

HOW MANY OTHER JOURNALISTS DOES THE FBI CONSIDER INFORMANTS?

Yesterday, the Center for Public Integrity revealed the contents of a secret FBI memo treating a top ABC journalist—who turned out to be Christopher Isham (currently CBS' DC bureau chief)—as a confidential source for a claim that Iraq's intelligence service had helped Timothy McVeigh bomb the Murrah Federal Building.

Isham claims he alerted the FBI about the story because there were indications there might be follow-on attacks.

Christopher Isham, a vice president at CBS News and chief of its Washington bureau, later issued a statement denouncing the claims, revealing himself as the subject of the report. Mr. Isham, who worked for ABC News at the time of the bombing, said he would have passed information to the F.B.I. only to try to verify it or to alert the bureau to word of a possible terrorist attack.

"Like every investigative reporter, my job for 25 years has been to check out information and tips from sources," Mr. Isham said in a statement released through a CBS spokeswoman. "In the heat of the Oklahoma City bombing, it would not be unusual for me or any journalist to run information by a source within the F.B.I. for confirmation or to notify authorities about a pending terrorist attack."

Only, it turns out that Vince Cannistraro—who had told ABC the story while serving as a consultant for them and had, in turn, been told the tale by a Saudi General—had already told the

FBI himself.

That source, Vincent Cannistraro, a former Central Intelligence Agency official who was a consultant for ABC News at the time, said in an interview that Mr. Isham had done something discourteous, perhaps, but not improper.

“I was working for ABC as a consultant,” he said. “I was not a confidential source.”

Mr. Cannistraro added, however, that he would have preferred it if Mr. Isham had told him that he had passed along the tip. “I was not told that Chris was also going to talk to them. And he certainly didn’t tell me.”

Now, aside from Isham ultimately revealing that his story came from Cannistraro, it seems to me the ethical questions on the part of ABC and Isham are misplaced. Isham’s call to the FBI to confirm or deny a tip really can’t be faulted.

The problem seems to lie in two issues: how ABC treated Cannistraro, and how the FBI treated Isham.

First, Cannistraro fed ABC an inflammatory tip, apparently without confirming it. Given that he was a consultant to ABC, was it his job to second source that material? As it happens, since both Cannistraro and Isham reported the tip to the FBI, it worked like a stove pipe, giving the FBI the appearance of two sources when the story derived from the same Saudi General. And how much other bullshit did Cannistraro feed ABC over the years? It’s not even necessary that Cannistraro do this deliberately—if sources knew he was an ABC consultant, particularly if they knew the information would be treated this way, it’d be easy to stovepipe further inflammatory information right to the screens of the TV. And who owns the source relationship, then, the understanding that the source can be burned for

planting deliberate, inflammatory misinformation designed to stoke an illegal war?

In other words, the way ABC treated Cannistraro as a consultant muddled journalistic lines in ways that may have led to less than responsible journalism.

It wouldn't be the first time networks' relationships with "consultants" had compromised their reporting.

And then there's the FBI. Anonymous sources are reassuring the NYT that Isham wasn't really treated as a snitch, even though the report that CPI has seems to treat him as such. This seems more like FBI trying to cover its tracks—reassure other journalists the FBI isn't typing up source reports every time a journalist calls the FBI for confirmation of a tip—than anything else. So how often does the FBI, having been asked to confirm information by a journalist, start an informant file on that tip?

And what is the relationship that evolves between the FBI and that source over the years? That is, if the FBI treats journalists who confirm information with them as sources, filing reports like this one that, if revealed, would reflect badly on the journalist, then what will the journalist do in the future when the FBI feeds him shit?