that criticism is directed at individuals residing outside of Morro Bay. Johnson indicated an investigation could happen, but didn't anticipate a negative outcome.

Rotary members expressed similar sentiments. Originally, club leadership was supportive as long as I shifted away from more pointed criticism and focused more on club activities, which I'd done in the months leading up to the robo-calls. However, club leadership expressed concern about CCN's seemingly endless "reporting" about me and how it could negatively impact the club in the long run. To help put my Rotary role into perspective, I met with Jim Bell, the 2015-16 Rotary district governor who oversaw the Eco Rotary Club. With over 30 years of experience in television and radio broadcasting, Bell recognized the risks associated with being outspoken in the media. He told me that I chose a difficult path in a difficult business. Because I made a conscious choice to criticize a retaliatory contingent of the county population, my words and actions affected club membership by association. He suggested that I step aside from my role as president-elect and continue being a participating member.

I couldn't hold it against them for wanting to protect the brand they represent. The circumstances they had to deal with – because of me – were unusual. They didn't know what was going to happen next. They feared the unknown, threatening emails and calls, hit pieces to incite the anonymous lynch mob and how I'd react to it. This phenomenon was completely new to them, while I was already spent, having to deal with the hysteria for several years on and off. I wanted out, not just for my sake but for the community's. They didn't deserve this.

At the same time, I felt there was an overreaction to accommodate demonstrably false, anonymous allegations and

bend to their pressure. CCN created the impression in readers' minds that there was some movement to oust me from anything and everything I belonged to. I couldn't independently verify a movement taking place beside the small group of individuals with a personal ax to grind. Then again, my colleagues were hesitant to step forward about any communications they might have had with that group. I was left to speculate about any harassment they might have endured.

In March, I resigned from the Morro Bay Recreation & Parks Commission. In my resignation note to the City Council, I condemned the profane and defamatory robo-call as not reflecting the kind of person I was. "I cannot in good conscience subject the city and community to such continued abuse," I wrote.

Despite Velie and CCN claiming that an "organized push" was in place to oust me, there was no push. Despite Congalton telling readers that "many people [were] planning on showing up in public comment to discuss why [I] should be removed," only one non-Morro Bay resident appeared before the council. That resident, Dane Senser, falsely claimed I threatened him and his family. After accusing me of unspecified "hate crimes," Senser issued threatening remarks of his own, which raised concern from law enforcement officials in the meeting room. Several months earlier, I jokingly asked if anyone had a straitjacket for him after he appeared at a county board of supervisors meeting, wildly gesticulating and yelling from behind the podium. His threatening and nonsensical rant was unnecessary as I already resigned days before he appeared at the meeting.

Senser was a known associate of CalCoastNews' Josh Friedman. He taped a 40-second segment with Friedman about his appreciation for the Seattle Seahawks football team. On his Twitter account, Senser credited his "friend" Friedman for helping set up his social media account.

The decision to resign was mine alone. I resigned to remain true to my beliefs and positions while protecting the City. Once I resigned, the robo-calls stopped. Velie wrote about my resignation and repeated some of CCN's false allegations. Again,

Velie referred to the “organized push” for me leaving my position and added there was also an “organized push” for my seat as president-elect of the Eco Rotary Club, but offered no evidence of any sort of resistance.

It would be convenient to claim victimhood, to be the fair-haired boy that proclaimed his angelic innocence, ask readers for sympathy and shower myself in self-pity. But the truth was undeniable: I squarely took aim at a small group of individuals for their misanthropic, conspiracy-theory-spreading, poisonous behavior. And yes, I gave it right back with my ham-fisted, snide yet articulate commentary. I didn't do it for anyone or to curry favor with public officials. I was simply tired of the lack of public decorum shown week after week, which was further amplified by CCN's reporting and allegations, and Congalton's echo chamber. Over time, my exasperation boiled over and I exhibited the kind of behavior I criticized others for having. I took the issues personally.

I was a self-absorbed idiot for writing such commentary while serving in public positions. I wasn't elected to office, wasn't mayor or served on council, but the responsibility of commissioner on an advisory body required that I act dignified, like an elected official. One of the lasting lessons I learned from the ordeal was about the ways I publicly present myself – that if I enter the public square as part of a team, I have to support the team by not becoming their problem. I needed to be cognizant of *everyone* who looked to me for support and guidance. I was taught the importance of self-awareness, humility and graciousness. I needed to be the centered person that – at the time – I couldn't be, that I could only aspire to be. But could I change? Time would tell.

But what I endured since late 2014 was unjustifiable bat-shit craziness. I felt CCN's response to my content was excessive and disproportional to what I published. I wasn't active with my criticism of the so-called community “activists.” My views were pointed and occasionally colorful or coarse, depending on which side of the debate one leaned, but reasonable. At the time, I had only a tiny fraction of the circulation boasted by our leading local publications of record. Frankly, my work wasn't well known to

the mainstream audience – that is, until CCN wrote about it. Then I became highly read, with followers awaiting my response to everything CCN got wrong, and what they got wrong just kept coming.

The aggrieved parties I featured in my critiques had every opportunity to contact me to express their dismay, to vent, complain or insult. They could've responded in a number of direct ways – I welcomed their response – but they resorted to childish, even extraordinary measures to tear me down, a private citizen and volunteer, with little to no influence in public policy decisions.

There was a sickness afoot, a virus in the air. There were people who not only wanted me to resign from my volunteer positions, they also wanted to ruin my personal and professional reputation. They wanted me to suffer and were unusually gleeful about it. But in their attempt to shine a light on my conduct, they inadvertently shined a light on theirs. People were able to see how they operated in real time without someone like me having to describe their actions. Everyone got to see what I personally witnessed for four years.

As time went on, as I slowly picked up the pieces of my temporarily shattered existence, residents began to forget what the controversy was about and why they should care. Life slowly returned to normal in Morro Bay. But I remained numb, directionless and unclear about my future.

Where could I go from here? For months, I had trouble sleeping, wandering the dark hallways early in the morning, softly cursing the sunrise for reminding me how long I'd stayed awake. I'd ramble to my friends about my frustrations, but they didn't want to hear them after a while. I was repetitive, combative and not much fun to hang around. For a while, it seemed, I was a social recluse.

I quietly resigned from my position as president-elect of Eco Rotary and left the club entirely. I wanted to protect the club from further harm. I also lost the motivation to volunteer for anything. It would take years before I mustered the motivation to volunteer in the community again.



Despite feeling withdrawn, I knew who I was. I knew the cartoony villain caricature they created wasn't me. I needed to fight back. How? Now I realized my pursuits came with a price. The more I pushed, the more they retaliated. The more I spoke out, the more they tried to silence me. The more I defended myself, the more determined they were to undermine my credibility. How was I going to end this vicious cycle?

Two weeks after I resigned, my parents received a knock on their front door.

A woman identifying herself as a case worker for Social Services asked to personally inspect a disabled relative my parents cared for. My mother escorted her mortified relative outside for the case worker to assess. The relative, who suffered from severe social anxiety, grabbed onto my mother's arm with one hand and held onto the outside wall with the other. Breathless, she staggered outside, muttering, "No, no, no!" as she gripped the walls and reluctantly walked to the front of the house. There, the case worker evaluated my relative's arms and face for signs of injuries.

The case worker revealed that she was acting on an anonymous tip the department received. The tipster, who reportedly struggled to name my relative, claimed to be someone my family knew personally. They claimed to have read CCN's articles about me and were reportedly concerned about me being "depressed" as a result of these articles being published, and that my alleged depression made me "dangerous."

After evaluating my relative, the case worker went inside to inspect my parents' kitchen and refrigerator. The case worker indicated the tipster claimed the relative was not properly or actively fed. After she found nothing unusual with my relative, the case worker left. She later issued her findings and the department closed the case file.

I immediately suspected CalCoastNews was involved in the false, malicious tip to Social Services, but I had no evidence. It sounded as though the intent behind the articles was to punish me by punishing my family and push me into a sense of despair and hopelessness. The end result of the "concerns" this anonymous tipster allegedly made had resulted in the humiliation of an emotionally vulnerable family member who had nothing to do whatsoever with the controversy CCN generated.

In the *Bay News* newspaper, one elderly Los Osos resident wrote a letter to the editor, claiming to be a “former friend” of the family. The resident, Peggy Pavek, accused my mother of attempting to sabotage her daughter’s career by making “numerous harassing phone calls” to her workplace. She also claimed that my “evil” family was working on a “tell-all book,” and that our attempt to “savagely attack many citizens” is believed to be some sort of precursor for a book that didn’t exist.

On CCN, Pavek rallied users to file a restraining order against me for publishing my “egregious” opinions, which somehow were a “cyber crime.”

There was one thing Pavek was right about: she was a former acquaintance of my mother’s. Pavek was a hard-nosed rabble-rouser, a great-grandmother who I knew during the Los Osos sewer wars. I got to know her after I defended her from personal attacks levied by another citizen during a public board meeting. Pavek had a penchant for confronting individuals she vehemently disagreed with. Her sometimes raucous disposition got her trouble and she would be on the receiving end of retaliation. Being a justice-seeking, twenty-something newbie to local politics, I was a lot like her and respected her for standing up for what she believed in – even if it sometimes ruffled other people’s feathers.

She’d occasionally walk her dogs with my mother or stop by the house with her delicious, homemade fudge. We didn’t always agree with her on national politics, but we generally felt her heart was in the right place. However, in 2014, I distanced myself from her after she shared politically-charged social media posts to my Facebook timeline about Obama being one of the hijackers in the Twin Towers attack that made me feel uncomfortable. I scolded her about sharing racially-charged posts. She angrily pushed back, claiming I “embarrassed” her in front of her friends. I decided to walk away from our relationship and move on.

I’d later come across some of her comments on CCN where, like a tipster with an “inside scoop,” she talked about having some information about me. It was strange to see someone I knew, someone who I was friendly with at one time, cavorting with individuals who were regularly attacking me. I confronted her

about it in email, but she denied making such comments. However, she admitted to discussing how “close” I was to supervisor Hill and publicly expressing curiosity about how my relationship with him came to be. Still, it was strange to see someone I once considered a friend openly speculating about my motives without asking me any questions.

After our conversation went nowhere, I left her alone – that is, until she rallied people to report me to law enforcement for various “crimes” in February 2015. It was surreal to see someone I knew, someone who *knew* I wasn't the kind of person CCN described, actively seeking to get me arrested for expressing views she disagreed with. My family was understandably and completely taken aback by this.

We were even more shocked when she submitted a letter to the editor defaming my entire family. I was appalled the letter was even published. In politics, there used to be an unwritten, long-established rule to not attack family, especially when said family did not voluntarily inject themselves into politics or public policy. Having read news about pundits, politicians and publications being lambasted for attacking the sons and daughters of public officials, I knew I wasn't an exception to the rule. But now the unwritten rule had been broken. The question was: *How do I respond?*

I reached out to Pavek's daughter, who I hoped would act as a mediator between the now-warring families, telling her I now had to defend myself. Her daughter apologized for her mother's “stupid letter” and condemned her mother for being involved in a letter she didn't agree with, and didn't appreciate her mother using or lying about her. She asked that I leave her out of any further discussions, which I did – for as long as I possibly could.

I later learned Pavek also played a role in the anonymous Social Services tip; she admitted having personal knowledge about it. In late 2015, Pavek claimed in an email to my father that she heard word about “neighbors” contacting Social Services because they were concerned about my relative, but she refused to name the person who gave her that information. At the time Pavek made those remarks, Velie wrote in a comment on CCN, “Neighbors

say [Ochs'] mother is addicted to pain killers and there is worry for the relative they are responsible for." Velie's comments echoed sentiments of the anonymous tipster, which I had not publicized prior. Now I was all but certain Velie was involved in the false tip and Pavek had knowledge of the tip being made.

CCN crossed the line by targeting a vulnerable member of my family. My skin was hardening from the experience, and I could take the slings and arrows, but my family was off-limits.

After long and careful consideration, I decided to send CCN a legal demand for retraction. I retained the services of Kerr & Wagstaffe – the same firm representing Charles Tenborg in his defamation claim against CCN – to issue a retraction demand for the article they published. I scrounged up some money to pay for the letter, knowing CCN would likely ignore the detailed corrections and goad me into a defamation lawsuit.

Editor Bill Loving responded to my attorneys, stating the staff would look over the points. At the same time, he falsely accused me of tampering with evidence. He encouraged my attorneys to give me "the talk" about preserving evidence for litigation, offering no timeframe on when the site's evaluation of their letter would be completed.

Following Loving's response, CCN published a "clarification" in the form of an article. They corrected one point, which is the fact I never personally discussed purchasing a firearm and that I was stating the nature of the threat communicated to me. They quoted me from my Facebook post, which they clearly had possession of, yet they chose to publish their false claims about me threatening Tacker with a firearm in the first place. It was unfortunate they made this "clarification" only under the threat of a lawsuit.

They clarified or corrected nothing else. The "clarification" went on to mention that Tacker filed a police report with the SLO County Sheriff's Dept. against me. Tacker said she feared for her family's safety because I was "talking about getting a gun" and felt I was stalking and cyber-harassing her. According to the Sheriff's Dept. there was no police report. According to Sheriff's Dept. officials, they reportedly received several calls from Tacker,

pleading with them to “investigate” my posts. In her communication with law enforcement, Tacker repeatedly claimed I was personally stalking and harassing her, yet refused to turn over any evidence.

It turned out the officer who called me to check on my safety was the same officer Tacker consulted. The fact he reached out to me in that way showed he didn't lend any credence to her allegations. One law enforcement official stationed at the their Los Osos substation told me Tacker developed a reputation within the department for “crying wolf” on her critics. Tacker had long held the view that personal and political criticism levied against her was fundamentally unlawful. In addition to being an overly sensitive bully and manipulator, Tacker provided illiterate interpretations of my posts, drawing criminal inferences that were never there.

Underneath the “clarification” article, Tacker added that at least three residents contacted law enforcement about my “cyber behavior.” The Sheriff's Dept. confirmed three Los Osos residents I previously criticized had contacted them about my posts, referring to them as evidence of harassment and elder abuse. In addition to calling law enforcement about my posts, Tacker coordinated with these residents – who I hadn't personally contacted – to press charges. I was shocked by the extent of her self-serving witch-hunt, but I wasn't surprised with the outcome. No action was taken against me.

I couldn't recall any other local writer, reporter or columnist getting reported to the police for occasionally throwing shade. This was the quintessential example of making a mountain out of a molehill, but the intended result was to ruin my personal and professional life. I figured if such a tactic was actually successful, the *New Times'* foul-mouthed, no-holds-barred Shredder would be already serving 25 to life in a maximum security jail. Or maybe my friend and mentor Bob Cuddy – who named private citizens for crossing the line with their personal attacks at public meetings – would be locked away in solitary confinement.

By publishing a “clarification” article with more false allegations about me, CCN was essentially punishing me for

exercising my legal remedies and defending my reputation. They never told their readers I submitted a retraction demand or that I contested their “reporting” at all. To the naked eye, it was simply happenstance they made a “clarification,” nothing more. *Oh, and by the way...*

According to my attorneys, Loving never followed up with his evaluation of the demand letter. There was never any evidence to suggest Loving reviewed or followed up on the specific corrections I made. I was never contacted by CCN to assist them in the editorial review process, assuming they underwent any sort of process at all.

Following CCN's assertion that my Tacker threat claim was unsubstantiated, I published audio of Hedges' voicemail, which my mother had luckily saved. The voicemail revealed Hedges' comments in their entirety. There was her bizarre, occasionally incoherent ranting and rambling, including the twice-repeated suggestion that my mother should get me a gun. The audio recording quickly went viral around the community with residents recognizing Hedges' signature gravelly voice.

Within hours of publishing the voicemail recording, Hedges called my parents. She was upset the voicemail was made public and called repeatedly, yelling and screaming, referring to my family as “trash” and threatening to report us to the police, claiming she was “illegally” recorded. She also complained bitterly about Velie and Tacker calling her about it. According to Hedges, she reportedly received “dozens” of calls from both of them. At one point, Hedges alleged Tacker personally urged her to change her story about Tacker being directly involved.

In April 2015, CCN published a short editorial supposedly penned by Hedges. In the editorial, Hedges falsely claimed I identified Tacker as the source of the threat as a way to “bully” her. CCN falsely claimed I made the post with the intent to “demean” Tacker. Hedges claimed Tacker hadn't spoken to her for about a year before she left the voicemail. Then she wrote, “People have turned the Ochs into multiple law enforcement agencies and adult protective services. The Ochs blame Julie Tacker for reporting them. They may not know who is angry

with them, but they believe they know.”

It was interesting how a private matter became a public item of discussion. On a site where public officials were roasted left and right about things they've done within the scope of public interest, there was a dissertation on issues in my private life. This was a deeply disturbing and personally vindictive piece on a private citizen that even the most ruthless muckraking tabloids wouldn't publish. The more I read it, the more I believed Hedges didn't write it.

Hedges reportedly claimed she was “laughing and joking” that I should get a gun because I “put such bad crap on the internet and has angered so many people,” yet she claimed in the voicemail she didn't have access to the Internet and only heard “bits and pieces” of things I may have written. In conversations the family had with Hedges, she never specified the “many people” I angered or what specifically made so many people angry.

There was one big problem with the editorial: I had not yet gone public about the anonymous Social Services tip. This was not public information. No family member told Hedges about it. Also, there was no truth to my whole family being “turned into multiple law enforcement agencies.” That was news to us. It was apparently news to Hedges, who later denied writing the editorial for CCN when I spoke with her in 2017. If she didn't write it, who did? Bread crumbs led to Velie or a family member.

It wasn't just about me anymore. Now my entire family was defamed, subjected to contempt and ridicule, and unnecessarily thrown into the clickbait sausage grinder without a scintilla of due process – without them once asking us the question, “Are all of these allegations even remotely true?”

I was surprised they didn't include mugshots of our pets.

In the comment section underneath Hedges' editorial, Tacker claimed Hedges called her to “apologize” and that her “laughingly said words had been twisted.” Tacker decreed that my comments were “slander [that] should be removed from the internet.”

This was a surreal experience. The best way I could comprehend and dissect the voluminous allegations was to



objectively assess them like they were levied at someone else. They made the claims. Now where is the evidence? They decided to publish an attack on someone's family, but how does that coincide with their stated mission to "prepar[e] articles on issues ranging from government schemes to financial fraud, from the fleeing of the American taxpayer to the plight of the homeless"? The only rational takeaway from the entire ordeal was: this was personal.

I regretted the fact my family remained in the cross hairs because of my written and lawful critique of a vindictive, fake news-driven blog. Every time I defended myself, they countered by expanding their retaliation to anyone who was publicly associated with me: family, friends, co-workers, board members of a non-profit I volunteered for. This was done with the malicious intent to inflict emotional distress, in other words, to break me down and destroy me.

I figured the time was right to raise the stakes and take my message to the mainstream. In May 2015, the *Bay News* published my response to Pavék and CCN: "Why I Fight a War on Lies." This was my heartfelt explanation, the period at the end of the sentence – my declaration of war against the people who were terrorizing my family.

I wrote the piece like the conclusion of a scientific study, stating that I found many of CCN's most controversial claims to be only partially true, severely misleading or completely false, and that defamation was their business model. I wrote about Velie's harassment and threats levied at my former employer, the conspiracy theories she voluntarily injected herself in, specific instances where her claims were reviewed, contested or rejected for a lack of evidence. I urged readers not to dignify CCN's behavior by doing nothing about it. I felt the editorial sufficiently cleared the air in a demonstrative and dignified way.

One month later my father heard a knock on his front door. A portly older man in his sixties, bald, with eyeglasses and a thick, gray mustache asked for me. After revealing that he was my father, Ed asked the man to identify himself. He said his name was "Mike," a process server, and he wanted to serve me with what he

described was a “cease and desist order.” When Ed asked what the cease and desist order was for, Mike replied, “I can’t discuss that with you.”

“Your son is in trouble,” Mike told him. “Where is he? If he doesn’t stop, I’m going to keep coming back here. If he avoids process service, I’m going to keep coming back., so you better tell me.”

“He’s not here, he’s at work,” Ed said.

“Where does he work?” Mike was growing agitated.

“That’s none of your business.”

Ed asked for his contact information. Mike supplied him with his name and phone number.

About 45 minutes after Mike left, I arrived at the house – a duplex: I lived in the front house, my parents lived in the back. My father immediately told me what happened and said he felt threatened by this person. He provided me with a piece of paper that had Mike’s phone number. Assuming CCN was involved, I typed Mike’s phone number into Google. Sure enough, the number belonged to former Atascadero mayor and CCN private investigator Michael Brennler.

I called him and forcefully told him I didn’t want him or Velie harassing my family, to which he replied, “I will keep coming to your house until you’re properly served and you leave Karen [Velie] alone.”

Concerned he would continue to harass my family, I accepted receipt of whatever he wanted to give me. He proceeded to tell me that, by law, I had to be served three times. I told him I wasn’t comfortable with him showing up at my parents’ home and didn’t want him coming back. Given his alleged behavioral issues, which were made aware to me by my sources in the San Luis Obispo Police Dept., I wanted a different process server. He insisted he had the legal right to not only visit my parents’ house, but also “lawfully trespass” since private investigators are also able to act as process servers under state law. This person was a problem.

I asked him to meet me at the house. He pulled up in front of my driveway in his SUV. I stood on a part of the street that was

on my parents' property. I slowly approached the driver's side and he rolled down his window. Brennler made eye contact with me, his face frozen with apprehension. He slowly reached for something on his side. I thought it was his holster. My heart skipped. I waited patiently and fearfully as his hand slowly retreated from his side. He reached over to the passenger seat to hand me a small stack of papers, which I assumed was the alleged cease and desist notice. As he gathered the paperwork, I started making small talk to ease the tension.

After I received the paperwork, he asked me if I had any questions. I said no. Brennler drove off.

What he gave me wasn't a cease and desist order. It was a retraction demand from attorney Stew Jenkins on behalf of Karen Velie. The letter demanded corrections, retractions and a personal apology to Velie for claims I made in the *Bay News*.

Jenkins demanded that I retract and apologize for the statement that CCN publishes unsubstantiated, unsourced and defamatory content; for implying that CCN and their staff were "liars or have been proved to be liars" (can't retract something I never wrote); and for claiming Velie harassed and threatened my former employer. Jenkins asked that I not only retract my column in its entirety, but also have Velie personally review my apology and retraction prior to running, and the retraction and apology must be published in the *Bay News* within 24 days after receiving his demand letter. Failure to comply would result in "increase[d] exposure to liability."

There was so much to unravel from this legally incoherent harassment. Instead of dignifying Jenkins' letter with a formal response, I made the letter public by posting it.

The letter was not only insulting to me, but also to Velie's victims who never received a retraction or an apology from her when her reported claims were disputed and refuted. Based on the letter, it was clear Velie placed greater value on safeguarding her lackluster reputation than she did for anyone she wrote about. In fact, she felt she was entitled to something she didn't give to anyone else. During the time Jenkins submitted his letter, Velie was being sued in court for defamation and there was a strong

## DEFAMERS

likelihood the plaintiff suing her had a strong probability of prevailing with his claim. To say I was somehow libelous for saying some of their work was “unsubstantiated, unsourced and defamatory” was laughably absurd and heavily delusional.

Now my family and I were being harassed by Jenkins and Brenner, and a growing cast of moral degenerates and sanctimonious sociopaths who continued to invade my privacy online and now at my home.

I contacted several lawyers about moving forward with a lawsuit against CCN. To my surprise, several law firms initially expressed interest in taking on my case. However, they also had strong reservations. For one, I was an unemployed 30-year-old with no source of income. The likelihood I could raise money for their retainer was slim to none. Also, I would be taking on Velie, an impoverished “reporter” who had support of pro-bono attorneys who firmly believed in her cause and were willing to eat expenses to pursue her provably warped sense of justice.

Should I win, there was no guarantee that she would abide by any court order, assuming I somehow had enough funds and emotional stamina to sustain the case to completion and achieve my desired verdict. As one attorney told me, “If Velie was willing to defame you this extensively and ferociously while being entrenched in a defamation lawsuit, it’s unlikely the court will be able to sway her. You can’t adjudicate psychopathy.”

In June 2015 I attended a hearing at California's 2<sup>nd</sup> District Court of Appeal, which was held in San Luis Obispo's City Hall. CalCoastNews filed an appeal to a Superior Court ruling, which allowed the Tenborg defamation lawsuit to proceed to trial. The ruling turned down what is called an anti-SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation) motion. In the motion, the website claimed their article on Tenborg was a "fair and true report of an official proceeding," therefore the site was not liable for a defamation claim. However, no proceeding was ever referenced. The judge also held that numerous statements in the article were defamatory and could be successfully tried.

CalCoastNews' appeal was the last hearing on the docket. I watched hearing after hearing as nervous local lawyers clumsily argued their cases to a stoical panel of three appellate court judges. Attorneys struggled through roughly 30 minutes of allotted time to make their arguments, only to be peppered by extensive questioning from the wary, visibly-bored panel.

I sat with my father. Seated behind me was Blackburn and Loving. I briefly looked over my shoulder and exchanged cold stares with them both.

About an hour into the hearings, Velie arrived, looking well dressed but visibly disoriented. Instead of sitting with the rest of her staff, Velie chose to sit beside me in the same bench row, about two feet away. I felt my shoulders tense up, my heart racing from being in close proximity to the woman who haunted me for months. I was uncomfortable, but tried to focus on the cases being heard and kept looking ahead. This is when time slowed to a crawl. Noticing my discomfort, Ed saw Velie seated beside me and asked if I was okay. I nodded, bit down on my lip and tried to block her out of my mind.

Then I heard Velie tapping her foot and moving around, followed by – what I thought was – dry heaving. I slowly looked

at her from the corner of my eye. She was staring directly at me with her right hand clutching her chest. She started coughing loudly, thrashing around and nervously rummaging through her purse. It looked like she pulled out an inhaler, but I wasn't sure. She suddenly gripped the bench in front of her and hurriedly stood up. She staggered forward, nearly tripping on one of her high heels, and left the courtroom after signaling Loving to follow her outside. After the commotion subsided, I could vaguely hear Velie from outside the chambers say, "He's here, he's – I can't, no. I can't."

Ed looked at me. I looked at him, shrugged and continued watching the hearings, hoping she wouldn't come back. But my hopes were soon dashed when she returned and, once again, sat beside me. This time she was closer. She was close enough to me that I could smell the alcohol on her breath hanging in the air well past its welcome. Minutes later she freaked out again, loudly coughing and sputtering. I could see the whites in her eyes, this time as she stared at me, drooling.

She left her seat and exited the room. This time she left by herself. A acquaintance of mine, who was inside City Hall at the time – but not in the chambers – witnessed Velie running into the women's restroom. Inside the restroom, Velie could be heard shouting, "He's here! No, no, no!"

Velie returned to the courtroom for the second time with her hair disheveled and her eyes fixed on me. She was visibly shaken. I looked away with disgust. My stomach was churning. I wasn't sure if she was trying to provoke me into a reaction, had some sort of medical issues, was genuinely frightened by me – or all of the above. In any event, I remained completely frozen and held my breath until the case was finally heard.

