



# **Investigative Reporting 101**

**By**

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# Looking Back to Look Forward

The best way to look forward is often to look backward. If journalists want to know how to navigate the challenges of uncovering the information powerful people don't want the public to know today, I recommend looking into recent history to see how investigative journalists were successful in doing what you want to do.

I began learning how to do 'undercover' investigative journalism in the 1960s. However, the people who trained me had learned their craft many years earlier. So, how far back did 'modern' undercover investigative journalism go?

# A Brief History of Undercover Investigative Journalism

The research I've done on the subject took me back to the early part of the 19th century. Journalism in America was active from the 17th century, especially against what many saw as the abuses of English control of the colonies. I've written about that before, but what I wanted to see this time is when journalism became investigative, especially as it relates to our current topic of 'undercover' investigative journalism.

Alexander Hamilton started the New York Post in 1801, just three years before being killed in a duel with Aaron Burr. Hamilton was a 'founding Father' of the United States and a Federalist. President George Washington appointed Hamilton as the country's first Secretary of the Treasury.

The Post was the first of many newspapers that would be started in the 19th century. Editors and their writers (journalists) reported on national and international events, in addition to local news. The public's interest in newspapers grew as literacy grew during the 1800s. Technology also played a factor with advances in communication (the telegraph) and transportation (railroads). Though much of early newspaper writing was based on the partisan opinions of editors and writers, there were some journalists who were interested in uncovering 'facts and evidence' as they pertained to powerful people of their day. Subjects they wrote about prior to the Civil War included the slave trade and human rights. Subjects after the war included reconstruction and rights for former slaves.

Some of the more interesting undercover investigative journalists of the 19th century were the ‘Girl Stunt Reporters’

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The 1880s and 1890s witnessed a revolution in journalism as publisher titans like Hearst and Pulitzer used weapons of innovation and scandal to battle it out for market share. As they sought new ways to draw readers in, they found their answer in young women flooding into cities to seek their fortunes. When Nellie Bly went undercover into Blackwell’s Insane Asylum for Women and emerged with a scathing indictment of what she found there, the resulting sensation created opportunity for a whole new wave of writers. In a time of few jobs and few rights for women, here was a path to lives of excitement and meaning. After only a decade of headlines and fame, though, these trailblazers faced a vicious public backlash. Accused of practicing “yellow journalism,” their popularity waned until “stunt reporter” became a badge of shame. But their influence on the field of journalism would arc across a

century, from the Progressive Era “muckraking” of the 1900s to the personal “New Journalism” of the 1960s and ’70s, to the “immersion journalism” and “creative nonfiction” of today. Bold and unconventional, these writers changed how people would tell stories forever. The Hidden History of America’s ‘Girl Stunt Reporters’

Nellie Bly (born Elizabeth Jane Cochran) started her journalism career working as a reporter for the Pittsburgh Dispatch. She used the pen name ‘Nellie Bly,’ which came from a popular song of the day. She wrote about living in the slums of Pittsburgh, and the tough working conditions that young women faced. She was expelled from Mexico after investigating government corruption there in the late 1880s.

As mentioned above, Bly may be best known for the undercover investigative journalism she did for the New York World. She pretended to be insane, which led to her commitment to an asylum. She wrote about her experience, which led to a grand-jury investigation of the asylum and improvements to patient care. Bly also uncovered problems with 'sweatshops, ' and corruption in government (including bribery by lobbyists).



## **‘Muckraker’ Journalism**

A ‘muckraker’ is defined as someone who searches out and publicly exposes — “real or apparent misconduct of a prominent individual or business “ (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). The noun ‘muckrake’ comes from a ‘rake for muck’ (i.e. manure). John Bunyan used the term in his famous 17th century book ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’ as representative of how people are preoccupied with earthly things.

‘Muckraker journalism’ grew in the early part of the 20th century. Investigative journalists like Ida Tarbell, Ray Baker, Lincoln Steffens, Charles Russell, Brand Whitlock, Edwin Markham, and others investigated government and political corruption, insurance fraud, industrial monopolies, corrupt business practices, stock market abuses, child labor abuses, problems with food inspections, etc. Their style of investigative journalism, including ‘undercover,’ led to many important ‘exposes.’

Lincoln Steffens wrote for McClure's Magazine and published an expose in the early 1900s about corruption between city officials and business leaders. Steffens continued to investigate and write until the articles were published in a book titled 'The Shame of the Cities.' The public responded by demanding reforms within city governments.

Ida Tarbell also wrote for McClure's Magazine. She wrote about corruption in business that led to monopolies, including The History of the Standard Oil Company in 1904. That led to the breakup of Standard Oil into more than 30 different companies because of the violation of antitrust laws.

## **‘Professional’ Investigative Journalism**

Muckraking journalism eventually came to a close prior to 1920. The era of ‘professional’ investigative journalism began after that as students studied at ‘journalism schools’ (e.g. Columbia University, University of Missouri). Those schools grew to emphasize the importance of journalists being ‘neutral’ and ‘objective’ in their reporting. As more students graduated and were employed by newspapers, and eventually broadcast news organizations, journalism became known as a ‘profession.’

I’m glad for the emphasis on ‘professional investigative journalism’ because it influenced the people who trained me and the people I trained. Journalists should hold themselves up to a higher standard because of the importance of what we do for the citizens of our country. That is the purpose of this Real Journalism newsletter.

Unfortunately, we have a couple of major problems with modern-day investigative journalism. First, the work of only a small number of journalists meets the standards of being ‘investigative.’ Though many reporters are called ‘investigative journalists’ in bylines and lower-thirds, many are not. Second, a large number of today’s journalists are no longer ‘neutral’ and ‘objective.’ It’s interesting how our ‘profession’ has changed in the last 100 years, and often not for the better — in my humble opinion.

We need to return to the ‘passion’ and ‘courage’ of early investigative journalists (including ‘undercover’ work), while holding up the standards of our ‘profession’ developed during the past century. I find it very sad to see such a noble profession necessary to the freedom of our nation divided by partisan political and social beliefs.

**We are, or at least should be, better than that.**



1960s Radio News, © Mark McGee