What is special about Investigative Journalism?
A critical look at its precepts and practice

by

N. Ram
Chairman of Kasturi & Sons Ltd. and Publisher of
The Hindu group of newspapers
It is a privilege for me to give this lecture in memory of Lawrence Dana Pinkham who taught me at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism nearly half a century ago. He was a gifted and inspiring teacher, a steadfast socialist, an upholder of the finest values of ethical and progressive journalism, a firm believer in journalism education, a wonderful friend. For me, like several others who were taught and mentored by Professor Pinkham at Columbia and subsequently at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, it proved to be a life-altering experience.

After a gap of many years, I was able to revive my contact with Professor Pinkham and his wife, Joan Pinkham. This was in Beijing where he did pioneering work in journalism education and she edited English language translations of works of enduring value. The daughter of Harry Dexter White, who along with John Maynard Keynes was a key participant in the negotiations that put together the architecture of the Bretton Woods institutions, Joan fully shared Larry’s intellectual interests and progressive values. Before we launched the Asian College of Journalism, Sashi Kumar, C. P. Chandrasekhar, and I, as Trustees of the newly formed Media Development Foundation, went on a learning tour. We visited leading journalism schools in the United States and the United Kingdom. A special port of call was the Pinkham home at Amherst where we discussed the core ideas behind our project. We invited Larry and Joan, who thought they had retired but seemed ready for any worthwhile adventure, to come to Chennai and help shape the ACJ.

This led naturally to what Sashi Kumar calls the “Pinkham years,” 2001-2002, and the “Pinkham template” for curricular development at the ACJ. Among other things, this meant privileging the “process” over the “product,” emphasizing the importance of making “reporting, writing, and editing” the centrepiece of our programme in a short academic year. Interestingly, when it came to journalism education,
Larry Pinkham was on the same page as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, who had started out as a journalist and remained engaged with journalism and journalism education all his life.

In a wonderful little meditation titled “Journalism: The Best Job in the World,” delivered in Los Angeles in 1996, the great writer criticized communication programmes that taught “many things useful to the job but very little about the job itself.” Marquez wanted the education and training of young journalists to “rest on three central pillars: the priority of aptitudes and vocations; the certainty that investigation is not a professional speciality but that all journalism should, by definition, be investigative, and the awareness that ethics are not an occasional condition but should always accompany journalism like the buzz accompanies the blowfly.” The final objective, he went on to say, should be “a return to the primary system of teaching journalism by means of practical workshops in small groups, making critical use of historical experience within its original frame of public service” (Marquez 2010: 112-113).

This was precisely the kind of hands-on journalism education, grounded in history, ethics, and professional integrity, that Professor Pinkham had in mind. Without going into further detail, let me simply say that his contribution, especially in the year of his Deanship, to putting us on the right and progressive track was decisive.

* * *

If journalism is the systematic attempt to establish the truth of what matters to society in time for that information to be useful, the activities that define journalism still matter even if the context in which they are done has changed. There are **four core tasks** that journalism should perform, which can be better done by people trained and experienced in this work. The four tasks are…*Verification*…*Sense making*…*Witness*…
[and] Investigation…these…are the irreducible core of what can be distinguished as journalism and they are the basis of the trust on which it relies. These tasks are also the foundation on which journalism in the 21st century is going to be rebuilt (emphasis added).

-- George Brock, *Out of Print: Newspapers, Journalism and the Business of News in the Digital Age*

The Convocation addresses given at the ACJ over the past decade-and-a-half by an interesting mix of practising journalists and scholars drawn from various fields cover a lot of ground. Approaching journalism and the news media from many vantage points, offering a number of fresh insights, they make up a valuable compendium of critical and forward-looking thinking on our field.

Today I will take up a subject that is increasingly seen as vital to the future of our profession — investigative journalism, what it is, its relation to the calling that Marquez called “the best job in the world,” its untapped potential, and what it can do for the future of journalism. This is a subject that has special resonance on a day the inaugural ACJ Awards for Investigative Journalism have been presented, with the adjudication done by an independent jury whose credentials and composition I would challenge anyone to improve on. Judging by the response from the print and digital media, I expect our Awards will soon be recognized in the profession and in the industry as the leading, standard-setting awards in this field, certainly for these media.

