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Investigative Journalism:

Secrets, Salience and Storytelling

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“There has never been more space for making noise, for digging, for examining and exploring those issues that are critical to a working democracy.”

Macintyre (2012)

The last generation of investigative journalism?

Ours might be the last generation in which ‘traditional’ investigative journalism plays a major role in our public sphere, scrutinising power, exposing wrongdoing, redressing miscarriages of justice, and bringing the guilty and hypocritical to account.

It might be the last generation that believed it needed this highly specialised form of journalism, a specialisation that even some of its most skilled practitioners now fail to distinguish adequately from other types of journalism.

It might be the generation that allows it to die. Only to wonder too late where it’s gone and why we let it happen.

Some, disillusioned by traditional journalism and excited by the development of the web and social media, question the need for journalists other than as facilitators in the process of discovery, disclosure and the public discourse. And they elide the distinction between investigative journalism and private inquiry and revelation.

We need to be clear about the very particular and specialised nature of investigative journalism and its unique contribution to our public discourse – what we say to each other – and our public sphere – the place we make up our collective minds about the big questions of our time.

This chapter will consider how investigative journalism is

both investigation and journalism. It's not merely discovery and disclosure, though those are essential. Nor is it merely forcing power to reveal secrets, though that too is – usually – essential. It's an 'end to end' process from curiosity through assessment, verification, digging deeper all the way to the headline and the compelling narrative.

The essential triangle of secrets revealed, salience and storytelling.

There are many pressures on it, many challenges that are undermining its present and jeopardizing its future. We hear much about the 'chilling' effects of the libel laws, 'judge-made privacy laws', injunctions, super injunctions and – possibly – new regulatory frameworks in the wake of the phone-hacking scandal and corporate dysfunctions at the News of the World and within News International. These are challenges of a kind and very real. But they are as nothing compared to the much more fundamental challenges deriving, ultimately, from the digital revolution of the past two decades.

Take the financial and market pressures, for example, generated by that revolution. Some have had obvious effects on investigative journalism, others more subtle. Together, they've tended to squeeze real investigative journalism and its precursors out of the system and create cheaper, hollowed out forms. They've also worked to raise the status of investigation's tools to appear as journalistic ends in themselves; undercover filming and recording, entrapment, confrontation, impersonation, 'blagging'. At the same time, indiscriminate and largely unethical use of those tools divorced from any public interest has further corroded the public's trust in the press – it was already pretty rusty – and in public institutions. None of that has helped reverse the general drift away from media that demands concentrated attention, disillusion in general with mass media and preference for private networks over interacting with strangers.

But the greatest pressure by far, the greatest threat, is the illusion that we live in a more transparent age and that, by extrapolation, we don't need journalism and untrustworthy journalists to do for us what we can now do for ourselves.

It's a paradox. Plainly, we now have the potential of more access to data and information than ever before. Yet, thanks to some of the same technologies that enable that potential, we're contriving to receive our information from a narrower range of

sources and share what we know within private, self-constructed networks, avoiding the strangers out there who constitute the public sphere.

This matters.

For all its many faults, journalism has evolved into a relatively successful means of nourishing effective public discourse – helping us find out about things we didn't know we needed to know and making sure we talk about them ... or, at least, watch others doing so. That's been even more true of investigative journalism, though it's also had the duty and responsibility of bringing those things we didn't know we needed to know into the light in the first place, verifying them, assessing them and spotting the salience in them.

Investigative journalism sits solidly on an essential triangle: Secrets, salience and storytelling. Remove any side of that triangle – or increase the size of any one side at the expense of the others – and our public discourse becomes poorer.

What do we mean by 'investigative journalism'?

It's worth getting terms clear. The term 'investigative journalism' is an elusive one. It's used to mean anything from reporting a gaffe made in a private conversation – especially if it's recorded on YouTube – to a single confidential conversation with a single whistleblower making a single allegation or concession. If we're going to think about its continued existence, we need to understand what we mean.

In 2012, some two dozen investigative and former investigative journalists turned academics contributed to a collection of essays called *Investigative Journalism: Dead or Alive?* (Mair and Keeble, 2012). Most answered that question with an enthusiastic 'Alive'.

Donal MacIntyre, for example, best known for his secret filming exposing the lives of Chelsea football hooligans (*MacIntyre Undercover*, 1999) condemns what he calls the “fashionable sentiments to the contrary” and declares “investigative journalism has never been stronger.”

