

CHAPTER ONE

Defining Investigative Reporting

What makes it different from other types of journalism?

Investigative reporting has many, sometimes widely divergent, meanings. To understand what investigative reporting is, it may be best to start by explaining what it is not.

It is said that all reporting is investigative. After all, journalists routinely dig for facts. They ask questions. They get information. They ‘investigate’.

But is this really the case? In the day-to-day practice of journalism, how deep do reporters really dig? How probing are their questions? And how complete or original is the information that they present?

The reality is that daily news coverage is usually not probing or investigative. It reports mainly what officials or institutions say, as well as other people’s responses to what has been previously said. Much of what we consider ‘news’ is reporting on official statements or reactions to official statements. Daily journalism is also mainly about events that reporters have witnessed or interviewed witnesses about - such as a train collision, a demonstration, a criminal being arrested. There is no digging beyond what has been said or what has been seen.

Daily news reporting is seldom investigative, it is mostly reactive.

Most of the time, journalists react to what is happening or what has been publicly announced. Reporters seldom decide on their own, what or who they cover. They often do not initiate story ideas. Unfolding events and the daily schedule of news briefings and press conferences determine what makes it to the newspaper, the newscast or the Web.

For the most part, journalists do not set the news agenda. Instead, they take the information they have been given, weigh its significance (does the prime minister’s statement, for example, deserve to be on the front page of a newspaper or in the first five minutes of a newscast?), check its accuracy and put it in context. The news reporter’s job is to confirm the facts of the story, make sense of them and to put them together in a coherent report.

Investigative journalism IS NOT:

- Daily reporting
- Leak journalism
- Single source reporting
- Misuse of information
- Paparazzi journalism

Investigative journalism IS:

- Watch-dog journalism
- Exposing how laws and regulations are violated
- Holding the powerful accountable

Investigative reporting, however, does not just report the information that has been given out by others - whether government, political parties, companies or advocacy groups. It is reporting that relies on the journalist's own enterprise and initiative. Investigative reporting requires journalists to go beyond what they have seen and what has been said, to unearth more facts and to provide something new and previously unknown.

Most of the time, investigative reporters uncover wrongdoing by individuals and institutions. The good that public officials or private companies do is often publicised; a whole army of public relations people makes sure this is so. It is the wrong that powerful groups and individuals do, that is kept secret and hidden from the public.

In the Balkans and other parts of the world, the term investigative reporting is sometimes associated with leaks. Public officials, police, intelligence agents or politicians selectively 'leak' or release secret information or investigative files in order to promote their own interests. Journalists report on the leaked information, often without checking or digging for additional facts on their own.

Leak journalism is not investigative reporting. An investigation can begin from a leak, but journalists must do their own digging, verify information and provide context.

Unless they do so, their reports will be distorted and incomplete. They will also be allowing themselves to be used to manipulate public opinion and to advance the agenda of individuals, rather than the public interest.

Investigative reporting entails the use of multiple sources – both human and documentary – that together paint a picture of wrongdoing or abuse. It requires the verification and corroboration of every piece of information, even if these come from sources that are considered reliable or authoritative. ***Reporting based on a single source cannot be considered investigative.***

Paul Radu, founder of the Romanian Centre for Investigative Journalism (or CRJI, its Romanian acronym), says that some reporters have used the information they have uncovered in their investigations to extort money from individuals or companies. That is true not just in Romania but in other Balkan countries and indeed, elsewhere as well. These reporters taint the name of investigative journalism and do damage to its tradition and reputation. ***Using information for extortion is not investigative journalism.***

Investigative journalism is also sometimes confused with stalking powerful or well-known people and writing intimate details about their private lives, uncovering such things as love affairs or other dark secrets. It is true that investigative reporters sometimes uncover details on the private lives of individuals – for example, the investigation by a US newspaper of Catholic priests accused of abusing boys. But such investigations are done only when there is a clear public interest in exposure – in this case, the priests conducted the abuse over many years and the Catholic Church hierarchy knew the abuses were taking place but did not take action.