Sitting almost motionless for the whole ordeal proved rewarding. CalCoastNews' attorney attempted to re-litigate arguments they made in the trial court ruling and struggled to explain how the Superior Court judge erred in his decision. I remember one judge essentially asking the attorney, "Why are you here?" At one point, I was wondering the exact same thing.

My father and I left the chambers, feeling certain they were

going to lose their appeal. CalCoastNews contended that Tenborg failed to prove that most of statements they made about him were false, though he provided irrefutable evidence of their falsity. They claimed he was “fired” from an earlier job with the County. His resignation letter and a declaration from his former employer showed otherwise. They claimed he “illegally transports hazardous wastes,” but his hazardous waste licensing and state registration showed otherwise. No matter how hard CCN tried to convince three judges that the clear and convincing evidence was insufficient because “it did not establish that the ‘gist’ and ‘sting’ of each of the statements at issue was false,” the appellate panel was not buying it.

I felt this was a turning point. They were now a few steps closer to having their reporting scrutinized by a jury of their peers in a public trial. Everything I was writing and talking about – their penchant for publishing knowingly false claims, their reckless disregard for the truth, their demonstrably flawed reporting practices – were going to be objectively scrutinized. What they’ve done, what they continued to do, was about to be exposed. I was grateful to Tenborg for his courage and financial sacrifice to see this case through to the bitter end when many of their victims, including my family, were unable to make the same commitment primarily for financial reasons – the astronomical cost of a lawsuit – and Velie exploited this.

We celebrated early. In his car, dad pulled up to a stop sign just outside of City Hall. Standing on the sidewalk, in front of City Hall, was Velie and Loving. They appeared to be having a conversation. Dad rolled down his window and laughed at Velie, pointing at her. I was shaking my head and laughing along. We couldn’t help it. Though we were completely miserable during the proceedings, we felt karma was steadily approaching for Velie and her gang of misfits.

Maybe there was light at the end of this extremely dark tunnel. Maybe Velie and Loving were going to look at this case and finally realize, “We screwed up.” Maybe they were going to settle, cut their losses and run. When the appellate court soon issued their ruling, which upheld the Superior Court ruling, it appeared their

downward spiral had finally begun. Yet, publicly at least, it appeared they took their appellate court defeat in stride. Nothing in their reporting indicated a modicum of self-awareness and demonstrated even grudging improvement or a desire to report more accurately in light of the inevitable.

In August 2015, Velie published a story about a Cayucos man who, she claimed, had his hand bitten off by a mountain lion. At least, that's what the headline said. Steven Weaver was found dead on a hiking trail in the town of Cayucos. Velie cited several unnamed "neighbors" who reportedly claimed they saw a mountain lion near his body. Velie claimed a portion of Weaver's hand "appeared to be chewed off" by what some suspected was a large animal that may or may not have been a mountain lion. Velie implied the man was killed by the large animal that could have been a mountain lion. At the time, the story caused an uproar among Cayucos residents who believed a mountain lion was preying on people in the area. Others, including Weaver's relatives, were disheartened to learn his untimely death was being speculated on and sensationalized with crudely assembled, grizzly details.

Naturally, the story sounded sketchy. The SLO County Sheriff's Dept. told *Tribune* reporters Weaver died of a heart attack and that his injuries – which he incurred after death – were made by a small animal like a raccoon or a skunk. As for the mythical mountain lion, the California Dept. of Fish & Wildlife received one report of a mountain lion nearby, but that was never confirmed.

Jennifer Hamman, Weaver's niece, called Velie to complain about the story. Velie, who stood by the article, reportedly told Hamman, "I just write what I hear."

Velie chose to write what she heard – or what she thought she heard – despite officials saying otherwise. CCN never updated Velie's article to include statements from county and state officials. Every claim that was proven wrong remain untouched like it was the unvarnished truth. Once again, Velie knowingly published false claims to the chagrin of a grieving family and a horrified community.



The *New Times* Shredder column ridiculed CCN for not publishing any sort of clarification or retraction for the story.

I wrote about the Weaver story, though my Facebook post linking to my article was removed for “violating community standards.”

Anyone can report a post to Facebook for publishing objectionable content in violation of their community standards. Violations include publishing hate speech directed at individuals with “protected characteristics”: race, ethnicity, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, caste, sex, gender, gender identity, and serious disease or disability; violent or graphic content; adult nudity or sexual activity; cruel and insensitive remarks targeting victims of serious physical or emotional harm. Users can repeatedly report the same post or comment *ad infinitum* with impunity. An unseen content reviewer reportedly analyzes the reported content to see if any violations occurred. If they decide a violation occurred, the content is removed and the violating user is notified. Repeated violations result in the account being prohibited from posting.

Throughout 2015, over 40 Facebook posts and comments on Cal Coast Fraud were reported and removed for violating community standards, with no specific reason provided. As a result, my personal account was restricted by Facebook five times, with each block being extended for a longer period. In a vain attempt to not appear too unreasonable, Facebook provides blocked users an opportunity to appeal – by “appeal,” they allowed users to post their objections in a small text box with no guarantee anyone would read it. I’d review my removed content and write detailed appeals that broke down the reasons why nothing I published was in violation of any Facebook policy.

Hearing no response from Facebook for weeks, I reached out to the company’s corporate office, wormed my way through their media and investor relations departments, circumnavigating the company switchboard. They did not want to hear from users like me. I was scolded for not going through the “proper channels,” though they made it extraordinarily difficult to know where those channels were. Often the call would suddenly disconnect.

Frustrated with their lack of follow-through, I filed a complaint against Facebook with the Better Business Bureau as someone with a business account. After a while, I was on a first-name basis with the organization's Facebook liaison. The liaison promised to forward my complaint along to Facebook, but she couldn't guarantee they would respond. Eventually they did, once again offering me a canned apology for removing my posts in error. My account would be unrestricted.

The vast majority of my removed content had a common theme – each post mentioned either Julie Tacker or Kevin P. Rice. According to Facebook, the same posts were reported for “harassing an individual.” As much as I would have loved to shower the two with insults and gratuitous name-calling, the posts reported either discussed public comments they made or public actions they'd taken. In some instances, the reported posts were links or references to news articles published by the *Tribune* or *New Times*.

This was a hardly new phenomenon with Facebook. The Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), a nonprofit organization specializing in preserving civil liberties in the digital world, have cataloged numerous instances of journalists and columnists being censored by the social media giant through an undisclosed moderating process. Writers producing content on widely recognized platforms can often get their blocks lifted after reaching out to a Facebook spokesperson. Most of the time, Facebook will admit to a mistake and restore the content if censorship outrage becomes viral. Average users publishing news-related content or opinion are not granted the same level of recourse.

“Block Aaron Ochs” continued to be the *modus operandi* for Velie, Tacker and Rice, each of whom were constantly crawling through my page for any content mentioning them.

I was tired of it. I decided to make a live appearance at a County Board of Supervisors meetings, where Tacker and Rice regularly spoke every Tuesday, to tell my story.

It was August 11, 2015. A week after Tacker appeared before the board to complain about a resolution they approved to adopt civil

discourse policies – she argued the resolution was a slippery slope to censorship and the marginalization of public comment – I made my prepared remarks during the meeting’s public comment portion. I told the board and everyone watching about Velie threatening my former employer and family, “Block Aaron Ochs,” the postcards, the robo-calls, the series of defamatory articles that Tacker and Rice were intertwined with. I forcefully described the two so-called “activists” as civility-obsessed hypocrites.

After finishing my remarks, I remember looking over my shoulder and seeing Tacker standing near the podium, pale-faced with her mouth agape. She walked to the podium and stated that my remarks were “well prepared.” Tacker paused for a second, unsure of whether to respond. While she tripped over her words and painfully tried to pivot to her originally prepared remarks, I sat back down in my seat. A woman seated in front of me handed me a blue Post-it note that read, “I’m sorry for what happened to you and your family. Stay strong.”

Tacker would return to the podium a week later, referring to my remarks as a “slanderous, personal attack.” Tacker talked about how my comments were outside the purview of the board and how they didn’t address the important issues – issues far more important than her bruised ego. Tacker never specifically addressed how I supposedly slandered her. She claimed citizens tapped her on the shoulder before she spoke, reminding her about my comments, as if she simply forgot about them. I didn’t believe her for a second. About a week earlier, using one of my contributor’s Facebook accounts, I shared a YouTube video of my remarks along with a transcript on Cal Coast Fraud’s Facebook page. That post was reported and taken down for violating Facebook’s community standards.

For months, the same cast of cantankerous, conspiring sociopaths made it difficult for me to express my opinion and defend myself without some sort of personal retaliation. I was able to articulate the issues and talk about the censorship while it was happening, but there was always a price to pay.

I want readers to know that I fully understood the risks

## DEFAMERS

associated with speaking out. When you have a strong opinion and take a position, there will be people who oppose you. Free speech has consequences. Neither I nor anyone else is entitled to be free of those consequences. But in lieu of verbalizing personal disagreement or issuing an in-kind rebuttal, they attempted to chill and suppress my opinion by extraordinary measures at every turn. I decided to do everything I could to document my experiences and commit to full transparency.

I always hated the taste of alcohol. The smell was terrible, too, especially when I could smell it on someone else's breath. My grandmother on my mother's side struggled with alcohol addiction for several years. As a young boy who witnessed the heavy toll of my grandmother's addiction, I swore I'd never use the bottle to escape my issues. I was a kid who shied away from underage drinking, happily played by the rules and couldn't care less about those who didn't. When I turned 21, there were no booze-fueled celebrations, no idolatry of intoxication. I took pride in my sobriety during troubling times.

In times like these, though, I was more troubled than usual.

I applied for several jobs throughout SLO County, but after CalCoastNews' attacks, I rarely heard back from anyone. Job interviews were scarce but friendly. I was turned down for nearly half of the jobs I was interviewed for because of concerns about CCN and Karen Velie. My potential employers obviously Googled me, found her stories, read through the allegations and were understandably horrified. I took some solace in the fact they thought her "reporting" was absurd, but she developed a reputation in the community for being volatile and vengeful. No employer wanted to be targeted for hiring me. I was grateful to job interviewers who specifically told me why I was turned down.

Making matters worse, someone had stolen my identity. Someone got a hold of my Social Security number, date of birth and personal information to register several credit cards and go on extravagant shopping sprees. Thieves in Southern California spent tens and thousands of dollars in expenses using my name. I had absolutely no idea how thieves got a hold of my information. I filed a police report, spent hours with customer support for retailers I never purchased from, placed a freeze on my credit report and ordered identity protection. Naturally, the family was suspicious that CCN and their conspiring associates might be

involved, but there was no evidence they were. It appeared to just extremely bad timing.

I started drinking. The hazy, sublime trance I put myself under placed me in a euphoria I hadn't felt in years. Though in the back of my mind, I knew that drinking wasn't the solution to my constant malaise, yet it helped me socialize and be a part of the world again. Sure, I wasn't as articulate or as suave as I could be after downing a pitcher or two, but nothing else mattered – not even my seemingly limitless tribulations.

Drinking more and drinking often kept me from thinking about my paranoia, bitterness and bleak outlook. Looking at the big picture and the totality of everything left me shaken to my core, so much so I'd sometimes stay in a catatonic-like state of disbelief for days, even weeks at a time. Then I'd snap out of it, hit the bar, and hibernate until my sober, morose self emerged from underneath the covers. Rinse and repeat.

As I swayed drunkenly over the bar counter one evening, I could hear my phone sounding off. I rummaged through my pocket, took out the phone and looked at my notifications alerting me of private messages my Facebook page received. I was notified of a message one of my readers wrote me privately: “Velie called. I don't know what to do.”

For months, I received emails and Facebook messages from readers alerting me about Velie, Tacker or Congalton contacting them because they “liked” my page. Many of them felt intimidated by their actions, but not intimidated enough to keep them from reaching out and telling me about their experiences. They showed me conversation logs and emails and relayed to me phone conversations they had. There was nothing I could do except write them back and encourage them to not “like” my posts so they didn't inadvertently put themselves in their cross hairs.

Velie would list Facebook users who “liked” my posts, weave their names into her articles, and assail them for “participating” by giving a “thumbs up” on posts she claimed were “degrading or defamatory.” Instead of messaging readers on Facebook directly, she tracked down their phone numbers and email addresses. I

heard about her screaming and rambling phone calls, which became her trademark approach to dealing with disagreement. She would take readers to task for engaging in comments I allegedly made “sexually demean[ing] women,” including allegedly referring to women as “cunts and whores.”

Her obsession with my site allegedly describing women as “whores” made its way into the public record. When one public official answered one of her questions for an article she was working on and derided her for not being a legitimate journalist, Velie claimed the official referred to her as a “click whore” on Facebook, presumably on my page. Velie requested the official, who occasionally commented on posts about CCN, “stop making comments about my children or my grandchildren’s photos.” She claimed I gratuitously posted photos of her family. Though I never posted photos of her grandchildren, I provided the photo of one of Velie’s grown daughters, whose namesake was associated with several anonymous accounts that echoed her mother’s allegations and personally harassed me. The official in question never left any comments under photos of Velie’s relatives. When the official asked Velie to prove her allegations, she didn’t respond.

In another instance, Velie called one of my acquaintances about me, at one point reportedly bragging about trespassing on my parents’ property and going through my garbage. There was no evidence she was on their property or dug through the trash. Given the fact she was particularly obsessed about my personal life, I wouldn’t put it past her to have at least driven by more than once.

Meanwhile, Tacker reached out to a number of residents, attempting to dissuade them from reading or commenting on my site. In one instance that stuck out to me, Tacker contacted the employer of one of my readers, stating in part, “It’s really nice to see you supporting Aaron Ochs’ CalCoast Fraud page on Facebook from time to time. You don’t know me. I wonder if your employer knows you are commenting and ‘liking’ things on Facebook that reflect poorly on his [business].” According to the reader, Tacker contacted the employer, but was immediately

rebuked.

Congalton chose to use his radio show as leverage in his correspondence with readers. His operating premise was: supporting Cal Coast Fraud was morally objectionable. If people continued to show their support – whether it was a Facebook “like” or a supportive comment – he reportedly threatened to “call them out” on his radio show. I’d tune into his show after he privately messaged my readers, but he never acted on his threats.

These people were pathetically obsessed with me and my site despite my readership paling in comparison to other more widely-known media outlets. I didn’t think it was necessarily a crime to contact my readers, but there was a prevailing sickness that neither my readers nor I could ignore. It certainly wasn’t my place to tell my readers to report them to law enforcement for stalking and harassment, but the extent of their communication with them was unsettling. They were cyber-bullying people who had no control or influence over my content on an almost-daily basis.

When they pushed, I pushed back harder. When they went after my readers, I posted more content on my site, sometimes multiple times a day – even when I had nothing of substance to say. I didn’t post many full-length articles brimming with intellectual and contextual analysis, instead I developed a knee-jerk reaction to their intimidation. Even if my content was comprised of one-line quips and site-related updates, I wanted to show readers I wasn’t backing down. I didn’t want to show readers the ongoing harassment was getting to me. Yet in hindsight, I was a flailing fish out of water. Looking back at my posts from that period, I could see my psychosis playing itself out, appearing as though I was fighting an invisible force no one else could see – and, frankly, I didn’t want anyone else to see.

I was criticized by some for pushing back constantly, and for good reason. Over time, I developed my own obsession with them. I was obsessed with their obsession. Being obsessed meant I didn’t have the time or patience to take a deep breath, carefully weigh my options and act cautiously, not abundantly. Whatever discretion I exercised before in choosing my battles wisely was thrown to the wayside. Friends would pull me aside, reminding



me to let them go and walk away. At the time, I associated “walking away” with defeat, and I had no intention of being defeated. There was a real and valid concern that I was overplaying my hand.

But every time I tried walking away – or at the very least, take a break from the wall-to-wall coverage – something else happened. There was always some fire I felt I had to put out, especially now that readers were becoming targets. Feeling the constant weight on my shoulders led me to drink for months. Eventually, my moral indignation would shine through and throw me back into sobriety.

In October 2015, I learned the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), a national nonprofit organization dedicated to defending individual rights and liberties, formed a chapter in San Luis Obispo County. The chapter was chaired by Stew Jenkins. The chapter’s steering committee included Velie, who continued to be Jenkins’ client. No other members were publicly disclosed or known around the time Jenkins announced the reopening of the ACLU-SLO chapter.

Jenkins helped re-activate the chapter, which had dissolved more decade earlier after Hank Albert, then-president of the ACLU-SLO, passed away in 2002. Under Albert’s leadership, ACLU-SLO took on a more proactive watchdog role, having advocated on local issues involving the separation of church and state and fighting for the city of San Luis Obispo to approve and hold Mardi Gras parades as a freedom of expression. Though Jenkins promised the newly reformed chapter would cover a broad spectrum of litigation, community education and movement-building, the ACLU-SLO was largely absent from the public conversation, seldom holding public meetings and events.

One of ACLU-SLO’s members was Grover Beach realtor and city councilwoman Debbie Peterson. Peterson was also a contributor to CalCoastNews and once described Velie as a “fearless publisher.” I shared a campaign photo previously posted on her political Facebook page. The photo showed Peterson, a Democrat, appearing at a fundraiser held by the Coalition of Labor, Agriculture and Business (COLAB), a conservative-

leaning nonprofit that actively lobbies for agriculture, business and labor special interests. COLAB was also one of CalCoastNews' largest benefactors, promoting their content regularly in member newsletters and social media.

Peterson reached out to me, objecting to sharing her public photo that anyone could share on Facebook. She accused me of infringing on the photographer's copyright and asked for me to remove the photo. The photographer, who wasn't Peterson, never expressly prohibited the dissemination of his or her work on social media and never reached out to me. I declined to remove the photo, citing the fair use doctrine, which permits limited use of copyright work without first acquiring permission from the copyright holder. Criticism, which provided context for the photo, also applies under the fair use doctrine. My declination triggered a series of harassing and threatening messages from Peterson. After the tense exchange, several of my Facebook posts mentioning her and her involvement with CalCoastNews were reported and removed by Facebook for violating community standards.

Though the ACLU helped preserve free speech rights, ACLU-SLO's membership actively sought to chill them. And evidence suggested ACLU-SLO's membership was being used for marketing and branding opportunities.

I came across an online store CalCoastNews put together. They were selling merchandise that branded themselves as protectors of freedom of the press, featuring quotes without citations and slogans about the "truth," free press and "common sense."

Since he became chair of ACLU-SLO, Jenkins regularly used his ACLU position to appear on the "Dave Congalton Show" and promote his legal practice. There was no evidence indicating the newly reformed ACLU-SLO was doing anything altruistically without some underlying promotional or profit motive.

I rallied readers to file complaints against the ACLU-SLO's organizers. In my complaint, I showed ACLU Southern California, the parent chapter of ACLU-SLO, the alleged "cease and desist" letter Jenkins had his "process server" serve me at my

parents' home. While Southern California chapter members called the letter “disturbing” and “irresponsible,” no further action was taken – at least, no further action I was aware of. My readers revealed they filed their own complaints, but had not heard back. Some of my readers, who were also card-carrying members of ACLU's national organization, claimed they were turned away from applying as a member of ACLU-SLO or their applications were ignored.

ACLU-SLO was a charade, a poor attempt at monopolizing free speech for themselves while promoting their professional endeavors.

I consider myself a free speech advocate. I always believed that free speech, no matter how subjectively tasteless or morally objectionable it may be, is an immovably fundamental right. I looked at CalCoastNews, everything they've said and done, and knew from the onset I had no right to limit or control what they wrote. They sometimes accused me of conspiring to cripple or “kill” their website with my criticism, but I never held that sort of power or believed I did. However, I believed in the right to correct the record by civil statute. CCN was not or should never be exempt from libel suits.

Instead of wallowing in booze, I had to start thinking outside the box. I needed to reshape the conversation taking place by not being the person that was always responding to whatever they were doing. By the end of 2015, I had a crazy idea to do just that.

Phillip McGraw was a popular American television personality. Before he branched out to his own show, “Dr. Phil,” he was known for his various appearances on “The Oprah Winfrey Show” in the late 1990s. When I was younger, I remember watching him act as a mediator between two disputing parties, assessing the underlying social and psychological issues involved, and dropping juicy morsels of Southern wisdom like, “My dad used to say, ‘Boy, don’t let yer alligator mouth overload yer hummin’ bird ass.’” I didn’t always figure out the meaning behind his slogans, but I respected his nonsense, frank assessments of his guests, even if it took about an hour of preachy rhetoric to get to the point.

Dr. Phil drew a sizable audience and the ratings were consistently great. I knew just the right person who wouldn’t hesitate to bask in that attention: Karen Velie. She craved the attention, especially the notoriety. For a self-described “investigative journalist,” Velie was a self-satisfied braggart who wanted nothing more than for CalCoastNews to receive the adulation and accolades she thought she deserved.

I had a vision of Velie sitting in the hot seat, getting grilled by Dr. Phil and witnessing her world crashing down before a live studio audience – with millions watching in televisionland. “Now Ms. Velie,” I imagined the television personality would say to her, pointing his finger at her, staring directly into her wayward, bloodshot eyes, “Why do you publish ‘news’ you know is untrue?” As she stumbles to answer, Dr. Phil would reveal to the audience that he invited several people to the show who were also her victims. Each victim would stand up, tell their story one by one, and explain how Velie’s “reporting” severely upended their personal lives. I imaged Dr. Phil putting Velie into a corner she couldn’t possibly escape from. This would be her day of reckoning.

In late 2015, I spent one evening browsing the website for Dr.

Phil's show and sent them an email with my pitch. Should a compulsive liar be given the responsibility to report news accurately? Should mental illness of a so-called "journalist" be a factor in expressing skepticism or measuring accuracy of a story? As the national "fake news" pandemic began finding a toehold in social media, I thought these questions were perfectly reasonable to ask.

About a month after I made my pitch, I received a call and an email from a producer of the show. According to the producer, Dr. Phil was intrigued by the pitch and was interested in scheduling a taping featuring Velie and I. The producer stressed that Dr. Phil would be fair to both parties, scrutinize both of us equally. I was more than willing to step in front of the cameras, state my case, provide my evidence and come clean with my shortcomings. I had plenty. But more importantly, I was willing to be a catalyst for a discussion I felt was relevant to local and national audiences.

The producer asked me to furnish my evidence of Velie's falsehoods and reporting from other periodicals, so I followed through. After providing what I had, the producer informed me Dr. Phil was personally committed to the show concept. He asked me to provide Velie's phone number and email address, which I did. Sure enough, the producer informed me Velie was an "enthusiastic yes." I was delighted.

When the producer asked what I wanted out of the show, I selfishly told him, "I want my reputation and dignity back." Then I thought about everyone else whose lives were upended by CalCoastNews. I paused for a moment and amended my answer. "I want everyone's story to be told."

Now I needed to go through the motions. I was asked a series of questions by one of Dr. Phil's production assistants, none of which felt particularly invasive. Per their request, I created a video on my smartphone, explaining why I reached out to Dr. Phil. We moved far along to the point that Dr. Phil's producers booked a date for the show and scheduled pre-interviews in Los Angeles, and were in the process of making hotel arrangements. Things were moving quickly.

On Facebook, I teased that I was going to appear on Dr. Phil. Members of the local media reached out to me for additional comment, which I provided. In emails that went out to several of my friends and victims of CalCoastNews, I went into detail about the appearance and encouraged anyone interested to join me in Los Angeles for the taping. Suffice to say, responses to my email was mixed.

One of my friends described the move as a “risky gambit” that could possibly backfire on everyone, as Velie would finally get the national platform she craved so badly – even if her reputation took a hit. After all, for some, bad publicity is good publicity. While she’d garner publicity in the short run, I argued Velie would forever be labeled by the public as “the pathologically lying reporter who got eviscerated by Dr. Phil.” If she wanted attention, let’s give it to her like a parent giving a carton of cigarettes to a child they caught smoking.

Others praised my pursuit, saying they were looking forward to justice being served and wished me the best of luck.

Most of my family thought I went insane – they probably weren't entirely wrong – but eventually warmed up to my wily idea. My resolve was no longer questioned. They knew I was willing to lay down my personal and professional reputation, risk the slings and arrows that could puncture my character, if the end result was holding CCN accountable. I wasn't doing this for attention or notoriety. I was willing to sacrifice everything for the truth to come out.

Then, within days of traveling to Los Angeles for the pre-interviews, the producer gave me the bad news: Velie backed out. Since both disputing parties needed to commit, the show could not go on. I was disappointed but not surprised by her cowardly retreat. Perhaps it was for the best, my friends assured me. Perhaps they were right.

Frustrated with the outcome, I penned a viewpoint on Cal Coast Fraud, detailing the process leading up to Velie backing out. I used the experience to render a controversial conclusion, a personal opinion which I resisted opining as long as I could: Karen Velie was unfit to publish news.

As someone who lived with a disabled relative, I was wary about the discussion of someone being fit or unfit to achieve certain things. I wasn't a doctor, not licensed to make any sort of diagnosis, and not qualified to make a detailed medical evaluation. Then again, I wasn't. I wasn't inside her brain and had no reason to be. I wasn't rattling off symptoms from the comfort of my armchair. Conversation surrounding mental illness should be handled in a careful, sensitive manner. But there were more than enough examples to show that something was terribly wrong with this person.

There were obvious signs of mental impairment that, in my opinion, made her too incapacitated to report news fairly and accurately without prejudice. I honestly believed she couldn't tell the difference between fact or fiction, except if the information fell into her lap or was culled from other news sources. I felt she tried justifying her harassment and unhealthy obsession with others as some self-righteous, self-victimizing journalistic pursuit, when real journalism was undertaken for far more objective, informative or enlightening purposes. Then there were the outbursts, the continuous, petty and rambling harassment of people who dared to exist in the same orbit as me. I believed Velie was a good candidate for psychiatric evaluation and a 72-hour involuntary hold for her safety and everyone else's, considering the grief she laid on so many.

I wasn't going to dwell on the topic. I wanted readers to know my thought process and felt the process of conveying my frustrations publicly was cathartic.

After publishing my column, I checked out CCN and noticed the site was inundated with unflattering articles about supervisor Hill. By then, Velie had published nearly 100 articles about him within the span of two years, with several articles containing personal photos of him that CCN lifted from his Facebook profile. Everything Hill said, everything he did, was considered "news" by CCN.

Since Hill declared his intention to run for re-election in 2016, CCN published a series of salacious allegations, none of which panned out.

In one series of articles, CCN accused him of moonlighting as a paid consultant for a company that's connected to a local developer. The connection, they claimed, was a limited liability corporation set up by Hill for his consulting business that shared the same address and suite number as the developer. However, the LLC's agent service of process used the same address to incorporate 32 other LLCs for other companies, many of whom were not financially tied to the developer. They also claimed Hill worked to change planning in areas where the developer had a vested interest, but the claims were anecdotal with no connected dots. When pressed on Congalton's show to provide evidence that Hill provided consulting work for the developer, Velie claimed she obtained paperwork from professional dumpster divers. That paperwork was never published into the public record.

In another article, CCN claimed Hill's campaign threatened Congalton's station and broadcast license through an anonymous account named "Jenny Herzog." The account reportedly described itself as a "volunteer assigned to Hill's campaign on behalf of a law firm that represents the Democratic Party," but there was no evidence the volunteer ever existed. Though he acknowledged that none of the details provided by that account were factual, article author Dan Blackburn presumed Herzog's alleged connection to Hill's campaign was based on fact. Blackburn claimed they had information that could lead to the exposure of the person behind Jenny Herzog. Blackburn wrote that CCN obtained "numerous screenshots" of the Facebook page and unspecified "additional evidence" that would identify the anonymous perpetrator, yet they were certain enough to assertively link the account to Hill without evidence. Readers falsely accused me of orchestrating the Herzog account.

