

# Investigative Journalism

## **Investigative journalism often involves:**

- Representing the public interest
- Exposing secrets, wrongdoing, harmful practices
- Critically examining institutions and their workings
- Showing how laws are violated or exploited
- Holding the powerful accountable

## **Controversies:**

- Accusations of bias, one-sided reporting
- Use of unnamed sources
- Going undercover
- “Fake News”

# Investigative Journalism

## Ultimate reward – Pulitzer Prize

- Regarded as highest honor in journalism
- Voted on by board of accomplished journalists
- Established in 1917 by publisher Joseph Pulitzer
- Administered by Columbia University
- Awarded in many areas of journalism, literature
- Most notably highlights investigative reporting

# Investigative Journalism

## Some terminology:

### ▪ **Accountability**

- Holding those in powerful positions responsible for actions
- Also must apply to journalists investigating them

### ▪ **Corroboration**

- Confirming aspects of a story from multiple sources, angles
- Incredibly important step in checking out information

### ▪ **Triangulation**

- Reporters verifying info with a minimum of three sources
- Important both ethically and legally

### ▪ **Off the Record vs. Unnamed vs. On Background**

- Off the Record: Info only for reporter's information, not published
- Unnamed: Not for attribution – use info, but not source name or job
- On Background: Use info, not name, some source identification

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## Different general types of investigative stories:

- **Scandals**
  - Uncover violations of laws, rules or norms of decency
  - Can involve organizations or individuals, sometimes both
- **Institutional Abuses**
  - Cases where laws or policies exploit workers or public, benefit the powerful
  - Frequently involve leaks or whistleblowers
- **Dangerous Developments**
  - Reveal situations, social movements that could pose threat to public
  - Can involve a social trend, a group gathering members, etc.
- **Positive Trends**
  - Bring attention to unseen groups & people doing good things
  - Often start out with different purpose
- **Stories of the Underrepresented**
  - Can be positive or negative, depending on circumstances
  - Often require reporters to approach carefully

# 10 Commandments of News

## “Thou shalt not...”

1. Lie or misrepresent information in any medium (also means not using technology to alter photos, video, audio, etc.).
2. Lie to or threaten a source.
3. Report rumors or other unverified information.
4. Suppress or omit opinion with which one disagrees.
5. Show favoritism or personal bias in one's reporting or writing.
6. Misrepresent oneself or use deception to get a story (without having extremely powerful reasons to do so).
7. Plagiarize words or ideas (journalists can use the words with attribution).
8. Record telephone conversations without permission.
9. Use one's position for personal gain (e.g., accepting gifts from sources).
10. Do anything that may be construed as a "conflict of interest" (e.g., write political speeches for the candidate being covered in an election).

Adapted from John Maxwell Hamilton and George A. Krinsky, *Hold the Press* (1996, Louisiana State University Press)

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## Ethical principles to apply to media:

- **Golden Mean**
  - Middle ground between two extremes
  - Associated with Aristotle
- **Categorical Imperative**
  - Some things are **always** right, and some are **always** wrong
  - Associated with Immanuel Kant
- **Utilitarianism**
  - Serve the greatest good for the greatest number
  - Associated with John Stuart Mill
- **Veil of Ignorance**
  - Remove social standing from view of subject
  - Associated with John Rawls
- **Golden Rule**
  - Do unto others as you would have them do unto you
  - Associated with longstanding Judeo-Christian philosophy

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## Examples:

- Harrisburg, PA *Patriot-News* – Sara Ganim
  - [Investigation of longtime Penn State coach and benefactor Jerry Sandusky for sex abuse of teenage boys](#)
- *Los Angeles Times* – David Willman
  - [Articles on consequences of FDA fast-tracking new drugs](#)
- *San Francisco Chronicle* – Kevin Fagan and others
  - [How established Oakland citizens found themselves homeless](#)
- *Spartan Daily* – Lindsey Boyd and others
  - [Investigation of misappropriation of athletic scholarship money](#)

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## Examples:

- *Tampa Bay Times* – Staff
  - [Investigation of area battery recycling plant](#)
- *Spokesman-Review* – Bill Morlin and others
  - [Investigation of Spokane Mayor Jim West](#)



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## Battery recycling plant case

- Gopher Resource runs local plant that recycles lead batteries
- Melts down car batteries & purifies lead components, repackages them for use in new batteries, ammo, military uses
- The process creates toxic dust – company operates “baghouse” to filter it and protect community from pollution
- Automated process designed to protect plant workers – but breakdowns happened – workers pressured to keep going
- Workers sometimes covered in dust – developed breathing problems, rashes, passed out from heat & fumes
- Company knew the problems but failed to act → expensive
- Newspaper investigation led to new safety measures to better protect workers and nearby residents

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## Spokane, Washington mayor case

- Republican state legislator Jim West elected mayor of Spokane
- Long history of voting against gay rights initiatives, introducing anti-gay legislation
- Local newspaper told that West was visiting gay chat rooms, looking for young men for sexual encounters and hiring them as interns in his office
- Newspaper hired consultant to pose as teen in chat room – engaged in online flirting, set up date – confronted on arrival
- Newspaper published results of investigation – West claims entrapment, exploitation by newspaper
- West refuses to resign – recalled by voters 7 months later
- Less than a year later, West dies of cancer