In corruption investigations in the Philippines and China, journalists have reported on the mistresses of high public officials who were accused of bribery. The mistresses were either conduits for the bribes or beneficiaries. A Philippine president, for example, was found guilty of building fabulous mansions for four mistresses. In China, an investigative journalist exposed a mayor who used public funds to buy apartments for 29 mistresses. In both these cases, there was a clear public interest in reporting on the private lives of officials.

Investigative reporting is not paparazzi journalism. Its focus is not private lives; it is the public good.

Investigative reporting is watchdog journalism: it aims to check the abuses of those who have wealth and power. It exposes wrongdoing so it can be corrected, not because journalists and their patrons benefit from exposure.

Various metaphors have been used to describe the work that investigative journalists do. They ‘lift the veil of secrecy’ by uncovering previously unknown facts, such as the surveillance and wiretapping of citizens by government security forces, which New York Times journalists uncovered in 2005. Another example is the reporting by journalists in North America, Europe, South Asia and the Middle East on secret renditions – the abduction and detention in secret prisons of suspected terrorists after the 9/11 attacks in the United States.

Investigative journalists ‘strike through the mask’ - they go beyond what is publicly proclaimed and expose the lies and hypocrisy of those who wield power. They have reported on such issues as corruption in government, crime, corporate misdeeds, environmental destruction, the exploitation of women, children, or minority groups, and abuses committed by such entities as churches, criminal gangs, private armed groups, and even non-profit organisations or charities.

In Thailand, journalists have written about scams and illegal money-making by Buddhist monks, exposing the dark underside of a venerable institution. In 2007, a Croatian journalist exposed false claims of business success made by a former minister. The journalist wrote that the politician, then a candidate for prime minister, promoting himself as a successful entrepreneur, actually had a string of business failures and that his company had racked up huge debts.

Most of the time, investigative journalists report on how laws and regulations are violated. They compare how organisations work, with how they are supposed to work. They expose how and why individuals and institutions fail. They report when things go wrong, who is responsible, how the wrongdoing was done and its consequences.

The best investigative reports expose not just individual, but systemic, failures. They show how individual wrongs are part of a larger pattern of negligence or abuse and the systems that make these possible. They examine where the system went wrong and show who suffers from the mistakes.

The Power Brokers

The award-winning 2006 investigative series, *The Power Brokers*¹, examined the Balkan energy market and the energy traders who had made enormous profits from it. Reporters from Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria and Romania traced the energy crisis in the Balkans to “a murky, closed system that is not open to fair trade and where state companies are giving away their advantage to well-connected energy traders”.

The series showed complicity between state power companies, local businessmen and public officials in the energy market. The system, they said, meant profits for a few, while ordinary households had to pay high prices for electricity and suffer from shoddy service as plants fell into disrepair.

The Dutch-Flemish organisation of investigative journalists, known by the acronym VVOJ, lists three kinds of investigative reporting:

- Revealing scandals or the violation of laws, regulations and ethical/moral standards by individuals or institutions.
- Examining the policies or functions of governments, companies and other organisations.
- Describing social, economic, political and cultural trends.

Unlike Investigative Reporters and Editors, (IRE), in the United States, which defines investigative journalism more narrowly as ‘reporting that reveals new facts, especially what is hidden or deliberately kept secret,’ the VVOJ is more inclusive. Reporting that interprets or connects already known facts in a new way is also investigative, according to VVOJ. The Power Brokers series falls into this category of investigative journalism: it pulls together information, much of it already known facts, from various sources and across different countries so that readers are able to look at the Balkan energy crisis in a new way and figure out who is responsible for it.

Holding the powerful accountable - Investigative reporters have always seen themselves as guardians of the public interest. By exposing wrongdoing and failure, they aim to hold the powerful accountable for their actions. In the United States in the early 1900s, crusading journalists were called ‘muckrakers’, because they dug out the muck - or the dirt - of society. The muckrakers exposed such issues as the abuses of corporations, unsafe working conditions, the state of mental institutions and poverty in the slums of the growing cities of the US.

The Watergate Case

In the 1970s, when Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, two young reporters from *The Washington Post*, wrote the Watergate reports, they exposed the involvement of President Richard Nixon and his staff in the bugging of their rival party headquarters and the cover-up of the crime. Since then, investigative reporting has been associated with exposing wrongdoing in high places. Nixon’s resignation because of Watergate and the Post’s exposes demonstrated the power of investigative reporting: two rookie reporters caused the downfall of the most powerful man in the world.

