

U.S.

# California Today: A Journalism Scandal Roils the Central Coast

Mike McPhate

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*Good morning.*

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Americans' trust in the news media has been at an all-time low.

So it didn't help last week when a San Luis Obispo County jury delivered a rare libel verdict against two reporters accused of smearing a local businessman's reputation.

Karen Velie and Dan Blackburn, writers and co-founders at the online publication Cal Coast News, were told to pay \$1.1 million in damages.

In a nutshell: A 2012 article by Cal Coast relied on unnamed sources to accuse a contractor of mishandling hazardous waste. It also said the owner, Charles Tenborg, was once fired from a county job.

None of it was true, according to Mr. Tenborg, who demanded a retraction, and failing to get it, sued.

In court, Ms. Velie and Mr. Blackburn stood by the article, but failed to back up its claims. Ms. Velie said she had lost notes in a computer malfunction. And two sources

died, she said.

James M. Wagstaffe, a lawyer for Mr. Tenborg, said San Luis Obispo had been terrorized by a brand of reporting at Cal Coast that trafficked in rumor. “It wasn’t sloppy journalism,” he said. “It was deliberately false journalism.”

Founded in 2008, Cal Coast is a tiny operation. But it has made waves in town with a number of investigative scoops. It has also drawn a fierce backlash from people in its cross hairs over sourcing practices that would not fly at many established news organizations.

During the libel trial, *The Tribune* reported, a journalism professor from San Francisco State University testified that the Tenborg article was “all innuendo.”

“I kept reading and I thought, ‘Where’s the proof?’ And I never saw any proof,” the professor, Venise Wagner, said.

Yet Cal Coast has fans. Among them, Dave Congalton, who hosts a local talk radio show that he’s used to promote the publication’s work, including articles that spotlighted accusations of misdeeds against a police chief, a city manager and a sanitation official.

“Warts and all,” Mr. Congalton said in an email, “Karen Velie remains the only game in town when it comes to investigative reporting.”

Reached by phone, Ms. Velie suggested larger forces were at work in her legal troubles. “I do believe this was done to shut down Cal Coast News because we have been very effective in bringing things out to the public that no one else reports on,” she said.

Mr. Blackburn did not respond to email messages.

Mr. Tenborg said the Cal Coast article damaged his business. As a result, he ultimately sold it.

“To this day, type my name in and the very first thing you see on Google is this article,” he said last Friday.

Told that the article had just been removed from the web, his voice rose with excitement: “Oh, really? It is? Well that’s news to me, buddy,” he said.

## California Online

*(Please note: We regularly highlight articles on news sites that have limited access for nonsubscribers.)*

- For Iranian-Americans in California, Persian New Year celebrations have been disrupted by uncertainty over the **travel ban**. [The New York Times]

- “A huge responsibility” — Senators Dianne Feinstein and Chuck Grassley will preside over **Judge Neil M. Gorsuch’s** Supreme Court confirmation hearings. [The New York Times]

- A program in California seeks to connect **transgender workers** with employers happy to have them. [The New York Times]

- “Jesus Culture,” a religious movement that practices faith healing, began in **Redding** and has gone global. [Sacramento Bee]

- **Sonoma County** has become the center of pot experimentation, despite threats from the Trump administration. [The New York Times]

- An early investor in **Uber** — his billions at stake — is stepping in to advise the troubled C.E.O. [The New York Times]

- ... Meanwhile, two more executives are leaving the company, adding to the turmoil. [The New York Times]

- **Dwight Clark**, the 49ers great, said he has Lou Gehrig’s disease. [San Francisco Chronicle]

- **Roger Federer** breezed to victory over **Stan Wawrinka** in the final at Indian Wells. **Elena Vesnina** won the women’s title. [The New York Times]

- What ever happened to the “gangbanger”? A photographer revisits a **Los Angeles neighborhood** to see. [Opinion | The New York Times]

- Belle of the box office: “**Beauty and the Beast**” broke multiple Hollywood records. [The New York Times]

## Coming Up This Week

- PaleyFest runs all week in Los Angeles with panels featuring talent from top shows. Among them: “Bob’s Burgers” and “Westworld.”

- Representative Adam Schiff, the Burbank Democrat, will deliver a talk at the Brookings Institution on Tuesday about protecting liberal democracy.

- On Friday, the United States men’s soccer team will play Honduras in San Jose in a crucial World Cup qualifying match.

- Eric Clapton will play a pair of shows, Saturday and Sunday, in Inglewood.

## And Finally ...

Last month, the Los Angeles Times reported that Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents were identifying themselves as police officers during searches for people in the country illegally.

That got attention of the mayor, Eric Garcetti, who along with two other city leaders demanded a stop to the practice.

The leaders argued that blurring of the lines between immigration agents and the local police hampers law enforcement. The Los Angeles Police Department has for years tried to reassure unauthorized immigrants that they can interact with its officers without fear of deportation.

An I.C.E. spokeswoman told the Times that immigration agents could identify themselves as the police because it was a universally recognized word for law enforcement.

City officials said the issue was not the legality, but rather the affect on public safety.

“There is no question that in the city of Los Angeles, the word ‘police’ means L.A.P.D.,” City Attorney Mike Feuer told the newspaper.

What’s your take? Is it O.K. for immigration agents to identify themselves as police? Tell us here: [CAtoday@nytimes.com](mailto:CAtoday@nytimes.com). Please include your name and city of residence, and we may feature your response in a future newsletter.

*California Today goes live at 6 a.m. Pacific time weekdays.*

*The California Today columnist, Mike McPhate, is a third-generation Californian — born outside Sacramento and raised in San Juan Capistrano. He lives in Davis. Follow him on Twitter.*

*California Today is edited by Julie Bloom, who grew up in Los Angeles and graduated from U.C. Berkeley.*

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