



Investigative Reporting 101

By

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‘Technical Tools’ for Your Toolbox

The ‘tools’ that investigative journalists have used through the past century have changed dramatically — especially in the last 20 years. We’ve moved from paper, to film, to tape, to digital. We’ve moved from ‘larger to smaller’ in the size of technical tools through the years. We’ve moved from ‘wired to wireless,’ which allows journalists more freedom of movement to do undercover work. The size and type of batteries have also changed to allow for smaller equipment with longer recording time. Some journalists even use their smartphones for sound and video recording.

I remember the first ‘hidden camera’ I bought for undercover work, and it was about the size of a tube of lipstick. It was ‘wired’ to a recorder, so it was difficult to hide. Our I-Team used a variety of ‘mesh’ hand carriers for the hidden camera and recorder. Sound was okay, but recording video through mesh material was a little hard to watch. However, it was what we could afford to use at the time.

The options today are much better. The size is smaller and the quality is higher. Journalists can hide cameras or recorders in glasses, ball caps, pens, shirt or coat buttons, watches, glasses, etc. Hidden cameras are commonly used by parents (sometimes called ‘nanny cams’), employers, journalists, and others — hidden in everything from a clock to a lamp to a teddy bear. They are small and inexpensive with a quality high enough for broadcast (1080 pixels is good enough).

The type of undercover work you’re going to do will determine what kind of equipment to purchase. Will you be inside or outside? Will you be recording in low light, normal light, or high light? How long will you need the recorder to record (battery length)? Will you be in a position to plug in a battery or will you need back-up batteries? Will you need a wireless recorder or will hard-wired work better for your purposes? Will your recording be close range, medium range, or long range?

If your recording will be long range, you may want to consider a 4K camera for quality as you push in to get closer to the subject. If you can't afford 4K, then go with what you can afford. You can always explain to viewers what they're seeing. You can also look into long-range lenses for your camera — similar to what still photographers use. As for sound at long range, you can consider a variety of 'parabolic' listening devices.

Do some research and you'll discover how much technology is available for investigative journalists. I also recommend you [research the laws in your state](#) that may impact your legal rights to use hidden microphones and cameras.

The Dangers

One of the dangers of doing undercover journalism, especially if you're using a hidden camera or voice recorder, is your subject discovering that you are recording them. Governments, businesses, and criminal groups have become more savvy about investigative journalism techniques. They may have counter-intelligence equipment that can detect your 'hidden' devices. Just be aware of that before going into a dangerous situation. The more you know about your subject the better for your own safety and the success of your investigation.

Talk about all aspects of an undercover operation with your news manager. That includes the dangers involved. Those dangers can go beyond the process of 'gathering' information. Consider the impact your story will have on people surrounding the subject. Will your story put them in danger? Will your story put your family, friends, or colleagues in danger? Some stories have unintended consequences to innocent people. Investigations have led to people losing jobs, even their lives (murdered or committed suicide).

All of that should be considered before launching an investigation, or at least before publishing or broadcasting the story. You don't have to reveal every detail you've learned and every recording you've made. You can put your story together in a way that gets the information to the public, while protecting some innocent lives. It's difficult to do stories that bring down powerful people with no fallout on innocents, but it is worth taking the time to consider them before 'breaking' the story.

Another danger to consider is trying to 'rush' the story on air, online, or in print. Investigations need to be timely, but they need to be done well. Trying to be first with a story when the story is not ready for publication can bite you in the end. Think it through carefully. Get the advice and guidance of your news managers, senior journalists on your team, and from your legal counsel.



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