

WHAT IS INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM?

UNESCO defines investigative journalism as “the unveiling of matters that are concealed either deliberately by someone in a position of power, or accidentally, behind a chaotic mass of facts and circumstances - and the analysis and exposure of all relevant facts to the public.”²

“Investigative Journalism is a form of journalism in which reporters go in-depth to investigate a single story that may uncover corruption, review government policies or of corporate houses, or draw attention to social, economic, political or cultural trends. An investigative journalist, or team of journalists, may spend months or years researching a single topic. Unlike conventional reporting, where reporters rely on materials supplied by the government, NGOs and other agencies, investigative reporting depends on material gathered through the reporter’s own initiative. The practice aims at exposing public matters that are otherwise concealed, either deliberately or accidentally.

Investigative journalism requires the reporter to dig deeply into an issue or topic of public interest. ‘Public interest’ refers to a quality whereby a community will be disadvantaged by not knowing this information, or will benefit (either materially or through informed decision-making) by knowing it. Sometimes, information that benefits one community may disadvantage another. For example, forest-dwellers can demand better prices if they know the market value of trees that logging companies want to sell. Of course, the logging industry does not want this information revealed, as tree prices will rise. An entire country need not be affected by the story and indeed, ‘public interest’ is often differentiated from ‘national interest’. Latter term is sometimes used by governments to justify illegal, dangerous or unethical acts or to discourage journalists from reporting on a significant problem.

Investigative journalism is not instantaneous. It develops through recognised stages of planning, researching and reporting, and has to adhere to accepted standards of accuracy and evidence. The base of an investigative story is the proactive work of a journalist and, where resources permit, his or her team. After receiving a story tip, journalists develop hypotheses, plan additional research, decide on the relevant questions, and go out to investigate them. They must compile evidence by witnessing and analysing answers for themselves, such that they go far beyond simply verifying the tip. The final story should reveal new information or assemble previously available information in a new way to reveal its significance. A single source can provide fascinating revelations, access to insights and information that would otherwise be hidden. But until the story from that source is cross-checked against other sources – experiential, documentary and human – and its meaning is explored, it does not classify as investigation.”

| | Conventional Journalism | Investigative Journalism |
|------------------|--|---|
| Research | Information gathered and reported on a fixed schedule (daily, weekly, monthly). | Information cannot be published until its consistency and completeness is assured. |
| | Research completed quickly. No further research is done once story is completed. | Research continues until story is confirmed and may continue after published. |
| | Story is based on the necessary minimal information. Can be very short. | Story based on the maximum amount of information, and can be very long. |
| | Declaration of sources can substitute for documentation. | The reporting requires documentation to support or deny declarations of sources. |
| Source Relations | The good faith of sources is presumed, often without verification. | The good faith of sources cannot be presumed; no information may be used without verification. |
| | Official sources offer information to the reporter freely. | Official information is often hidden from reporter, because its revelation may compromise interests, individuals, or institutions. |
| | Reporter must accept official version of a story, though they may contrast it with other source materials. | Reporter may explicitly challenge or deny official version of a story, based on information from independent sources. |
| | Sources are nearly always identified. | Sources often cannot be identified for the sake of their security. |
| Outcomes | Reporting is seen as a reflection of the world and reporter does not hope for results beyond informing the public. | Reporting is aimed at penetrating or exposing a given situation to reform, denounce, or promote an example of a better way. |
| | Reporting does not require a personal engagement from reporter. | Without a personal engagement from the reporter, the story will never be completed. |
| | Reporter seeks to be objective, without bias, or judgement towards anyone in the story. | Reporter seeks to be fair and scrupulous towards the facts of the story, and on that basis designate its victims/survivors, "heroes", and wrongdoers. |
| | Dramatic structure of the story is not primary as the story does not necessarily have an end because the news is continuous. | Dramatic structure is essential to its impact, and leads to a conclusion offered by reporter or source. |
| | Errors in reporting are inevitable and are usually without grave consequences. | Errors expose the reporter to formal and informal sanctions, and can destroy the credibility of the reporter and the media. |

<http://wayback.archive-it.org/10611/20160906193350/http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001930/193078e.pdf>, p. 9.