“There has never been more space for making noise, for digging, for examining and exploring those issues that are critical to a working democracy.” (MacIntyre, 2012, p6)

And he calls in evidence the MPs' expenses scandal, Andrew Jennings' "relentless FIFA investigations", The Guardian's phone hacking investigation and the creation of the Centre for Investigative Journalism (CIJ) at London City University – though, of course, as the CIJ says of itself:

"The centre for investigative journalism came into being in 2003 to address a deepening crisis in investigative reporting." (CIJ, 2012)

Macintyre doesn't recognise that "deepening crisis" but is able to reject it only by extending his notion of investigative journalism to include advocacy journalism, satire, social networking and acts of journalism that, a generation ago, we would have thought were normal, everyday journalistic functions; verification, story spotting, unearthing a new 'fact' or angle in a running story.

It's an analysis that offers false comfort.

Investigative journalism, along with war reporting, has traditionally been at the pinnacle of our trade. The first, exposing wrongdoing and holding power to account; the second, bearing witness. And the image of the investigative journalist has been a powerful and sustaining one; revealing truths, fighting for justice, "telling the truth to power". An image realised by Bradlee, Woodward and Bernstein over Watergate; Evans, Page and Knightley over Thalidomide; Ware and Taylor over Omagh and torture. Many young men and women went into journalism in the 1970s, 1980s and even in the early 1990s inspired by and burning to copy the Sunday Times 'Insight' team, BBC's Panorama and Rough Justice or ITV's World in Action.

Yet however fundamental, powerful or sustaining the idea is, 'investigative journalism' is difficult to define. And like most things in journalism, it's often named after rather than before the event.

Perhaps one of the most comprehensive efforts to arrive at a definition – and certainly one of the very few academic efforts – was Hugo De Burgh's at the end of the last century (De Burgh, 1999). A rough and ready summary of his description – apologies to him for its crudeness – would include characteristics such as;

- it satisfies the general characteristics of journalism;
- it's seen as just, as having a right to exist and is competent;

- it aims to discover the ‘truth’ and lapses from it, to reveal a ‘truth’ that has been obscured;
- it aims to deal in and make clear the rights and wrongs, there is always a victim (though that could be ‘all of us’) and always a villain;
- it seeks an outcome, the righting of the wrong;
- it involves a subject not usually on the main news agenda that the journalist has to insist we should know about;
- it draws our attention to something that we’re not aware of at all or care about something we don’t care about at all; it selects its own information and prioritises it in a way that contrasts with daily journalism;
- it differs from other investigative roles in society (police, lawyers, auditors etc) in that its ‘targets’ are not limited, it has no legal foundation and achieves its effects through publicity and public opprobrium directed at the villain.

De Burgh (1999) was writing for an audience that was familiar with some of the great investigative reporting of the latter half of the 20th century and with the genre more broadly. After all, it had remained more or less constant for a century and a half, since William Russell combined both war and investigative reporting and opened the nation’s eyes to the realities of the Crimean War in the 1850s and by so doing enabled the public to ask searching, evidence based questions of power.

Audiences were familiar, too, with the way investigative journalism demanded attention; the grounds on which it demanded that attention, always moral; and the way it got people talking – or to put it more academically, the way it fed public discourse and sustained the public sphere. They would recognise De Burgh’s (1999) characterisation if they were asked to think about it in those terms. More obviously, though, those audiences would recognise investigative journalism’s outputs. Lengthy narratives requiring their attention; a careful, argued exposition of a considerable weight of evidence, the majority of which was previously hidden, secret or difficult to find; a strong, continuous reference to the moral questions raised; a strong evocation of empathy with the victims and of outrage and condemnation of the guilty.

It was never a perfect way of getting the nation talking – or sustaining public discourse. There was nothing rational in the

choice of ‘targets’ or their treatment and, inevitably, there were always many more injustices than either journalism could address or the public sphere properly absorb. It could be messy, brutal and obsessive. Nor did it always meet its implied ethical standards, which, for obvious reasons had to be higher than those of journalism more generally.

Broadly speaking, though, it was a form of journalism that was capable of calling to account those who misused political or corporate power or the criminal justice system. And as far as the ‘guilty’ were concerned, even if the investigative journalists’ eyes weren’t turned their way, there was always the threat that they might be.

Then, the world changed.