In the 1960s and 1970s, investigative reporters in the UK wrote on corruption in parliament, bribes paid by businessmen to politicians, and horrific scandals such as the marketing of the drug thalidomide, a sedative prescribed for pregnant women which caused severe birth defects.

Since the late 1980s, investigative reporting has taken root in new democracies in Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe and Africa. In these places, journalists have exposed corruption, environmental damage, organised crime and the suffering of women, children and marginalised groups. For example, between 2001 and 2004, reporters in Costa Rica uncovered malfeasance involving millions of dollars in bribes paid by local and foreign companies to three respected former presidents.

Watchdog reporting in the Balkans

Investigative reporting is relatively new in the Balkans. In Romania, Bulgaria and Albania, this kind of reporting began only after the fall of communism and the rise of a free press. Communist regimes in Romania and Bulgaria collapsed in 1989; in Albania, in 1991.

Things were different in the former Yugoslavia, where there were some openings in the press after 1980, with the death of Josip Broz Tito, the country's president since the end of the Second World War.

In the decade that followed, magazines across Yugoslavia published articles that exposed wrongdoing and corruption by state companies and socialist officials. Most of these investigations, however, were based largely on documents leaked by various political groups intent on using the exposes to remove their competitors from power.

Some of these investigations appeared to serve the interests of one ethnic group and its leadership, while putting down the others. These may have helped create an atmosphere of animosity that eventually led to war.

War first broke out in Croatia in 1991, then in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1992 and Kosovo in 1998. In all these places, jingoistic, war-oriented parties took control of the

state and of mainstream media. Nonetheless, some investigative reporters took great risks to uncover and publicise war crimes and other human rights abuses.

Despite the lack of a watchdog reporting tradition and the inaccessibility of documents and sources, a growing community of Balkan investigative journalists has emerged since the 1990s. These reporters have exposed corruption, especially in relation to the privatisation of state companies, war crimes, organised crime, social problems such as human trafficking, and environmental destruction.

There was much to investigate. Massive economic problems and social dislocation accompanied the transition from socialism. The fall of strong, centralised states resulted in a breakdown of the rule of law, paving the way for the entry of organised crime.

In many countries, organised crime developed in collaboration with state security forces. In Serbia, in the 1990s, the government of the late Slobodan Milosevic used organised crime as a tool to further its political and economic goals. In Albania, the post-communist state was so weak that local mafias took over entire sections of the economy. While state security forces were already involved in criminal activity during the communist era, the slow pace of the reforms and other transition problems strengthened the links between the criminals and the state security apparatus.

The transition also saw a decline in living standards, with many from the Balkan middle class sliding into the category of the ‘new poor.’ Inequality grew, as the collapse of welfare infrastructure meant that vulnerable groups could not rely on the safety net of healthcare, insurance and pension systems. At the same time, the legacies of the past had to be dealt with, whether these involved the crimes of the communist era or the atrocities that were committed during the conflicts of the early 1990s.

The Balkan media, meanwhile, were newly free but financially weak. New constitutions and new laws guaranteed press freedom. Licensing requirements were eased, allowing new newspapers and broadcasters to be set up. Donor support funded new media initiatives. But the Balkan media could barely cope with the day-to-day coverage of news events, much less delve into the urgent issues of transition. To this day, there is little time or effort put into in-depth or investigative reporting.

¹ See Pavlina Trifonova, *Partners in Crime: The Risks of Symbiosis between the Security Sector and Organised Crime in South-eastern Europe*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2004, in unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/UNTC/UNPAN017117.pdf

In recent years, independent investigative reporting centres have emerged throughout the Balkans, providing alternative means with which to tackle serious issues.

Today, such centres exist in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia and Serbia, funding journalists and providing them with editorial support to produce investigations, many of which are published in the mainstream media. In addition, the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), a media development and publishing group which emerged in 2005 through the localisation of an international programme run since the early 1990s by the London-based Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), has branches throughout the region and an online publication, Balkan Insight: www.balkaninsight.com. The latter provides an outlet for publishing investigative reports produced by its reporting teams and other co-operating journalists with the support and mentoring of BIRN editors. These reports are often available for republication free of charge by the region's media.

