

CHAPTER 1

DEFINING INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING

What makes it different from other types of journalism?

Investigative reporting has many, sometimes widely divergent, meanings. To understand what investigative reporting is, it may be best to start by explaining what it is not.

It is said that all reporting is investigative. After all, journalists routinely dig for facts. They ask questions. They get information. They “investigate.”

But is this really the case? In the day-to-day practice of journalism, how deep do reporters really dig? How probing are their questions? And how complete or original is the information that they present?

If reporters attend a press conference and then write about it, they cannot be said to be doing investigative reporting. If they interview those wounded in a police operation and then report what they have been told, that is not investigative journalism either.

The reality is that daily news coverage is usually not probing or investigative. It reports mainly what officials or institutions say as well as other people’s responses to what has been previously said. Much of what we consider “news” are reports on official statements or reactions to official statements. Daily journalism is also mainly about events that reporters have witnessed or interviewed witnesses about—such as a train collision, a demonstration, a criminal being arrested. There is no digging beyond what has been said or what has been seen. **Daily news reporting is seldom investigative, it is mostly reactive.**

Most of the time, journalists react to what is happening or what has been publicly announced. Reporters seldom decide on their own what or who they cover. They often do not initiate story ideas. Unfolding events and the daily schedule of news briefings and press conferences determine what makes it to the newspaper, the newscast or the Web.

For the most part, journalists do not set the news agenda. Instead, they take the information they have been given by weighing its significance (does the president’s statement, for example, deserve to be on the front page of a newspaper or the first five minutes of a newscast?), checking its accuracy, and putting it in context. The news reporter’s job is to confirm the facts of the story, make sense of them and to put them together in a coherent report.

Investigative reporting, however, does not just report the information that has been given out by others – whether it is government, political parties, companies or advocacy groups. It is reporting that relies on the journalist’s own enterprise and initiative. Investigative

reporting means journalists go beyond what they have seen and what has been said to unearth more facts and to provide something new and previously unknown.

Most of the time, investigative reporters uncover wrongdoing by individuals and institutions. The good that public officials or private companies do is often publicized; a whole army of public relations people makes sure this is so. It's the wrong that powerful groups and individuals do that is kept away from the public. This is why **investigative reporting often involves digging up what is secret or hidden.**

In some parts of the world, the term investigative reporting is sometimes associated with leaks. Public officials, police and intelligence agents or politicians selectively "leak" or release secret information or investigative files in order to promote their own interests. Journalists report on the leaked information, often without checking or looking for additional facts on their own.

Leak journalism is not investigative reporting. An investigation can begin from a leak, but journalists must do their own digging, verify information and provide context. Unless they do so, their reports will be distorted and incomplete. They will also be allowing themselves to be used to manipulate public opinion and to advance the agenda of individuals, rather than the public interest.

Investigative reporting entails the use of multiple sources – both human and documentary – that together paint a picture of wrongdoing or abuse. It requires the verification and corroboration of every piece of information, even if these come from sources that are considered reliable or authoritative. **Reporting based on a single source cannot be considered investigative.**

Paul Radu, founder of the Romanian Centre for Investigative Journalism (or CRJI, its Romanian initials), says that some reporters have used the information they have uncovered in their investigations to extort money from individuals or companies. That is true not just in Romania but elsewhere in the world as well. These reporters taint the name of investigative journalism and do damage to its tradition and reputation. **Using information for extortion is not investigative journalism.**

Investigative journalism is also sometimes confused with stalking powerful or well-known people and writing intimate details about their private lives, uncovering such things as love affairs or other dark secrets. It is true that investigative reporters sometimes uncover details on the private lives of individuals – for example, the investigation by a U.S. newspaper of Catholic priests accused of abusing boys. But such investigations are done only when there is a clear public interest in exposure – in this case, the priests conducted the abuse over many years and the Catholic Church hierarchy knew the abuses were taking place but did not take action.

In corruption investigations in the Philippines and China, journalists have reported on the mistresses of high public officials who were accused of bribery. The mistresses were either conduits for the bribes or beneficiaries. A Philippine president, for example, was found guilty of building fabulous mansions for four mistresses. In China, an investigative

journalist exposed a mayor who used public funds to buy apartments for 29 mistresses. In both these cases, there was a clear public interest in reporting on the private lives of officials: either public funds were involved or bribery – a crime and betrayal of the public trust – was being committed.