They also continued to go after Hill's spouse, Dee Torres, accusing her of allegedly providing false testimony that later contributed to a family losing custody of their three children to a household of an alleged child rapist, and that the family's biological daughter was reportedly raped and sodomized for six years by her foster father as a result of Torres' testimony. However, CCN failed to show causation for their disturbing piece



– that Torres' testimony was the sole or leading factor in the family losing custody of their children, including their daughter. CCN insinuated the “false” testimony was payback for the family reportedly refusing to provide 70% of their income to CAPSLO homeless services. The problem with their article series was their deeply flawed and prejudiced presumption of how much power they thought Torres wielded over a Child Welfare Services case.

CCN also covered Torres' fallout with CAPSLO since she filed a lawsuit alleging wrongful and retaliatory termination for voicing concern about the organization's management practices. Torres went on to launch SLO Housing Connection, a nonprofit that CCN claimed “competed” with CAPSLO by providing case management, employment and shelter services. CCN reported that Torres' friend and developer Gary Grossman donated \$50,000 to the organization allegedly in exchange for Hill lobbying members of the San Luis Obispo city council to vote in favor of a land use change that Grossman reportedly needed to develop large parcels near the city airport. The large donation by Grossman was also covered in the *Tribune*, but CCN focused on connecting conspiratorial dots. According to three sources familiar with SLO Housing Connection, Velie reportedly confronted the organizer's treasurer at her office, demanding to see the organization's budget. After Velie's confrontation, the treasurer reportedly expressed concern for her business, closed down her office and publicly distanced herself from Torres.

By December 2015, Hill reported receiving death threats to the SLO County Sheriff's Dept. and reportedly claimed he was receiving protection by the Sheriff's Dept. Hill explained the threats were a clear byproduct of CCN's incendiary allegations about him and his wife. Frustrated with the website's “reporting” on him and his wife, Hill issued a public Facebook post that mentioned CCN as part of the “local hate media” responsible for the “derangement in our culture.”

“These outlets take advantage of the community by lying to them, vilifying people, and encouraging sadistic, paranoid, and violent thinking,” wrote Hill. “This is not being properly addressed. And it needs to be. Because this occurs locally too and

our indifference is part of the problem. It's understandable that people are afraid to challenge the purveyors of local hate, but do we have to wait until we experience something terrible before we do?"

Velie reportedly asked Hill to substantiate his claims about receiving threats in "multiple" emails, but didn't disclose the fact that she was one of the individuals who repeatedly harassed him.

It was clear she was weaponizing her obsession to help unseat Hill. She was creating a culture of deep-seeded contempt that would manifest in harassment and death threats. Sure, as a public official, Hill's words and actions were worthy of a public debate. But they were making a voluminous amount of serious accusations about him and his wife about things they couldn't prove. They weren't putting in an equal amount of time to evaluate the words and actions of his political opponents, nor were they forthcoming about their personal, deeply vindictive bias. Velie's unabashed hatred for Hill – and those she believed were conspiring with him to cripple and destroy her business – was readily obvious but never acknowledged by her like-minded peers. I found the lack of candor terribly disingenuous.

I didn't feel Velie's hatred for Hill had any journalistic value. If anything, it was a testament to her demonstrable lack of fitness as a reporter. It bothered me that people like Dan Blackburn and editor Bill Loving turned a blind eye to this open secret by knowingly publishing her false, conspiratorial claims by the ton and tacitly condoning, even enabling her manic behavior.

Eventually, Velie's derangement would turn into something much bigger.

Prior to the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, Facebook gave their users and pages *carte blanche* to spend money on political advertisements without making legally required disclosures. One could literally could create a website, privatize their domain registration, launch a Facebook page from it and spend money on advertising with an unlimited budget. With that budget, an anonymous user could specify a target audience for ad distribution, whether the ad was a political flyer or a video. It was ridiculously easy to meddle in elections while circumventing state and federal law.

That's exactly what an organization called "Fire Adam Hill" did.

They sounded like another anonymous manifestation with the same stylistic footprint as CalCoastNews' conspiracy theory-tinged bombast. In this iteration, it was an unidentified coalition of "longtime residents and business people who have grown tired of the antics of this embarrassing, self-serving politician."

On their hastily constructed website, Fire Adam Hill (FAH) speculated that if Hill "could identify the backers of this site he would attempt to destroy them. And he will try, most likely using tax funds or money from his campaign coffers. He will enlist the help of his cabal of powerful and unscrupulous friends possessing deep pockets and little in the way of conscience."

It all sounded familiar.

There wasn't any physical evidence linking CalCoastNews to the anonymous group – just a ton of loosely connected dots all swirling around in the same conspiratorial orbit. At first, I publicly speculated who was behind the organization, but it wasn't informed. Later, I came across one of their campaign video ads, which prominently featured a low, gravely voice that sounded eerily familiar to a local radio host, a known Hill detractor.

Dick Mason was a veteran radio newscaster who had a show on KKJL 1400 AM and 106.5 FM. Mason's career spanned over four decades, jumping from station to station reporting news. On his broadcast, Mason regularly referred to CalCoastNews articles when he talked about supervisor Hill. Hill reportedly contacted KKJL station management to complain about Mason's coverage and how it contributed to him receiving harassment and threats. Mason fired back, stating Hill was attacking the messenger, and that it was his prerogative to report on newsworthy matters about the supervisor.

Hill also accused Mason of being the voice behind a FAH video that played dramatic, spine-tingling piano in the background and cycled unflattering images of the supervisor, touched on CalCoastNews' claims, and described him as being "plain dangerous." The ad was paid for by a group called "Concerned Residents of San Luis Obispo County." No local or state campaign filing statements could be found for the nonexistent political organization. Mason denied being the now-infamous voice.

Around the end of December 2015, I uploaded two audio samples from an interview Mason did in 2013 and compared it to FAH's isolated voiceover track, allowing readers to come to their own conclusions. It was clear to my ears that the voice samples were identical. There was no mistaking it, but I wasn't going to throw my conclusion out there right away. Guessing wasn't my specialty, so I waited until my readers provided their verdict: Dick Mason was the voice behind Fire Adam Hill.

Mason's colleague Dave Congalton pushed back against the audio sample comparison, falsely claiming that I asserted Mason was the voice. Congalton and his show producer, Craig Hill, briefly touched on the comparison in a radio segment, denying Mason's involvement, saying the voiceover pronounced certain letters differently. It was bullshit. The more they tried covering for him, the more I suspected Mason was involved in the illegal political campaign.

Shortly after the audio comparison was released, Mason was terminated from KKJL for "budgetary restraints," according to

station management. They declined to elaborate further on Mason's departure. Mason spoke to CalCoastNews, asserting his dismissal was not related to recent discord with supervisor Hill. Yet on Fire Adam Hill's website, organizer(s) said Hill's "direct or surrogate-delivered threats [...] led directly to KKJL's shameful holiday firing of longtime local favorite Dick Mason."

Who were we supposed to believe?

Fire Adam Hill launched their Facebook page in early January 2016. The page garnered early support from Hill's challenger and San Luis Obispo city councilman Dan Carpenter, who shared FAH materials on his campaign page.

Within days of their page launch, FAH used their video in political advertising that appeared on thousands of local Facebook users' news feeds, including mine. The posts were presented as "sponsored." I'd log onto Facebook in the morning and was immediately hit with their ads, which also featured a blog article from *Forbes* magazine columnist Steven Hayward. On his blog, Hayward described Hill as "the most appalling local government official ever" after he took aim at the supervisor for his *New Times* commentary categorizing people susceptible to conspiracy theory-thinking. Hayward had roots in San Luis Obispo County, appearing at fundraisers and speaking engagements hosted by conservative groups critical of Hill, including COLAB and the North County Tea Party.

FAH covered an election debate organized by one of Hill's most ardent adversaries, Kevin P. Rice. Under the name "Integrity SLO," Rice sent mailers to residents in Hill's district, claiming the supervisor confirmed his attendance at his debate. However, Hill had already declined the invitation in a press release he proactively released to the media. Rice spun Hill's declination as a "false rumor." On January 26, 2016, the debate went on with challengers Dan Carpenter and Debbie Peterson. There was an empty seat and a name card for Hill. Rice reportedly told attendees that Hill suddenly canceled his appearance. Rice's charade was ridiculed by the *New Times*.

The vast majority of FAH's advertised political posts were CalCoastNews articles, including articles about Hill's wife. Each

post was distributed to a wide audience, not just residents who lived in Hill's district. The organization's loyalty to CCN would expand into screenshots they took of my Facebook posts, opining I was Hill's "government troll" or "paid troll" who was "harassing and defaming a reporter." The reporter was never identified. Anyone who mentioned Velie by name had their comments removed from their page. They claimed FAH was not created to bash the "excellent reporters" that "exposed" the supervisor. They called CCN an "accredited news agency" and went apoplectic when commenters described the website as a "blog."

"We are not a blog!" the organizers exclaimed. "*We*?"

The page was not only political, but deeply personal in nature. FAH meticulously cataloged screenshots of my readers, noted their involvement on my page, discussed their employment status, and routinely notified their employers about their alleged status as one of Hill's "trolls" through Facebook. They also discussed my readers' marital status, known relationships, known personal and business addresses, and their suspected alliances with Hill. Organizers routinely threatened to report my readers to local law enforcement, the district attorney, FBI and other national intelligence agencies.

In February 2016, Fire Adam Hill launched another advertising campaign, this time about me. Organizers linked readers to CalCoastNews' 2015 article about me being a "government troll." They also falsely accused me of being "removed" from Morro Bay's recreation & parks commission; that I was no longer considered for president-elect of Eco Rotary; that I was under criminal investigation by law enforcement; and that my activity had been "documented" for two years since I left *Information Press*. They published wanted posters featuring my personal photos, falsely accusing me of "trolling on the Internet for Team Adam Hill." The campaign resulted in various physical and death threats from county residents. For good measure, they made a wanted poster for my father.

Adding to the fire was Peggy Pavek, the former family friend and septuagenarian from Los Osos. After I blocked her and two Facebook profiles she created under the same name from my page,

Pavek regularly took screenshots of my page, urging readers as a frequent contributor to FAH to “get rid of” me and my family. Pavek occasionally shared private conversations she had with the page organizers. After my family expressed concern that Pavek was inciting violence, I obtained several screenshots of her posts and comments. She wrote that I should be “in the ground” and someone should “put an end” to my family, whom she attacked months earlier in her *Bay News* viewpoint. After my family reported her harassing and threatening comments to Facebook, Pavek began referring to my family by their initials. In comments she made to a retired law enforcement official, Pavek expressed the desire for law enforcement to break my neck. In her wild and threatening rants, Pavek often fantasized about inflicting physical violence and intertwined these fantasies with tidbits about my personal life.

While she didn't personally direct these messages to me, Pavek created a sense of urgency in her remarks like she was actively being victimized by me and was hoping for someone to physically teach me a lesson. I felt like I was in *The Twilight Zone*, reading these disturbing messages from someone my family once trusted to bring into our home, now speaking to trolls who flooded my Facebook with harassing messages.

Pavek also shared a number of wild, false allegations about me, shared personal photos of ours, and referred to my father and I as “the devil and the devil's disciple.”

Knowing she was an elderly person, I made a careful and conscious decision to fire back. I publicized various screenshots of her comments on Cal Coast Fraud for my readers to see. Because she shared a number of screenshots of posts on my page, I knew she was actively viewing my posts. Angered by my decision to publish her comments, Pavek created a new Facebook account after I blocked her from commenting on the page. I blocked her again. When she persisted, I lit into Pavek with toxic levels of savage mockery. I wanted her to stop inciting hatred, contempt and possible violence against my family. If it took publicly shaming her, that's what I was going to do.

Privately, I reached out to her friends, relatives, her pastor –

anyone would know her well enough to intervene, urging them to talk some sense into her. But there was nothing they could do. She was too far gone. According to her daughter, Pavek alienated herself from many of her close friends because of her behavior and was practically inapproachable.

I contacted law enforcement about Pavek's disturbing comments. A deputy perused several pages of her comments, reading them stoically before showing signs of disbelief. The deputy was alarmed enough to suggest I file a civil harassment order. However, I was less concerned about the great-grandmother and more concerned about to whom she was appealing her case against me.

One of those shocktroops was Arroyo Grande resident Tory Rand, who shared homoerotic fantasies about me – some of which involved rape and incest – with Pavek. In late 2015, Rand created a Facebook page called “Aaron Ochs – Nambla President – Stop this Pedophile.” Rand shared public posts from my personal Facebook page and published sexually graphic allegations. After I shared screenshots of his nauseatingly libelous page to readers, Rand deleted it. Nevertheless, public scrutiny didn't stop Rand from publicly speculating that I was in a sexual relationship with local developer Gary Grossman on Fire Adam Hill.

After Rand made his comments, Arroyo Grande resident Dane Senser appeared before the County Board of Supervisors to personally attack me. Senser shared a stock photo of a man wearing a black ski mask, wearing headphones, posing menacingly in front of a computer. He claimed the photo, which he compared to a member of an Islamic terrorist group, was me. Senser falsely claimed that I threatened to cut his head off. He read from a prepared speech, his hands shaking, and lips quivering with stuttered words. He falsely accused me of being in a relationship with Grossman. Following his bizarre speech, Senser left the chambers with a deputy following him.

CalCoastNews summarized Senser's speech by being critical of Hill for “using unscrupulous intermediaries to intimidate him not to speak during public comment.” They did not investigate



the various allegations nor did they link to my published denial on the *Tribune*.

The people I mentioned in my piece were linked to Karen Velie as Facebook friends.

The cyber-harassment I received was extensive and relentless. For the most part, there was absolutely nothing I could do about it. We live in a free country. We see and hear things that one would normally object to, but such expression is protected. The problem, as I see it, is how free speech is sometimes used to solely determine what people can get away with, as opposed to using that right to have a civil conversation. Senser's comments perfectly epitomized the issues I often wrote about on my site, especially the degradation of public comment, which went from a discussion about the public process to a discussion about personalities and personal grievances with private citizens.

Despite their impassioned, rambling speeches, conspiracy theory allegations and political campaigning, I was still a private citizen who wrote about public issues. I figured there would be blowback for addressing certain controversial individuals in the community, but not to this level. This was extraordinary.

Then I realized something. Their heavy scrutiny of me spoke to their immeasurable, collective hatred for supervisor Hill and liberalism in general. The root of this hatred literally stemmed from Velie's near-daily obsession with the supervisor, her repetitive dwelling over his alleged conflicts and corruption, and her belief that anyone and everyone who vocally supported Hill was part of some elaborate conspiracy to shut her website down. I couldn't prove Velie was behind Fire Adam Hill, but the motive, resources and familiar obsessions were there.

In one video uploaded to YouTube by Fire Adam Hill, a voiceover claimed that "Team Adam Hill" retaliated against critics, critics' families and friends, reporters, radio personalities, even "retired folks." The video featured a screenshot of Cal Coast Fraud, specifically my column titled, "Explaining the Unexplained." The article caption read, "How else can I explain the recent rash of extremely strange attacks from people closely associated with CalCoastNews – attacks that could only come

from obviously disturbed people who are pushed, prodded and exploited to exhibit their worst in public?”

After being repeatedly attacked by FAH, Dee Torres appeared to refute the group on their page. She erroneously stated that I used to “blog” for CalCoastNews to which they replied, “Aaron Ochs never blogged for us, that is a flat out lie.” Hill and I – by now we were comparing notes on a fairly regular basis – interpreted the response as an accidental admission that CCN was directly involved with the organization.

“Velie & Co, you are not fooling anyone with this bunk,” wrote Hill on FAH. “You can't even stay anonymous (which is illegal anyway). You'd be better off simply donating this money to Dan Carpenter.”

The organizers responded to Hill, stating they were spending thousands of dollars in political campaign advertising to unseat the supervisor. Their admission raised a legal issue. According to the California Fair Political Practices Commission, an independent expenditure committee must file with the state if they spend over \$1,000 in independent expenditures – supporting or opposing a California candidate – per year. I used their admission to file a complaint with the FPPC.

The complaint made headlines in the *Tribune*. Reporter Kaytlyn Leslie reached out to an unidentified representative of the organization who denied making independent expenditures to back a California candidate, adding they were merely sharing news articles on Facebook as a private citizen. This contradicted all their professionally-edited campaign videos, which credited the videos as paid for by “Concerned Citizens of SLO County.”

Meanwhile, I received a number of disturbing messages from a Facebook user named “Gary Russell.” Initially, “Russell” was friendly on the Cal Coast Fraud page – that is, until I touched on Velie's mental health. From that point on, “Russell” discussed showing up at my parents' house and “taking [me] down.” This “Russell” person, who claimed to be a Morro Bay resident who worked as an internal auditor for SLO County, challenged me to a physical confrontation on the *Tribune* website. This account, which I believed to be anonymous, occasionally interacted with

Pavek. The camaraderie between the two led me to suspect they knew each other.

I called County Human Resources to verify his identity. No one named “Gary Russell” worked for the county. I looked up records for anyone named “Gary Russell” who lived in Morro Bay. No matches. Finally, I took the profile photo that “Russell” shared of an unidentified male and ran an image search on Google. I found a match. Turned out the real Gary Russell was a British freelance writer, producer and former child actor who lived in Australia. I reached out to an Australian animation company that he worked for and they confirmed the real Russell never lived in Morro Bay. The “Gary Russell” who harassed me was impersonating a real person.

Mr. Russell was known in the fandom of popular British television series *Doctor Who*. He was editor of *Doctor Who* magazine between 1992 and 1995. Since then, he served as producer for the show’s licensed audio dramas and wrote several *Doctor Who* spin-off novels. Karen Velie’s daughter, Summer, posted links to Mr. Russell’s *Doctor Who* work on her Facebook profile in 2012 along with posts related to the series. Shortly after I publicly revealed the research I’d done in tracking “Russell” down, Summer’s post was removed along with all references to anonymous accounts she was linked to – some of which were used to personally harass me online.

Tracking down anonymous accounts became a pastime. Working under the presumption they were all linked to Velie to some degree, I uncovered two Facebook profiles that administrated the Fire Adam Hill 2016 Facebook page. One account, “Thomas Andrews,” listed Pavek as his only Facebook friend. The account published a number of stock photos taken from the Internet. “Thomas” claimed to be an Arroyo Grande resident, yet no records showed anyone with that name lived there.

The second account, “Tracy Thompson,” was also listed as an Arroyo Grande resident, yet no records verified her existence. “Thompson” was involved in the creation of three separate pages: “Adam Hill Videos,” “Arrest Adam Hill” and “No Adam Hill for

SLO.” Each page shared graphics of wanted posters, showcasing personal photos of my father, Hill and some of his supporters. The wanted posters, which included a photo of a police badge from the City of San Luis Obispo, urged residents to call the police to report “trolling” by “Team Adam Hill.” The posters were then shared on the Fire Adam Hill page and turned into political ads. I contacted the San Luis Obispo Police Dept. about the posters, which they denied being involved with. The city’s legal counsel issued a demand to Fire Adam Hill to remove the badge, and they did.

“Thompson” would produce FAH’s own set of videos under the YouTube channel “InHonorOfAaron.” Aaron was in reference to Aaron Wynn, a witness who worked for Charles Tenborg. CalCoastNews explained to readers that Wynn’s testimony would be part of Tenborg’s defamation case. Wynn claimed Tenborg dumped waste in fields, rather than at a hazardous waste facility. Wynn uploaded a rambling video on YouTube of him walking around a part of the Cold Canyon Landfill, claiming he submitted soil samples for testing to determine the existence of hazardous chemicals. After he made the videos, Wynn committed suicide. “Thompson” and “Andrews” both claimed he was actually murdered, thereby preventing him from testifying at their defamation trial.

In late 2016, CalCoastNews stoked the Wynn conspiracy theory in a Facebook ad, showing a woman with her mouth covered by someone else’s hand. Describing Tenborg’s lawsuit against them as “pernicious,” they wrote, “An employee of a SLO County hazardous waste hauler videotaped and reported the wrongful dumping of PG&E waste, he then died from a gunshot wound.” The post didn’t reveal the official cause of death was suicide. The ad clearly insinuated Wynn was murdered for speaking out.

Videos uploaded by “InHonorOfAaron” included statements by Hill without context, public comments made by Dick Mason claiming he was harassed by Hill, County supervisor Lynn Compton advising Hill to not chastise members of the public, portions of Dane Senser’s bizarre speech about me, and portions

of comments I made before the County Board of Supervisors in 2015. Fire Adam Hill shared this video and advertised it on Facebook as a “sponsored” post. The video featured my face as their thumbnail image.

Troubled with the research I was publicly disclosing about the anonymous behind Fire Adam Hill, “Thompson” threatened to have her husband show up at supervisor Hill’s house and my parents’ house “to discuss why you are stalking me.” Before I blocked “Thompson,” the account flooded my Facebook page with ambiguous threats like, “I am coming to get you, Team Adam Hill.”

Both “Andrews” and “Thompson” were active on CalCoastNews as “Thomas A.” and “Tracy,” sharing conspiracy theories pertaining to Hill and the defamation lawsuit. They came up with the conspiracy theory that supervisor Hill was working with Tenborg by orchestrating the lawsuit behind the scenes with the intent to shut down CCN. They offered no proof, just conjecture with some name associations tossed into their word salad. Of course they mentioned me as being part of this elaborate conspiracy.

By then, when my name was typed into a search engine, the only results available were several pages of wildly imaginative but false allegations, whether posted on Facebook by Fire Adam Hill or CalCoastNews. The content and methodologies used were identical.

If I was going to move forward with my life, I had to develop a thicker skin. This was politics. It wasn’t the kind of politics I originally expected to endure as a private citizen, but now I had to find a way of dealing with it. I was slowly getting accustomed to the “new normal.” All I could hope for was that one day, the sickness would stop spreading.

**D**an Blackburn was silent throughout the ordeal. Neither he nor Velie investigated Fire Adam Hill or the various conspiratorial claims they were spreading with their articles in tow. I figured their long and deafening silence was an act of complicity.

But in April 2016, that all changed.

Blackburn published a long and rambling editorial about supervisor Hill, his alleged “toadies” and the Internet. He started his editorial with a sensitive topic: Velie’s deceased daughter. He wrote about a “rumor” floating around that Velie was being investigated for her daughter’s death, which he claimed was promulgated through an unspecified online account associated with Hill. He claimed “meanness” invoking Velie’s daughter was spread through sites promoted by Hill. Then he segued into a select list of CCN’s “accomplishments” – all debatable.

He went on with his usual trope about Hill “frequently us[ing] his office to threaten CalCoastNews advertisers who have pending projects with the county, thereby deflecting vital reporting by trying to choke off the news source’s revenue stream.” Then he wrote about unnamed reporters having their phone numbers and addresses posted online; homes vandalized; a family dog poisoned; and mutilated cats left on porches. Blackburn claimed Velie moved three times in the last four years because a “few of [Hill’s] thugs continue to act on [his] coaxing.” His words were directly juxtaposed with my photo.

The implication? I was involved in this harassment. And Velie said as much to my former employer.

Following “several anonymous” Craigslist ads seeking to pay a blogger to “change public opinion” in SLO County, Blackburn claimed that my site “immediately emerged” from this appeal – perhaps “the only website in the world devoted to minute-by-minute critiques of a single news outlet.” He even questioned

whether my criticism was actually written by me.

The implication? Blackburn insinuated that in 2014 I responded to a Craigslist ad and was hired by the ad poster to criticize CalCoastNews. However, he left out the fact that I was critical of their coverage years earlier and overwhelming physical evidence indicated that.

Blackburn, however, claimed the website was provided with evidence that their anti-Hill articles, including ones claiming he was moonlighting as a “paid advocate” for a local developer, prompted internal company discussions of hiring “a hit man” to “terminate” the “reporting” and the “reporter.”

Blackburn commented about one of my readers who called Velie a misogynistic slur on my site. He stated I reportedly “allowed” comments like that, and that the reader reportedly posted “several threats” against Velie and Hill’s opponent, Dan Carpenter, which resulted in law enforcement being notified.

Blackburn did not specifically address the issues with my work, but he didn’t have to. He carefully crafted the perception in readers’ minds that I was surreptitiously involved with a lot of bad people doing underhanded things. To everyone who exhibited even the smallest modicum of journalistic integrity, Blackburn’s editorial was a hysterical, self-serving mess. But to his readers, it was a righteous exposé of Hill and his alleged cabal of “thugs,” who were spending every waking hour trying to make Velie’s life miserable because they were paid and coaxed into doing so.

I could understand Velie coming up with that nonsense, but Blackburn? He was the veteran reporter on their team, the “investigative journalist” with decades of experience. Why was he resorting to making things up? I didn’t recall him asking me whether or not I was hired to criticize CCN. So much for exercising due diligence.

Blackburn used his editorial to make a guest appearance on Congalton’s show. I remember listening to the guest segment in the car as my father and I drove to a birthday party for one of supervisor Hill’s big donors, builder Gary Grossman. Though I was accused in being in a relationship with Grossman, I never

actually met him, although we had mutual acquaintances. I listened to Blackburn for about an hour personally tear into Hill, my father and I and people he labeled as Hill's associates, talking about how misogynistic we were, about how I spent "days hunched in front of a computer," criticizing "every single word" they published, allegedly because I was paid to.

The problem I had was Blackburn's insistence that I was casting aspersions on Velie with regard to her daughter's death, and that I was spreading a vile rumor that Velie either murdered her daughter or was investigated for her untimely death. It infuriated me that Blackburn and Velie were exploiting a young woman's tragedy to personally go after me, especially when I had absolutely nothing to do with this "rumor." This specific allegation was used as a bludgeoning tool against my reputation several times before. Every time they brought it up, I received death threats. I was considered by their gullible readers to be one of the most callous, heartless people to have ever resided in the county, and this callousness was intricately linked to a county supervisor they clearly despised with every fiber of their being.

I arrived at Grossman's party with a fixed, furrowed brow, my face red. I was visibly angry and gritted my teeth as I walked into his home. I sat on Grossman's couch, combing my hair back with my fingers, looking down at his floor, trying to distract myself. After a short while, I slowly got up, wandered around the room and socialized with guests. It turned out many of the guests I spoke to had listened to Congalton's segment with Blackburn and already read his CCN editorial. I was reassured the frustration would come to pass. Maybe a few tasty *hors d'oeuvres* and a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon wine would help ease my tension.

The birthday party served as a fundraiser for Hill's re-election campaign. As he delivered a short speech with his wife by his side, I retreated to a small dining area in the house where an assortment of food was laid out on a table. Cher's "The Beat Goes On" was playing in the background as I rummaged for appetizers. A middle-aged woman appeared at the food table, staring intensely at me as I put food on my plate. I never met the woman before, but she appeared to recognize me. With an empty plate in her



hand, she moved closer without saying a word. I decided to wrap up my gluttonous expedition and head back to the party.

