

Investigative Journalism – Recap

One definition of investigative journalism: Finding, reporting and presenting important news that is hidden by people or institutions.

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

Investigative Journalism – Recap

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](#)

Investigative Journalism

Most famous example/exception:

Bob Woodward & Carl Bernstein – Watergate

- Young *Washington Post* reporters – unknown at the time
- Started with simple burglary case, but strange details
- Early reporting was largely dismissed by other outlets
- In spite of reports tying burglary to him, Nixon was reelected
- Continued reporting solidified connections to White House
- Congress held hearings; eventually aides convicted of coverup
- More than 2 years after first story ran, Nixon resigned presidency
- Bestselling book, eventually Oscar-winning movie
- Woodward & Bernstein most famous reporters in U.S. history

Investigative Journalism

Most famous example/exception:

Bob Woodward & Carl Bernstein – Watergate



Investigative Journalism

Most famous example/exception:

Bob Woodward & Carl Bernstein – Watergate

Example

- Started at bottom
- Tireless work ethic
- Hundreds of interviews
- Plowed through documents
- Gained key allies
- Worked for months/years
- Outlet stood by them
- Affected important change

Exception

- Published while investigating
- Became public targets
- People not yet cynical
- Toppled a president
- Became celebrities themselves
- Praised & vilified ever since

Investigative Journalism

Controversies:

- Accusations of bias, one-sided reporting
 - Reporters should give all sides the chance to comment
 - One side's refusal to comment shouldn't kill a story
 - Independence is vitally important
- Use of unnamed sources
 - Often needed to get important information out
 - Should only be used when absolutely necessary
 - Some states have whistleblower & shield laws to protect sources
- Going undercover
 - Dangerous practice – many outlets don't allow it
 - Sometimes the only way to expose serious issues
 - Reporters should not use deception to get truth

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

Investigative Journalism

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

Investigative Journalism

What readers should look for:

- Clear, thorough explanation of the issues involved
- Well-defined connections to issues important to audience
- Evidence of detailed research into the subject, from different angles
- Original data and documents, or direct excerpts from them
- Clear evidence of any broken laws, worker mistreatment, etc.
- Quotes from people both inside & outside of institutions involved
- Conclusions clearly drawn from the material presented
- After publication, news outlet stands by its reporting

Investigative Journalism

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

Investigative Journalism

Examples:

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

Investigative Journalism

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

Investigative Journalism

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