The financial challenge

Since the mid-1990s, the digital revolution has changed many of our perceptions about information, knowledge, attention, communication and our notion of self and public. The pace of change has accelerated each year and shows no sign of slowing.

The most fundamental effect of that revolution on journalism has been the way in which it first eroded then ripped apart the business model that’s sustained newspapers for over two centuries. It’s a financial crisis that’s affected all journalism but has had an extraordinarily disproportionate effect on investigative journalism and not always in ways that are immediately obvious.

We know the story well. Between 1998 and 2012, newspaper revenues from display advertising fell by over a quarter from £2.4bn to £1.7bn, a fall that hasn’t been compensated by newspapers’ miserly take of web advertising at just £200m. Terrestrial broadcasters have been subject to similar pressures, too. Even at the publicly funded BBC, restrictions on the licence fee coupled with new financing obligations – paying for the BBC World Service out of the licence fee rather than a government grant – has effectively taken around 15% out of the amount it has to spend on journalism.

Taking these amounts of money out of any business has obvious effects. For journalism, it’s resulted in fewer local and regional newspapers, consolidation, dailies turning into weeklies or going online. And that’s meant, in turn, fewer journalists, more ‘efficient’ newsrooms and a retreat to core business,

focusing on increasingly homogenous agendas. Any editor – or, in broadcasting, any commissioner or channel controller – now looks more closely than ever before at any money they spend and asks the obvious question: ‘what am I going to get for my money?’ That presents investigative journalism with its most obvious challenge.

Investigations take time and money. The toughest investigations often require a team and produce little for weeks or even months. Try to cut corners by publishing early or without that final fourth or fifth check on the facts and the legal risks increase. And while there is clearly a strong commercial or reputational premium attached to headline investigations, there are nevertheless strong financial reasons to be risk averse or calculate the potential commercial benefit of taking the risk.

Importantly, all genuine investigations, even those, which begin with apparently strong prima facie evidence, have to have the right to fail. One of the characteristics that distinguish investigative journalism from advocacy journalism is that the investigative journalist searches for evidence that undermines or disproves his or her original suspicion as well as the evidence that supports it.

John Ware is one of British TV’s most skilled and dogged investigative journalists, spending a quarter of a century on BBC’s Panorama. His painstaking and often dangerous inquiry into the 1998 IRA bombing of Omagh town centre was a model investigation, challenging not just the failures of the police investigation, but also the lethal mendacities of the terrorists. In 2011, I asked him whether he believed he could mount such an investigation again. He didn’t rule it out completely, but:

“The financial risk taking which used to underpin a lot of the stuff that I was really privileged to do ... has fallen away ... Editors want an assurance that you are going to get home on this target.” (Ware, 2011)

That assurance, that need to ‘get home’ runs directly contrary to the demands of journalistic investigations.

As Paul Kenyon, one of Ware's Panorama colleagues, describes:

"They can take months and, sometimes, years to complete, with no guarantee there will be any programme at the end of it."
(Kenyon, 2012)

That much is, perhaps, obvious. What is less obvious is the way in which these financial pressures disrupt the chains that, traditionally, generate investigative journalism. And when it comes to investigative journalism on TV, this matters. Most of us get most of our news now via TV.

Most investigations begin with straightforward, routine journalistic inquiry. Whistleblowers and leaks are important, of course, but it's relatively rare that they're the starting point. Much more often, an investigation begins with an attempt to verify a story and it turns out that the 'verification' raises more questions than it answers. Or perhaps with a contradiction in the public account or a mismatch between that account and what a journalist establishes privately. Or, of course, it may begin with the human, moral judgment a journalist makes, asking of some event 'how can this be right or just?'

In the more 'efficient' newsrooms that the financial crisis has created, the pressure on journalists to produce is intense. What was once routine – taking nothing on trust, fact checking agency copy and quotes individually – is now much more rare. For many journalists, their job feels like an industrial one, processing increasingly homogenised raw materials. As Cardiff University researchers discovered in 2008:

"Most journalists are now required to do more with less time ...while the number of journalists in the national press has remained fairly static, they now produce three times as much copy as they did twenty years ago." (Lewis et al, 2008; page 3)

At least 60% of national press articles and 34% of broadcast stories, the researchers found, came wholly or mainly from either PR sources or from homogenised wire copy. As Megan Garber of the Nieman Journalism Lab put it : "Though we live in a time of abundant information, we also live in a time of homogenization. Repetition is everywhere. (Garber: 2011)

Garber (2011) was referencing Pablo Boczkowski's (2010)

study of the way we tend to consume our journalism and how that tends to shape what we consume. Boczowski (2010) found that the increase in potential information available to us was matched by a decrease in the diversity of mainstream content producing “homogenised news”

This ‘processing’ is indeed ‘efficient’, but it squeezes out those once routine functions that were the seed corn of investigative journalism. It discourages, too, the dissident, curious mindset essential to raise the difficult questions in the first place.

