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Investigative Journalism

By

Murray Masterton
Let's start this session by getting the terminology accurate. "Investigative journalism" is a term which has caused more ethical and professional problems in modern journalism than any other, with the possible exception of "objectivity". This dates from 1974, when Woodward and Bernstein of the Washington Post uncovered the Watergate scandal which eventually resulted in President Nixon resigning from the Presidency of the United States, the first president ever to do so.

Woodward and Bernstein were praised beyond reason for their reporting, which was undoubtedly thorough and determined, since covering the story spanned more than a year. The way their colleagues feted them you would think there was no such thing as investigative reporting before then. Of course there was, even though it had been more of less in recess because of its cost.

What happened in 1974 was that the Washington Post revived the journalism of organised and prolonged inquiry, restoring investigative reporting to its place within the journalism profession. The newspaper did nothing new. It just had the courage to do properly what had been honoured in the breach for too many years -- perhaps since the muck-rakers of the 1920s.

The problem for journalism was that because of the success of Woodward and Bernstein every young reporter suddenly wanted to be an investigative reporter and unearth a scandal of his or her own. In too many cases editors, hoping to win for their paper some of the Post's prestige, encouraged them to try, in spite of the cost. For most of the aspirants ambition outranked ability. Their investigations foundered on inaccuracy, incompetence or a disregard for ethical standards. Paradoxically, those who rushed to emulate the reporting which heightened respect for American journalism only served to destroy the public's regard for the profession.

Five years after Watergate, journalism in the West -- and not only in America -- was debased by its own practitioners to the extent that journalists ranked low on the scale of social respect. Investigative Journalism was not to blame; would-be investigators were, and there-in lies the lesson.
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Investigative journalism is not digging up the dirt about someone, though it can be. It is a systematic inquiry to reveal facts and the only difference between this type of good journalism and any other type of good reporting is that the inquiry is made difficult by people not wanting the facts to get out.

In reality any good reporting is investigative reporting, since it calls for the search for and checking of facts before any information is published. The difference is therefore a matter of degree, which means that any good reporter who has the determination and perseverance, and who has the support of his or her editor, has the makings of an investigative reporter. Not every reporter has this desire, so don't feel less than worthy if you are one of them.

No matter how good the journalist or team of journalists, there can be no worthwhile investigative reporting without the full support of the management. Investigations take time, especially when those being asked don't want to answer -- which is why the report demands investigation instead of normal reporting. So the management has to recognise that there will not be a great revelation every day, or even every week. Days may pass without enough information being gleaned to enable the reporters to write anything publishable -- after all, publish too soon and you may destroy the whole investigation. So the editor and management must know and approve of the investigation and be prepared to fund it.

Since such reporting costs money, editors are reluctant to agree to any but their most efficient and effective reporters from undertaking it.

It may have been the WASHINGTON POST in the United States which supported the most famous of all investigative reporting efforts -- though I'm not sure it was the best piece of journalism -- but many other newspapers have done the same job: the NEW YORK TIMES exposed the Pentagon Papers, the LOS ANGELES TIMES was instrumental in following up the My Lai Massacre to tell a shocked America about the training methods of the Marines. Yet probably the same goes on in every country -- yours and mine as well.

Television in the United States reopened in the 1960s the investigatory path the newspapers seemed to have abandoned so many years earlier. Under Edward R. Murrow CBS inquired into the social ills of the country in a way which set new standards for television but which frightened away commercial sponsors. Investigative journalism worthy of the name obviously has a limited audience, and even if it is a thoughtful and socially-conscious one, it is not the audience advertisers want to reach.

Television has visibly outranked newspapers in Australian investigative reporting in recent years. Most of the worthwhile investigation has been done by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation -- an irony not lost on Australia's federal government, since some of the investigation has been unflattering to the very government which provides the ABC's funds. The ABC has exposed corruption in the Queensland State Government, the French involvement in the sinking of the Greenpeace ship Rainbow Warrior in Auckland and long-running political feuds within the governing Labor Party. Its investigations have led to royal commissions and courts of inquiry.
In an attempt to emulate this, commercial television reporters have hounded frauds and cheats to publicly expose them, but their success is rebounding on the reputation of good journalists in the same way as happened in the United States. There is a public outcry for higher ethics, for less intrusion into private lives and for the media, not just television, to look more closely at itself.

With all this happening, what is so special about investigative reporting that so many serious reporters want to take part in it?

To begin with, newspaper reporters tend to look on investigative journalism in the same way that television reporters look on documentary making, as the highest form of their professional art. They compare it to writing a nation-moving novel while their reporting colleagues are writing short stories. In part this is a true comparison, yet at the same time it is frighteningly false.

Investigation calls for the highest of reportorial ability. It means being able to persuade people to give you information they would rather not, since it might cause trouble for someone and they don't want anything traced back to them. When those who have the information don't want to reveal it, other sources have to be found and they are seldom willing ones.

If they are willing ones, or even too easily persuaded, there is the risk that you, as reporter, are being used: the information is being revealed apparently reluctantly so you will believe it and be led away from the truth. This is only one reason why all information gained in investigative reporting has to be corroborated before it can be published. Those of you who have read All the President's Men will know that Woodward and Bernstein were in anguish about a fact which was central to their story which they could find no one to corroborate. It delayed publication of the crux of the story for weeks and even then the corroboration was not to Woodward's liking.

