

Investigative Journalism

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

How do reporters' roles fit into this paradigm?

▪ Disseminator

- Common in daily journalism, but more passive than active

▪ Interpreter

- Need elements of this (clarifying), but investigations go deeper

▪ Watchdog

- Goal: Critically examine work of government & major institutions
- Expose wrongdoing, hold those in power accountable
- Best fit for investigative work, but not the only one

▪ Adversary

- Goal: Confront officials, fight for public interest over private gain
- Most reporters tend to want the facts to speak for themselves

▪ Mobilizer

- Reporting behind the scenes, not as face of movement

Investigative Journalism

What investigative reporting is not:

▪ Daily news reporting

- Attending news conferences and staged events
- Routine statements from officials, comments from citizens
- Covering individual day-to-day incidents

▪ Reactive

- Responding to others' ideas for stories
- Reporting leaked information from officials
- Simply verifying material disseminated by others

▪ Fast

- In-depth investigations can take weeks, months, years
- Getting info from & about reluctant individuals & institutions takes time

▪ Cheap

- Many news organizations don't have resources to support it
- Salaries, travel, databases, document requests, etc.

▪ Spotlight seeking

- Most work done quietly behind the scenes
- Nothing glamorous about poring through documents, making calls

Investigative Journalism

What investigative reporting is:

- **Proactive**
 - Often begins with desire to look beyond the obvious
 - Relies on reporters' own drive and initiative
- **Original**
 - The reporters' own work, assembling facts from many sources
 - Typically involves plowing through records, laws, data, messages
 - Requires ability to connect, interpret, explain complex information
- **Often teamwork**
 - Take advantage of individuals' strengths, divide labor
 - Complexity of work frequently requires team approach
- **Time consumptive & exhausting**
 - Often must confront threats from powerful people
 - Painstaking – can involve weeks, months of thankless work
- **In the public interest**
 - Usually topics that are important to citizens, communities
 - Serving the public's right to know

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

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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

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

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](#)