The Future of Investigative Journalism: reasons to be cheerful

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Paul Lashmar [1] 13 June 2011

The general consensus is that investigative journalism is in decline. Yet the future looks hopeful, with the rise of journalism bureaus, the active involvement of the campaign sector, and a new generation of networked, web-savvy journalists pushing the field forward.

I've been reluctant to be pessimistic about the state of investigative journalism in the UK over the last decade. Much was made of the 1970s as a golden age of investigative journalism and I'm not much of a believer in the golden ages. These tend to be the golden age for those who were in a job at the time. That said, it has been hard in the 2000s to be anything but pessimistic.

There is a widespread consensus that the quality of the traditional media is in decline. Empirical research conducted at Cardiff University [2] and elsewhere has supported this view. One of the most disturbing findings of the team led by Justin Lewis at Cardiff was that a large number of apparently self-generated stories in the national mainstream news media were in fact taken directly from PR material or news agencies.

I recall the former 'Sunday Times' investigative journalist Nick Fielding saying in 2008 that “very little serious investigative journalism is going on” in the UK. Citing job losses at the 'Guardian' and industry speculation over the future of the 'Independent' newspaper, Fielding said of the British press: "It's an industry which is massively in crisis at the moment."

In my 2008 academic paper, 'The Crisis in Investigative Journalism', I estimated that the number of serious journalists, who you could call investigative, in the traditional media had fallen from around 150 during the 1980s to fewer than 90. That numerical decline probably continues.

There are certainly reasons to be miserable. The 'News of the World' tends to be at the epicentre of them. The cultural capital of investigative journalism has been frittered away by the perverse use of investigative techniques for salacious celebrity-based journalism. A trade that provides the public with its first line of defence against overbearing institutions and interests has emerged badly tarnished from the phone hacking scandal and the Max Mosley affair.

That said, two and a half years after my earlier paper there are a number of reasons for optimism.

Firstly, there's the rise of new investigative journalism bureaus funded by donations or subscriptions. In the United States, a number, like ProPublica [3], have been successful. An early success in the UK is the Bureau of Investigative Journalism [4], which was set up with funding from the philanthropists David and Elaine Potter and has a team of between 20 and 25 journalists. The bureau's profile has been raised by its involvement in the Wikileaks story.

Secondly, a whole generation of web savvy journalists is emerging who use new investigative techniques to interrogate public interest issues. Datascrapping, crowd-sourcing and social media have in the last few months really taken off as powerful tools for investigative journalism. Few of these journalists work for the traditional media.

Thirdly, what I describe collectively as the campaigning sector - pressure groups, consumer groups, charities and other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) - are increasingly doing their own investigative journalism to great effect. Much has been written about the phenomenon of Wikileaks,
but it makes sense to see it as part of a process whereby investigative skills and functions are increasingly being found outside traditional newsrooms.

Finally, there is the rise of international yet informal networks of investigative journalists. These groupings are providing under-resourced investigative journalists with global stretch as they are now able to call upon like-minded colleagues for help and advice in all continents. This is an important development given that the targets of investigative journalists are often well resourced and operate globally. Journalists are then able to share these stories. The exposure of FIFA’s corruption is just one example of how this is happening in practice.

The really striking development has been the embrace of investigative journalism by activist NGOs. Whether it’s corruption, human rights, the environment, climate change, illegal resource exploitation, child detention or a wide range of other important issues, campaigners have been shaping the news agenda through their use of investigative techniques to an ever-greater extent.

A number of pressure groups, social justice campaigners, consumer advocates and charities conduct investigations and analysis on matters of local, regional and international concern. Organisations in this sector have become extremely effective in bringing political and economic pressure to bear on errant governments and companies.

In October 2010, two front-page investigations published in the Guardian were from NGOs. In May 2010, BBC’s Panorama broadcast an excellent investigation into the transfer of e-waste to Africa where it was dismantled in hazardous ways, often by child labour. A lot of the evidence had been supplied by the London-based Environmental Investigations Agency (EIA).

Some NGOs have been supplying investigative material to the traditional media for a long time. But NGO managers say there has been a important shift in the relationship since they now often provide the whole package.

Many organisations are waking up to the full potential of investigations as a campaigning tool. NGOs have started hiring investigative journalists to provide the media with material that they are no longer willing to fund.

Clive Stafford-Smith told me:

“Reprieve places a huge emphasis on investigation – important cases are won by facts to a far greater extent than they are by law. My own view is that many NGOs, pressure groups and charities could be more effective by developing their investigative skills. Likewise, the symbiotic relationship between NGOs and journalists could do with a re-emphasis, particularly now that print media spends so much less on its own investigations, and depends to a greater extent on NGOs such as Reprieve.”

Over the last year I’ve been talking to key people in Global Witness, Greenpeace, Environmental Investigations Agency, Reprieve, the Cornerhouse, CAAT, nef and many others. It is clear that this shift of investigative activity in the public interest away from the conventional media towards other actors in civil society has extremely important implications.

Debates about the media tend to assume that the difficult and sometimes dangerous work of public interest journalism mostly takes place in media organisations. As a result various more or less opaque subsidies flow to these organisations. As Dan Hind and others have pointed out [6], subsidies could be directed to journalists working in the public interest more efficiently if they did not go by
default to institutions that are often unwilling or unable to conduct in-depth investigations about anything other than the contents of Cheryl Cole’s dustbin.

Similarly, journalism training tends to assume that students will work primarily for news organizations. Teacher-practitioners can be tempted to concentrate on the world they know, rather than the world their students are likely find themselves in, after all. Here at Brunel we are launching an MA course that seeks instead to prepare students for a career in which investigative journalism is as likely to take place in advocacy organisations as in newspapers and broadcasters.

We’ll be debating the increasing importance of NGOs in shaping the news agenda at a special panel on the Future of Investigative Journalism at Brunel University on July 16th. 

Paul Lashmar has been an investigative journalist for three decades and is the acting head of journalism at Brunel University. 

To find out more about the new MA in Campaigning and Journalism, visit the Brunel website.

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About the author

Paul Lashmar is a Senior Lecturer and leads Journalism at the University of Sussex and he is also an investigative journalist and research academic. He has been on the staff of The Observer, Granada Television’s World in Action current affairs series and The Independent. He has also produced a number of TV programmes for BBC’s Timewatch and Channel 4’s Dispatches. Paul covered the ‘War on Terror’ for the Independent on Sunday from 2001-2007. His profile is here.

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