



The Problem with Investigative Journalism

When 'Investigative Reporting' is Not Investigative

By

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The problem with much of ‘Investigative Reporting’ today is that it often fails the ‘investigative’ test. I’ve been watching local television stations and reading stories from ‘investigative reporters’ for years. Anchors introduce these reporters as ‘investigative’ and the words ‘investigative reporter’ appear under their name in lower-third fonts.

Unfortunately, most of them are not doing ‘investigative reporting.’ The reports are usually what most reporters do in a normal day — cover public meetings and events, go to crime or accident scenes, cover weather events, ‘report’ information from news releases, etc. That’s usually as far as the report goes, which is not technically ‘investigative.’ Let me explain what I mean.

Investigative Journalism

Here are some definitions of ‘Investigative Journalism’ that you may find helpful —

Investigative journalism involves exposing to the public matters that are concealed—either deliberately by someone in a position of power, or accidentally, behind a chaotic mass of facts and circumstances that obscure understanding. It requires using both secret and open sources and documents. Global Investigative Journalism Network

... a type of journalism that tries to discover information of public interest that someone is trying to hide — Cambridge English Dictionary

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 ... **investigative reporting often involves digging up what is secret**

or hidden. Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning

Notice the emphasis on the words ‘trying to hide, hidden, concealed, secret, new, previously unknown.’ Investigative reporting should ‘**surprise**’ viewers, listeners, and readers. The information should focus on things that people would not know unless you told them.

True investigative journalism is usually something that only one journalist knows about and reports. Investigative journalism is **not** reporting what people already know, adding a little more detail to what people already know, or reporting what other reporters are saying or writing about a story. Investigative reporting is about **uncovering** information that people in positions of power don’t want the public to know.

Columbia University's Center for Teaching and Learning explains my point pretty well —

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.** Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning



Digging for Information

Investigative reporting — to be legitimately ‘investigative’ — means **digging for information** that is beneath the surface of what most journalists do every day. Today’s journalists have so many ‘tools’ available to them that I didn’t have in the 1960s, 70s, or early 80s. They have multiple computers on their desks, access to the Internet via those computers and mobile phones, etc. I didn’t have those tools, but I’m glad for the tools I had available to me. I had landline phones, public pay phones, fax machines, hand-held radios, typewriters

(manual and electric), news vehicles, etc. I had access to public libraries, law libraries, public records kept in boxes in storage facilities, microfilm of old newspaper stories, etc. The ‘essence’ of what makes a story ‘investigative’ has not changed in the last 60 years, but the tools and resources have changed.

Those tools make ‘investigative’ journalism faster, but not necessarily better. It still comes down to how well a reporter thinks and processes information. Journalists, if they truly want to be ‘investigative’ journalists, will have to take personal and professional risks to ‘uncover’ what powerful people want to keep ‘hidden.’

Please know that I’m not saying that ‘daily’ journalism is not important — not at all. That’s the kind of reporting that makes up the bulk of a newscast. What I am saying is that ‘normal’ daily reporting is NOT ‘investigative’ reporting. I recommend managers, editors, and producers NOT use the word ‘investigative’ until it is truly an ‘investigation’ that uncovers what people try to ‘hide.’ To do otherwise is to ‘water down’ the meaning and purpose of the word **investigative**.

I believe that calling reports that are **not** investigative, *'investigative,'* dulls the audience from the power of what investigative reporting really is and the power it has to deeply affect a community in positive ways. I know this is true because I did it for many years in a variety of media. Because of some of my investigations, I received personal threats and attacks for my reporting across several decades. I also led a television investigative team for many years after becoming a news manager. I know what investigative reporting is and what it isn't. I had some good teachers when I was a young journalist — investigative journalists and professional detectives. They helped me see the difference between 'daily' journalism and 'investigative' journalism.

So, what do we do about the problem? We make journalism 'real' again. If it's normal daily news, just present it that way. Don't hype it by calling it something it isn't. However, if the reporting is truly 'investigative' then call it 'investigative.' That's why words exist — so we can describe what is **'real.'**

Making Journalism 'Real' Again

Journalists — please understand that I am trying to help journalism become 'real' again. I am not trying to make reporters, editors, producers, and managers feel bad about what they're doing. I think what's happened is that journalism has 'drifted' through the years, using the wrong titles to describe what journalists are actually doing. Who's to blame? Consultants? Owners? Managers? I don't know that we need to focus much time playing the 'blame game' on this one. I think the important thing is to get journalism 'back on track' to being real again.

Your audience needs to know the news of the day, how the news affects them personally, how the weather will impact their day, what's going on with their favorite sports teams, etc. That's expected and perfectly fine. The problem is calling those types of reports 'investigative.' Please — save the words 'investigative report' and 'investigative reporter' for journalism that is really 'investigative.'

One of the things I want to do this year is help journalists and their managers understand the process of doing ‘investigative journalism.’ I’ve touched on the topic in previous newsletters, but I believe it would help to go deeper into how to ‘uncover’ what powerful people want to stay ‘covered.’

I’ll share thoughts for journalists who cover ‘news of the day,’ as well as journalists who specialize in ‘investigative’ reporting. I hope my thoughts will be helpful to both groups of journalists because we need the best possible coverage from both.



[1960s Radio News, © Mark McGee](#)