Investigative journalists must take reams of notes and take them with unfailing accuracy. Most type them out immediately so there is no risk about not being able to understand their note-taking when the time comes to read them in earnest. Not only must they make and transcribe those notes, but they file them and cross reference them, so that they know at any time -- or if they don't know but suspect, they can find out immediately -- whether new information fits or conflicts with what is already known, whether it is genuine information or may be yet another false trail.

These days those who want to take investigative reporting seriously must be able to use computers, not only because the people or institutions they investigate also use them and that is where most of the information is stored, but because without computers the files of reported information will get too big to handle and to slow to manipulate.

Investigative journalism also demands the highest of ethics. The methods of some reporters involved in what they have called investigative journalism have caused the angriest outbursts of recent years against journalism's lack of ethics.
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There is a clause in the Australian journalists' code of ethics which says they must use only fair and honest means to gather information, pictures and documents for publication. There have been cases of reporters concealing the facts that they are reporters, even of posing as gas company employees or council officers, to gain admission to get information or pictures they feel they need for their investigative story. In Australia recently a journalist -- paradoxically an ABC journalist -- posed as the husband of a state cabinet minister to gain information from a bank about the minister's personal spendings, on the grounds that the money spent may have been public, not private at all.

Dozens of books have been written about journalism ethics in the 20 years since the passion for investigation recaptured journalists' imaginations, many more than were written in the half century before, or probably since it was decided that journalists should have ethics. Most reach much the same conclusion: that no matter what the investigation, the ends seldom justify the means and that any reporter who thinks they do had better explain why very clearly to his or her public.

It is no use protesting that the reporter's minor dishonesty was necessary to reveal a greater dishonesty, since the reporter is the only one who is making that decision. In the United States a television network bought a city bar reputedly an exchange point for illegal liquor and perhaps drugs, staffed it with reporters acting as barmen and waiters and armed it with concealed cameras. It was a long and expensive operation to get the story. Ethicists were not impressed, even when the whole story was told on television. They said the television people would have been better to give their information to the police and let them do the job. After all it is their job.

In another instance a more ethical journalist who wanted to report on life in a high-rise tenement block came to the conclusion that to get the story he had to conceal his identity. So he rented an apartment and went to and from the place like everyone else for more than a month, speaking to others there as a fellow tenant, and gathered all the information he wanted. Then, to clear his conscience, he revisited everyone he had spoken to and admitted that he was a reporter gathering information. He promised that if they wished to retract anything they had told him about the evils of the place and those who ran it, that he would not publish it. No one chose to withdraw. No one blacked the reporter's eyes. But no one confirmed that they would have spoken to the reporter at all had they known that he was a reporter.

With honesty, he overcame the criticism that reporters, especially probing, nosy, questionning investigative reporters, are so keen to expose their prey that they and their methods can not be trusted.

That is the fence you must climb if you wish to investigate anything that someone does not want investigated. Put an ethical foot wrong, and you lay yourself open to charges just as serious as those you are investigating.

You must not steal information, nor even buy it. If information comes into your possession by unusual or unexplained means -- they call it falling off the back of a truck -- then that has to be made clear in case readers think it was stolen. Before anything is published, make sure the information or documents are genuine. Leaks carry risks of their own.
People make information available to the media for many reasons. True, most of the reasons are political. Governments fly policy kites to see what the public reaction is to some possible action, and through publishing the leaked information the press obligingly sends the kite high for all to see. Oppositions leak information to embarrass governments, and again the media oblige by making the information public. In both cases the information's reliability is taken for granted simply because of its source, yet both governments and oppositions have been known to lie, or perhaps I should say to deliberately mislead the press.

And what of the private person who leaks information, from a government department or a public company or corporation? Such people may be very genuine in wanting to reveal corrupt or illegal activities, but on the other hand they may not. They may be more interested in having someone above them removed from office for any one of a dozen private reasons. The journalist has to judge whether the information and the reasons for its release are genuine. If they are but the decision is otherwise, the story is lost and the corruption or crime not exposed. If they are not genuine but the information is published, the investigation is wasted and the exposure fails, or worse, ends in court.

What has all this about leaks to do with investigative journalism? Plenty. Those who investigate like leaked information. Their actions as investigators seem to attract people with something to tell about the object of that investigation. Those being investigated may often leak information deliberately to mislead. Those in favour of the investigation can be just as dangerous, wasting the reporter's time and prejudicing the whole project with information that is no more than rumour or is wildly exaggerated.

So he or she who would investigate must have unerring judgment as well as unfailing patience, unyielding determination, the data capacity of a computer hard disc and the thinking processes of a detective -- as well as the reporter's ability to write it so the truth is absolutely clear to everyone who sees the report. And it has to be done so thoroughly and convincingly that the revealed truth can not be challenged, even by the most angered and vengeful subject; governments and public companies can be expensive vengeful in defending their own.

So it is no wonder that managements and wise editors hesitate to approve truly investigative reporting. The newspaper virtually loses the use of the reporters concerned while the investigation is carried out, because there is seldom time for other work if the investigation is done well.

And there may be no end result. The American association of newspaper editors, conferring at a conference about ten years ago, came to the conclusion that less than half the investigative journalism projects they supported ever produced a publishable story. Of those which were published almost one in five caused some expensive legal problem and almost double that number caused no response from either the subject or the newspaper audience. But those that were published and did cause a reaction are the reports that editors and investigative reporters hold up as examples of what good journalism can achieve. Incompetent emulators put all this at risk by their excess of enthusiasm and lack of professionalism.
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