I wandered outside to gaze at panoramic, scenic views of the Pacific Ocean and talk with friends. The woman appeared again, this time only inches away from me while I had a conversation with a party-goer. She was clearly eavesdropping. Feeling like I was being followed, I walked back inside and returned to the living room. She followed me up the stairs and ducked around the corner to another room as she entered through one of the back doors. I could see her peeking at me as I had a conversation with supervisor Hill. She was acting like she was on some espionage mission collecting intel.

I decided to follow her back, but I wasn't going to be stealthy. I wanted to ask her, "What's your problem? Why are you stalking me?" After making a beeline straight to her, she skipped quickly across the floor and scrambled to the front door. My father and I left the party, followed her out to her car. She immediately hopped into her car, turned the ignition, hit the gas and floored it through Shell Beach. We tried catching up to her, but she sped away.

Within a span of 48 hours, I was accused of being paid by a county supervisor and coaxed into poisoning and mutilating pets, accused by Blackburn on a popular radio show of spreading rumors about Velie murdering her daughter, and stalked around someone's house during a birthday party. Next I was included in a report the woman published about the birthday party on CalCoastNews. The woman was a San Luis Obispo resident named April "A.J." Dury. Dury was a friend of Julie Tacker.

Acting on the advice of my attorney, I decided to contact the regional vice president for station owner El Dorado Broadcasters and then-general manager of KVEC, Ron Roy, to correct the many erroneous claims told by Congalton and Blackburn. My conversation with Roy was cordial. He sounded eerily calm, like he'd received complaints about the radio host at least a hundred times before.

"Why does Congalton keep telling the same false claim over and over again – even after I've corrected him?" I asked. I was

referring to the false claim that I was paid by Hill to criticize CalCoastNews.

“Because he’s giving what his listeners want,” Roy replied. “He’s a shock jock.”

“Why is a ‘shock jock’ hosting a show called ‘Hometown Radio’?”

“He likes to get a rise out of people who tune into his show late.”

“Are you implying that he *knows* he’s not being truthful?”

“Well, yeah – I mean, he *knows*.” Now the overly hostile behavior made sense. It was an act.

“I’d like to make a correction, even though he might –”

“Throw it back in your face? I can’t make any guarantees he’ll correct himself, Aaron.”

I told him how distasteful I thought it was to throw out serious allegations like I allegedly accused a grieving mother of murdering her child or somehow being involved in animal cruelty. “Saying shit like that is going to get me killed,” I told him.

“Best I can do is relay the message,” he said. “Again, no guarantees.”

I turned into Congalton’s show the next time Blackburn was brought onto his show. Congalton reluctantly issued a tepid correction that I was not paid by Hill. Blackburn chuckled a bit and referred back to his editorial, reiterating that I demonstrated a lack of acuity.

I couldn’t keep track of all the lies being written and uttered. My mind – consumed with an obsession to provide the counterpoint, triggered by the cyber-bullying and constant invasion of my personal life – felt permanently ablaze with thoughts that went sideways and desires going nowhere. Nobody knew the mental strain I was experiencing or the sleepless nights I spent thinking about what could happen next. I was encouraged by friends to walk away from them and pretend the defamers didn’t exist. Yet Cal Coast Fraud’s popularity expanded a fledgling, quirky Facebook page into a news-driven media

watchdog website inhibited only by its juvenile name.

The *Tribune's* Kaytlyn Leslie wrote about the acrimony in the District 3 race. Leslie wrote about my site and the still-anonymous Fire Adam Hill. The article mentioned FAH's obsession with me and my readers – the wanted posters, and attacks on candidates' families and their supporters' families. All the candidates involved in the District 3 supervisor race – Adam Hill, Dan Carpenter and Debbie Peterson – denied having anything to do with the online battles being waged and condemned the inappropriate behavior between our warring factions.

“There’s nothing wrong with pointing out the characteristics of an individual,” Carpenter told the *Tribune*. “But going after them personally, I don’t want my supporters doing that.” Carpenter regularly interacted with Fire Adam Hill organizers on his campaign page. Carpenter's quote appeared shortly after his campaign mocked Hill's wife on their Facebook page.

The article did not deter FAH from their deeply personal and vindictive campaign. Shortly after Blackburn's article was published, they circulated a photo of my face next to a burning house. The top of the image read, “Aaron Ochs – Report Adam Hill trolls,” and the caption read, “They thought the dead animals I left on their doorstep were gifts. They were warnings.” Pavек disseminated the graphic on Facebook, falsely claiming I created it. To my dismay, the graphic was eventually seen by my friends and professional colleagues. I shared the post with my readers, showing yet another example of cyber-harassment. By then, the graphic became incorporated into a political advertising campaign by FAH. I tried to report the graphic and related posts to Facebook, but the social media giant took no action.

By the mid-2016, it all taking a toll on me. I was experiencing mental health issues. Though I firmly believed in myself and was able to cultivate a support network, I was constantly paranoid. There was a real fear that the end-result of these false allegations, conspiracy theory claims and harassment would be bodily harm. There were people who literally yearned for me to endure physical abuse and mayhem. Others wanted me arrested, convicted and thrown into prison for challenging CalCoastNews and holding

## DEFAMERS

some of their most virulent supporters to account. Normally, I wasn't a fearful person. But after years of being bombarded with drama, I felt obligated to look over my shoulder once every two minutes while I was out in public.

I found myself having these abnormally elevated moods like I was ready to take on the world one moment and have anxiety attacks the next. The emotional rollercoaster ride would last throughout the day and into the night. There were nights I didn't sleep. I would curse the sun for rising before I even *considered* sleeping. I would be laying in bed with my eyes closed with a random assortment of thoughts rapidly looping. Staying awake and keeping my eyes open was the lesser poison, but I eventually became an insomniac.

The only viable solution was to withdraw from the controversy and focus on improving my personal life one step at a time.

## 31

They were quiet for a while. *Finally.*

Against all odds, I was hired for a job in August 2016. I was relieved knowing I *could* be hired in spite of the constant barrage of defamatory material that clogged the search engine results for anyone running a background check on me. I felt like I effectively shattered one of Velie's favorite talking points: that I was "unemployable."

There was hope.

It wasn't a job I expected to be a part of for long, but it was certainly a step in the right direction.

In preparation for the job, I transitioned from Cal Coast Fraud to a political news-opinion hybrid platform I created called SLO Truth. This transition was meant to broaden my focus, expand my target demographic and improve the modulation in my editorial. I had to have an answer when potential employers asked me if I had any recent writing samples to share. Now everything I put out there on the Internet had to be more palatable than the work I was accustomed to writing – or falsely accused of writing.

It was clear that my constantly pointed, repetitive and increasingly aggressive criticism was not resonating with readers. My aggressiveness also kept a bull's-eye on my back with the anonymous trollers. In my attempt to defend myself, I became wild-eyed and overzealous in my execution, not fully taking into account how others perceived my actions. Yet my actions became easier to understand for people who've endured similar cyber-harassment from the same people, but that demographic was extremely limited. The only choice I had was to make a change.

To help establish a modicum of normalcy, I worked a second job as principal of a freelance marketing business. Ochs Public Relations worked with several local clients in the restaurant and hospitality industry, a refreshing far cry from the hustle and bustle of politics. I didn't want my professional career to be

completely dominated with politics, and politics wasn't exactly a lucrative expertise, either. However, SLO Truth was part of the Ochs Public Relations' publishing division.

Instead of being bombarded with death threats and sensationalized smears, I was thumbing through training manuals, processing client tasks at breakneck speed and managing subordinates in the retail industry. I was dressed in a work uniform – tucked blue shirt, black pants and a cheesy smile affixed to my face. Beneath the facade, I quickly began to despise my new job, but at least it was better than being a target. All I wanted was a distraction.

One afternoon while I was at work, my phone rang two times just seconds before my 15-minute break expired. I saw my father's caller ID and answered.

"I didn't want to tell you this while you're at work, but Mike Brennler showed up at the house again," he said.

"Oh my God. What did he say? What did he do?"

"He said he was looking for you and asked where you were. I told him, 'That's none of your fucking business.' He basically demanded I reveal where you are, where you live, where you work, saying he was going to keep showing up here if I didn't show tell him. I didn't tell him you lived in the front house. He's fucking crazy. I said to him, 'What do you want with Aaron?' and he told me something like, 'I can't tell you that, only him. I just want to know where he is.'" Then he threatened to knock on our neighbors' doors to ask them about you.

"If you don't tell me where he is, I'm going to ask your neighbors," he reportedly yelled to Ed, then walked away from the house into the street and began walking toward the nearest neighbor's house.

"That's harassment!" Ed yelled back.

"No, it isn't!" he bellowed – it echoed up and down the street. "I can do whatever I want!"

I previously warned Brennler to leave my parents alone. Now I considered filing against a restraining order against him, now that he was no longer specifying what he wanted from me.

I was in the break room, feeling overwhelming dread and a sense of hopelessness due to not being close to home. I wasn't sure what would happen next and what my options were, but one thing was certain: I was livid. I had four hours to go before the end of my shift, which would feel a lot longer now with this on my mind.

A short while later that day, I was on my lunch break, seated inside a restaurant located next door to my employer. As I reached the halfway point in finishing my lunch, I received a call. It was Brennler. My heart skipped a beat.

Because I was in a seething rage, I could only remember pieces of the conversation we had. I remember him telling me that he arrived at my parents' house and quickly realized my father was being uncooperative. Then he accused me of avoiding process service, but failed to disclose what he was serving me with. I told him I was at work, reminded him of my warning and threatened to call the police. He pressed me for my home address. That's when I lied to him, told him I lived somewhere else. When he asked for my address again, I refused to answer, stating I didn't want to be stalked by him or his psychotic client.

From there, the phone call got heated. The restaurant, which was crowded due to the lunch rush, went completely silent once I raised my voice and yelled at him with every profane expression imaginable. Everyone stared at me, looking worried. I paused for a moment to look around, noticed the waitresses behind the bar counter looking frightened. I calmly ended the call by telling him to meet me inside a grocery store close to my house, where there were plenty of witnesses to any potential harassment or physical altercation.

Hours later, I arrived at the grocery store on time and sat in a small dining area near their Starbucks kiosk. Brennler arrived, served me with a document, asked if I had any questions and left without further incident.

The document was a subpoena to testify as a witness for CalCoastNews in a deposition. The deposition was for their upcoming defamation trial, which I wasn't involved in – or to be more specific, a case I shouldn't be involved in. The website

provided no explanation or documentation indicating how I was involved or why they wanted my testimony. Right away, I believed this was flagrant abuse of the legal process, an unlawful fishing expedition.

So I contacted Velie's attorney, David Vogel, to find out the purpose of the subpoena. Vogel, who Tacker and CalCoastNews helped ouster as a board director for the Los Osos Community Services District, was involved in a murder case that I had investigated one year earlier.

In 2015, Morro Bay resident Benjamin Terra was murdered by Paso Robles resident Nicole Luxor after they engaged in a heated dispute about a medical marijuana operation they both ran together at her residence. Vogel represented Luxor, who faced one count of premeditated murder for Terra's shooting death and five counts of attempted murder for shots she allegedly fired at officers during the nine-hour standoff. Karen Velie exclusively alleged Terra struck Luxor – that is, according to “unnamed sources” that she refused to divulge. However, the alleged sources' claims did not line up with media and police reports about the incident. Terra's family and friends (I was one of them) were devastated by the article, which appeared to justify his brutal and untimely death as self-defense. After Luxor passed away in 2016, Vogel was quoted in the *Tribune* as saying he was planning to show Luxor was acting in self-defense.

Vogel called me back and informed me that Velie alleged I was a “co-conspirator” in Tenborg's case. I asked Vogel to provide evidence, but he refused, stating that Velie had the right to depose anyone she personally believed was a witness. I couldn't understand how or why I would be a “co-conspirator” to a personal defamation case, given I wasn't mentioned in the article they were being sued over. Then I realized... Velie's “co-conspirator” line: she was going to use her conspiracy theory as a defense, asserting that I worked with Tenborg, Hill and others to shut down her website through a lawsuit CalCoastNews described as “pernicious.”

I also expressed to him security concerns about the deposition, given I'd likely be in the same room with Velie, a person who



threatened my family. Then I brought up the fact that Velie had constantly lied about my words and actions to boost her case. He declined to comment, stating he was only doing what he was told. I wasn't getting anywhere with Vogel.

Usually, I wasn't one to run from anything or anyone, but I was tired and angry. My family was tired and terrified of the harassment. There had been a slow evolution of harassment, almost as if Velie was constantly trying to improve on the various intimidation tactics she'd tried before, escalating the situation into thermonuclear psychological warfare. It was almost like she was constantly racking her brain, trying to figure out ways to chill my criticism by any means necessary.

I reached out to a number of attorneys about the deposition subpoena. Because of the volatile nature of the harassment and threats – whether Velie was the source or her supporters were, anonymous trolls or not – I became acquainted with the local legal community. The attorneys I consulted were keenly aware of the drama and were largely supportive. As time went on, there was a growing consensus for me to move forward with the deposition. The basic reason was: if I didn't have anything to hide, what should I be afraid of? But “hiding” was never the issue. My father told me to go before the judge and seek to quash the subpoena, but after long and careful consideration I decided to do it.

One of the people I confided in about CCN was since-retired *Tribune* reporter and CCN critic Bob Cuddy, who now wrote an occasional column for *New Times*. Cuddy asked me to accompany him for an event hosted by ACLU-SLO. I anticipated seeing the same people that would likely show up at my deposition because they had co-opted the local, revived ACLU chapter. I knew I would face them sooner or later. Going to the event would be a test of my resolve, to see whether or not I could face them without feeling fearful. I decided to go, knowing I'd have a friend with me at least – a familiar face in a crowd of ironically pious civil liberty advocates.

On September 17, 2016. I arrived at the event with my father, who wanted to be a witness to anything that might go awry. He

calmly sat under a shady tree, watching me from a safe distance as I wandered into the lion's den. ACLU-SLO was hosting an event in San Luis Obispo called "Constitution Day," which was meant to celebrate the anniversary of the 12 state delegations' unanimous vote to approve the Constitution. The event provided BBQ at a local park and offered information about their organization.

When Cuddy arrived, I waved and walked up to him. He introduced me to his wife. The closer I got to the gathering, the more anxious I felt. I nervously joked about them poisoning my hot dog at the BBQ. The joke was overheard by John Clemons, a member of ACLU-SLO and then-Chief Operator of South SLO County Sanitation District's wastewater plant. At the time, CCN reported that Clemons, an African-American, had been reportedly hit with a barrage of racist messages and emails. The website published coverage favorable to Clemons, who was at the same the subject of controversy over alleged job performance issues.

Cuddy and I reluctantly approached Stew Jenkins, who greeted everyone attending the event. Cuddy shook hands with Jenkins, who looked at me in mid-shake with his eagle-like scowl. When I introduced myself and extended my hand, Jenkins said, "I know who you are. I won't shake your hand because you're a snot."

"So much for civility," I quipped. Civility was an issue Jenkins often publicly discussed, but his sour disposition at the event underscored the blatant hypocrisy. Because of his harsh demeanor, I wanted nothing more than to confront him and ask him why the self-proclaimed "free speech advocate" previously threatened me for expressing verifiably accurate statements and truthful opinions about his client. I decided to walk away from Jenkins, believing it would be in my best interest not to make a scene.

Children were running around in the grass, circling around the BBQ grill and the information table. The event drew a small crowd of familiars: Debbie Peterson, Dan Carpenter and a few faces I recognized but couldn't place their names. I had no intention of interacting with any of them and had no reason to. Julie Tacker, who sat at a table behind me, immediately caught

my eye. I remember silently staring her down, silently conjuring a mixture of emotions. I had a lot to say, but the words wouldn't come out.

This was a person who spent a considerable amount of time trying to get me arrested for civilly expressed but critical Facebook posts. This was a person who repeatedly lied about reporting me to the police for harassment and stalking on CalCoastNews, despite law enforcement's steadfast non-response to her allegations.

*How dare you show your face at an event sponsored by an organization that purportedly defends and preserves individual rights and liberties,* I thought.

The “Constitution Day” event started with Jenkins waxing nostalgia about the U.S. Constitution, educating mostly adults – his friends, close associates and elderly parents – about the document's historical and legal significance. This was part of a lengthy, self-indulgent rant that preached to the choir of his core political base. His unremarkable speech served no greater purpose than to do what was minimally necessary for his chapter to exist.

Then he invited Karen Velie to stand beside him and talk about the free press, which he claimed Velie rigorously advocated for. I expected a rimshot to wrap up the joke. Cuddy, who sat beside me, let out an exasperated sigh. Velie ended up boasting about her accomplishments as a “fearless publisher” to a group of people who received favorable, often flowery news coverage from her. Like Jenkins, Velie appeared to be currying favor with her base, namely individuals whose political campaigns she promoted with her “reporting” and received advertising dollars from.

I could only handle so much irony before I quietly left.

After their event, I published a short column about my experiences on SLO Truth. It was, in retrospect, a successful experiment for me, one I relied on to carry me through to my deposition. I was able to maintain my composure among people I considered hostile. This gave me the confidence to face them.

SLO Truth's popularity rose significantly heading into my deposition. I was writing about a circus with elephant loads of drama and readers were morbidly intrigued. Because there was a lot of context to unravel in these stories, I prepared investigative dossiers on public figures associated with CalCoastNews and their network of deceit. Originally, I used these dossiers as personal reference I could draw from when necessary. In mid-2016, I decided to make these dossiers and relevant documentation public.

I released my library of documentation on individuals and groups, including Kevin P. Rice (his independent expenditure committee IntegritySLO) and Michael Brown (Coalition of Labor, Agriculture & Business). There was a lot of back story about each of them that was never compiled in one place before. I wanted readers to know more information about public figures in the community who either wielded a sizable amount of public or political influence, or have tried to influence local elections.

Except for the media that covered local elections, not many knew who Rice was, the man behind the provocative robo-calls and what his motives were. Yet there was a treasure trove of information about CCN's more active contributors online, most of which wasn't flattering. In fact, Rice reveled in notoriety. His rabid insistence on being the center of attention and scorn created an extensive paper trail for me to publish. He also made a number of political and personal enemies who uncovered information on their own that wasn't readily available. In spite of the overwhelming documentation of his intimidation and harassment, Rice continued to deny wrongdoing, spinning his verifiable record of bullying as "manufactured and unquestioned lies." That was how Rice described my dossier when former San Luis Obispo mayor Jan Marx shared it with her campaign supporters in late 2016. Rice never elaborated on what the "lies"

were or made corrections.

Similarly, COLAB was a mutual benefit 501(c)(6) non-profit organization that acted more like a extreme-right political action committee – with the same fiery temperament as Rice's organization – and less like a non-profit advocating for public policy benefiting the industries they claimed to represent. Though they refused to disclose their board of directors, board activities or donors, the membership was comfortable letting one person speak for them: Michael Brown. Brown would help produce alarmist weekly updates discussing county meetings, positions on key agenda items and claim the “enviro-socialist left” was going to destroy American values, principles and civil liberties. Brown's doomsday prophecies, which were regularly and exclusively published on CalCoastNews, reminded me of one of the memorable lines from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: “The lady doth protest too much, methinks.” The protestations piqued my intellectual curiosity.

Shortly after CCN contributor Julie Tacker announced her bid to reclaim her old seat on the Los Osos Community Services District, I released my dossier on her and her partner Jeff Edwards' controversial history. Prior to releasing my file, I learned that Tacker had obtained thousands of pages of public record documents and published them without redaction. Many of the public record requests were extensive and frivolous, yielding little actionable content. Tacker received thousands of pages pertaining to her requests, but she routinely refused to pay for copies and related expenses, citing her “government watchdog” status. According to city and county officials, Tacker reportedly cost municipalities \$172,000 in public record-related expenses. Hourly labor costs were factored into the cost.

Given the fact she helped drive the district to bankruptcy and was routinely chastised for her ethical lapses while running around as a pious “government watchdog,” I found her decision to run again to be appallingly delusional. I continued holding resentment over the fact she lied to law enforcement about me, essentially tried to criminalize my criticism of her record and spent months attempting to scrub my opinions off Facebook. So I

decided to release a dossier on her and create a social media campaign around it called #NeverTacker.

#NeverTacker was launched around the time the *New Times* published a report about a 12-year-old girl attempting to seek a restraining order against Edwards for approaching her multiple times and exhibiting troubling behavior that made her feel uncomfortable and fearful for her safety.

“[Edwards] told me he likes my hair, he told me that I’m pretty, he touched my legs when he saw that I had mosquito bites and then gave me Benadryl spray and told me to use it (he gave me this on school property),” the minor wrote in the request.

Documents showed Edwards repeatedly attempted to befriend the girl, who he had no prior relationship with, by offering to partake in activities including hiking, biking and taking swimming lessons. He reportedly asked her questions about where she lived and whether she was interested in riding with him to school.

“I feel very uncomfortable and unsafe when [Edwards] is anywhere near me because of all the ways he has acted with me so far,” the girl wrote. “I am scared now.”

For his part, Edwards denied any wrongdoing. He told the *New Times* that “casual conversation” with the minor was “being distorted and turned into something unpleasant.” However, Edwards wouldn’t go on the record to explain why he was striking up a conversation with this particular girl at the school, especially when she had no relationship with Tacker or Edwards’ children.

A judge threw out the restraining order, but requested Edwards stay away from the girl. Naturally, the controversy wasn’t picked up by CalCoastNews. Users began to question Tacker, her relationship with Edwards and his reported physical contact with the unidentified minor on the website, but their comments were almost immediately scrubbed. Tacker issued no statement and the story seemed to disappear into thin air without a trace. Tacker and Edwards benefited from the controversy arising before the dawn of the 2017 #MeToo movement, which spurred victims of sexual harassment and assault to tell their

stories and highlight the prevalence of sexual abuse internationally.

Nonetheless, the #NeverTacker campaign struck a chord in the Los Osos community and developed a life of its own. There were a number of Los Osos residents who approached me and talked about the community's collective Tacker fatigue, from a person who was constantly embroiled in controversies and admonishments by the media in scathing editorials, and Edwards. In 2018, the couple was dubbed “forever schemers” by the *New Times'* Shredder, a sentiment that resonated throughout the community during her re-election campaign.

After my #NeverTacker articles and files were collectively viewed 22,000 times within two months, residents took the liberty of printing out the dossier, knocking on doors with #NeverTacker t-shirts they made on their own and publicly criticized her. There were campaign buttons and other printed material I came across when I traveled through Los Osos. Having no involvement in the coordination of producing campaign material, I was surprised by the #NeverTacker's viral success.

Tacker was handily defeated in the 2016 election, garnering only 16% of the vote.

The experience gave me tremendous insight into the power of research and presentation. I was battling a group of people who cast aspersions on individuals by using propaganda and hearsay. I saw what they were doing and countered it with research. I was proud of the fact that readers didn't have to take my word for it alone. The evidence was already there, but it wasn't conveniently found in one place before.

There were more eyes on what I was doing than ever before. With more eyes came more public scrutiny. Yet the heavy emotional toll I endured made a fairly convincing case for me to walk away from a cesspool of hatred that I was all too familiar with. My desire to be more diverse with my content grew exponentially. I had a responsibility to my readers to be more versatile, expand my repertoire of coverage and be the investigative news-opinion outlet I knew SLO Truth could be. But with the deposition looming, progress was at a standstill.

## 33

On Sept. 20, 2016, I walked into a small office in San Luis Obispo for my deposition. I went with my father as a witness and attorney Kevin Clune in tow. I didn't get much sleep the night before, so I was already wired and agitated. I tried to be self-effacing and tactful, but I also wanted to clear the air. However, "clearing the air" was something my friends in the legal profession specifically said I shouldn't do, opting instead to answer only "yes," "no" and "I don't recall." Be truthful, but not candid. But my growing frustration and insomnia pushed me into a corner where I felt obligated to over-explain and make my words, values and positions painstakingly clear. I was tired of my words being constantly misrepresented, but I ran the risk that my frustration could lead to more headaches.

After a short conversation with Clune about the ground rules, I walked into the office conference room where the deposition took place.

Inside the conference room, the CalCoastNews team was already seated and ready. There was a large rectangular table with court reporter Elizabeth Doukas seated closest to the door with her laptop and an audio recording device. CCN attorney Burndt Ingo Brauer sat at the table alongside Mike Brennler and Daniel Blackburn. I was immediately concerned about Brennler and nearly walked away from the deposition all together, but decided the truth mattered more than fear. Directly across from the conference table was two smaller round tables, with Karen Velie and David Vogel sitting next to each other. Velie – who appeared in a slouched position with a Bluetooth device planted to the side of her face – suddenly looked frightened as soon as I walked in with my father.

She got up from her seat, briefly stumbled and pointed at him. "I can't have Ed Ochs in here," Velie said tersely, reaching



over to her right shoulder with her left hand. Ed and I froze, unsure what would happen next. Then she raised her voice and shouted, “Ed Ochs hurt me! He hurt me!” My father and I looked at each other, confused. She didn’t describe how he “hurt” her, but this caused alarm in the room.

Brennler quickly stood up, stared directly into Ed’s eyes and reached for his side like he was going to brandish a firearm.

“I disagree,” Ed said, “I have a right to be here as a witness.”

I stood, frozen in place, looking at Velie and Brennler. Velie was shaking.

“I can’t have Ed Ochs in here,” Velie stammered.

Then Ingo Brauer calmly said to me, “Mr. Ochs, your father is not allowed in here without a court order. We cannot proceed until he leaves.”

After a measured sigh, I replied, “Okay, that’s fine.” I asked Ed to wait outside in the office. He readily complied.

My heart was racing. Things were already not going as planned. My palms were sweaty. The air was stifling since there was no ventilation in the room. I quickly took a seat at the conference table facing Ingo Brauer, who appeared mildly exasperated with Velie’s sudden outburst. I could see her from the corner of my eye, sitting about a foot behind Ingo Brauer, shaking like she was convulsing.

The deposition started. Despite Clune raising a flurry of objections about his questioning being irrelevant to the case, Ingo Brauer asked me about Cal Coast Fraud. He asked me about the organization’s origins and my motivations for launching it. I truthfully answered. Against the advice of my attorney, I occasionally volunteered more information than necessary in order to correct CCN’s widely disseminated false claims about me. I wanted my corrections to be in writing and let the record speak for itself. I was able to find a rhythm in answering questions about my site, though the deposition was constantly interrupted by my attorney chiding Ingo Brauer for asking me questions that had nothing to do with their defamation case. It was clear they were on a fishing expedition, looking for that “gotcha” moment

to trap me into some confession that validated their reporting on me.

During Ingo Brauer's questioning, I could see a large white binder that was opened up. Inside the binder were several pages of screenshots containing my various posts and articles over the years – none of which, that I could see, related to the article CCN was being sued over. They performed an extensive audit of my work, which I figured I'd be grilled on. From the binder, Ingo Brauer brought out what he called "exhibits" for the deposition, with one of the sheets of paper containing my first post from May 2014 that questioned Velie's mental state.

From there, the conversation was about Velie's mental state. I remember Ingo Brauer asking me if I believed Velie was mentally ill given the behavior I personally witnessed. I answered yes. After I answered, Velie started shaking nervously and breathing heavily. They asked me if I had any documentation proving her mental illness, including medical records. I told them no, but reiterated that I witnessed her behavior and outbursts first-hand. I also testified that Adam Hill told me on a number of occasions that Velie was "crazy." The more I discussed this issue, the more Velie squirmed in her chair. I saw her shivering.