In addition, non-profit media organisations like BIRN and SCOOP, the latter a network for investigative journalists in East and Southeastern Europe founded and managed by the Danish Association of Investigative Journalists, hold training seminars for would-be investigative journalists. These interventions have helped build a corps of journalists committed to investigative reporting.

This corps of investigative journalists has also been helped by new laws that guarantee freedom of information and provide more protection for the press than existed in the past. But the rule of law is weak in the Balkans, and the existence of these laws does not mean that they are actually followed.

Thus, journalists often take risks - some have been questioned, threatened or sued. There is little tolerance for critical reporting among public officials. At the same time, corruption and bribery of the press is common. In some countries, the media are controlled by individuals who hold public office or run big businesses. Real conflicts of interest arise and the investigative zeal of journalists is blunted in order to please press proprietors.

For the most part, despite occasional investigative reports, journalism in the Balkans consists of daily news reporting. Reporters are given several assignments per day, offered little financial support or editorial supervision, and poorly paid, while, as a profession, journalism does not have high prestige.



Photo courtesy of the Balkan Fellowship for Journalistic Excellence

Training is vital to build a corps of journalists committed to investigative reporting.

The good news is that, despite these difficulties, Balkan investigative journalists have succeeded in exposing wrongdoing and making change possible. Their reports have initiated official investigations. Overall, investigative reports have raised public awareness about urgent social issues.

The characteristics of investigative reporting

In 2003, Bosnian journalist and founder of BIRN Bosnia-Herzegovina, Nerma Jelacic, set out to investigate the network of organised crime that surrounded the former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic, for many years a fugitive from international justice, who was arrested only in 2008, and sent to The Hague, accused of ordering the killing of thousands of Bosnian Muslims and Croats in the 1990s.

After being indicted by the International War Crimes Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) for, among other things, genocide and crimes against humanity, Karadzic had gone into hiding and the search for his whereabouts was an ongoing news story.

While researching Karadzic's support network, Jelacic frequently heard the name of one of his alleged aides, Milan Lukic. Lukic, too, had been charged with crimes against humanity for 1992 atrocities in the city of Visegrad, a picturesque eastern Bosnian town on the banks of the Drina river. He was alleged to have set fire to two houses in which he had detained 130 Muslim women, children and elderly men, and to have shot those who tried to escape the blaze. He was also accused of having ordered the round-up of Muslim men and their transportation to the river where, as reported by the UK's *Guardian* newspaper, he and his men shot them and then threw them into the water, "dead or in various states of half-death, turning the turquoise of the Drina red with blood".

An investigative story...

- Is the product of a reporter's and his news organisation's initiative and enterprise
- Is not leaked information or the findings of someone else's investigation
- Reveals information previously unknown or kept hidden from the public
- Puts together and connects already-known facts in a new way
- Requires an investment of time and effort
- Addresses a matter of public interest

Jelacic and her family were living in Visegrad at that time. They fled to Britain when the atrocities began. Nerma was only 15 years old. When she returned to Bosnia-Herzegovina 11 years later, as a journalist and editor running IWPR's Bosnian project, Milan Lukic's name still sent chills down the spines of the local folk. During that period, Lukic had made the transition from mass-murderer to well-connected criminal gangster. Despite being charged with racketeering and involvement in organised crime, he had eluded the law. He was arrested on three occasions but released each time. The Hague tribunal was trying to find him in 2004. And so were Jelacic and her colleagues.

"I spent many weekends in Visegrad bars and pubs while my colleagues did the same in Obrenovac," a town not far from Belgrade, recalls Jelacic. "We spoke to various people: ex-soldiers, Milan's ex-roommates, his former friends and former policemen. Someone, we thought, must know how we could get in touch with him. Three months later, I had his phone number."

This research, conducted by the IWPR's Balkan programme, involved getting sources within the police, the security and intelligence agencies, and the Hague tribunal, to talk. These sources provided clues as to Lukic's whereabouts and the vast network that surrounded the illicit dealings he was involved in, together with wartime accomplices, smugglers and even active public servants. When Lukic's brother Novica was killed in a police raid on the family home, Tanja Matic, a member of the investigative team from IWPR's Kosovo office, persuaded Lukic's parents to agree to an interview. Later the journalists found that the police had ordered the raid after learning of Lukic's plan to meet with investigators from the Hague tribunal and provide them with information on Karadzic's support network.

