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

Adapted from Sheila Coronel, *Digging Deeper* (Sarajevo, BIRN, 2009).

Investigative Journalism – Recap

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 – Recap

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

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

"Shooting the messenger"

- Metaphor used – taking out your anger over bad news on the person who tells you about it
- Ancient times – deliverers of bad news sometimes executed
- Modern times – rather than disputing truth of an item, attack the reporter or news outlet – "fake news"
- Officials and powerful entities can use powers to intimidate reporters and force sources to stay silent
- Social media – users can leak personal info – flood feeds with threats – creation of deepfakes, false information
- Can create "chilling effect" – climate of fear, discouraging future reporters or sources from similar investigations

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

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 onto others as you would have them do onto 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