Then they asked if I referred to any other CCN staff as mentally ill. I turned to face Blackburn and answered something along the lines of, "I also referred to Blackburn as senile." Not relevant to the case, but I readily admit to throwing a rhetorical dagger his way.

I soldiered on feeling more confident as time passed. Ingo Brauer tried to determine whether the creation and content of Cal Coast Fraud was part of conspiracy to cripple and shut down the website. I repeatedly shot the notion down with my answers. When Ingo Brauer tried to move onto another subject, Blackburn and Velie passed him notes with additional questions about Cal Coast Fraud. Clune continued to object to the line of questioning and did so repeatedly, since I spent over an hour answering questions that had absolutely nothing to do with the case.

At one point, Velie grabbed onto the table she sat at and promptly stood up. "A break. We need a break!" she angrily

proclaimed. After Ingo Brauer concurred a break was needed, I walked outside the office with Clune and Ed. Together, we discussed the line of questioning while Velie was apparently rampaging in a closed room adjacent to the conference room, repeatedly yelling “Bullshit!” I couldn’t hear what she was saying exactly during her clearly emotional breakdown, but it was clear she wasn’t getting as much mileage out of the deposition as she hoped.

I felt confident with my answers, which were truthful and transparent. Still, the process was infuriating. I wanted to go home. My time was being wasted. I quickly surmised they were angling to write some story about the deposition, looking for the “gotcha” moment that never came. I noticed Velie and Blackburn were exponentially more visibly frustrated with the answers I gave about my content than questions about the legal case itself.

Once the deposition resumed, Ingo Brauer asked me about my freelance marketing business and asked me to identify my clients. I refused, citing Velie’s harassment and threats of my former employer. Then I was asked if my clientele included certain individuals, and I truthfully said no. The individuals he named were also individuals I was accused of co-mingling with by anonymous accounts linked to Velie and her daughter. In my mind, this verified my suspicions that Velie and her daughter were behind the strings of cyber-harassment I had received on a consistent basis for nearly two years.

After Velie passed him a piece of paper, her attorney read from it asked if my clients included *Tribune* columnist Tom Fulks, supervisor Adam Hill and Pacific Gas & Electric director of government relations Tom Jones. I knew Fulks and Hill but didn’t work with them. I never met or spoke to Jones.

My answer frustrated Velie, who appeared to roll her eyes and shake her head furiously.

After nearly an hour and a half of questions about my articles – including one that asked me whether or not I was ever a reporter – they started asking me about the Tenborg case. They wanted to know how I first came across the case and what led me to ultimately write about it. I broke down my process, starting

from reading their controversial article about Tenborg in 2012, to reading the *Tribune's* article about Tenborg's lawsuit, and attempting to address unanswered questions about the case by reaching out to government sources like California Department of Toxic Substances Control and officials associated with handling of hazardous waste on local and state levels. It wasn't the most riveting testimony, but I wanted to document my process and eliminate the slightest misconception that I was somehow part of a master plan to "kill" their website.

I did testify, at one point, that Tenborg once asked me if I was interested in contributing to his lawsuit as someone who Velie previously defamed. I declined.

Before the deposition ended, the attorney asked me where I got specific information about the case that wasn't previously publicized. After he threatened me with a subpoena to reveal my source, I mentioned that one of my sources – who was not involved in the case – informed me of dates and times the website's depositions were taking place. I didn't feel my disclosure unveiled any controversial or compromising information. My disclosure prompted Blackburn to chuckle giddily as the deposition wrapped up.

I had a few immediate takeaways from the deposition. It was undeniably clear they were using the Tenborg case as a pretense to depose me with the intent to validate Velie's zany conspiracy theories. Since I had absolutely no involvement in the defamatory article they wrote on Tenborg and the lawsuit that followed, there was no valid reason for me to be there. After a while, their lawyer was asking questions that some tabloid might ask me, not in a discovery phase for a trial. The one big "revelation" I gave them was the fact I regularly spoke to public figures and private citizens they targeted, and that instead of coordinating with anyone to undermine the website, I communicated with people who resented the way they were treated by CalCoastNews. To them, this was a revelation. To me, it was the inevitable byproduct of how they mistreated others.

With the deposition behind me, I felt relieved, knowing that relief would more likely than not be short-lived. As I

participated in the deposition, I could see their twisted faces staring at me. Surely they were not going to take my deposition at face value.

**M**ore than a week after my deposition took place, an anonymously bylined story about my deposition appeared on CalCoastNews called, “Public officials tied to cyber harassment of CCN.” Interestingly, the article never quoted me directly, opting instead to paraphrase my testimony.

The article falsely claimed that in my deposition, I allegedly admitted that public officials provided content for my Facebook page with a stated intent to get CCN to discontinue its reporting. Of course, that was a lie. What I actually said, under oath and penalty of perjury, was that I was *inspired* to launch my site by their faulty coverage of the officials they named – never once saying they were involved in producing or managing content.

They also claimed the same officials were “participants” in the “online harassment” of reporters, but never specified the nature of the harassment. They wrote about acquaintances who occasionally commented or “liked” my Facebook posts with a “thumbs up.” The implication: any participation on my Facebook page was somehow legally tantamount to criminal harassment of their reporters, family members, friends, colleagues and acquaintances. They were unable to specifically show how opinions expressed by people understandably frustrated with their “reporting” and their “reporters” applied to the legal definition of criminal harassment. As far as I knew, the content I published and opinions that were expressed on my Facebook page were about them, but not directed to them.

Underneath their article, anonymous commenters named individuals who “liked” or commented on my site, shared snippets of their comments, and discussed their personal and professional lives with a stated intent to retaliate. This was in concert with comments made by their readers on Facebook, who disclosed the names of these individuals’ employers and published their contact information on CCN’s Facebook page.

CCN also falsely conflated comments on my page made by Facebook users with my published content. This false conflation was done to show that Cal Coast Fraud somehow endorsed the words and opinions expressed by CCF readers about CCN and their writers. It was a downright bizarre and false argument, since I was being held personally responsible for comments I didn't make.

The article's author obsessively spent a lot of time on the subject of mental illness and disputing one of their unnamed "reporters" being mentally ill. Velie was the "reporter" that was obviously being referred to. The article didn't take into account my personal experiences and encounters with Velie – the screaming phone calls, threats against my former employer and my family, and the various public outbursts at the appellate hearing and my deposition – and dismissed my overall testimony about her state of mind as mere "conjecture." The implication was that my opinions on Velie's state of mind were made to discredit CCN, despite having several witnesses corroborate my accounts. Some of the witnesses included their own staff.

Immediately following the article, I was notified by individuals I mentioned in my deposition that Velie contacted them. Like me, these individuals were defamed by CCN. However, they weren't involved with my journalistic pursuits or published opinions. Velie used the deposition – or rather her unsubstantiated account of what I said at the deposition – as a sledgehammer to personally harass these people. She claimed I admitted under oath that they helped "create" Cal Coast Fraud or participated in activity that personally hurt her and her family. The emails I read from Velie certainly weren't coming from a measured journalist looking for insight into a story of public interest. There was a seething, personal vindictiveness that ran through her correspondence. Feeling guilty about mentioning these individuals, I personally apologized to them for mentioning their names in the deposition without factoring in the potential consequences.

Like clockwork, I received harassing messages and threats as a result of CCN's article. The harassment occurred after a paid viral

social media marketing campaign by Fire Adam Hill commenced, which directly linked to the article.

Then I came across a number of disturbing comments on CCN. An anonymous user named “Moss\_on\_Stone” wrote a series of comments that specifically mapped out areas of my parents’ house, noting my personal whereabouts and people I traveled with throughout the day. While much of what they wrote was conjecture, it was clear that the person who was commenting knew specific information about where I lived and where I traveled. A lot can be speculated as to the identity behind this account, but the intent to personally stalk my family was profound.

This person also went apoplectic about me using the word “blog” to describe CCN, which they equated to describing something in a “slut”-like, derogatory way. When Velie spoke to my former employer, Sandra Marshall, she specifically objected to me describing CCN as a “blog” and a “tabloid.” I could only naturally assume Velie or her daughter was behind the anonymous account.

Minutes following those comments were comments left by an anonymous user on CCN’s Facebook page that revealed my home address. This disclosure was supplemented with an ominous message: “You know what to do.” While I couldn’t independently verify the Facebook user’s provided name and location, I was able to report the comment to Facebook and it was removed a day later.

I was being stalked, no doubt about it. Through their network of anonymous accounts, CCN was inciting hatred and aggression toward me at a frenzied pace.

Shortly after my home address was posted online, I was walking down one of the more populated streets in Morro Bay. It was evening and I was heading to a nearby restaurant. A black vehicle slowly drove parallel to me from across the street as I was walking on the sidewalk, with their brights occasionally flashing at me. There were enough spaces on the street to park, so I didn’t understand at first why this car was tailing me for nearly two blocks. I put my hands in my pockets, kept my head down and



slowly picked up my walking pace. Eventually, I stopped in front of the Morro Bay Theatre. I noticed they'd just opened their doors for ticket sales. I slid inside.

"I'm being followed," I told the cashier. "Can you make it look like I'm buying a ticket?"

She slowly nodded and whispered, "Yes, of course."

The car eventually drove away after idling in front of the theater for about two minutes.

I noted two occasions in October 2016 when vehicles were parked outside my home and my parents' house with the driver staying in the car. On both occasions, the driver could be seen surveying the immediate area in front of the driveway and quickly speeding away once my father went outside. Normally, strangers pull over by the house to take a call. These people lingered for about 15 minutes with their engines off. I had no idea who these people were and didn't know if their suspicious activity had anything to do with CalCoastNews. But I was completely certain that incidents like these did not occur before CCN published their article about my deposition.

This was a frightening time for my family. We were understandably, overly cautious.

The way CalCoastNews laid out their conspiracy theories was categorically absurd, potentially dangerous and completely irresponsible. By every objective measure their "reporting" was biased, angrily and poorly written diatribes coming from someone with a personal grudge against her adversaries, that is anyone who questioned her competence. I took solace in their poor presentation. However, with a looming jury trial that had a strong likelihood of them coming up short, they were more desperate than ever. They were trying to rile up their dwindling but dedicated loyalists to raise legal expenses by using their conspiracy theories as a rallying cry. In doing so, they raised allegations so incendiary and grotesque that anyone incapable of discerning between verifiable fact and fiction would march to their orders. Considering the harassment and threats I received, some of their readers truly believed without question that I was

part of a large conspiracy to destroy what they considered an “accredited news agency.”

They used Adam Hill – who they also tried to depose, but he refused – as the connecting thread for all their conspiracies, using the ambiguous “multiple sources” or “affiliates” to validate their allegations. Their anonymous commenters – many of whom I reasonably believed were run by Velie herself – used published allegations to incite more contempt with even more salacious allegations. Everything alleged on their site was distilled onto social media as Fire Adam Hill, presented to the public as paid political advertisements. Once these ads were spread to a larger audience, anyone and everyone CalCoastNews associated with Hill were targets for their criminal conduct.

I studied the people who CCN and Fire Adam Hill catered to. These were people who had no connection to Hill, but they had a strong resentment toward the political left to various degrees – some were more extreme in their views than others. CalCoastNews was telling those people, “You’re right. Not only are liberals corrupt, they will do everything in their power to silence us from shining a light on the ‘truth.’” And I couldn’t find many examples of their readers wondering out loud if the conspiracy theories being injected into their gullible minds were inaccurate.

Sometimes, residents I never met would inject themselves into the discussion, claiming they were victims. Fire Adam Hill’s sponsored posts yielded people who I never met, never talked to or bumped into on the street who claimed they “knew” me or had some undesirable reaction. I recognized some of the people they reached out to as individuals I personally blocked from my Facebook page. Initially, I was drawn to their so-called “experiences” with me because they were so fanciful and vivid. There were times when I’d write them on the side and say, “Maybe you’ve confused me for someone else,” but they were determined to believe that I was the source of their malaise, that I was the one person Hill “used” to track them down. And CCN was speaking to some of the most vulnerable members of the community exhibiting these delusions.

In one instance, after claiming she was victimized by Hill, one Paso Robles resident I never met wrote on Fire Adam Hill, “If it takes Aaron Ochs to be killed to stop my pain, so be it.” In another instance, Atascadero resident Rick Holliday falsely accused me of attacking him online by publishing a number of false claims about him on the Internet. Holliday, who was linked to Velie on Facebook, repeatedly threatened to physically confront me and told users to “stay tuned.”

In early 2018, Holliday raised the ire of the District Attorney's office after he placed flyers on parked cars driven by people attending a debate between incumbent DA Dan Dow and challenger Judge Mike Cummins. The flyer offered a \$250,000 reward for “evidence leading to the arrest and conviction” of Dow and 11 Atascadero city officials. At the time, it was revealed that Holliday was charged by with five felonies and three misdemeanors by the SLO County District Attorney's Office.

Knowingly playing with fire, CalCoastNews was so insistent that I was the problem, their readers began to internalize what they were reading as if I was personally afflicting discomfort onto them. They used this internalization to justify their behavior, from making threats to casting wild allegations that turned me into some nefarious force that had to be arrested, or personally and professionally destroyed. This was a frightening phenomenon I wasn't used to as a young man with no criminal record – not even a speeding ticket.

CalCoastNews intended to foment a hostile atmosphere, even providing their users the tools necessary to hunt me down and put my family at risk. I could never forgive them.

In the back of my mind, I knew they weren't going to change a word, even if they were wrong. Now that I testified under oath and voluntarily elaborated – and probably shouldn't have – to make my words, efforts and motives painstakingly clear, I felt they owed it to their readers to, at the very least, acknowledge their “reporting” was challenged.

Against my better judgment, I decided to go through the legal remedies once again and contact them.

In October, I contacted Velie by email and provided extensive corrections. Instead of Velie responding to her claims, editor Bill Loving did so in her place. Instead of addressing the corrections individually or offering to review her most salacious claims, Loving vowed to “keep the story online,” despite the fact I asked for the story to be corrected and revised with my statements, not taken down. Loving based his decision solely on a phone call with Velie and her personal recollection of my deposition, not the actual transcript. I found this particularly troubling coming from a journalism professional who lectured on media law and journalism ethics.

I pressed him further in a short war of words via email. I took aim at Loving for allowing a provably biased writer to write a demonstrably biased and factually inaccurate article about me without any objective source documentation. Loving couldn't have cared less, blasting me by saying I wasn't “credible.” His personal opinion of whether or not I was “credible” was irrelevant. I was in disbelief that this behavior was being exhibited by a tenured journalism professor at Cal Poly. As someone who was once interested in pursuing a journalism major in that department, I now felt Loving's employment was a black eye on the institution and reflected poorly on Cal Poly. As it turned out, I wasn't alone in that observation.

In 2010, Loving was ousted as chair of the journalism department amid allegations by one of his colleagues that he mistreated her. According to the then-Liberal Arts College Dean Linda Halisky, Loving exhibited “antagonisms between and among his staff.” One of the staff members was prize-winning print journalist and journalism professor Teresa Allen, who repeatedly complained about Loving. Two sources familiar with faculty matters at the Cal Poly Journalism Department said that personnel, including Allen, were reportedly concerned about Loving's involvement with CCN. However, multimedia journalism instructor Patrick Howe disputed that any conversations about Loving's involvement with CCN took place.

Loving's tenure at Cal Poly was contentious at best. It appeared his hostility and management style was compatible with

CCN and their journalism practices.

After going nowhere with Loving, I decided to contact Velie herself.

“Why hello there, Mr. Ochs,” Velie said in an eerily gleeful tone, as if she was expecting me to call. As I attempted to calmly correct her false claims, she spoke over me and wouldn’t stop. This angered me. I remember standing in the middle of my kitchen that evening, screaming at the top of my lungs, “That’s not what I said, Karen!” The angrier I got, the more she laughed. She took delight in my anger, which caused me to lash out.

She began taunting me and giggling. “I know what you said better than you,” she cackled. “I know what you said.”

“You’re not a fucking journalist,” I yelled. “You’re a terrorist!”

“It’s over for you, Mr. Ochs,” she said, giggling.

“Why did you write that article?”

“You said I was mentally ill.”

“You are,” I shot back. “Your words and actions make it blatantly obvious. You deposed me for a case I wasn’t a witness in and wrote a hit piece because I called you ‘mentally ill’? That’s not journalism.”

“You called me mentally ill,” she repeated. “And you called me a whore and a cunt.”

Here, Velie made it abundantly clear what her motivations were. The article she wrote wasn’t a matter of self-preservation of an “accredited news agency.” This was malicious retaliation. This was personal. And I was speaking to someone who was truly evil.

The next day, CCN featured comments from an anonymous user named “Sore Throat” who repeatedly wrote, “AARON OCHS IS A LIAR” in all caps, followed by comments that touched on specific talking points Velie made in my call, specifically when she accused me of being a misogynist and participating in the “online degradation of women.”

In her mind, Velie felt I wasn’t merely criticizing her because of her behavior or her work. In addition to “being paid by [Hill],” she told me I criticized her because she was a woman, a refrain she

recycled from her bouts with the *New Times*.

It was glaringly obvious that Velie was behind many of their anonymous accounts, stirring up their crowd with incendiary, libelous rhetoric.

About a week later, after my anger subsided, Doukas, the deposition recorder, informed me that the deposition was ready for inspection, but I wasn't allowed to obtain a copy until the attorneys for both the plaintiff and the defendants signed off on its release. To inspect the transcript, I met with Doukas at the law office of James McKiernan, a well-known personal injury lawyer in the area. As I reviewed the documentation in a small room, we made idle chatter as she was working on another case. Through our conversations, Doukas revealed she was a die-hard fan of CCN.

"I really appreciate how they've covered [Grover Beach mayor] John Shoals," Doukas, a Grover Beach resident, told me. Doukas explained she was an outspoken critic of the mayor and cited a number of controversies he was involved in."

"They've been saying what I've been saying about him for years: he's corrupt, owns all this property throughout the city, doesn't disclose it in his filings, and does all of these dirty back-room deals," she told me. "When I raised these issues at council meetings, people thought I was some crazy lady." She went on to laud CalCoastNews for covering Grover Beach issues she felt were vastly under-reported.

"I owe them a debt of gratitude," she said.

After telling her I investigated local corruption cases, I volunteered to help investigate Shoals. I insinuated that CalCoastNews doesn't always get the story. She admitted they weren't always accurate, but she appreciated their dedication. She concluded our conversation by telling me in a shrill voice with her eyes nearly popping out of her head, "I don't trust him – well, not just because he's black. He's a bad black."

A "bad black"?

That's when I went silent and awkwardly walked out of the room without saying another word.

I remember looking up from the transcript I was reviewing to see a worried expression on her face – a flash of regret for a racist remark? I closed the door behind me and tried to leave the office as soon as possible.

“Excuse me, Mr. Ochs,” McKiernan’s receptionist called out as I was about to leave. “Mr. McKiernan wants to see you.”

“Why? Well, okay. Sure.”

I met McKiernan in his office. He struck me as soft-spoken and affable. He described himself as someone who was familiar with my written work, and made no indication whether or not he was a fan. He inquired about my professional background like he was interviewing me for a job. I gave him information that was already public knowledge. Since he shared the office with Doukas, I decided to tighten my lip, explain nothing further and determine where he was coming from.

Things started to take an interesting turn when he started asking where I was currently working. Now it sounded like he was fishing. He was now asking questions as if he was deposing me. *Who do you work with? Do they provide income for the kind of work you do with Cal Coast Fraud?* I remember facing him as he sat at his desk with my arms crossed, smiling wryly.

“Glad you’ve taken such an interest with me,” I joked.

He shrugged and said, “Hey, I’m just curious.”

McKiernan started asking me about my hobbies. I declined to tell him much, stating I occasionally performed music around the area and studied law. My answers were now crisper, less revealing without acting cagey. The less I volunteered, the more he leaned in.

“Here’s my advice – unsolicited, not legal, of course – and you can take it or leave it. Consider doing something other than investigating,” he said. “I think everything else you’re doing, I think, is more worthwhile.”

“Why are you giving me this advice?” I asked him coldly.

“Because I think it will be less painful for you.”

Did McKiernan threaten me? I honestly wasn’t sure. The way

he communicated it to me was strange. I asked him what he meant by it, but he assured me that he meant no harm by it. Still, none of this sat right with me. During the conversation, he oscillated between intrigue and concern. He didn't strike me as abrasive necessarily, but it was creepy. I didn't specifically know what his deal was, and didn't feel like sticking around to find out.

To me, it sounded like McKiernan wanted me to drop my coverage of CalCoastNews, but his "unsolicited advice" had the opposite effect. Now I wanted to dig deeper. At the same time, I needed to keep my head down, hope everything would blow over, and work quietly without constantly raising their ire. More importantly, I had to take extra precaution with my personal life and safety. There were other factors I constantly needed to take into consideration. As my father would often say, this was the nature of the investigative journalism business. If I wasn't willing to go big, I had to consider going home. I wasn't going to back down.

By the end of 2016, I quit my job. Because my job was in the retail field, I was once again exposed to the public. There was no cubicle I could hide behind, no machine I could become a part of as an anonymous cog. There was always a concern that one of *them* would find me and retaliate. Since CCN and crew were fixated on my professional life and where I worked, I couldn't risk any more people being impacted by their harassment. It was difficult working with the public while feeling like I was being hunted.

Around this time, CalCoastNews attempted to subpoena Facebook for the name of credit cards associated with paid advertising for Cal Coast Fraud and SLO Truth, using the Tenborg case as a pretext. However, their subpoena request was unsuccessful. According to Facebook's legal department, the social media giant dismissed their request since the website failed to show how my credit card information was specifically pertinent to their case.

Around the time I quit my job, faces of me and my father appeared on wanted posters by Fire Adam Hill.

Frustrated with the harassment the family had endured, my



father penned an op-ed on SLO Truth to explain why Velie wasn't a journalist. He had been a journalist for many decades and knew from experience that Velie was anything but a journalist. His piece was called "The Journalism Con." This angered Velie, who raised legal funds from his op-ed, falsely claiming on her fundraising page that Ed was "one of [Adam] Hill's paid flunkies." She falsely told her followers my site was "demean[ing]" CCN daily with a "constant flow of garbage."

In spite of all the hysteria thrown at Hill, the supervisor handily won his re-election bid. Once the election was over, Fire Adam Hill stopped posting but kept their page online. It remained a relic of one of the nastiest local elections I've ever heard of or covered and one of the craziest chapters in my life. I was glad the constant stream of lies stopped and my life would return to a semblance of normalcy.

I was left with lingering scorn for Facebook for allowing an anonymous, patently illegal political committee to spend hundreds, if not thousands of dollars to influence an election by defaming not only Hill, but anyone loosely associated with the supervisor – anyone who dared to say anything positive about him or show disdain for the psychotic trolls perversely obsessed with him. This was an issue the Fair Political Practices Commission couldn't wrap their minds around. They later dismissed my complaint, citing the fact they were stonewalled by Facebook when they requested information about the page and their administrators. This undoubtedly foreshadowed the controversy surrounding Facebook and their reluctance to stifle Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election with their anonymous sponsored posts and paid advertising.

To my pleasant surprise, 2016 ended peacefully. Though I was shaken by the events that unfolded over the past two years, I felt more comfortable in my skin and vowed to avoid being a lightning rod for their harassment. I was content to work in the shadows and not become as accessible a target.

## 34

In April 2016, Karen Velie filed a claim for damages against supervisor Hill. I was blissfully unaware a complaint had been filed until the matter was reported out of closed session at a SLO County Board of Supervisors meeting. I didn't know what the claim was about, though I heard from a source involved in the case that Velie invoked her "conspiracy" claims. Later the same month, Velie's claim was rejected. In October 2016, Velie filed a lawsuit against Hill in federal court. I was only aware of the case contents when the lawsuit was thrown out in January 2017.

Velie alleged Hill and his alleged "co-conspirators" violated her civil rights, unlawfully interfered with economic and contractual relations and inflicted severe emotional distress. Velie felt her civil rights were violated because the "conspirators" prevented her from having access to interviews, documents, press releases and information allegedly at Hill's direction. She believed she wasn't given the same access provided to other news agencies. However, in her exhibits, Velie didn't provide any evidence to show she was intentionally deprived of equal access to information because of Hill or anyone else. She was also unable to show any sort of case law or foundation to justify unrestricted entitlement to information.

It was certainly news to me – perhaps to the news media at large as well – that anyone not responding to inquiries or declining comment was infringing on someone's civil rights. It was certainly laughable that a pathologically lying "reporter" who harassed government officials believed she was legally entitled to their trust.

Velie also complained that Hill pressured local news radio programs from having her as a guest, thereby preventing her from reaching a larger audience. What she conveniently left out of her complaint were the facts. In 2014, Velie was banned by 920 KVEC after the station manager received complaints about her "reporting" and on-air claims on a "relatively regular basis."

“I just got to the point where I am not willing to take a chance on letting something on our airwaves that will get us in trouble,” KVEC station manager Ron Roy told CalCoastNews. Though he decided to temporarily ban Velie (the ban was later lifted in 2016), none of the other CCN writers were affected. There was no proven correlation between the fact that she was temporarily and personally banned from the station and her website being adversely impacted. There was no evidence the “Hill-uminati” influenced Roy’s decision to ban Velie.

In addition to naming Hill as the chief architect of the conspiracy, Velie also named SLO County sheriff Ian Parkinson and a county employee as assisting Hill. She implied Parkinson led to her being banned from the station.

In her filing, Velie named my website and falsely accused me of being Hill’s “business associate.” I remember reading her claim, thinking: Where are the business incorporation filings? What is the extent of our supposed business relationship? I was taken aback by this particular false allegation because my name was now besmirched in federal court record. It was one more lie I had to explain to any potential employer that conducted a background check.

She claimed I falsely accused her of being mentally ill, of being a “convicted felon,” and claiming her reporting was not accurate – and it was all done to intentionally degrade and humiliate her. Velie went on to claim that anyone who “participated” on my site was somehow part of this elaborate conspiracy to ruin her business. She also discussed how there were “lewd postings” about her and her family, including her deceased daughter. Velie offered no evidence of Hill’s “business” connection to my site, the “lewdness” of posts about her family, or how my criticism was specifically designed to personally humiliate her; however, she provided an anonymous post from an unrelated online message board that I had nothing to do with.

She also claimed Hill, in his official capacity as supervisor, actively threatened her advertisers, many of whom allegedly canceled their contracts with her or prohibited her from a prospective economic relationship with an advertiser. For her

evidence, Velie showed a flyer I designed for my site that called for a boycott of her advertisers. She provided the flyer under the false guise that I was coordinating with Hill to disrupt her relationship with advertisers. Velie also shared an email she had with a potential advertiser, who apparently shared a post Hill forwarded to him from another source that criticized CCN. Hill, who did not author the post that he shared, sent it from his personal email account, not from his county email.

Velie resented the characterization of being unstable, but everything she had done – up to this point – did not lead to a different assessment.

I resented being pulled into a legal case for no good reason, with my name now being dragged through the mud in a federal lawsuit that was deeply flawed and frivolous.

