



Investigative Reporting 101

By

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Entering With Eyes Wide Open

I want to be brutally honest with you. There are some serious downsides to being an investigative reporter. Once you know what they are and consider the impact they may have on your life, you can make a reasoned decision about whether to move forward into the world of ‘uncovering’ what people want ‘hidden.’

The following list is based on my experience as an ‘investigative’ journalist. Other journalists may not experience the same challenges. However, I do believe all journalists who step into the world of ‘investigative journalism’ will experience pushback from powerful people who don’t want their secrets revealed.

The purpose of this particular article is to help you enter investigative journalism with ‘your eyes wide open.’



Unpopularity with Powerful People

Many of your investigations will involve ‘powerful’ people. By ‘powerful’ I mean the type of people who can control information and even ‘cover up’ things that the public has the right to know. You may find yourself investigating current or former government officials, judges, police chiefs, sheriffs, owners of small and large businesses, CEOs, criminal gang leaders, etc. Anyone who doesn’t want you to know

something that the public has the right to know can become the 'target' of your investigation.

Investigating powerful people will not make you 'more popular' with those people. In fact, just the opposite. Not only will you become 'less popular' with them, many will despise you and put everything imaginable in your way toward finding and uncovering the truth they're trying to keep hidden.



Unpopularity with Your Audience

This may come as a surprise to some journalists, but not everyone in your audience may like what you uncover during an investigation. Eyes wide open - deal with it. If you want to be an investigative journalist, don't expect to be popular with everyone. You will endear yourself to some in your audience who will see you as having the courage to bring what was 'hidden' into the 'light.' Some will not see it that way. Just know that going into this journalism 'niche.'

Danger of a 'Power' Setup

Powerful people often know how to protect themselves from 'prying eyes.' They'll sometimes put legal and even physical 'roadblocks' in your way to keep you from uncovering their secrets. Learn how to use various legal ways to get the information you need. 'Sources' that you can identify and are verifiable are very helpful. However, powerful people often know how to 'shut down' your sources through bribes, threats, etc. Develop as many sources as you can and do your best to convince them to 'do the right thing' when the powerful make things tough.

The reason I mentioned the 'power' setup is because it happened to me. I won't go into detail to protect my sources, but I was warned that I was going to be set up in a way that would lead to my being arrested on phony charges. The problem, according to my sources, would not be the phony charges but what would happen to me once I was inside a jail and behind bars. I heeded their warning. That kind of danger goes with the job.

Potential of Being Fired

The potential of powerful people putting pressure on your employer to fire you is real. That's something I experienced personally. It's helpful to have news directors, editors, and general managers who won't be bullied by the powerful.

My experiences with powerful people trying to get me fired because I was investigating them goes back decades. I'm afraid the current climate for investigative journalists has changed in some situations. I'm concerned about powerful people using 'cancel culture' to shut down journalists and even get them fired. Attacks and smears on journalists in social media and even from other news outlets is making the job tougher than when I was on the street. Maybe that will change some day, some way. I hope so.

Potential of Going to Jail

I know what it's like to sit in the witness chair and be asked to reveal a 'source' to a story. I also know what it's like to refuse to reveal my source and have the judge look at me and demand that I reveal my source or be in contempt of court. I politely refused the judge's demand. Fortunately, my attorney was able to demonstrate that the opposition could get the information without my having to reveal my source. I didn't go to jail that day — but came 'very' close. I was threatened with that possibility in other situations, but stood my ground then as well. If you're going to be a journalist, especially one who does investigations, prepare to be put in that position some day.

Personal Danger

I've been physically attacked by powerful people and criminals. So were members of my investigative team. I've been yelled at and threatened with physical action. Being a martial arts instructor gave me the confidence to handle those situations, but having a gun pointed at your head or being attacked by an angry mob takes physical threats to a new level.

Fortunately, I'm still here to write about it. Not everyone else is so fortunate. Many investigative journalists have to deal with serious beatings, and some have been killed for investigating powerful and often dangerous people.



In Conclusion

Please understand that I'm not trying to talk journalists out of investigating powerful people. We need more journalists who have the courage to do that work. My purpose is to be as honest and forthcoming as I can about what investigative journalism can become. I was also an investigative manager and hired investigative journalists, photographers, and producers. We always discussed the same potential 'negatives' of the job before hiring them. I wanted them to enter the job with their 'eyes wide open.'

Some investigative journalists may never face any of the challenges I've described above, but I wouldn't count on it. If you take on powerful people, you will eventually feel the impact of their 'power.'

The first rules of self defense are 'Be Aware and Beware.' The same is true for investigative journalists. Watch your back. Someone is not going to like where you're headed.



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