Newspapers, of course, can’t exist without disclosure – not for very long, at least. Editorial ingenuity, however, has filled the disclosure gap by devising hollowed-out forms of ‘investigation’, journalism that looks like investigation but is no such thing. Revelation for it’s own sake, often with no public interest and, if celebrities are involved, the connivance of PR companies provides ways of “getting home” with more certainty and lower outlay.

Entrapment, for example, impersonation and secret filming are important but highly contentious tools of investigative journalism. They raise ethical questions that can only be answered by the public interest in and moral value of the eventual outcome. They are last resorts, which, in real investigative journalism, are generally used when substantial evidence of wrongdoing or hypocrisy has already been collected and all other methods of gathering that final, clinching proof have failed. In the hollowed out form, it’s cheaper to go straight to entrapment to ‘see what we can find’ – so-called ‘fishing trips’.

It was a favourite technique of the News of the World before it was summarily shut down in the wake of the phone-hacking scandal. It was highly profitable, ideal for catching out the witless or their unsuspecting but obscure relatives, was rarely used in the public interest and often placed the journalist in the position of apparent co-conspirator, raising the question on more than one occasion that the wrongdoing probably would not have taken place without the intervention of the journalists. It looked like ‘investigation’ but was no such thing and, inevitably, those fishing trips that caught nothing never saw the light of day.

For the broadcasters, secret filming has become a sine qua non of TV ‘investigation’, though it’s much more closely controlled and regulated than in the press. Its power in Panorama’s

exposure of Winterbourne View (Panorama, 2011) or Mark Daly's *Secret Policeman* can't be denied. And self-evidently, secret filming that shows wrongdoing in plain view performs a valuable service to the public discourse and in righting wrongs.

However, an investigation without secret filming – no matter how strong the witness testimony or documentary evidence – has a reduced chance of being commissioned. Controllers and commissioning editors understand that the You Tube generation sets far greater store by seeing for themselves than any other form of revelation. An investigation that relies on documentary and witness evidence alone begins the commissioning process at a disadvantage. There may even be pressure to stage 'secret filming' to create the illusion of verity (Editorial Standards Committee of the BBC Trust: 2011).

Something similar is true of the other tools of investigation, tools that raise important ethical questions. In the first half of 2012, we learnt through the evidence at Lord Leveson's inquiry how the tabloid press had come to use as routine many of the more intrusive tools of genuine investigation; intrusion, blagging, phone and email hacking – not to clinch the final piece of evidence in a major investigation but to generate stories that had the appearance of revelation. The health records of celebrities, their families and public figures or their discreditable, though essentially private behaviour. Hundreds of these stories were wrapped up to appear as investigations but were very far from the real thing. Some even involved putting a kind of pressure on those whose private lives were invaded that was barely distinguishable from blackmail. They were hollowed out forms of investigation, devised to "get home" with minimal financial risk. And when those hollowed out forms failed, there was always the option of just making it up – as Daily Express and Daily Star journalists did over 100 times when they filed 'exclusive revelations' as a result of their 'investigations' into the disappearance of Madeleine McCann in Portugal.

The increasingly porous boundary between investigative and advocacy and journalism challenges from another direction. Campaigning and advocacy journalism are vital parts of our public sphere and have been since the pamphleteers of the 17th century. They are one of our media's greatest strengths. Increasingly, though, campaigning films, websites and magazines have the surface appearance of journalistic rather than partisan

‘investigation’. They’re revealing, certainly. And feed the public discourse. But by definition, they don’t move outside of a fixed view of the world. And, once again, it’s easier to “get home” if you know in advance what “home” looks like.