The court appeared to agree. In January 2017, they dismissed Velie's claims with prejudice. They noted the court held that she had no right to press releases, interviews or government documents. They were also weary on ruling on any retaliation claims involving government officials, using established case law to show that restricting the ability of decision-makers to engage in speech could undermine the competing First Amendment rights of the officials themselves. Despite her case being thrown out in federal court, Velie later re-filed nearly the same case in Superior Court. However, court records indicated she hadn't served Hill with papers.

Velie wasn't the only CCN fellow entangled in a legal dispute at the beginning of 2017.

Julie Tacker, an active CCN contributor, and her partner, Jeff Edwards, were the subjects of a local controversy. Edwards was hit with two lawsuits by people he previously did business with. Civil allegations included unjust enrichment, fraud and financial elder abuse. The lawsuits spurred a criminal investigation by the SLO County Sheriff's Dept. and an investigation by the California Bureau of Real Estate (BRE).

Due to septic contamination of their groundwater, Los Osos was under a building moratorium. One way people could build is

to have historical “septic credits” that already exist on their property. When Fresno-based Los Osos Investment Group (LOIG) purchased property in Los Osos in 2013, Edwards approached them to look at a “transfer development credit program,” which would pair septic credits from their property with other lots in Los Osos. This would allow LOIG to build on that property. After entering into a broker agreement with Edwards, the LOIG discovered the property contained fewer septic credits than he initially indicated and alleged he falsely sold one of its septic credits to a retired doctor. Believing Edwards was unjustly enriching himself, LOIG filed a lawsuit against him. Tacker was personally involved in the transaction, having personally received and cashed \$70,350 for the septic credit sale from retired dermatologist, Dr. Frederick Novy. Novy later discovered that neither Tacker nor Edwards owned the credit in question. Novy filed a lawsuit against Edwards. For his part, Edwards denied any wrongdoing and later counter-sued LOIG for breach of contract.

The California Bureau of Real Estate investigated Edwards and concluded the allegations made against him were “factual,” and Edwards chose not to contest the allegations. In October 2018, Edwards signed a stipulation and agreement with the BRE, agreeing to his license being suspended until he paid the BRE costs of investigation and enforcement in addition to completing educational requirements for renewing his real estate license. The SLO County Sheriff's Dept. ultimately deferred to the BRE for further investigation.

I broke the story about Edwards and Tacker's various legal entanglements in January 2017. The *New Times* followed up with the story in July. When I first published the story on SLO Truth's Facebook page, the post was once again removed for “violating community standards.” I could only assume that Tacker was continuing to report my content and thwart any further engagement on social media. Naturally, the one website that prided itself on investigating government schemes and financial fraud did not publish a single word about the controversy. When readers began questioning Tacker on CalCoastNews, their

## DEFAMERS

comments were removed. The removal prompted Velie to demand that anyone criticizing her longtime contributor would have to reveal their real names.

Similarly, CCN did not cover Velie's unsuccessful federal lawsuit, despite covering and raising money for other legal issues they were involved in.

And yet, the beginning of 2017 was relatively quiet on the controversial news front. I was getting ready to prepare for their defamation trial, which was finally set to take place in March. It was the calm before the storm. This was what I hoped would be their last hurrah and my final storm. I was ready to cover the trial as a journalist and a victim.

## 35

It was a cloudy, windy day on the morning of March 6. I rolled out of bed, put on my business-casual attire like I was getting ready for work and drove to the San Luis Obispo Superior Court. Despite covering a myriad of news articles and topics, I'd never set foot in the courthouse before. As someone who studied law, I was thrilled to be there, though I initially got lost on my way to the courtroom where the CalCoastNews-Tenborg case was being held. I followed local reporters who were covering the case and ultimately managed to find my destination.

Once I arrived, I walked down the hallway toward the courtroom entrance. There I saw a morose-looking Daniel Blackburn. He said nothing as I walked by and later sat down on a bench a few feet away. For souvenir purposes, I took a photo of Blackburn as he sat on the bench. I felt the image served as a sharp contrast to the bombast and braggadocio he exuded on the website and on radio. I'd started to firmly believe that Blackburn's hubris was nothing more than an act.

Joining me at the courthouse was Kenny McCarthy, who couldn't wait to see justice being served. Under hushed voices we talked about the trial and what our expectations were. Then his eyes lit up like a Christmas tree as he saw Charles Tenborg walk by. He promptly stood up, followed Tenborg down the hallway and introduced himself. After shaking hands with Tenborg, McCarthy told him, "I just want you to know: your pursuit to reclaim your reputation – with this lawsuit and trial – means a lot to those who CalCoastNews has hurt. Thank you, sir. Thank you." As McCarthy briefly told the story about how Velie suggested he was responsible for his wife's untimely death, Tenborg took a step back, feeling the weight of McCarthy's pain. Tenborg looked into McCarthy's eyes and told him modestly, "We'll do what we can."

Then it was my turn. I stood there awkwardly, unsure of what

to say to the man who was about to show the county what CCN was truly about. As he was talking to his legal counsel, I stepped forward and introduced myself. He brandished a quick smile. I shook his hand and briefly felt his sweaty palms. He was nervous, too. Tenborg told me the case had taken a heavy financial and emotional toll. He didn't strike me as someone who was opportunistic or nefariously wanting to drive the site into ruin. He wanted justice, but he was also exhausted and couldn't wait to put a long and dark chapter behind him. After introducing me to his attorneys, all the involved and interested parties began huddling around the door.

Just before the courtroom doors opened, drama ensued. One of the attorneys representing CCN, James Duenow, who appeared sickly, pale and gaunt, aggressively approached the head of Tenborg's legal counsel, James Wagstaffe. "You represent the polluters in San Francisco, you sick motherfucker," he barked at Wagstaffe.

"Excuse me," said Wagstaffe. "Do we have a problem here?"

Duenow jabbed his bony index finger in Wagstaffe's face. "You're a fucking disgrace to the bar."

"You're being completely rude and unprofessional," said Wagstaffe. "I'm not going to sit here and take this from you."

"I'm going to kick your fucking ass."

Blackburn stood up from his seat and waved Duenow over. The other reporters nearby looked at each other, then at me as I looked at them. We were surprised to see CCN's legal team come undone this early in the game merely minutes before the pretrial actually began – before the jury was even selected.

When the bailiff arrived and opened the courtroom doors, we all hustled inside and took our seats. I sat with the rest of the media. While everyone else in close vicinity was taking notes on a notepad, I used my phone. I utilized technology that allowed me to form words using finger-swiping on a small digital keyboard. This allowed me to transcribe quotes faster than traditional methods.

While I was getting myself situated, I looked over my left



shoulder and saw Duenow poke Wagstaffe and become physically aggressive. The courtroom momentarily went silent as all eyes were on Duenow. I anticipated a fist fight was going to break out between the two right in front of us. But when Wagstaffe raised his voice and threatened to report Duenow to the State Bar of California, Duenow slithered out of the courtroom while loudly musing, “How about if I punch him?”

A few short but seemingly long minutes later, the pretrial hearing started.

Still red in the face from his confrontation with Wagstaffe, Duenow wobbled around the audience, telling a visibly exasperated Judge Barry LaBarbara that supervisor Hill was “biasing” witnesses against his clients. LaBarbara asked for evidence from him, but Duenow failed to muster a response. At times, Duenow leaned against one of the empty seats in the audience behind the defense counsel’s table and struggled to remain still as he threw out another unsubstantiated allegation. Duenow claimed an unnamed attorney from Wagstaffe’s firm threatened one of the defense witnesses with a lawsuit.

Duenow’s behavior was later brought to the judge’s attention by Wagstaffe. LaBarbara urged the two of them to work out their differences privately in his chambers, but Wagstaffe declined, opting instead to file a formal complaint. Two days after the altercation occurred between Wagstaffe and Duenow, I reached out to the state bar and determined a criminal complaint had been filed. Records also showed Duenow was practicing law on a suspended license. Once the complaint was filed, Duenow withdrew his representation and renewed his license. His outbursts became emblematic of the website’s overall approach to the case and the trial that later ensued.

After Duenow’s contentious appearance, it was CCN attorney James McKiernon’s turn to address the court, urging the judge to reconsider a previously ruled motion that determined Tenborg was a private figure. McKiernon argued that Tenborg was a public figure because he “injected himself in a public controversy,” but McKiernon could not identify the controversy other than the one his clients created. When that line of argument

failed to sway LaBarbara, McKiernon focused on Tenborg's involvement at conferences where he allegedly educated the public on hazardous waste management. Tenborg was briefly called to the stand to clarify his public involvement, if any. Tenborg testified that his public involvement, which was mostly at waste management conferences, was limited to promoting his business and garnering clients. After hearing Tenborg's testimony, LaBarbara ruled that Tenborg was a private figure.

McKiernon quickly ducked out of the courtroom after his motion was shot down, but not before smiling and nodding in my direction. I nodded back to him.

CCN's counsel touched briefly on another motion, which pertained to their trial subpoena of supervisor Hill. According to LaBarbara's tentative ruling dated March 3, 2017, CCN sought to examine Hill on four topics: (1) Whether Hill urged the plaintiff to file the lawsuit; (2) whether it was true that Hill sent text messages to CCN advertiser/developer John King that stated he was behind the lawsuit; (3) whether the purpose of the lawsuit was to put Velie out of business; and (4) whether contracts with Integrated Waste Management Authority (IWMA) – who Tenborg provided services for as a subcontractor – for more than \$100,000 must be sent out to bid. LaBarbara ruled that the first three topics were irrelevant to the case and the fourth could be gathered from other sources. LaBarbara also ruled that Tenborg's alleged motivations were irrelevant to the case and the article in question.

Judging by their pretrial motions, CCN was desperate. These weren't arguments being made by journalists who were comfortable presenting their facts in an open trial. These arguments indicated that CCN was desperate to throw the case out based on technicalities already adjudicated on the superior court and appellate levels.

The pretrial phase concluded with the jury selection process.

During court recess, I went with McCarthy across the street to a restaurant. To get to our table, we both walked past Velie, Blackburn, and their attorneys Vogel and Ingo Brauer. They noticed us immediately. As I dined and discussed the case with

McCarthy, I could hear Velie's manic laughter. I briefly looked over my shoulder and there was Velie, laughing like a jackal. She expressed complete confidence in the trial outcome. At this point, I rolled my eyes, dismissed her delusional optimism and resumed eating my meal. Then I heard Velie loudly say, "Aaron Ochs is here. He's here! Go away, Aaron Ochs!" Tempting as it was, I refused to turn around. Seeing I was agitated, McCarthy asked me what they were babbling about. I honestly told him that I had no idea and wasn't interested in eavesdropping. All I knew was this lady appeared to have nervous breakdowns when we were in close proximity, acting like I was a serial ax murderer one moment and then jovial the next.

When McCarthy and I returned to court, the plaintiff's counsel brought Tenborg to the stand. From the onset, it appeared the counsel's focus was to capture Tenborg's personal and immediate response to the article. Wagstaffe asked Tenborg to not only review the allegations, but also discuss the insinuations that were made. For example, Tenborg answered yes when he thought the article's headline, "Hazardous waste chief skirts law," referred to him. Tenborg explained the implication was clear, since he was the subject of the article's lead paragraph and five subsequent paragraphs. In later testimony, CCN claimed the "hazardous waste chief" was someone else, not Tenborg, and that the article was about the IWMA, not Tenborg specifically.

Then Tenborg's counsel started their slow pivot to CCN's fact-gathering and source-accumulation methods. I wanted to know their "journalism" processes behind the scenes, and what followed would be hugely insightful.

A significant portion of Tenborg's testimony focused on CCN's claim that he was fired in the mid-1990s for undisclosed reasons from the SLO County Environmental Health Certified Unified Program Agency. Counsel admitted into evidence a memorandum of his resignation from 1997. Counsel also brought in Tenborg's former employer at the time, former SLO County Director of Environmental Health Curtis Batson, to testify. Batson stated that Tenborg had a good reputation prior to his resignation and confirmed he wasn't fired. Batson reportedly told

Velie of Tenborg's employment status shortly before the article was published. CCN attorney Vogel sought to discredit Batson's testimony on cross-examination, stating that it wasn't proper protocol to discuss the nature of employment status of his subordinates, and that he should have referred Velie to the personnel or human resources department. However, no records show that Velie made any attempt to contact human resources about Tenborg.

Instead of relying on Tenborg's former employer as a reliable source, Velie later testified that she used "several" sources to confirm that Tenborg was fired. One of the sources, a criminal investigator employed by the California Dept. of Toxic Substances Control, had recently passed away. Velie had no documented evidence of the investigator's assertions, relying instead on hearsay she claimed the investigator personally told her. When she was asked if she kept a record of any notes of her conversations with the investigator, Velie claimed she wrote notes that she later typed on the computer. However, Velie stated she subsequently threw away her handwritten notes once she converted them to digital format before her computer mysteriously "broke." Velie claimed the computer was taken to the "shop [from] over there" — presumably in San Luis Obispo — but most of her files on the hard drive couldn't be recovered. It sounded like an extremely elaborate excuse — "dog ate my homework" would've sufficed.

Another source, former San Luis Obispo city employee Doug Dowden, claimed he heard Tenborg was fired but didn't have evidence. The defense argued Dowden's hearsay was a persuasive source because he was a "whistleblower" involved in another hazardous waste case not associated with Tenborg.

The third source was Aaron Wynn, a former employee of Tenborg's. In his declaration, Wynn claimed Tenborg illegally transported and disposed hazardous waste. Tenborg questioned the credibility of his testimony because Wynn was fired from his position and didn't understand why, and he was denied a license to transport hazardous waste because of "an incident on [his] record where the authorities thought [he] was transporting a pipe

bomb.” Following his declaration was a video Wynn posted on YouTube in 2014, which he narrated.

The video showed Wynn walking around the Cold Canyon landfill in San Luis Obispo where Tenborg hauled waste to, and made accusations that mirrored the ones he made in his declaration. Though he was shown collecting soil samples, nothing in the court records show that the samples were tested or that the soil was dumped onto the ground by Tenborg himself.

According to Velie, this was a video the website personally asked Wynn to record and provide. To me, this was a curious revelation. In one of their YouTube accounts called “InHonorOfAaron,” Fire Adam Hill uploaded several versions of the Wynn video. The videos contained descriptions lifted directly from conspiracy theories that were floated around by anonymous Facebook accounts linked to Velie’s daughter. This fueled speculation that Velie was behind the anonymous accounts.

Despite having no finite evidence to back the website’s assertions about Tenborg’s employment and professional conduct, despite being shown hard evidence contradicting her “reporting,” Velie firmly stood by the article.

CCN editor Bill Loving, who personally reviewed several article drafts and provided input, described himself as the website’s “gatekeeper” and asserted that all articles published on CCN undergo his rigorous review. But the seasoned journalism professor and expert witness was unable to explain how several of the claims he personally asked Velie to elaborate on or document with sourcing ended up being published. This indicated to me that Loving was intellectually lazy, negligent, and not fully committed to ensuring their “reporting” was completely accurate. I wasn’t able to fully grasp why Loving was not held to account like Blackburn and Velie were in this case, since he was personally and keenly made aware of Velie’s accuracy issues with several articles she published with his personal approval.

When Blackburn approached the stand, he was peppered with questions about his involvement with the article. He stated that he worked on one half of the story, which focused on IWMA manager Bill Worrell. However, like Loving, Blackburn possessed

the credentials and the wherewithal to review and verify the entire article. He didn't. In one noted example, Blackburn contacted a reporter at the *San Diego Union-Tribune* and stated Velie's unsubstantiated assertion that Tenborg and Worrell were in an illicit contractual relationship. Blackburn contacted the *San Diego Union-Tribune* because Worrell once served San Diego County as their deputy director for the Solid Waste Division. Based on their "several sources," Blackburn wrote in the article that Worrell had a "long list of questionable activities" during his tenure in San Diego in the early 1990s. However, Tenborg's team read into the record Blackburn's deposition from 2013 when he admitted to not having evidence that Tenborg and Worrell engaged in any wrongdoing together.

What surprised me was how easily Blackburn and Velie gave up the game. In their depositions that Tenborg's team cited, both Velie and Blackburn stated that their purpose was to provide content built to be the "tip of the spear" by using juxtaposition and inference to create a click-bait narrative. They admitted to using the heading, lede, pictures and words to create a meaning they chose as "reporters" to put there and not what verifiable facts dictate. In other words, they admitted to producing sensationalized content. I believed this was their subtle admission to publishing fake news.

During the trial, San Francisco State University Journalism professor Venise Wagner testified as an expert witness for the plaintiff. Regarding the article CCN did, Wagner stated, "I kept reading and I thought, 'Where's the proof?' And I never saw any proof." Wagner added, "There were untruths, and it didn't seem that reasonable care was taken to get the truth."

With no relevant or persuasive sources of their own, the defense in CCN's trial was virtually non-existent. Vogel and Ingo Brauer took turns in cross-examining all the plaintiff's witnesses, but instead of successfully impugning their character and testimony, they managed to get the witnesses to shine a brighter light on CCN's journalism practices or lack thereof. But their biggest mistake was allowing Velie to testify on the stand. Most of her rambling and often incoherent testimony was objected to,

sustained and ruled inadmissible, with Judge LaBarbara constantly reminding her to answer questions properly. A key turning point in the case occurred when Velie claimed that Tenborg didn't return her final calls for comment before the article was published. This prompted Tenborg's team to turn over phone records, which revealed that Tenborg personally spoke with Velie and answered her questions prior to the article being published. Having been caught lying on the witness stand, a petrified Velie eyed the jurors from her counsel table. Most of the jurors shook their heads, grimaced and took notes.

When attorney David Vogel apologized to jurors for the quality of the defense's case, it felt like all the air was completely sucked out of the room. He told jurors, "We're just trying to do this by the seat of our pants," later adding, "Don't let our representation get in the way of this case."

Throughout the trial, there was an aura of hopelessness around the defense. For all the bluster and bravado CCN constantly projected to their readers, for all the sensationalized claims they bombarded their website and the airwaves with, they had absolutely no leg to stand on. They had excuses, but no witnesses. They had plenty of claims, but no evidence. They claimed the evidence would have been revealed in a follow-up article they were unable to publish because of the lawsuit. The article never came.

I felt more confident that the county was finally going to know what they were all about. It wasn't just me pointing it out. The media was right there beside me, covering the case and exercising their due diligence. I was relieved to shed the designation of being CCN's lone critic and looked forward to the *Tribune* and *New Times* providing the corroboration I sought for years. As a bonus, the slow-moving wheels of justice were finally turning in the right direction.

## 36

Guilty.

That was the text message McCarthy sent to me. I was at home, taking a break from covering the trial when I received the news. The jury was unanimous in their verdict. Daniel Blackburn and Karen Velie were guilty of defaming Tenborg. The verdict had far-reaching ripples as it signaled to many of CalCoastNews' victims that justice was served in their favor.

To say I was overjoyed would be a misstatement. In between thanking Tenborg profusely for pursuing the case beyond the point of physical and financial exhaustion and calling CCN's victims to report the verdict, I cried for awhile. All the anger and resentment I had faded into the ether. It was a feeling akin to finding out a loved one's cancer was in remission. I had a new lease on life. Regardless of what they say or write, the verdict effectively rendered their credibility moot. Regardless of what they wrote about me before, it didn't matter anymore. Not only did their words lose significant value in the public square, they were now on the hook for \$1.1 million in damages. It was time for them to pay the piper, and I couldn't have been happier.

The jury was less than unanimous on damages, having awarded \$300,000 in actual damages for pain and suffering and emotional distress, \$300,000 in presumed damages for loss of future revenue and \$500,000 in punitive damages. Velie was deemed liable for the entire amount, and Blackburn was responsible for \$600,000 because the jury did not find him liable for punitive damages.

The *Tribune* caught Tenborg and Wagstaffe outside the courtroom to discuss their victory. Wagstaffe told the *Tribune* that CCN was “an online rag sheet that sensationalizes.” Wagstaffe added, “And a local community can be terrorized by that activity. When there are false statements — I believe in the First Amendment, I believe in great investigative journalism. This



was not that.”

His word resonated profoundly. I couldn't have agreed more.

Following the verdict, CCN removed the original article but stood by their reporting. They vowed to file an appeal and, once again, claimed the “pernicious” lawsuit was orchestrated by supervisor Hill and a number of conspirators to shut them down. They offered no apology, no willingness to improve their practices or conduct. If I was in their shoes, I would've done everything that was necessary to ensure better checks and balances were in place to prevent a legal trainwreck like theirs from ever happening again. For all intents and purposes, their case was an unequivocal disaster. Their refusal to hold themselves accountable for their demonstrably poor choices was nothing short of grand delusion.

The media response to CCN's verdict was swift. The *Tribune* editorial board said the jurors made the right call and, in doing so, reminded journalists of the importance to report accurately and correct responsibly. Then they went further, writing that the outcome reflected poorly on Cal Poly due to Loving's involvement with the website. During the trial, Loving informed his students that he was retiring and moving out of state, effectively resigning from the journalism department.

*New Times* used the verdict as an opportunity to highlight CCN's various controversies as a cover story. They reached out to victims whose corrections were ignored or outright denied. In one account, when a relative of one of CCN's victims reached out to call Velie to express her displeasure, Velie reportedly told her, “I just write what I hear.” The comment was an eerily similar refrain to the one she gave me when I called her, but she went a bit further by saying she *knew* what I said better than me. *New Times* reached out to Velie to comment on the record about the other stories she reported incorrectly.

The *New York Times* briefly covered the verdict. Reporter Michael McPhate reached out to me for comment, but opted not to publish my remarks. He did, however, indicate that Blackburn had previously reached out to the *New York Times*, asking them to investigate me and the “conspiracy.” Sure enough, I also heard

from a reporter working for the *Los Angeles Times* that told me a similar story, but they decided to not run their story on the verdict.

Dave Congalton, who didn't attend the trial, reacted to the verdict by praising CCN's work, "warts and all." Congalton said in an email to the *New York Times*, "Karen Velie remains the only game in town when it comes to investigative reporting." Like Congalton, who had a deep connection to Velie and Blackburn, many of CCN's core supporters remained steadfast in their loyalty, despite the unanimous guilty verdict and onslaught of unfavorable media coverage.

In May 2017, after the dust settled, CCN filed a motion for a new trial, claiming the jury awarded "excessive" damages to Tenborg without receiving evidence of Velie's net worth. Her attorney claimed Velie did not receive the court's request for financial records because it had "inadvertently not been forwarded to her by counsel when received a month earlier." But Velie proved to be elusive and not forthcoming with her records. According to the *Tribune*, Tenborg's legal counsel was unable to locate Velie despite records showing at least two dozen attempts by process servers at various addresses throughout the county listed for the business and Velie's family members. Velie later claimed her father passed away during the trial and she was out of town.

Velie's attorney David Vogel claimed his client had "no assets other than \$1,000 in her bank account and CalCoastNews." But even he had trouble locating her. Vogel ultimately declined to represent her further in the judgment portion of the case. In 2018, Velie sued Vogel and Ingo Brauer, claiming they both failed to properly represent and prepare her for the case. The case had been in legal limbo for nearly four years before the trial started.

During the time CCN sought a motion for a new trial, Velie apparently transferred her primary asset, CalCoastNews.com, to friend and Cayucos entrepreneur Dennis Pfister. When attorneys attempted to "serve" Pfister, he reportedly and repeatedly refused to come out of his home to be served.

Velie appeared on Congalton's show shortly after the *Tribune*

wrote about her allegedly dodging service process. Sounding oddly joyful, Velie gave a shout-out to me with Congalton joking that she just came out of the witness relocation program. Velie attempted to correct the *Tribune*, stating they falsely claimed she lost her appeal (they didn't). She claimed I falsely accused her of being “convicted” of an unspecified crime (I didn't) and “in hiding” (referring to the *Tribune* article). She also accused me of saying I was taking over her website, which was false because I clearly joked about that. Then she claimed I and a group of people have referred to her using a bunch of misogynistic slurs. She named a number of public officials who she claimed referred to her as a “whore” (they didn't) and floated that some on my site claimed her daughters “deserved to be called whores” (didn't happen).

I found Velie's on-air conduct disturbing enough to reach out to the station manager and American General Media, the new owners of 920 KVEC. My frustration with the segment was compounded with harassment I began receiving from Congalton's listeners. After a short internal review, the station decided to permanently ban Velie.

Blackburn refrained from making public appearances and comments about the case to the extent that his beleaguered colleague did. Blackburn, who filed financial records with the court, filed for bankruptcy protection. Blackburn revealed in a 2018 editorial on CCN that a trust fund was established by the bankruptcy trustee. Part of that trust was funded by a \$100,000 second mortgage on his home, which he credited his sister-in-law for donating.

Meanwhile, their writer Josh Friedman – who was in Europe during the trial and was not a party to the case – vowed the website would no longer be on the defensive. Claiming a reporter's children was “snatched from their family” and implying reporters were physically assaulted, Friedman told viewers in a November 2017 YouTube video that he was going to release “information that has long been suppressed” incrementally and on a daily basis, presumably about the “conspiracy.” Friedman never carried out his threat.

## DEFAMERS

In the midst of all their chaos, CalCoastNews' limited liability corporation was seized by Tenborg. This occurred after Velie, Blackburn and Loving were removed from the website's masthead and their short biographies were scrubbed. While they remained online and active, CCN lost their registered likeness. I wrote about this, interpreting the move as a closing of a dark chapter, that there was poetic justice in the defamed taking ownership of the defamers. Friedman defiantly stated that was not the case, calling me a "troll" and accusing me of fomenting some sort of hostile takeover of their website. He claimed that my "trolling" essentially led to "stalled reporting and raised serious concerns among contributors including people who have written comments [on their site]," despite the fact he never showed readers how those concerns were real in any way.

Claiming anonymous readers were concerned that they could be targets of harassment if their real names became known to Hill, Tenborg or me, Friedman used the hysteria generated from his article to launch a new site: Cal Coast Times. It didn't make a whole lot of sense why they would have two "news" sites with a similar name with the exact same content, especially when CCN was never taken down to complete the transition. It didn't make sense to me why they would be so concerned if the website was fully in their control. This was the fake news I was now accustomed to. The frustration of being falsely accused had gone away, now that they were spending most of their time desperately flailing.

Recognizing they were now in an irreversible downward spiral into perpetual self-denial and irrelevance, I decided to shut down Cal Coast Fraud and move forward – that is, until my morbid curiosity once again reared its ugly head.

## 37

The courthouse was a place for people to be absolutely miserable. As for me, I loved the experience. As someone who studied law, I had a natural inclination to cover court cases. I wasn't necessarily part of the mainstream media landscape, but the CCN trial gave me the experience I needed to fully appreciate the legal process. I got used to removing my belt and metallic possessions with the metal detectors and making small talk with some of the security guards.

It was July 19, 2017. I received a tip from a reliable source that Velie was appearing in court for a debtor's exam as a result of the court judgment against her. At the time, Velie was reportedly evading process service and conducting legally questionable asset transfers to avoid paying damages. I decided to attend her debtor's exam as someone who was curious about her latest excuse *du jour*. I was also interested in knowing about her assets in the event that I took her to court for defamation. Despite the fact I no longer took CCN seriously at face value, I continued to be the subject of harassment from their gullible readers, which resulted in continuous emotional distress for my family and I.