This investigation led to the publication on May 4, 2004 in IWPR's Balkan Crisis Report, of a report detailing Lukic's involvement in drug deals, his ties with Karadzic, and his efforts to strike a deal with the Hague, which was subsequently reprinted by 140 local, regional and foreign newspapers¹.

Milan Lukic was finally apprehended and transferred to the ICTY in August 2005, and on July 20, 2009, was sentenced to life in prison for the crimes he committed in Visegrad.

¹ The full text of 'Serb police target Karadzic informer' by Nerma Jelacic, Tanja Matic and Hugh Griffiths can be read on page 205

Jelacic's reporting on Lukic can be described as 'investigative' for the following reasons:

Firstly, it provided previously unknown information. While there had been some reporting on Lukic and his involvement in ethnic cleansing, no one had, until then, been able to put together information on both his war crimes and organised crime activities. Lukic's network of crime would not have been revealed to the public at large without the efforts and enterprise of IWPR's editorial and reporting team.

Secondly, the report was the product of the journalists' own initiative. They were not merely reporting others' findings. While they tapped into the work of other agencies investigating Lukic, they also launched their own investigative effort. Nor was information deliberately leaked to them – they had to find it on their own. They were not simply reacting to, or reporting an unfolding event, such as the killing of Novica Lukic. In fact, the journalists questioned the police version of that event and alleged that they had raided the Lukic family home to prevent Milan from cooperating with the Hague tribunal.

Thirdly, the report required an investment of time and effort. Investigative reporting requires painstaking work. It is not something that can be done overnight. It implies talking to a range of sources, obtaining documents, when they are available, and spending weeks, even months, piecing a story together.

Fourthly, there was clear public interest in the investigation. Lukic was a notorious war criminal who had long eluded prosecution for his crimes. In addition, the conduct of the police - a public institution - deserved to be exposed so that it could be held accountable for its actions in this case.

This last element - the public interest - is key to investigative reporting. Like private detectives, investigative reporters uncover hidden or secret information. But investigative reporting is more than just private detective work. Investigative journalists uncover information because they know that it is crucial to the public, and because the public has a right to know of it.

Investigative reporters do not reveal secret facts merely for the thrill of doing so, or the prospect of winning an award. They do not dig for dirt just to sell newspapers or to make profits for television networks. Their work is motivated by a desire to expose wrongdoing, so the public may know about it. They also hope that once the wrongdoing is publicised, it will eventually be corrected.

Investigative reporting as a set of techniques

There are various ways of looking at investigative reporting. At the most basic level, investigative journalism can be considered as a set of research and reporting techniques that are used to uncover information that is secret, kept hidden, or is otherwise difficult to access. Other reporters use these techniques, but investigative journalists employ them in a more systematic and intensive way.

These techniques include:

Getting documents or following the paper trail: Documents are at the heart of investigative reporting. Often, they provide proof or clues as to the wrongdoing that journalists wish to expose. Documents can corroborate - or disprove - the information that is given by human sources.

Investigative techniques...

- Getting documents or following the paper trail
- Interviewing the sources or following the people trail
- Using computers and the Internet or following the electronic trail
- Doing fieldwork

Investigative reporters analyse the documents they obtain and use the information they find there to piece their stories together. It is difficult, although not impossible, to conduct investigations without some sort of paper trail. Many journalists begin by unearthing documents even before they conduct interviews. This is because documents provide them with the background, context and detailed information they need in order to pose more probing questions to their sources.

Often, documents give leads on how the investigation should go forward. They give clues as to how the journalist should proceed. A signature on a government contract, for example, points to the person who is responsible for it and therefore who the journalist ought to interview. Sometimes documents cite other documents, thereby providing clues as to what else journalists might obtain.

Interviewing sources or following the people trail: People are as important as paper in a journalistic investigation. They can talk and answer questions – things that documents cannot do. They can provide history, background, colour and anecdotes that spice up a story and give it depth. They can also lead the journalist to other documents and people who may be vital to the investigation.