Michael Moore’s films, for example, are extremely effective at advocating his favourite causes and views of the world. They’re presented as an investigation and are often mistaken for the real thing. Yet Moore, like any other advocate, only includes – or seeks in the first place – the evidence that supports his thesis and frames it accordingly. So, for example, he says of Farenheit 9/11 that it ‘exposes’ the “true” story of the Bush administration’s response to the 9/11 terror attacks.

The late Christopher Hitchens wrote of that claim that Moore sought only “easy applause, in front of credulous audiences” with a film that:

“... bases itself on a big lie and a big misrepresentation ... (it) can only sustain itself by a dizzying succession of smaller falsehoods, beefed up by wilder and (if possible) yet more-contradictory claims.” (Hitchens, 2004)

Hitchens was a trenchant critic of Moore and his words are sharp. However, he reminds us of that important difference between investigation that approaches discovery and revelation with an impartial mindset, valuing counter-evidence as highly as ‘proof’, and advocacy, which does not. A reminder, too, of the distinction between genuine investigation and the millions of fringe conspiracy websites, each with a title that contains some variant of the word “TRUTH”, each of which promises ‘the facts they don’t want you to know’.

The illusion of transparency

All of these are considerable challenges for investigative journalism. But there’s another challenge, which is even more powerful – and that’s the illusion of transparency.

For a variety of reasons, we’ve come to believe that in the second decade of the 21st century we live in a culture that is more transparent than ever before. Partly, that’s a result of the changing attitude of governments towards data and information. Mostly, though, it’s because of the web.

In 2004, Google's CEO Eric Schmidt startled participants at the World Economic Forum in Davos with the prediction that within a decade, everyone would be able to carry around with them in a device no bigger than an iPod every piece of data or information in the world. Everything that was known, everything that had ever been known, everything that was knowable.

Three years later, when Apple launched the iPhone in 2007, it offered exactly the possibility that Schmidt predicted. Not only that, since at about the same time, the amount of discoverable data and information on the web has multiplied many times and continues to do so. Now, we all believe there's no theoretical limit to what we can 'know', if by 'know' we mean the ability to access a piece of information instantly, anywhere. If it can be known, we should 'know' it.

And, as far as the kind of information that used to be the domain of investigative journalists is concerned, vast tracts are now routinely placed into the open voluntarily. Those in power who are more ambivalent about openness have had their hand forced, to some extent, by the Freedom of Information Act – an Act that could be improved but is better than nothing. And leaking and whistleblowing have moved from a largely individual occupation onto an industrial scale, bringing huge amounts of what was previously secret into the open.

It might seem perverse to see such a massive increase in apparent transparency as a challenge to investigative journalism. No one with an interest in informed democracy can possibly argue against knowing more. One of the UK's most formidable 'transparency' journalists, Heather Brooke, puts it like this:

“Society has an interest in encouraging the efficient use and enforcement of freedom of information and making official information freely available to the public who paid for its creation and in whose name it is gathered.” (Brooke, 2011)

That's clearly true. Access to information and data is essential to efficient public discourse and scrutiny. And the default position has to be that we, the public, have the right to 'our' information. More has to be better. Quantity alone, however, doesn't necessarily lead to a public sphere that works well. Indeed, it risks flooding it.

It's a reality that the biggest game changer in the business of

leaking – Wikileaks – acknowledges and understands, though some of its most vociferous supporters do not. In the summer of 2010, Wikileaks had to suspend its website, closing it down temporarily. Not because it was under any new or particular kind of threat from governments and their agencies – it always is – but because it was sinking under the weight of unprocessed leaked material.

Its spokesman, Kristinn Hrafnsson said the site “could not have done justice” to new material. What was being posted to the site during the deluge was as hidden from public view as it had been before it was leaked. It was only theoretically out in the public sphere. At the same time, Wikileaks acknowledges that without its collaborations with traditional journalism – determining salience and creating journalistic narratives – its voice would be directed into a very tiny, online echo chamber.

The same web technologies, that have enabled leaking on an industrial scale as well as offering a home for FOI requests, government and authorities’ ‘infodumps’ have also tooled up every one of us to mine and analyse the data that might matter to us, assuming we’re aware of it in the first place and can find it. They’ve also changed fundamentally how we share what we’ve found or learn what others have disclosed or discovered – and what we seem to mean by public discourse and the public sphere.

Under that more ‘traditional’ model of journalism, we had our attention grabbed by strangers – journalists – who had trawled through or discovered by their own enterprise new information, verified it, derived something salient from it and woven it into an engaging narrative.