A number of cases were heard in the courtroom before Velie's debtor's exam. I sat in the front row of the audience beside Tenborg's attorney, Kevin Clune. Velie sat in the back row against the wall with her attorney. Velie and the attorney were speaking loudly. At one point, Velie started taunting me. "Hi, Aaron Ochs," she said before engaging in a discussion with her attorney. I didn't bother turning around. I kept my head down and started taking notes. They were discussing transferring assets to a "network" of relatives. Velie loudly vowed to "not give Tenborg a penny." The attorney, who didn't appear fazed by having this conversation within an earshot of me, advised her to form a new company where assets could be transferred to. That company would later become Cal Coast Press.

By the time he got around to the debtor's exam, Judge Charles

Crandall stated he had to recuse himself from anything having to do with Velie or CalCoastNews. He deferred to another judge to administer the debtor's exam at a later date. The trip to court didn't seem as fruitful at first, but now I have Velie openly conspiring to avoid paying judgment – even if she ultimately lost the appeal she had just filed. I wanted to ask Clune some questions about the discussions Velie had with the attorney.

I stepped out of the courtroom. Clune, Velie and the attorney were in the doorway. I briefly stood behind Clune and whispered that I wanted to ask him a few questions before I left. Feeling uncomfortable with my presence, Velie said, “I don't want Aaron Ochs to listen to us.” Having no intent to listen in, I sat what I believed was a comfortable distance from her. I started scrolling through my notes on my phone and waiting patiently. About five minutes passed and I was eager to leave. Then I heard Velie loudly and repeatedly saying, “I don't want Aaron Ochs here.” I looked up and saw Velie smiling down at me with her arms defiantly placed by her hips. She was starting to make a scene. My indignation was steadily rising every time she invoked my full name.

Then I snapped. Literally.

I took out my phone, got up close to Velie and snapped a photo. Right then and there, I decided that I was going to ask her questions. The flash of the camera briefly disoriented her. “It's illegal to take photos in the courthouse,” she snapped.

“No, it isn't,” I said, being completely unaware of the sign that only allowed media photos in a designated area of the courthouse.

“Can you get my photograph too?” her attorney asked jokingly.

Then she walked away, zipping down the hallway and up the stairs. I followed her while trying to get my voice reporter app to work on my phone. I was unsuccessful. Instead, I referred to my notes and started asking her questions about false allegations she wrote about me. I provided her context for my two questions about her “reporting,” then asked her point blank, “Why are you publishing allegations that you know aren't true?” I got no

response. I waited about five seconds for her to answer before moving to the next question. The third question was about transferring her assets to her relatives, specifically her daughters. Having answered none of my questions, I said, “Have a good day,” and walked toward the courthouse annex exit. She headed toward the front entrance.

After the awkward exchange, I sat in my car inside a nearby parking garage, cursing at myself for approaching her. I was nervous with a lingering sense of dread. *She’s going to lie about this encounter, I’m sure of it.* For every situation between her and I, it was always a “he said, she said” situation, and I made the mistake of not asking her questions in front of witnesses. In my exasperation, I inadvertently created the perfect storm for a controversy that should never exist. Yet I felt strangely at peace, knowing she couldn’t justify her “reporting” in person.

I returned home later that day and published my report on the debtor’s exam hearing, including the specific questions I asked Velie. After the encounter, I vowed to never be in the same room as her again. It wasn’t worth it.

On August 1, 2017, I received an email from a *New Times* reporter who informed me Velie had filed a temporary restraining order against me. I was completely dumbfounded. I figured she would write another article about me with the same, tired conspiratorial nonsense. But a restraining order? For what? I reached out to the reporter to get some clarification. I wanted to know what I was being asked to comment on. He forwarded me the temporary restraining order request, which offered a wildly different take on what I thought was a one-sided, but uneventful interaction.

In her July 27 temporary restraining order request, Velie claimed I “assaulted” her at the courthouse in front of law enforcement officials. The assault reportedly included me “yelling and aggressively gesticulating,” threatening her daughters and saying I was going to “bury [her]” if I didn’t get what I wanted – whatever that was. Following the interaction, Velie claimed she sought a guard who attempted to detain me while I “took fled with the bailiff chasing [me].” Describing what sounded like a

scene out of a courtroom drama, Velie claimed this was the culmination of “more than four years of ongoing harassment.” Nothing she described actually occurred.

Velie used her restraining order request to raise new and old false allegations about me. She started her complaint with the claim that she was “informed” that supervisor Hill, Tenborg and Wagstaffe were trying to “destroy” her and her business. She claimed that he had copies of text messages where Hill reportedly threatened to “use” me to harass her and anyone affiliated with her. Velie never provided evidence that those texts existed in my case or in her lawsuit against Hill.

She claimed I stalked her at public events and at home, made “false claims,” attempted to incite violence against her and made posts about her family and business. It was true that I mentioned her grown daughters, but only within public relevance. There was extensive anonymous trolling of public figures and private citizens by accounts linked to Velie’s grown daughters. One of them created a Facebook account to bombard Velie’s critics with private messages and friend requests. This activity, which was brought to my attention by members of the San Luis Obispo County Progressives, a left-leaning political group that Velie despised. Additionally, Velie’s daughter breached secure access to private conversations between SLO County Progressives. Following her daughter’s ouster from the group for infiltrating their private Facebook group, Velie claimed without evidence that the political group denied multiple Democrats in the community – who were critical of supervisor Hill – from participating in private group discussions.

More than anything, Velie wrote how she resented being labeled mentally ill, unstable and dangerous. She felt “harassed” because I wrote about her behavior – that is, to a lesser extent than her fixation on other people’s behavior. At that time, Velie authored or co-authored over 100 articles about supervisor Hill, which excluded extensive psychoanalysis of his online habits.

Velie claimed she reported me to the Arroyo Grande Police Dept. and the District’s Attorney for “impersonat[ing] someone online in order to do harm,” but there was no evidence these



reports existed.

She claimed “multiple people” reported me for stalking and harassment, though the only time I was contacted by law enforcement was from a deputy who checked on *my* safety. There were no police reports on file. After reading her allegations, I ordered a comprehensive criminal background check on myself and contacted law enforcement for any incident or police reports on file. I was clean. Didn't even have a single traffic ticket.

Without evidence, Velie falsely claimed I regularly asked readers to “destroy” her and her family. She provided no evidence to suggest I wrote anything about “destroying” her, let alone provide the court with a record of these “regularly made” posts. She went on to claim that these alleged posts allegedly led certain people to confront her near her home in Santa Margarita. She also associated me with dead cats being placed on her porch and her beloved family dog being poisoned.

Velie falsely claimed I incited Kenny McCarthy to physically confront her.

Velie falsely claimed my father showed up to her house. This fabricated event reportedly led her to stay part-time at a friend's home to protect her family and herself. This fear and anxiety she reportedly accumulated from this so-called “harassment” caused her to consider buying a gun. However, Velie furnished no evidence showing my father was on her property. I contacted law enforcement to determine if Velie filed any police reports regarding this alleged incident. There were none.

Nearly everything she alleged was completely made up. The fact that she was willing to request a restraining order based on an elaborate string of lies was deeply disturbing. It was one thing to write an article, hide behind anonymous bylines and “numerous sources,” but she was making these deeply inflammatory and defamatory claims after she just lost a defamation lawsuit.

What was truly her end game? What did she want out of this whole ordeal? In her request, she asked the court to compel me to stop writing about her. Never before have I experienced a situation that involved someone attempting to file a restraining

order against me because they didn't like what I wrote. Ever tried not reading it?

This was a clear attempt to chill my free speech and prevent criticism of her public actions – and manipulate the court system to use as a weapon of harassment.

I was determined to fight this and put an end to CCN's reign of terror, but I was extremely distraught. I confided to friends and family that I hadn't slept for almost three days after learning of the temporary restraining order. There was also a legitimate concern that this person was going to haunt me for the rest of my personal and professional life based on an overwhelmingly false and convoluted premise that I was harassing *her* as part of a conspiracy that didn't exist. How could I not possibly believe that these actions weren't from someone who was unstable and dangerous? Was I going to be penalized for expressing an opinion that had a strong likelihood of being true?

After receiving an electronic copy of the temporary restraining order request, a deputy arrived at my home to hand-deliver a large stack of papers containing the request, her evidence and a notice that the temporary request was granted. The hearing was set for August 17.

With little sleep, I tapped into my manic, insomnia-fueled adrenaline to read everything, scan documents and prepare my response to allegations she couldn't prove.

In her stack of papers, Velie furnished the California legal definitions for criminal harassment and stalking, followed by several pages containing some of my older Facebook posts, none of which lined up with the allegations she made. She described these posts as examples of stalking and harassment. One of them included a post I made in 2013 to a friend, which made light of her suspicion of her DUI arrest, specifically her excuse for her slurred speech as “tongue thrust.” I posted a photo of her mugshot that featured an exaggeratedly long tongue. Velie also shared a parody photo of her face on nearly every member of the Addams Family. The photo was a tongue-in-cheek (pun intended) response to her claim that I was constantly publishing photos of her children and grandchildren. Without context, Velie crafted the appearance that

mentions of her family were excessive and gratuitous. She didn't want to address the fact that I was reporting on cyber-harassment from Facebook accounts that readily featured her daughter's name. To emphasize how bizarre it was to be harassed from family members of a self-proclaimed "reporter," I used satire. Seeing how it was wildly misconstrued as harassment to the point of being used as flimsy justification for a restraining order, I clearly missed the mark with her.

This spoke to a larger problem I had with my messaging earlier on: I used a lot of satire and sarcasm to underscore serious issues and downplay her salacious allegations. In turn, Velie would publish my words verbatim to her readers without context. The frequent cyber-harassment of my family led me to making a number of irresponsible snap judgments, which included samples of my gallows humor. In the heat of the moment, I couldn't figure out how to effectively respond to it and didn't feel I had the time to learn how. Feeling a sense of futility – that I was unable to curb what was happening because it fell within the guidelines of free speech – I tried to laugh about it. There was nothing I could do but laugh. Now my words were being wildly misconstrued as purposeful intimidation, and I was being forced into court to testify about it. This was no laughing matter.

I wasn't alone in making quips about the ongoing situation. There were people who shared satirical hot takes, some of which I felt were right on the line or crossed over. One Facebook reader was fairly prolific in his satire, often going low-brow. In February 2016, one reader made a comment about Velie's daughter and her physical appearance. He conjured a misogynistic mental image in my mind that led me to respond, "Not enough bleach for the eyes." This was a popular Internet idiom for being unable to "unsee" something once seen. But somehow, Velie interpreted this quip as a communicated threat to *throw* bleach in *her* daughter's eyes. This wasn't a matter of misreading a comment. This was about creating an element of criminality that never existed. This would become a common theme throughout her complaint.

Reading her "evidence," Velie was evidently apoplectic over

the fact that I touched on her mental health, which I mentioned in moderation. Considering my personal experiences with her, how I was treated and how she treated others, it became a conversation I couldn't ignore – no matter how much I wanted to ignore it.

When I started discussing this sensitive issue, there was a similar conversation going on about then-presidential candidate Donald Trump. In 2017, psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton said that Trump “makes increasingly bizarre statements that are contradicted by irrefutable evidence to the contrary,” but he wasn't sure whether Trump's lack of clear contact with reality qualified as a *bona fide* delusion.” Curiously, Velie included similar comments I made about her as part of her evidence against me. Velie was repeatedly corrected for claims she reported on, but routinely ignored or dismissed the corrections. But Velie saw the conversation I was having as “criminal harassment.” The fact she viewed that discussion and criticism as unlawful indicated – at least in my mind – that she didn't have the mental fortitude to be in the journalism business.

To emphasize her points, Velie also solicited depositions from others I've previously criticized.

Los Osos resident Peggy Pavek submitted a declaration, claiming I harassed her, was somehow involved in vandalism of her property, and wished one of her daughters would “die of cancer.” The false allegations were outrageous and hurtful to my family. These allegations were coming from someone my family personally knew – someone I previously defended from the kind of behavior she now accused me of exhibiting. While it was true that I wrote about her, it was in the context of disturbing comments she made about me. I used everything in my legal and linguistic arsenal to convince her to stop – including publishing screenshots of her comments to put her behavior under the microscope – but to no avail. It was the opposite situation.

Julie Tacker also submitted a declaration, also claiming I was harassing her. Tacker described my relationship as something that started as cordial but soured over time. She speculated the dissolution of our relationship pertained to her involvement with

CalCoastNews. From there, she went on to describe how she felt I “harassed” her. She discussed the voicemail my mother received from Sandra Hedges in 2015, and admitted to believing that I personally discussed purchasing a firearm presumably to harm her. Ironically, it was CCN that posted a rare correction that included my actual remarks, which stated nothing like that. From there, Tacker admitted to repeatedly reporting me to Facebook and law enforcement over criticism of her conduct as a “government watchdog” and later her candidacy for re-election. She concluded her declaration by stating that she “support[ed] the efforts to remove [my] website and blogs from the internet” based on my public criticism.

As an addendum to her declaration, Tacker showed a string of emails between her and SLO County Sheriff Ian Parkinson, pleading with him to investigate my posts, which she described as “mostly lies and are pretty scary in fact.” In her email correspondence with Parkinson, Tacker denied my claim on SLO Truth that she made threatening remarks about one of her critics. “I just mourned a cricket that died before making it out of the house,” Tacker arrogantly defended herself to Parkinson. What kind of person sends an email to the sheriff about something a writer wrote?

She also shared her correspondence with Velie and Kevin P. Rice, which indicated to me they were colluding and possibly conspiring to undermine my First Amendment rights.

I was not surprised at Tacker's fascist zeal to have my critical posts and articles removed from the internet, but I was shocked at the extent of her pursuit and her obsessive desire to have me investigated by law enforcement. The revelation was mind-blowing. I was discussing the conduct of a public figure – someone who voluntarily made herself a public figure – within the scope of public interest. It was particularly unnerving to see someone – who should by now be accustomed to public scrutiny – engaging in extensive oppression of a private citizen's views. It wasn't uncommon to read or hear about public figures who resented critical coverage, but Tacker's response to my work was nothing short of disturbing and autocratic. It all boils down to a

simple concept: if you don't like what you read, don't read it. Grow up.

Velie also solicited a declaration from her daughter, Cristin Powers. In her declaration, Powers claimed I made “false claims [and] promoted aggression” toward her, her sister and mother. Powers was the person who infiltrated private discussions with SLO County Progressives and was subsequently booted. Powers falsely claimed I made personal claims about her mental state and children. I informed readers of an article featuring claims her mother's website made in their reporting, specifically when they claimed Powers' children were “kidnapped” by the government, and that the alleged “kidnapping” was orchestrated by supervisor Hill and others. Powers went on to claim she never wrote for CalCoastNews (she did), claimed I referred to her as a “whore” (I didn't) and I attended the ACLU-SLO Constitutional Day event “knowing” her family would be there and taking photos of her children (false).

I was stunned by the abundance of perjury – that these people were willing to perjure themselves in order to prevent me from writing about them or quoting their own words. This was a deep sickness I couldn't cure by simply walking away. They wanted me to be completely eliminated from public discourse, and this was not an exaggeration. This was a conspiracy to silence me. They handed me all the evidence I could ever ask for and then some on a silver platter. That's not to say their resentment of my criticism was unjustified, but their obsessive, manic desire to disembowel my civil rights was something I couldn't allow in good conscience. I was going to fight for my rights and document my mission to preserve them.

Now I was tasked to respond to everything they alleged. It wasn't going to be as simple as “I didn't do it.” I had to show the judge my documentation and compile a record that was never before consolidated in one place. For the next several days, I went through binders of documentation I organized over the years, containing what felt like a lifetime of harassment. I had to essentially relive the drama and heavy emotional toll, which made the process more agonizing. I kept thinking: *I should be the one*

*taking them to court and file a restraining order against them.* But then I'd be abiding by their faulty logic. Had I followed through with that consideration, I would've lent their flawed argument credence: that if criticism was disagreeable enough, the law should be utilized to prohibit it. If I was going to fight for my free speech rights, why would I risk compromising my integrity by using their suppression methods to take away theirs? To be fair, I contacted law enforcement to see if anything could be done to reduce the amount of harassment I received from them. Their answer was consistently simple: unless they made constant, unwanted personal contact with me or directly threatened me with harm, there was nothing I could do. I could feel harassed, but mere feelings weren't actionable.

I reached out to a number of lawyers about my case for representation. There was a prevailing concern that CalCoastNews would personally retaliate against them in one form or another. One of my contacts expressed interested in representing me, but due to time and scheduling constraints she became a legal adviser. It appeared that I was going to represent myself in my case against Velie, who declared in court documents that she would represent herself *pro per* – as themselves. With about a year of law school under my belt and a good sense of what was at stake, I was cautiously optimistic about my chances for success and felt I'd prevail on the facts alone, regardless of my performance in court.

**M**y father reminded me that the truth would set me free, but I felt imprisoned in anguish. It didn't matter how many times he told me that. Preparing for the August 17, 2017 hearing felt heavily prolonged. I figured the hearing would be just as cumbersome if not more. I anticipated Velie would turn the case into an elaborate circus, complete with well-debunked conspiracy theories, zany allegations and a thorough examination of my posts, many of which I removed months earlier in light of the verdict – motivated by the desire to move forward and not have CalCoastNews as my singular focus. Yet months later, that was all I could think about.

Six of Velie's contributors and associates piled into the courtroom. There was Kevin P. Rice, sitting directly behind my father and I. As I conversed with Ed, I could feel Rice's warm breath on the back of my neck. He was eavesdropping. Next came Julie Tacker, who sat one row behind Rice. Accompanying Tacker was Los Osos resident Dr. C. Hite, someone I criticized years earlier for comments she made during public comment at a SLO County Board of Supervisors meeting. Michael Brennler arrived and sat across from us. Blackburn sat beside Velie. The last person to arrive was Stew Jenkins, who approached me with paperwork, indicating he was now representing Velie. We were surrounded by people who dedicated hours, days, weeks, months and years trying to ruin my life. It was an Oscar's list of sociopaths.

Prior to the hearing, I hadn't slept a week for nearly two days. I joked to dad about being too tired to be intimidated. I just wanted the hearing to be over and done with.

To my surprise, Judge Charles Crandall approached the bench. He was the same judge who previously recused himself from any and all legal matters pertaining to CalCoastNews and Karen Velie.



I sat in silence while I watched Crandall handle the case preceding ours. In that case, Crandall disclosed to the parties involved that he had a mentally disabled relative in his family. I predicted Crandall would show some lenience toward Velie, especially because I touched on the subject of her mental state a number of times. In anticipation of lenience, I provided records of her correspondence with my former employer, a transcript of comments she made on “the Congalton Show” back in May, and I planned to discuss her personal behavior she exhibited in my presence on several occasions. I wanted to show the judge that my interest in this sensitive subject was not borne from the intent to harm – that it was motivated by legitimate concern about her proven disregard for accuracy and the safety of others.

Then it was our turn. Crandall asked me how much time I needed to present my case and witnesses in total. I said 15 minutes. When Crandall asked Jenkins how much time he needed, Jenkins said two and a half hours. Jenkins said he needed the time to roll out “extensive physical evidence” and witnesses. Though I had received declarations from some of the individuals Velie solicited, I did not receive a witness list from Jenkins before the scheduled hearing. In his opening statements, Jenkins referred to my 2016 deposition transcript when he falsely claimed I testified about never being a reporter, and therefore my criticism of Velie was part of a “course of conduct” that served “no legitimate purpose.” Interestingly, despite ordering the transcript of my deposition, I never received one. Jenkins refused me access to it, thereby violating California evidence code.

Crandall didn't object to Jenkins' tactic, and occasionally referred to him as “Stew.” I deduced there was some collegiality between the two, but I was too preoccupied with the case to be distracted.

Jenkins discussed that he had “clear and convincing” evidence that I harassed not only Velie, but also her children and grandchildren, personally.

Then came the witnesses. None of the individuals that provided sworn declarations to Velie were called as witnesses, though Tacker was in the courtroom.

The attorney representing Velie on July 19 was called to the stand and testified that he felt “threatened” by me when I took a photo of Velie. On cross-examination, I asked him if he personally felt threatened despite Velie being the subject of the photo. I asked him if I verbally communicated any threats to him that day. He said no. I asked him if he felt threatened even when he jokingly asked me to take a photo of him. He said yes. He testified that I walked after Velie, but didn't notice any threatening activity. At the end of my cross-examination, I couldn't understand why Velie felt he was a valuable witness.

Brennler was called to the stand to address part of my response to Velie's accusations. In my response, I mentioned that Brennler harassed my father, who I stated would be a witness. Ed also provided a sworn declaration about his confrontations with Brennler. Brennler testified about his visits to my parents' home, vehemently denied personally harassing my father and I. To corroborate his testimony, Brennler admitted to secretly recording a conversation I had with him on my property. He falsely claimed the recording took place on a public street. Crandall initially ruled the recording as legally in the gray area and that it would be inadmissible. However, Crandall allowed Brennler to read a summary of the recording. What kind of process server would illegally record someone he's serving?

Brennler had trouble on the stand, changing his answer for the question I asked him: Did Brennler provide *pro bono* work as a private investigator for Karen Velie? He said no. I referred to a 2013 lawsuit filed against him by Dee Torres in which he described his relationship to her and CCN as such. He changed his answer and admitted to his *pro bono* status. I wanted to show the judge that Brennler did not act solely within the scope of process server, that he was likely given direction by Velie to confront and intimidate my family. He admitted on the stand to having personal motive for harassing them: I had previously reported on his lawsuit and his reportedly contentious relationship with the San Luis Obispo Police Dept.

I was called to the stand. Jenkins approached the stand and leaned over, with my nose just inches away from his. I stoically

looked past him and tried to maintain my composure. It proved to be extraordinarily difficult. I wasn't intimidated by Jenkins, I wanted him to stop breathing in my face. He asked me a leading question about my status as a journalist. I remember him asking me, "Did you say, in your deposition, on the following lines that you were never employed as a reporter or journalist?" He opened up his binder, which contained my deposition. I told him that I was previously employed at *Information Press* and before that served as a writer and designer for *The ROCK*. He accused me of not answering the question and being argumentative. I asked Jenkins to read the relevant portion of the transcript to refresh my memory of the context he was citing. He refused.

Jenkins went through pages of his "evidence," which contained printouts of some of my older posts and comments – all the ones I've seen before in the packet Velie provided. He discussed one post after another asking me if I authored the posts and, if so, if I posted them with the intent to harm Velie. I admitted to authoring most of the posts with the exception of one. He grew exasperated with my truthful answers, slowly increasing the volume in his voice until he asked me to review a comment I made. It was a comment I made when I responded to a reader's comment about Velie's daughter by saying, "Not enough bleach in the eyes."

"Did you author that comment, Mr. Ochs?"

"Yes."

"Did you threaten to throw bleach in Ms. Velie's daughter's eyes?"

"No."

Jenkins looked stunned. I couldn't understand why he would be. Then he leaned further on the stand. Our noses touched. He looked me in the eye and asked, "Did you know that in Afghanistan, terrorists often times throw bleach into women's eyes?"

"No, I –"

It felt a thick gob of saliva hit me on the face, right below my left eye. It happened so suddenly, I froze for a moment, trying to

rapidly unravel what just happened. It took me a few seconds to absorb the fact that Jenkins, a practicing attorney, spit in my face. I quickly gripped the stand, resisting a tempting urge to punch him. But I stayed still. I looked over at Rice and Tacker, who looked on, smiling. Crandall tapped his pen on his lip, cleared his throat and gently asked “Stew” to take a step back from the witness stand. I realized that had I reacted, I would likely be arrested and thrown straight into jail. It was like a higher power had convinced me to resist, but quietly.

From his table, Jenkins asked me about posts I allegedly made to incite violence against Velie. He referred to a post where he claimed I incited Kenny McCarthy to physically confront her. Since I didn't personally author the post in question (one of my contributors did), I denied inciting any sort of confrontation. Frustrated with Velie's reporting on him, McCarthy wrote on social bookmarking site reddit, “I hope I never meet her in public because it probably won't end well. For her, that is. She's scum.” The contributor responded to him by telling him to “Stay strong. Truth defends itself while liars fall all over themselves to defend what they have said.” Velie falsely attributed the post to me. Brennler testified about McCarthy's confrontation with Velie in Santa Margarita. When I asked him if he had evidence that I was personally involved in the event he described, Brennler said no.

In Velie's case, there was a pattern I noticed where she would exaggerate the amount of times I allegedly did a certain thing, but only cite one or two examples of it. The examples she provided didn't justify her claims whatsoever. Yet Jenkins was completely convinced that there was “clear and convincing evidence” that validated everything she mentioned.

Then Velie approached the witness stand. I looked on as Jenkins helped Velie weave a magical tale about how I aggressively followed her through the courthouse, yelling and screaming at her about her daughters. Choking back tears, Velie said she was concerned about me physically grabbing her by the legs and throwing her down the stairs – like I had the ability to turn into The Hulk in front of witnesses and security guards. She mentioned how I dashed out of the courthouse with people

chasing after me like I was Dr. Richard Kimble in “The Fugitive.” She claimed “everyone” witnessed my apparent aggression, but she could only name one security guard. The guard later informed Crandall that he had no recollection of the events Velie described.

She also described an incident where she claimed I made “throat-cutting” gestures and threatened to kill her outside San Luis Obispo City Hall. This reportedly occurred after the Second District Appellate Court’s three-judge panel heard her website’s Tenborg pretrial appeal in 2015. While I did laugh at her for what I believed was her impending loss, the “throat-cutting” and threats didn’t happen.

Velie’s demeanor turned from tearful to joyful within minutes as she described how I allegedly showed up at her house on a motorcycle, stood for an unspecified period of time by the fence in her driveway, removed my helmet and stared at her house. She said I appeared at her driveway “many times.” On cross-examination, when I asked her whether she filed a police report, she answered she filed “multiple police reports” with the SLO County Sheriff’s Dept. When I pointed out that she didn’t furnish any police reports as part of her evidence packet, she told me to “look it up.” Velie repeated similar allegations about my father, claiming he was also stalking her. I repeated the same line of questioning and got the same answers. Crandall volunteered to inspect the reports. He later discovered that there were no police reports detailing any stalking by my father and I. Nothing.

Later, Velie claimed I personally stalked her children and grandchildren “many times.” The one example she provided was my attendance at ACLU-SLO’s Constitution Day event in 2016. She falsely claimed I was there with the stated purpose to stalk her family and take photos of them. When I asked her if she read an exhibit I submitted to the court from a *New Times* columnist – where he stated he invited me to the event – she said yes. Velie was unable to present evidence of her claim.

Around the event of her testimony, Velie began sobbing when she described in detail a phone conversation I reportedly had with her in December 2016, roughly around Christmas. She told the tale of how I called her while she was at the hospital late one

evening for a family emergency. She claimed that I repeatedly yelled that she was “mentally ill.” With tears welling in his eyes, Velie’s grandson reportedly asked her, “Why is this man yelling at you, grandma?” She finished telling her story by breaking down on the stand. However, the reality was far different. I contacted her three months earlier over her falsified depiction of my deposition. This was when I calmly read her my corrections and she began shouting over me.

I found myself having to improvise with my defense to accommodate all the additional allegations she exclusively levied on the witness stand. Crandall, who chided me for taking up more time than necessary to cross-examine her brand-new allegations, finally gave me the floor to lay out my case.