Investigative reporting is not paparazzi journalism. Its focus is not private lives; it is the public good.

Watchdog journalism

Investigative reporting is watchdog journalism: it aims to check the abuses of those who have wealth and power. It exposes wrongdoing so it can be corrected, not because journalists and their patrons benefit from exposure.

Various metaphors have been used to describe the work that investigative journalists do. They “lift the veil of secrecy” by uncovering previously unknown facts, such as the surveillance and wiretapping of citizens by government security forces, which U.S. journalists reported in 2005. Another example is the reporting by journalists in North America, Europe, South Asia and the Middle East on secret renditions – the abduction and detention in secret prisons of suspected terrorists after the 9/11 attacks in the United States.

Investigative journalists “strike through the mask” – they go beyond what is publicly proclaimed and expose the lies and hypocrisy of those who wield power. They have reported on such issues as corruption in government, crime, corporate misdeeds, environmental destruction, the exploitation of women, children or minority groups, and abuses committed by such entities as churches, criminal gangs, private armed groups, even nonprofits or charities.

In Thailand, journalists have investigated scams perpetrated by Buddhist monks, revealing the dark underside of two of the country’s most venerable institutions. In Croatia, a journalist exposed the false claims of business success by former minister and candidate for prime minister Radimir Cacic. In 2007, the journalist wrote that Cacic – who promoted himself as a successful entrepreneur – actually had a string of business failures and his company had racked up hundreds of millions in debt.

Most of the time, investigative journalists report on the how laws and regulations are violated. They compare how organizations work against how they are **supposed** to work. They expose how and why individuals and institutions fail. They report when things go wrong, who is responsible, how the wrongdoing was done and its consequences.

The best investigative reports expose not just individual, but systemic, failures. They show how individual wrongs are part of a larger pattern of negligence or abuse and the systems that make these possible. They examine where the system went wrong and show who suffer from the mistakes. They probe not just what is criminal or illegal, but also what may be legal and above-board but nonetheless causes harm.

For example, the Pulitzer-Prize-winning 2007 investigative series published by the *Chicago Tribune* examined inadequate government regulation of toys, car seats, and cribs and linked this to child injuries and deaths. The manufacturers of these products and the retailers that sold them were not doing anything illegal, but existing regulation did not compel them to check on the safety of their products. The series had dramatic impact: it led to the recall of hazardous products and congressional action that tightened safety guidelines and government oversight of consumer goods.

The Dutch-Flemish organization of investigative journalists, known by its initials VVOJ, lists three kinds of investigative reporting:

- Revealing scandals or the violation of laws, regulations and ethical/moral standards by individuals or institutions;
- Examining the policies or functions of governments, companies and other organizations; and
- Describing social, economic, political and cultural trends.

Unlike the Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE) in the United States, which defines investigative journalism more narrowly as reporting that reveals new facts, especially what is hidden or deliberately kept secret, the VVOJ is more inclusive. Reporting that interprets or connects already known facts in a new way is also investigative, according to VVOJ.

For example, in 2006, the *Los Angeles Times*, ran a series on the increasing toxicity of the world's oceans that it traced to industrial and agricultural pollutants, overfishing, and the destruction of wetlands. The series, which won the Pulitzer Prize for explanatory reporting, showed how fish, corals, and marine mammals are dying even as algae, bacteria, and jellyfish are growing unchecked. "Where this pattern is most pronounced, scientists evoke a scenario of evolution running in reverse, returning to the primeval seas of hundreds of millions of years ago," the series warned.

The *Times* series explored marine pollution, an issue that was already well known and well-reported. It pulled together information, much of it already in the public sphere, from various sources and across different countries, so that readers are able to appreciate the urgency of the issue.

There is no single definition of investigative reporting. Journalists in different countries build their own investigative traditions based on local practices, shared standards and norms and the limits of what they are allowed to publish or air.

Holding the powerful accountable

But whatever journalistic tradition they come from, investigative reporters have always seen themselves as guardians of the public interest. By exposing wrongdoing and failure, they aim to hold the powerful accountable for their actions. In the United States in the

early 1900s, crusading journalists were called “muckrakers,” because they dug out the muck – or the dirt – of society. The muckrakers exposed such issues as the abuses of corporations, unsafe working conditions, the state of mental institutions and poverty in the slums in the growing cities of the U.S.