Now, that still happens, of course, though far less frequently than before the world changed. Increasingly, we have our attention grabbed not by strangers – if they happen to be journalists, we hardly trust them anyway – but by friends and members of our networks. Or, as Eli Pariser argued, our private journeys through information web tend to close us in ‘filter bubbles’ (Pariser: 2011).

Nor are these ‘filter bubbles’ the kind of places where publicly significant discourse takes place as a matter of routine. When Brian Baresch and others looked in detail at the kind of ‘news’ we’re tending to share (Baresch et al: 2011), they found it was rarely anything that could be termed ‘investigative’ or even rev-

elatory except in the broadest possible sense that we share with our friends something they might not know. In other words, social media as a news source is positioned very firmly at the softer, lighter, intellectually and publicly undemanding end of the spectrum. It's far more likely to be 'hey, look at what **insert name of celeb/sports personality etc here** has just done/said' than 'look at what I've found in this data about this outrage'. And even where outrage at a perceived injustice is shared widely, via Twitter, for example, the outrage is visceral and reactive rather than evidential. It's tribal and rarely mind changing.

It's a further paradox. At the very time the quantity of 'knowable' information is multiplying unimaginably, the 'filter bubbles' we create tend to mean we share less of it with fewer people and what we do share is likely to be of lesser significance. A trajectory that is wholly opposite to Gerard Hauser's description of a working public sphere:

"(The) discursive space in which strangers discuss issues they perceive to be of consequence for them and their group. Its rhetorical exchanges are the bases for shared awareness of common issues, shared interests, tendencies of extent and strength of difference and agreement, and self-constitution as a public whose opinions bear on the organization of society." (Hauser, 1999; page 86)

The agency we've traditionally relied on to feed this "discursive space" has been journalism, which, through mass-market newspapers, broadcast bulletins and websites, has convened the public in huge numbers and more or less simultaneously around the salience of its revelations. That's required what Amity Shlaes, a senior fellow in economic history at the US Council on Foreign Relations, described as

"A certain kind of person who is able to efficiently sift through a flood of information, pulling out nuggets that matter and presenting them in a compelling way." (Shlaes, 2010)

A journalist, in other words. Her characterisation was a reaction to the deluge of information on the web and the, as she saw it, mistaken view that we could safely cut journalists out of the equation. Views like those of New York University's Jay Rosen

who barks at journalists:

“You don’t own the eyeballs. You don’t own the press, which is now divided into pro and amateur zones ... there’s a new balance of power between you and us.” (Rosen, 2004)

Or of Dan Gilmore who wrote how ‘the ‘former audience’ ... has ... turned its endless ideas into such unexpected, and in some cases superb, forms of journalism.’ (Gilmore, 2003; page 238)

Or Alf Hermida, an Assistant Professor at the University of British Columbia and formerly a BBC News website editor:

“Today, the process of journalism is taking place in public on media platforms ... information is published, disseminated, checked, confirmed or denied in public through a pro-am collaboration facilitated by social networks.”
(Hermida, 2011)

Or CUNY’s Jeff Jarvis, who talks about,

“opening up the information and the actions of government at every level by default in a way that enables any citizen to take, analyze, and use that data, extracting or adding value to it and overseeing the actions of those who act in our name, with our money.” (Jarvis, 2010)

Here in the UK, Paul Bradshaw’s excellent ‘Help Me Investigate’ website – “A network helping people investigate questions in the public interest” (HMI, 2012) genuinely taps into the expertise of members of the public to assist in holding power to account, offering the opportunity for disclosure and revelation that was once the monopoly of journalism.

The risk, here, is that we forget that central purpose of journalism – sustaining and nourishing the public sphere and significant public discourse. We rejoice at the possibilities of finding secrets, deliberately hidden or simply buried in a mass of data, and allow ourselves to be deluded by superficially persuasive piece of false logic. To many, especially those with a well-founded journophobia, the answer is obvious – at the very least, the need for ‘traditional’ journalism is much reduced if not eradicated altogether. But there is a danger that in reaching for this

obvious conclusion. And that is that sitting comfortably within our filter bubbles, we harm the public sphere more than any increase in theoretical transparency sustains it.

For all the failures and inadequacies of modern journalism, it's important not to lose sight of what good investigative or analytical journalists enable when they apply the skills, time, reasoning and intuition that most people neither have nor want to apply outside our own bubbles.

