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ABBY LUBY PHOTO.
Steve Brill at his office in midtown

PULLOUT

‘The best journalism figures out who its audience is, who its community is, and writes the stuff they really want to read, because it directly affects their lives.’
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Yalie journos get boost from Brill’s beneficence
By ABBY LUBY

An unlit cigar is wedged in the corner of his mouth as Steve Brill thumps on his keyboard with determined speed. In his modest, bare-bones office above Radio City Music Hall in Manhattan, Mr. Brill, 55, is the C.E.O. of Verified Identity Pass Inc., a company that makes Clear Card, a piece of powered plastic that lets you skirt by airport security checks. The former journalism innovator launched The American Lawyer, Brill’s Content, and Court TV. He recently donated more than $1 million to Yale University, both his alma mater and the school where he teaches a journalism course. The endowment is for an undergraduate journalism program.
“It will be basic training in journalism — values, ethics, and interviewing techniques,” said Mr. Brill. “Then we have to figure out how to channel those students into becoming working journalists by giving them career counseling, which the program will fund.”
The Yale Journalism Initiative is endowed in perpetuity and is open to students with varied majors, said Mr. Brill. “It means they have this training and writing internship experience. The career counseling will help place them into entry level jobs. They will be able to put ‘Yale Journalism Scholar’ on their resumes.”

Mr. Brill said he encourages his students to intern at independent, local publications. The Yale program will foot the bill if smaller publications can't pay interns.

He added that The Record-Review is the ideal publication for interning students. "If I can channel one or two of my students to intern there, I'd do it every year," he said. "I always advise them the best place to start out is a smaller paper, where they can do more and have more independence."

Mr. Brill is very familiar with his local paper, because he and his wife, Cynthia, with their three children, have owned a home in Bedford since 1981. Although based in Manhattan, Bedford is the Brills' respite on weekends and in the summer. "We love Bedford. It's a place to get away to and get out of the city," said Mr. Brill. "It gives us privacy. It couldn't be better."

Mr. Brill noted that local journalism is the most important journalism. "Local can be defined by any community, like The American Lawyer is specific to the community of lawyers," he said. "The best journalism figures out who its audience is, who its community is, and writes the stuff they really want to read, because it directly affects their lives. The only question becomes whether you write it for independence and clarity or you are just a show for your advertisers."

Producing better journalists is the challenge for the new Yale journalism program, said Mr. Brill. "Especially at a time when the marketplace is making that more difficult, bucking the trend is not going to be easy," he said.

Mr. Brill's thoughts are borne out by statistics. Notably, in the "State of the News Media 2005," a report by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, there was a rise of advertising revenues of 207 percent, while the increase in newsroom personnel was only about 3 percent from 1991 to 2000. The report also said that there are 2,200 fewer newsroom employees today than in 1990. But for Mr. Brill, now is the time for good, qualified journalists to be out there reporting the news.

"The honest brokering of information that journalists do, that's not going away," said Mr. Brill. "As life gets more complicated, people need more of that. Now it's just as important that you and I know what's going on in Afghanistan as what's going on in California. As we found out five years ago, a bunch of guys we never heard of in caves in Afghanistan could really affect our lives. As the world becomes more interrelated, we need more honest reporting, not less of it. It's something people want."

The day after Sept. 11, 2001, was the starting point for Mr. Brill's book "After: How America Confronted the September 12 Era," published by Simon & Schuster in 2003. The 700-plus page book details the aftermath of the terrorists' attacks in a day-by-day account of people living and working near ground zero to the White House officials. The world-altering event was also pivotal for many news organizations and news reporters. "A month after 911 some of the best journalism in the world was done," said Mr. Brill. "All the so called 'tabloidy,' cable news networks suddenly became real serious. People read newspapers real seriously because they had to."

In the last three to four years however, journalists have found their credibility is plunging. In 2003, The New York Times reporter Jayson Blair was caught fabricating his news stories and was fired. Others preceded him, including Janet Cooke of The Washington Post, New Republic's Stephen Glass, the Boston Globe's Patricia Smith, and Jay Forman of Slate.

Teaching basic principles and living by them is Mr. Brill's approach to keeping reporters accountable. "It takes a little doing," he said. "Our policy in all publications was to send 10 random letters to people we wrote about. The letter would be from me, and it was a basic quality-control check. It would say, 'You've been written about in our paper by this reporter and attached is a copy of the article. Were you quoted accurately? Did the reporter treat you politely?' That way we could judge the overall accuracy and fairness of the article."

The most typical response Mr. Brill got was, "I can't believe anybody is doing this."

But the letters worked. "In one case in a legal and business newspaper in Miami an article was written about a real estate mogul," said Mr. Brill. "I got a letter back from him saying, 'I really appreciated the article. The reporter was wonderful, and it was really great how he had me saying all those articulate things. I really appreciate all the quotes that he gave me.' We asked the reporter for his notes for the article, and he admitted he never talked to the guy and that he was faking the articles. We fired him instantly."

Regular surveys to readers, being open to complaints, and printing letters to the editor lets people know that they are being taken seriously as news readers, according to Mr. Brill. "People don't like to be accountable," he said. "The press has total freedom from the First Amendment, but editors should be accountable, and they should also make their reporters accountable."

Keeping the news original and interesting are dynamics that still work, said Mr. Brill. "If you depended on Gannett's AP wire for your stories and they depended on you for their stories, neither of you would be doing anything new," he said. "Somewhere along the line it hits the wall. In the case of your newspaper, The Record-Review, somebody started something new and original. I think the market for getting original information is not likely to go away."

Part of getting good, firsthand information is in a reporter's interviewing techniques. "I tell all my students that the best interview is done in person," said Mr. Brill. "If you can't do that, then the phone. E-mail interviews are unacceptable."

Also unacceptable, he said, are e-mailed press statements from public officials. "That's six people huddling around the keyboard thinking up answers," Mr. Brill said.

Getting information for reporters through the Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) and protecting reporters' sources with proposed shield laws are both an occupational practice and concern for news writers. Former New York Times reporter Judith Miller was jailed last year for refusing to reveal her sources in the investigation about a leak naming Valerie Plame as a covert CIA agent. Individual states are now voting on shield laws.

"We need shield laws," said Mr. Brill. "But I think there's probably a way to resolve some of the issues. In a civil suit a judge can look at the source notes in camera [a private meeting with judge and lawyers] and satisfies himself that the source actually exists without others knowing. There's probably a way to do that."

FOIL laws should be strengthened, said Mr. Brill. "Governments should have to respond quickly and affirmatively or else explain why they can't. "But with FOIL, that's only one piece of the puzzle," he said. "You have to know what to ask for, and you can't know what to ask for often unless someone tells you there are some documents."

When asked how he made the leap from journalism to transportation security, Mr. Brill took a swig of his diet soda and said, abruptly, "It's a long story and you're out of time."