In the 1970s, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, two young reporters of *The Washington Post*, wrote the Watergate reports, exposing the involvement of President Nixon and his staff in bugging the headquarters of their rival party and their cover-up of the crime. Since then, investigative reporting has been associated with exposing wrongdoing in high places. Nixon resigned because of Watergate and the Post’s exposés demonstrated the power of investigative reporting: two rookie reporters helped cause the downfall of the most powerful man in the world.

In the 1960s and 70s, investigative reporters in the UK wrote on corruption in parliament, bribes paid by businessmen to politicians, and such horrific scandals as the marketing of the drug thalidomide, a sedative prescribed for pregnant women and which caused severe birth defects.

Since the late 1980s, investigative reporting has taken root in new democracies in Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe and Africa. In these places, journalists have exposed corruption, environmental damage, organised crime and the suffering of women, children and marginalised groups. The impact of some of these reports has been dramatic. For example, between 2001 and 2004, reporters in Costa Rica uncovered malfeasance involving millions of dollars in bribes paid by local and foreign companies to three respected former presidents. All of them were subsequently tried for corruption.

Following the trail of wrongdoing

In 2004, the *Williamette Week*, a relatively small newspaper in Portland, Oregon, ran a front-page story that began:

“When the story of late-20th-century Oregon is written, Neil Goldschmidt will tower over most other public figures. His accomplishments as mayor and governor have stood the test of time.

“It is also true, however, that his incomprehensible involvement with an adolescent babysitter changed both of their lives forever and – although few people knew about it--the secret profoundly affected Oregon history. No one can say with certainty how much of the arc of the woman's life was shaped by the man who molested her starting when she was 14. But it is clear that today, on her 43rd birthday, living a thousand miles from her friends and family in Portland, she is a haunted woman.”

This story was part of a series, called, “The 30-Year Secret,” which shook Oregon and Won the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting.

This is a classic investigative report. Firstly, it provided **previously unknown information**.

Secondly, the report was the **product of the journalist's own initiative**. Nigel Jacquiss, the journalist who uncovered the abuse, was not merely reporting the findings of other people's investigations. Nor was the information deliberately leaked. He was reacting to or reporting an unfolding event. Instead, he initiated the investigation on his own.

Thirdly, the report required an **investment of time and effort**. Investigative reporting requires painstaking work. It is not something that can be done overnight. It means talking to a range of sources, obtaining documents when they are available, and spending weeks, even months to piece a story together.

Fourthly, there was a clear **public interest** in the investigation. The target of the investigation was a public figure, a former mayor and governor who continued to wield influence in Oregon.

This last element—the public interest—is key to investigative reporting. Like private detectives, investigative reporters uncover hidden or secret information. But investigative reporting is more than just private-detective work. Investigative journalists uncover information because they know that such information is crucial to the public and the public has the right to know.

Investigative reporters do not reveal secret facts merely for the thrill of doing so or the prospect of winning an award. They do not dig for the dirt just to sell newspapers or to make profits for TV networks. Their work is motivated by a desire to expose wrongdoing so the public may know about it. They also hope that once the wrongdoing is publicized, it will eventually be corrected.

An investigative report...

- Is the product of a reporter's and his news organization's initiative and enterprise (it is not leaked information or the findings of someone else's investigation).
- Reveals information previously unknown or kept hidden from the public or puts together and connects already known facts in a new way.
- Requires an investment of time and effort.
- Is on a matter of public interest.

Investigative reporting as a set of techniques

There are various ways of looking at investigative reporting. At the most basic level, investigative journalism can be considered as a set of research and reporting techniques that are used to uncover information that is secret, kept hidden, or is otherwise difficult to get. Other reporters use these techniques, but investigative journalists employ them in a more systematic and intensive way.

These techniques include:

Getting documents or following the paper trail: Documents are at the heart of investigative reporting. Often, they provide proof or clues on the wrongdoing that journalists wish to expose. Documents can corroborate – or disprove – the information that is given by human sources.