Conclusions

In the spring of 2011, I interviewed one of Britain's most celebrated investigative journalists for the BBC College of Journalism, Philip Knightley.

Knightley was an early and one of the most industrious and productive members of the Sunday Times 'Insight' team in the 1960s and 1970s. Under the editorship of Harold Evans, 'Insight' was the most consistently successful investigative unit in the history of British journalism. But its impact didn't derive from disclosure alone nor from its doggedness and expertise in shining light into darkness. Nor, incidentally, did it make the mistake of believing that what was previously secret was by virtue of that former state more 'true' than any other information.

Knightley understood that imposing forced transparency on secret worlds, was central to his work – but that alone could never have projected his disclosures into the public sphere with anything like the impact necessary to generate the scale of discourse that might achieve any kind of resolution. Particularly the moral resolution inherent in all of Insight's investigations. Wrong had been done and it had to be righted.

It required a sober assessment at each stage of investigation; it required him to make a call on each individual piece of evidence's significance; to make connections and determine the next step to go deeper into the 'truth'. The investigation itself was a form of narrative that became the basis for the eventual written narrative, a timely, salient, engaging narrative. A story told with skill around which he could convene millions of Sunday Times readers and by so doing, place his disclosures into the public sphere with an impact that engaged even those who never knew they had any interest in it.

This is what is at risk.

Without doubt, we now have the potential to be better-informed citizens and our public discourses – what we say to each other, especially those who are strangers – better founded on facts and insights that, previously, might not have been available to us.

We have the potential to uncover the secrets that matter most personally to us and the potential to feed the public domain. Those are some of the unarguable benefits the web and its tools have brought to the lives we live in common.

But those same tools offer us better opportunities to retreat to our ‘filter bubbles’, avoiding that discourse with strangers over strangeness that constitutes a working public sphere.

Pair that with the financial crisis in journalism that is squeezing out the time, skills and motivation to invest in investigative journalism and you have a perfect storm for one of journalism’s most specialised crafts.

One of America’s most revered journalists James Fallows wrote in 2012 about the problem of reconciling new media with older, traditional media, concluding that we were still at an early stage “in the collective drive and willingness to devise new means of explaining the world and in the individual ability to investigate, weigh, and interpret the ever richer supply of information available to us”. He may be right – perhaps were yet to see what can emerge from this perfect storm and perhaps it will be better not worse than what has gone before.

But Fallows (2012) offers a warning, too:

“Perhaps we have finally exhausted the viable possibilities for a journalism that offers a useful and accurate perspective. If so, then America’s problems of public life can only grow worse, since we will lack the means to understand and discuss them.”
(Fallows, 2012)

That has alarming consequences for our freedom and self-government. For our sense of who we are. And it would seem that if we were to lose the skills and mindsets of ‘traditional’ investigative reporting, as well as the public appetite for it, that essential triangle of secrets, salience and storytelling would fail.

Then, you can be sure it will be that warning rather than optimism that will be realised.

Challenging Questions

- Investigative journalism is about shining light on secrets – nothing else. Is that true?
- “People shouldn’t expect the mass media to do investigative stories. That job belongs to the ‘fringe’ media”. (Ted Koppel). Discuss.
- “An investigative journalist is one who can think up plausible scandals”. (Lambert Jeffries) To what extent do investigative journalists define right and wrong before investigating wrongdoing.
- Either: “The methods of investigative journalism are justified only by the ends”. Discuss.
- Or: “The public interest is always defined after the event”. Is that true?
- Is information that was previously secret more reliable or more “true” than information already in the public domain?

Recommended reading

Evans, H., (2009,) *My Paper Chase*, Chapters 14 and 15, Abacus
 Hersh, S., *Torture at Abu Ghraib*, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/05/10/040510fa_fact

Hersh, S., *The My Lai Massacre*, <http://pierretristam.com/Bob-st/library/wf-200.htm>

Hosken, A., (2007), *Nothing Like a Dame*, Granta Books

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Journalism: New Challenges
Edited by: Karen Fowler-Watt and Stuart Allan
Published by: Centre for Journalism & Communication Research
Bournemouth University

ISBN: 978-1-910042-01-4 [paperback]
ISBN: 978-1-910042-00-7 [ebook-PDF]
ISBN: 978-1-910042-02-1 [ebook-epub]

<http://microsites.bournemouth.ac.uk/cjcr/>
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