Journalists talk to a range of sources in the course of their investigations. These could be official sources, such as government or corporate officials or representatives. They could be private individuals involved in the case the journalist is probing. They could be victims of crime or disaster, human traffickers, drug dealers or arms sellers. Sometimes they are eyewitnesses to a crime, an accident or a calamity. They could be classmates, neighbours, relatives or friends of a politician who has amassed wealth that cannot be explained by what he earns. Journalistic sources are often also experts - scientists, lawyers, accountants - who can explain the technical issues under consideration and make an impartial or disinterested appraisal of available facts. In short, journalists interview just about anyone who can provide information on the subject they are investigating.

Using computers and the Internet or following the electronic trail: Increasingly, investigative journalists are using the Internet to do research on just about any topic they are investigating. The Internet, with its vast resources, is a mine of information. Familiarity with online research techniques is now a pre-requisite for investigations.

In addition, journalists have used e-mail to correspond with sources in government or the private sector. They have also used electronic or digital communications (including SMS, Skype, Google Talk etc.) to receive information from sources who wish to remain anonymous or who find it dangerous to meet with journalists face to face.

Computer databases that contain a lot of information are also now part of the investigative journalist's toolkit. Reporters have analysed trends and patterns using databases available from companies or government, and used these as building blocks for their stories. Sometimes journalists construct databases themselves, based on information obtained from documents.

Doing fieldwork: Often there is no substitute for the journalist getting his or her hands dirty and going to the field to do research. Investigative journalists have gone to the scenes of disaster, whether it is to examine an area destroyed by a fire or devastated by toxic waste spilled by a mining company. They have visited, or even lived for a time, in communities to report on victims of various forms of exploitation, such as poor villages where women are forced to find jobs in cities and end up as sex workers, factories where poorly paid immigrant workers are forced to labour, or mines where workers risk their lives.

Fieldwork is essential for the journalist to get a feel for - and also the sounds and smells of - the subject they are working on. Investigative reporting, like all journal-

ism, is about real life. Conveying a sense of other people's lives as actually lived, is as important as obtaining documents or getting informants to talk. For example, a story on corruption in a government hospital is made more compelling if the reporter spent time in the facility, observing the poor delivery of healthcare and the inadequacy of drugs and equipment. By recording or filming what takes place in the hospital, the journalist can provide graphic examples of how corruption causes unnecessary suffering and even death.

In addition, fieldwork can be used to compare government reports of project accomplishments with the reality on the ground. For example, investigations on corruption in public works projects have been done by getting documents on roads, bridges and ports supposedly built, and then going to their intended locations to see if they have indeed been completed. The same technique can be used when investigating government purchases of textbooks and desks for public schools, or medicines and equipment for government clinics.

Sometimes, fieldwork involves the use of undercover reporting, to gather information more freely. This is a controversial method with ethical and legal implications. Going undercover makes it easier for journalists to get into places where they are not welcome or to interview people who would otherwise not talk to reporters. But it risks violating the privacy of individuals and can be physically risky for the journalists themselves. In addition, the reliability of information gathered through deception can be questioned. Moreover, unorthodox techniques make journalists vulnerable to criticism about their motives and methods.

Exercise 1

Dissecting an investigative report

Read the BIRN investigative report, ‘World Bank Demolished Albania Village’ by Besar Likmeta and Gjergj Erebara, on page 212 and answer the following questions:

1. What is the new and previously unknown information in this report?
2. List the documents that the journalists obtained to prove their story.
3. List the people they interviewed.

Additional reading & references

Investigative Reporting Institutions in the Balkans

Balkan Investigative Reporting Regional Network, BIRN
Bosnia-Herzegovina, www.birn.eu.com

The Center for Investigative Reporting, CIN
Bosnia-Herzegovina, www.cin.ba

Bulgarian Investigative Journalism Center
Bulgaria, www.bijc.eu

Romanian Centre for Investigative Journalism, CRJI
Romania, www.crji.org

The Center for Investigative Reporting in Serbia, CINS
Serbia, www.cins.org.rs

Investigative Journalism Centre (Croatia), www.cin.hr