Investigative reporters analyse the documents they obtain and use the information they find there to piece their stories together. It is difficult, although not impossible, to do investigations without some sort of paper trail. Many journalists begin by unearthing documents even before they do their interviews. This is because documents provide them the background, the context and the detailed information they need so they can ask more probing questions from their sources.

Often documents give leads on how the investigation can go forward. They give clues on how the journalist should proceed. A signature on a government contract, for example, points to the person who is responsible for that contract and who the journalist ought to interview. Sometimes documents cite other documents, thereby providing clues on what other documents exist that journalists can then obtain.

Interviewing sources or following the people trail: People are as important as paper in a journalistic investigation. They can talk, answer questions – things that documents cannot do. They can provide history, background, colour and anecdotes that spice up a story and give it depth. They also lead to other documents and to other people who may be vital to an investigation.

Journalists talk to a range of sources in the course of their investigations. These could be official sources, such as government or corporate officials or representatives. They could be private individuals involved in the case the journalist is probing. They could be victims of crime or disaster, human traffickers, drug dealers or arms sellers. Sometimes they are eyewitnesses to a crime, an accident or a calamity. They could be classmates, neighbours, relatives or friends of a politician who has amassed wealth that cannot be explained by what he earns. Journalistic sources are often also experts – scientists, lawyers, accountants – who can explain the technical issues and make an impartial or disinterested appraisal of available facts. In short, journalists interview just about anyone who can give information on the subject they are investigating.

Using computers and the Internet or following the electronic trail: Increasingly, investigative journalists are using the Internet to do research on just about any topic they are investigating. The Internet, with its vast resources, is a mine of information. Familiarity with online research techniques is now a requisite for investigations, even for those working in countries where computer and Internet access is minimal.

In addition, journalists have used email to correspond with sources in government or the private sector. They have also used electronic or digital communications (including SMS

or Skype or Google Talk) to receive information from sources who wish to remain anonymous or who find it dangerous to meet with journalists face to face.

Computer databases that contain a lot of information are also now part of the investigative journalists' toolkit. Reporters have analyzed trends and patterns from available databases from companies or from government and used these as building blocks for their stories. Sometimes journalists construct those databases themselves, based on information obtained from documents.

Doing fieldwork: Often there is no substitute for the journalist getting her hands dirty and going to the field to do research. Investigative journalists have gone to the scenes of disaster, whether it is to examine an area that has been destroyed by a fire or devastated by the toxic waste spill from a mining company. They have visited or even lived for a time in communities to do reports on victims of various forms of exploitation – such as poor villages where women are forced to find jobs in the cities and end up as sex workers, factories where poorly paid immigrants workers are forced to labour, or underground mine tunnels where workers risk their lives.

Fieldwork is essential for the journalist to get a feel – and also the sounds and the smells – related to the subject she is working on. Investigative reporting, like all journalism, is about real life. Conveying a sense of other people's lives as it is actually lived is as important as obtaining documents or getting informants to talk. For example, a story on corruption in a government hospital is made more compelling if a reporter spent time in the hospital, observing the poor delivery of health care and the inadequacy of drugs and equipment. By recording or filming what takes place in the hospital, the journalist can show graphic examples of how corruption causes unnecessary suffering and even death.

In 2007, *Washington Post* reporters Dana Priest and Ann Hull, made several visits to the Walter Reed Army Medical Center to expose the maltreatment of wounded war veterans. The lead of their Pulitzer-Prize-winning investigation – a graphic description of the conditions at the hospital – was based on what they saw during those visits:

“Behind the door of Army Spec. Jeremy Duncan's room, part of the wall is torn and hangs in the air, weighted down with black mold. When the wounded combat engineer stands in his shower and looks up, he can see the bathtub on the floor above through a rotted hole. The entire building, constructed between the world wars, often smells like greasy carry-out. Signs of neglect are everywhere: mouse droppings, belly-up cockroaches, stained carpets, cheap mattresses.”

Sometimes, fieldwork involves the use of undercover reporting, where journalists do not identify themselves so that they can gather information more freely. This is a controversial method with ethical and legal implications. Going undercover makes it easier for journalists to get into places where they are not welcome or interview people who would otherwise not talk to reporters. But it risks violating the privacy of individuals and can be physically risky for the journalists themselves. In addition, the reliability of

information gathered through deception can be questioned. Moreover, unorthodox methods make journalists vulnerable to criticism about their motives and methods.