Investigation has formed an integral part of journalism from the time it emerged as a modern profession. John Pilger recalls that when he began his career in the late 1950s there were great old-world journalists, such as Wilfred Burchett, Martha Gellhorn, James Cameron, and Edward R. Murrow, who excelled in uncovering the truth, making sense of it, and holding those in power to account, but “the term, investigative
journalism, did not exist.” It became fashionable in the 1960s and 1970s and especially when Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein did their Watergate investigation and exposé (Pilger 2004: xiv).

State of the field

Over the past half century, there has been an ebb and flow of investigative journalism and public interest in it across the world, in response to larger events, trends, and issues in politics, economy, culture, society, and international relations. The late 1960s and early 1970s — a period of social upheaval and radical ferment in several western countries — saw an upsurge of independent, tough-minded investigation of wrongdoing and blundering in high places. The high points during this period were The New York Times’s publication in 1971 of a series of articles based on the secret Pentagon Papers, which dealt with the conduct of the Vietnam War and were leaked to the newspaper by the military analyst and indomitable whistle-blower, Daniel Ellsberg, and The Washington Post’s Watergate investigation, which inspired a legion of young men and women to take up journalism. The work of the Insight team of The Sunday Times, which took off in the 1970s, broadened the field and brought to the fore new areas for investigative reporting such as the thalidomide calamity and scandal.

And there has been a great deal more, in many countries and in various languages. Global Muckraking, an anthology of “pieces that launched campaigns, exposed military atrocities, and called for justice for the downtrodden and the colonized” (Schiffrin 2014: 1), is an educative and inspiring read. Edited by Anya Schiffrin and consciously favouring work from “the global south,” it presents a well-researched and contextualized tasting menu from a century of broad-ranging investigative journalism in the long form.

Historically speaking, India’s, and South Asia’s, contribution to this corpus of global investigative reporting is a subject that needs to
be researched and I wouldn’t be surprised if we found some hidden treasures in different languages going back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. What we know about the exposés of the corruption scandals of the British Raj, and the detailed and sensitive reporting of crisis hunger and famine, in contrast to the coverage of endemic, silent hunger and other mass deprivations, suggests that there was a depth of investigative resources and untapped potential in the Indian press several decades before Independence was won (see Ram 1990: 179-223).

In India too, over the past half century, there has been an ebb and flow of investigative journalism and related to this, but separate from it, an ebb and flow of public engagement with the results of investigative journalism. The Bofors investigation of 1987-1989 by The Hindu had a major impact on national politics. But there have been many other investigations on subjects of significance, done in the public interest, by the Indian press (see, for example, Verghese 2003), which do not seem to have had anything like the same impact.

The 2010 exposé by Open magazine and Outlook of an unsavoury nexus between politicians, corporates, and journalists, based on the leaked Nira Radia ‘tapes,’ actually 140 available digital audio recordings of telephone conversations secretly done by the Income Tax department in 2008-2009, showed for the first time what digital platforms could do for the presentation of a mass of evidence turned up by journalistic enterprise. What the online platform made possible in a way that could not be matched by printed newspapers or even television was that instead of relying solely on the journalist’s interpretation and opinion, serious readers and listeners could now make up their own minds on the basis of what they heard, verifying this against the transcripts made available on the platform. During the course of its prolonged Bofors investigation in the analogue age, The Hindu was able to print in facsimile form about 200 items of documentary evidence, spread over whole pages; today a newspaper would be able to publish online a hundred times that number without taxing the reader or taking up too much space.
Indian news television has also contributed actively to investigation, but the obsessive reliance by many television reporters on ‘stings’ through the use of hidden cameras and microphones has narrowed its vision and constrained its approach to the core task of investigation. I don’t know if the paucity of quality entries in the broadcast category of the inaugural ACJ awards for investigative journalism reflects a larger problem, but I hope it does not and that we will see a significantly better response next year.

What has become clear is that in this digital age, while the quality and range of investigation as one of journalism’s core tasks are not necessarily better than they were half a century ago, the reach of major work on issues of importance has become truly global, in a way that could not have been imagined in the analogue world. Consider the game-changing contributions of WikiLeaks in freely making available to the media and the public very large datasets of “censored or otherwise restricted official materials involving war, spying and corruption” (WikiLeaks: 2015); the Guardian’s courageous investigation of the phone hacking scandal, which forced the closure of Rupert Murdoch’s News of the World, brought the issue of regulation of the British press on the agenda, and raised troubling questions about journalistic methods everywhere; and the explosive Snowden revelations about the US National Security Agency and global surveillance. And consider the global significance of the Panama Papers, the year-long collaborative investigation involving more than 100 news organizations round the world into “the sprawling, secretive industry of offshore that the world’s rich and powerful use to hide assets and skirt rules by setting up front companies in far-flung jurisdictions” (ICIJ 2016).