I started from the beginning, or when the conflict between Velie, and I escalated.

“Would you agree that between you and I, we have a long history.”

Velie didn’t answer the question affirmatively, but snapped, “It’s *you* that has a history with *me*.”

I brought up her 2014 harassment and threats to my former employer Sandra Marshall, presented a series of emails between the two – with some of my emails indicating that my employer was uncomfortable talking to her. Though Velie adamantly denied harassing Marshall, she admitted under oath that most of her correspondence had nothing to do with my reporting at *Information Press*.

This was part of a pattern of conduct, which involved contacting other people not responsible for my content to “correct” things I’ve written, but she never provided corrections to me. I provided a few examples, including emails she left with a smattering of public officials she personally derided for “participating” or giving a “thumbs up” on my Facebook page. She took umbrage with these individuals for making – what she believed was – endorsements of content containing false claims and attacks on her family. Yet for all the “false claims” she claimed I made, Velie made no effort to contact me personally to clarify or

correct the record. She often accused me of libel, but never contacted the supposed libeler. In fact, the opposite was true. I reached out to her with corrections, to no avail.

I went on to discuss Velie's penchant for brazenly exaggerating and lying about me in public. After citing her articles, I discussed her bizarre May 2017 appearance on "Hometown Radio." Though I presented her with an accurate transcript of her on-air comments, Velie immediately denied making any of the transcribed comments. After absorbing her impulsive lie for a few seconds, I asked her to clarify comments she made on the air and attempted to approach the stand with my copy. This caused Jenkins to hurriedly leap from his seat and dash to the witness stand as if he was about to stop an impending assault. He had a copy of the transcript and handed it to Velie.

Though she initially denied making any statements to Congalton that day, Velie admitted that she claimed I falsely accused her of being convicted for an unspecified crime and that I reportedly called her and her daughter "whores." Noting the fact she reiterated similar allegations in her complaint, I pointed out that she once again provided no evidence I made these false claims about her.

Due to the amount of time I spent batting down Velie's voluminous allegations, Crandall barred my father from testifying as a witness to Brenner's harassment and to address the false allegations Velie personally made about him.

At the conclusion of my cross-examination of Velie, I asked her if it was true that a unanimous jury found her guilty of defamation. She said yes.

The hearing lasted nearly four hours. By the time we got to our closing statements, I was ready to collapse after being forced to ride a horrifying roller coaster of emotions. I listened to Jenkins repeatedly impugn my character for 10 minutes during his closing statement, describing how he demonstrably showed the court "clear and convincing" evidence that I was a monster who would go as far as stalk someone's grandchildren. I was sick to my stomach, with a heavy head stacked on my shoulders and my eyes blurry as I heard Jenkins unsubstantiated claim that I stalked her

and her family. Feeling the effects of insomnia rattling my concentration, all I could comprehend was a blur of allegations never proven.

There was one thing I knew for sure, which I had to keep reminding myself: the truth will set me free. Despite some lapses in judgment when handling my content, my moral compass never waned. Deep inside I knew I was not the hateful, vengeful person Velie and her insane posse claimed I was. I was many things: arrogant with an acerbic wit, provocative, bitter, sanctimonious. I was angry at Velie and CalCoastNews for how they treated me and others and I wanted to set the record straight. I wanted my reputation and dignity back. I was more than willing to jump in the mud with them, call them out and be ruthless in my lawful, sometimes excessive prose. But I was not a monster. I believed they truly *knew* I wasn't a monster, but they wanted me to stop writing about them – and they were willing to throw all sorts of mud on the wall to see what stuck.

By the time it was my turn to make my closing statement, I told the court that I was the real victim. I accused Velie and Jenkins of slandering me in court without providing a scintilla of evidence to show that I harassed, stalked or threatened her in any way. I told the court that I was committed to not only correcting the record for myself, but also the various victims of her “reporting” – people whose lives were unnecessarily turned upside down for attention and profit. I rattled off the names of victims. When I mentioned Nailani Buchholz, the 13-year-old girl whose suicide was made into a “bullying” spectacle by Velie, Velie turned to face me and chuckled. She was chuckling, blissfully unaware of the pain and suffering Nailani's loved ones had to endure – not dissimilar to what I was going through.

That moment, I looked into Velie's eyes and saw immovable darkness.

After I finished my closing statement, Crandall announced he was going to make a decision, but needed a few minutes to issue a ruling.

I remembered sitting motionless in my seat, looking around the room. By then, it was hot inside the courtroom and I removed



my jacket. I looked at Velie and Jenkins seated across from me at the plaintiff's table, exchanging pleasantries and smiles with each other. They were having fun. This wasn't the behavior exhibited by individuals who were fearful for their lives.

Jenkins jovially spoke to a young boy and girl seated quietly in the jury box. They were students and revealed to Jenkins that they were watching the hearing for the purpose of improving their mock-trial experience and learning more about the legal system. Jenkins offered to help the students with any questions. Then he suddenly pointed to me and said, "Did you think I did a good job dealing with him?" The students looked over at me but didn't respond to Jenkins. Then he added, "It's about over for him anyway."

Crandall returned from his chambers and decided to issue a continuance, citing that he needed a week to review the evidence, declarations, and consult the security guard Velie named as a witness. This was a temporary reprieve as I felt he would naturally rule in my favor after reviewing all the facts in the case.

The hearing, which left me emotionally drained, was definitely a teaching moment.

When you step out in public and express an opinion – one that's negatively charged – you have absolutely no control of how that opinion is received. Unless you personally know the person you're opining about, it's extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible, to be cognizant of how they will react to the way you present them. If you refer to someone as being unstable, you can't reasonably predict their instability. One thing's for sure: calling someone "crazy" will likely make them crazier, and there's not a whole lot you can do to put that genie back in the bottle once it's out. There could be valid reasons for expressing frustration over people like Velie, sure. However, it took me about five years and two legal cases to figure out that standing up for what you believe is right – what you believe is true – comes with risks.

In addition to retaliation, one of the risks is losing yourself in the heat of passion. I read my older posts over and over again and thought about how I could've phrased certain words better. I also thought about the importance of taking a step back when

necessary and cooling off before deciding to respond. As my anxiety worsened over the harassment I came to expect on what felt like a near-daily basis for nearly three years straight, I grew more impulsive. When I was impulsive, I lost the words to calmly express my views. It was easier for me to dismiss the pathological lying and strange behavior as actions taken by a “crazy” person. But in my inability to articulate and properly, calmly separate fact from fiction, I created an opportunity for people to think that I was degrading and humiliating people for facets about themselves they couldn't or wouldn't control. It was irresponsible of me to assume that my impassioned and judgmental views about people who wouldn't change would somehow “shame” them into changing.

Even if I exercised more restraint in my presentation, there was no guarantee that I would receive a more favorable outcome. I couldn't deny, though, how cathartic it was to show readers the whole truth and giving people the opportunity to tell their story as well as mine.

I didn't provide this service as an extension of a known media outlet, but the exceedingly hostile reaction to my work made it appear like it did – like I was a force to reckon with. At first, I wasn't. But when they went after me using extraordinary measures, put my face on their articles and mentioned my name, they effectively created me as their worst nightmare. The more attention they gave me, the more dastardly they were in attacking me, the more powerful I became in their head. Nothing I said or wrote stopped them from expressing themselves or going about their daily lives. Similarly, nothing I wrote landed me in a more prominent, influential position of power. The vast “conspiracy” was neither lucrative nor real. The true effectiveness of our salvos canceled each other out.

For a week, I spent most of my time reflecting on my actions. The question I found myself asking over and over again was, “What did *I* want out of this?” My family asked me a similar question: Why did I put myself through this seemingly endless ordeal?” It was a valid question because I developed opportunities for Velie, Blackburn and their minions to retaliate, so I wasn't the

unwittingly perfect victim by any stretch.

I wanted people to have a voice, be recognized for expressing their truth and have their experiences validated.

Throughout my childhood, I was bullied, attacked and left bloodied on the playground. As a young victim of bullying, I constantly felt I was at a disadvantage. Schools rarely wanted to get involved. Rarely any disciplinary action was taken. Because “boys will be boys.” Administrators would collectively shrug and dismiss incidents as “he said, they said.” Adults would attempt to speak for me, which resulted in them mischaracterizing my words and actions. Another tactic officials would deploy to justify the bullying was asking what I did to deserve it, even if the bullies’ violent actions were physically excessive and wholly unjustified. In every instance, I kept getting back up and moving forward with a raw desire to speak out. And by extension, when I saw others being bullied, I stepped in.

In my adult years, I didn’t just step in when friends and colleagues were maligned. I charged in, but didn’t bother to look at better ways to respond. Everything was done by instinct.

What CalCoastNews did was defame people and routinely deny them the dignity of a response. They offered no journalistic due process. Normally, I wouldn’t care what some gossipy blog claimed about public officials and private citizens, but their allegations were so damning and salacious that they went viral on social media, pervading public discourse with tantalizing click-bait. In a relatively small county like San Luis Obispo County, California, being falsely accused of the most heinous things imaginable had a greater potential to be personally and professionally devastating. Knowing this, I created a place where people could have their say and receive due process. I used my marketing sensibilities to promote the whole story to a wide audience. In doing so, I got to know people better, often times befriending people who I politically disagreed with – I wouldn’t have known who they truly were had I not given them the opportunity to tell their whole story. This was the power of empathy and objectivity. From this terrifying experience, I learned the joys of open-mindedness and balance.

**M**y father and I sat quietly outside the courtroom for the August 23 hearing. I was more comfortable in my own skin, having been able to calmly meditate on the case for a week. From the corner of my eye, I could see Velie sitting happily, moving her feet up and down like a child. She was flanked by Jenkins, Blackburn and James Duenow.

“Aaron Ochs is a bad man,” she kept saying loudly in between giggles. “Aaron Ochs called me mentally ill. He’s mentally ill” Over and over, she kept mentioning my full name loudly in association with the same tired allegations – that I was working with supervisor Hill and several others to “destroy” her.

“Ed Ochs is here. He tried to assault me. Ed Ochs and Aaron Ochs don’t like women,” I remember her saying. She was spouting this nonsense as people walked past us.

Ed and I coldly exchanged glances with them. Blackburn looked at us, shook his head and sighed. He had an unmistakable glimmer of self-awareness in his eyes. He looked at me, back at his cheerful, babbling colleague and somberly looked down at the floor. I wasn’t exactly an expert at body language, but it looked like Blackburn finally realized who Velie truly was.

I could hardly wait for the ruling to come.

Some of the same people who attended the previous hearing appeared at this one: Rice, Tacker and Hite. There were a few others who showed up. Since they were seated close to Velie, I assumed they were her supporters. Duenow was the only Velie supporter who sat beside me, reading a book. Having witnessed his past behavior in court, I didn’t feel comfortable with him being close by. Then again, perhaps that was the point.

I was seated at my table when Crandall took his seat. When he called my name, my feet were firmly planted on the ground.

He asked me about something I mailed to him. After seeking the advice of two lawyers, I decided to mail Crandall two

additional exhibits. The first exhibit was phone records I obtained, showing a call I made to Velie in September 2016, not December as she personally testified. The second exhibit was an addendum to my father's declaration in which he addressed and denied the allegations Velie made about him. Crandall ruled these exhibits inadmissible because they were "inappropriate" and had arrived too late to be submitted. This led to Jenkins complaining that his client never received copies of my new exhibits. He was right. I figured if evidentiary rules didn't apply at this hearing, what difference did it make?

The ruling started with Crandall prefacing his remarks by saying that the history of events between Velie and I was "too complicated" for him to confidently make a definitive ruling. However, he said my conduct was "troubling" and my posts were "inappropriate," some of which he mistakenly claimed were still online. He educated me on the local court rules, which prohibited photography in the courthouse except for the second floor rotunda. I expected to be admonished for my handling of the situation, but I was surprised by how ambiguous his comments were. I was left with the distinct impression that he didn't fully read the evidence presented by both parties, but I was in no place to be argumentative.

Just when I thought it was over, the other shoe finally dropped.

Though he noted Velie's "tearful" testimony, Crandall announced that he reached out to the security guard Velie identified as her sole witness to the events that transpired on July 19. The guard revealed to Crandall that he had no recollection of the dramatic account that Velie described. Crandall also couldn't find the "many" police reports Velie reportedly filed against me.

Crandall ruled that Velie failed to provide clear and convincing evidence that I harassed or stalked her. He struck down her restraining order request and asked me to "step back" from Velie. He expressed concern that if I continued to exhibit unspecified behavior, I would find myself back in court. Honestly, I didn't know what he was referring to and felt his admonishment largely lacked merit. All Velie had was a set of critical opinions, which she

wanted to place on trial and did so for several hours, only for the judge to find that she perjured herself extensively. Her attorney spit in my face while I sat, said nothing and didn't object to blatant criminal assault, yet I was the only one admonished.

In the end, I won. I appreciated the victory. At the same time, I was overcome with a confluence of emotions I couldn't completely fathom. I won, yes, but it felt like a Pyrrhic victory. In the short term, I was able to keep my personal record spotless just like it always was. No police reports. No criminal records. But I couldn't shake the feeling that the saga would continue in some fashion, though I vowed in court never to be in the same room as Velie. Truth be told, I never wanted to see her face again.

I remember looking over at Velie, her jaw agape, with Jenkins looking completely shocked. Tacker, Rice, Hite and Duenow sat frozen in their seats, unsure what to do. As soon as we were able to gather ourselves, we dashed out of the courtroom, happy to leave the losers in our wake, hungry to find some oxygen outside so I could breathe again. As we left the courtroom, Blackburn stood leaning against the hall wall with his arms crossed. He looked at me, nodded silently to us and said, "Good luck." I thanked Blackburn and left, never once looking back.

Once I returned home, I announced Crandall's ruling, accepted responsibility for any actions and posts that were wildly misconstrued as "harassment" and vowed to move forward.

The next day, Velie published her account of the ruling on Cal Coast Times. In typical Velie fashion, the article contained several falsehoods. My personal favorite was that I allegedly admitted in court to developing a website that demeaned her for a speech impediment. She also falsely claimed I "demeaned" her daughters and incited others to join in on "sexist comments."

The more problematic allegation she made was the claim that I discussed "tossing bleach in her [daughter's] eyes." The allegation led to one reader tracking me down on Twitter and sending me death threats in direct messages. Following the threat were comments left by Velie supporters on my Facebook page reiterating her false allegation. This was an environment I was now used to. With the restraining order hearing now behind me,

this was nothing.

There were the usual cliched tropes thrown my way. “Get out of your parents’ basement.” Some of her users weirdly accused one of my legal advisers of being my mother. That was all they could say because, in the end, none of that mattered.

I wrote about my account of the case on SLO Truth. Velie’s supporters descended onto my site in response, telling me to stay silent because Crandall told me to “step back” and “stop writing about Velie.” The harassment died down after a week, but the persistent nature of it was agitating to say the least.

In December 2017, shortly after Velie made an appearance at a Tea Party meeting in Atascadero, I received an influx of harassing messages from people who, once again, repeated the assertion that I either discussed or threatened to throw bleach into her daughter’s eyes. No matter how many times I denied it or showed them the physical evidence that I literally made no such remark, their perception was cemented in the minds of her believers. In April 2018, Velie repeated the same assertion on CCN. But over time, the outrage she tried to incite against me waned.

After losing their defamation lawsuit and their case against me, CalCoastNews moved forward by promoting their appeal. Friends of the website reportedly enlisted the services of private investigator Carl Knudson to investigate Tenborg, the IWMA and their finance reporting. In his reports, Knudson claimed Tenborg committed perjury in his testimony and found a number of questionable expenditures made by the agency that hired Tenborg as a subcontractor. The website felt Knudson’s findings, which were sent to the District Attorney’s office for review, were somehow vindication for their “reporting.”

Meanwhile, despite her lawsuit against supervisor Hill being dismissed with prejudice, Velie continued to push her case to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. In August 2018, the Ninth Circuit affirmed the federal court’s ruling, stating in part that Velie failed to state a claim for retaliation and First Amendment denial of equal access to information. Despite her federal and superior court filings receiving coverage in the *Tribune*, CalCoastNews never published information about her case or the

outcome. Velie continued to publish articles about supervisor Hill without disclosing her extensive personal and legal biases to readers. These are biases that would normally disqualify reporters from producing similar coverage in a traditional newsroom.

For months, they continued to re-litigate the defamation lawsuit they lost with a score of self-serving pity rants. In his November 2018 editorial, Blackburn claimed the law firm representing Tenborg did not disclose that they had a professional legal relationship with the counsel representing the IWMA. He mocked the physical appearance of Wagstaffe (“dapper bantam rooster”) and one of his associates (“a hulking presence”). In the same editorial, Blackburn accused Hill and one of his “blogger buddies” of conspiring to take down the website. Some of the conspiratorial acts included insulting and facilitating the “kidnapping” of Velie’s grandchildren. Blackburn also wrote that I received a temporary restraining order because I “threatened to throw bleach in Velie’s daughter’s eyes.” The longtime journalist, who once prided himself on his investigative prowess, had relegated himself to the role of hackneyed conspiracy theorist.

Blackburn’s editorial was titled “A failed try to kill CalCoastNews.” The truth was a lot less menacing. There was a strong desire for CCN to be accurate and admit to making mistakes, but not to “kill” them. There was a widespread frustration and condemnation over their intentional and negligent omission of facts, which resulted in several lives unnecessarily being upended. Even when they stepped outside of their self-proclaimed roles of “investigative reporters” to inflict emotional distress on others, many in the community wished for them to stop behaving that way.

It’s fundamentally unrealistic to assume a website harboring deep malevolence would be “killed,” or that constitutionally protected criticism had the intrinsic power to “kill” them. If there was anything to be gleaned from everything that happened up to this point, it’s that their fall from grace gave the community a powerful reason for them to be ignored. They were clearly “killing” themselves without any outside intervention whatsoever.



In late January 2019, the California Second District Appellate Court unanimously upheld their guilty verdict and denied their invitation to appeal. The court ruled their appeal was invalid because they previously waived the right to have a court reporter for the first three days of the 2017 trial. In order to file a valid appeal, the appellant must have a complete and adequate record of their trial. The court also ruled the damages awarded to Tenborg were valid. Though he claimed he no longer writes news for CCN, Blackburn responded to the appellate court ruling and told the *New Times*, “Let’s not lose sight of the fact that Karen and I are not the ones who are under criminal investigation by law enforcement – that would be the IWMA, Bill Worrell, Charles Tenborg.

“They’re finished, and we’re just getting started.”

However, two sources familiar with the SLO County District Attorney’s investigation indicated there was no criminal investigation of the individuals Blackburn mentioned. SLO County Assistant District Attorney Eric Dobroth told the *New Times* that the investigation was “fairly broad” and “very active.”

Said Tenborg’s attorney, James Wagstaffe, in a January 2019 press release: “[The appellate court] ruling underscores that the First Amendment and its free speech protections are not a hunting license for malicious and unprofessional scandal mongers like CalCoastNews.”

I slowly returned to being the easy-going person I used to be. But my past experiences had taken an undeniably heavy emotional toll. Had it been a decade ago when all of these events happened, when I first emerged from my sheltered cocoon of high school to wander around in the real world, I might have considered suicide.

But the pain and hardship I endured only made me stronger and more resolute.

With the noted exception of sites like *The Onion*, “fake news” is an oversimplification of a larger problem. We use that term to dismiss news we don't like or disagree with. But we don't often think about how “fake news” affects our society and people caught in the middle of it. As we learned in the 2016 presidential election, fake news can be used to influence an election and cement views about certain individuals and issues. Our political landscape largely changed as a result of an influx of “fake news,” a propaganda tool with the uncanny ability to warp our perception of the world around us.

I never would have imagined that our small county would bear the brunt of it. Then again, I never would have imagined the purveyors of fake news would openly conspire to hurt me and my family.

Had CalCoastNews simply wrote stories that were untrue and limited their conduct to their published work, I wouldn't have written this book. Had they done nothing else, this book would not exist.

CCN regularly publishes “news” that contains unsubstantiated claims, half-truths, willful exaggerations and outright lies with the intent to garner attention, clicks, donations and advertising revenue. Their original “uncovered” coverage is supplemented by refurbished articles lifted from other news sources, sometimes without proper source attribution.

They have repeatedly and brazenly violated commonly recognized journalism ethics by proudly showing a reckless disregard for the truth. Instead of recognizing the importance of fairness and accuracy and providing fair courtesies to their article subjects, they have used surreptitious methods of gathering information – by abusing the legal process to obtain information they could have received using traditional means (i.e. deposition, lawsuits and restraining order request) under the fraudulent cover of self-preservation.

CCN has willfully wielded their “reporting” as a weapon against critics and perceived adversaries of Karen Velie with the intent to inflict significant emotional distress, disrupt economic relationships and silence dissent by extraordinary means. When her content is unable to achieve their desired goals, Velie has resorted to repeated verbal and written harassment of public officials and private citizens, and threats to harm individuals and their families. Velie has threatened to publish unflattering articles and file lawsuits should her targets fail to bend to her desires.

In 2014, I was the subject of harassment and threats made by Velie to my former employer because Velie vehemently disagreed with my criticism of her reporting and mental state. Velie's repeated, unwanted and threatening communication with my employer made me concerned for my family's personal safety. As a result of Velie's contact, I resigned from my position under severe duress. This motivated me to investigate her reporting further and extensively question her fitness to responsibly lead a website she calls “an accredited news agency.”

Frustrated with my criticism, CCN's listed contributors Julie Tacker and Kevin P. Rice publicly engaged in a conspiracy to “block,” harass and defame me. Rice invited Velie to participate in the discussion, which preceded anonymous postcards and robo-calls delivered to Morro Bay residents. This led to my voluntary resignation from volunteer service under duress.

In conjunction with the robo-call, Velie published a defamatory article about me, which contained numerous falsehoods that I legally challenged with a retraction demand, but corrections were neither publicly acknowledged nor accepted. In

the article, I was falsely accused of criminal conduct, including “impersonation” and forgery, but I was neither investigated nor charged.

By refusing to acknowledge corrections and labeling me a “government troll,” Velie’s article was published with a clear intent to harm my personal and professional reputation. As a result of her article, I was unable to find work and felt compelled to defend my reputation.

I believe Velie and Los Osos resident Peggy Pavek had personal knowledge of an anonymous tip to Social Services that reportedly expressed concern about me posing a danger to a loved one. Pavek admitted in an email to having knowledge of the tip, but did not disclose the name of her source. An anonymous account linked to Velie reiterated specifics about the tip that only my family knew at the time. An editorial on CCN reportedly penned by a Los Osos resident publicly revealed that my family was “reported” to Social Services. However, the resident denied writing the editorial. This incident caused my family significant emotional distress.

Julie Tacker was responsible for coordinating a campaign to have me criminally investigated and ultimately arrested for publishing constitutionally-protected critical opinions that, in no way, signaled any intent to harm her or her family. Tacker falsely reported me for personal harassment and stalking to law enforcement, but her efforts were not borne from a legitimate concern for safety. Tacker admitted in a court declaration and email correspondence that she reported my Facebook posts as part of a campaign to “remove [my] blogs and websites from the internet,” thereby violating my civil rights.

My father and I were personally harassed by CCN *pro bono* private investigator Michael Brennler at our home. Under the faulty guise of serving what he claimed was a legal cease and desist notice as a “process server,” Brennler made threatening comments that made me concerned for my family’s personal safety. When I was served with what turned out to be a retraction demand from Velie attorney Stew Jenkins, Brennler secretly and illegally recorded me without my consent on private property. Brennler would return to my property at a later date, despite being verbally

warned to not appear there again.

For approximately two years, I was the recipient of harassing and defamatory comments from several anonymous Facebook accounts. Upon further investigation, I learned the accounts were linked to Karen Velie's daughter, Summer Awbrey. I believe Velie was involved in the proliferation of these anonymous accounts and the dissemination of their messaging, some of which also communicated conspiracy theories that CCN exclusively published later.

I believe Velie is involved in the creation and maintenance of a Facebook page called Fire Adam Hill, which was used to diminish, defame and harass allegedly “paid” supporters of District 3 supervisor Adam Hill's 2016 re-election campaign. In addition to using CCN articles as paid advertising (“sponsored posts”) – including the articles Velie published, which had nothing to do with the Hill campaign – Fire Adam Hill published disturbing and defamatory wanted posters featuring me and my father, which left us concerned about our safety. Evidence indicates Peggy Pavek coordinated with this page and may have knowledge of the perpetrator(s) involved.

In 2016, CCN subpoenaed me for a deposition, claiming I was a witness for a case that Velie had no evidence that I was involved in. CCN abused the legal process by surreptitiously gathering information for an article. The article contained a falsified depiction of my testimony with no direct quote attribution, and therefore it was neither a fair nor accurate report of a court proceeding. Velie claimed in a phone conversation that she published the article because I had referred to her as “mentally ill.”

Velie attempted to file a restraining order against me, using numerous false allegations that she made under penalty of perjury. During the trial, Jenkins spit in my face while I testified on the witness stand. Jenkins also made a number of false and defamatory allegations that he was unable to prove in court. The hearings and subsequent article, which contained defamatory misrepresentations about my testimony, caused me acute emotional distress.

While I could hope this would be the final chapter in the saga, I strongly suspect it won't be. There is a distinct chance that this book could trigger more harassment toward me and the people I care about. Ultimately, it's important for readers to realize the clear and present danger of fake news, especially when it goes unchecked.

This book should serve as a reminder to never take journalistic accountability for granted. When we read news articles, there is an underlying trust in the source. We trust them to accurately tell the story, everything in between, and let us know when they made mistakes. But when one news site knowingly produces misleading or “fake” content, the reader's ability to separate fact from fiction becomes dulled. We start to question what's true and what isn't. If readers believe in one local news source that produces inaccurate content, they're likely going to distrust other local sources who have a stronger, ethically binding checks and balances system. CalCoastNews has fueled that distrust by telling readers that they're the only purveyors of investigative reporting. They often call out the names of their competitors, even attack other reporters by name and shame them for not working up to CCN's journalism standards – all after their defamation lawsuit loss showed the world what little care they had for *any* standards.

Had they shown accountability from the onset, none of the chaos and drama would have happened.

Behind these paper-thin walls of pitiful self-denial are “reporters” who aren't reporters at all. They're terrorists who've terrorized an entire community with tabloid-style vendetta journalism and criminally toxic spite. That's not to say that all the people and organizations they've “reported” on come with clean hands or should be exempt from investigative reporting, but CCN misses the mark every time they step outside the responsible boundaries of journalism to punish and inflict pain. Their malice is glaringly obvious in nearly everything they do – and those who point it out have to be concerned about their safety, as some of my readers would likely attest.

It's easy for us to fortify ourselves from negative coverage, set aside the bruised egos, hurt feelings and live for another day. But

we don't often associate negative coverage with being ensnared in someone's vengeful delusions that could last a lifetime.

Karen Velie is one of the most evil, if not dangerous predators I've ever known. Her predatory and psychotic behavior is dignified and even stoked by people who should know better – community leaders, lawyers, government officials and on-air personalities. One can only hope that one day, the people she's closest to will recognize that she is wholly unfit to print. And one can only hope that everyone who supports and exhibits a similar, perverse need to suppress others will fade into the ether of time.

## DEFAMERS



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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