Recently established disciplines, such as data journalism, open journalism, and forensic accounting, and emerging super-specializations, such as forensic architecture, promise to revolutionize investigation in journalism. The whiz kids of forensic architecture claim they are developing ‘unique’ new technologies and tools for visual investigation with the capability to “deconstruct lies and myths
by creating simulations that prove a specific argument or fact is false” and the capability to “unveil…truth in highly sensitive political situations” (short description of Session 9, Logan CIJ Symposium 2016). Information security for journalists, which offers safeguards and counter measures against surveillance, is on its way to being recognized as a professional sub-discipline for investigative journalists.

**What is investigative journalism?**

On the face of it, the term ‘investigative journalism’ is simple enough to figure out.

There is a large historical and contemporary literature on the subject, with journalists writing books and chapters for anthologies on their exploits and triumphs and journalism professors turning out ‘how-to-do-it’ textbooks on the subject. Journalism schools offer specialized courses for the field and there are associations of investigative reporters in several countries. And as though this was not enough, *Spotlight* (2015), which has been critically acclaimed for getting the subject right by capturing “the mix of frustration, drudgery and excitement that goes into every great investigative story” (Engelberg 2016), has picked up an Oscar for its pains.

But when you look deeper into what kind of animal investigative journalism is, you will discover a surprising lack of agreement among practitioners and scholars in the field.

One type of definition is investigating and exposing wrong-doing, typically corruption and abuse of power by the powerful, with the public interest in mind. A cover-up, or intentional concealment of information that the public has a right to know, is invariably involved.

Another type of definition stakes a claim for investigative journalism as a higher, an intellectually and methodologically more demanding form of journalism, which can and must be differentiated from the garden
variety pursuit. According to this standpoint, “investigative journalism is an intellectual process...a business of gathering and sorting ideas and facts, building patterns, analyzing options and making decisions based on logic rather than emotion — including the decision to say no at any of the several stages” (Paul N. Williams, cited in Protess et. al. 1991: 4, 24n).

Other definitions lay down stiff conditions for even a well-researched, hard-worked piece of reporting to be admitted to the high table: first, the reporting must be “one’s own work product and initiative...not a report of an investigation made by someone else”; secondly, the subject must be a matter of “reasonable importance to the reader or viewer”; and thirdly, somebody must be “attempting to hide these matters from the public” (a definition adopted by the organization, Investigative Reporters and Editors, cited by Protess et. al. 1991: 5).

In contrast to such rigid, dogmatic assertions on what investigative journalism is and is not, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel offer a typology of three major forms the discipline has taken after it matured and diversified: “original investigative reporting, interpretative investigative reporting, and reporting on investigations” (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2001: 111-130). It is not necessary to go into the details but the typology is useful because it recognizes the need to broaden our understanding of the pursuit.

A more radical view is that investigative reporting is “the journalism of outrage” and that “more than a news-gathering process, the journalism of outrage is a form of story-telling that probes the boundaries” of a society’s “civic conscience” (Protess et. al. 1991: 5), or launch[es]...campaigns, expose[s]...military atrocities, and call[s]...for justice for the downtrodden and the colonized” (Schiffrin 2014: 1). The key here is the reporter’s determination to investigate and expose injustice in a world that is filled with it.
‘All journalism, by definition, should be investigative’

It may have been the plethora of definitions, the resultant confusion, and the pretensions to a higher realm within the profession that made Marquez register “the certainty that investigation is not a professional speciality but that all journalism should, by definition, be investigative” — and foreground ethics as a condition that must “always accompany journalism like the buzz accompanies the blowfly.” It is also noteworthy that Bruce Page, an outstanding journalist who was a member of the Insight team of The Sunday Times, expressed the same view, that “investigation is what journalism is about,” that “all reporters should do what so-called investigative reporters do: check facts, never take anything on trust, never take anything on trust from people who have an interest in pushing a particular view,” and that “investigative technique is the foundation on which everything in journalism rests” (Spark 1999: loc 266-277).

Page spoke on the basis of rich experience: he had worked on several investigative projects and had led the Insight team’s investigation of the thalidomide calamity, which left in its wake 8000 deformed children, and the scandal of the prolonged, unconscionable, and eventually unsuccessful cover-up by the companies involved. It is not without significance that looking back, Page, the team-leader, was far from satisfied with the way his newspaper had handled the thalidomide investigation. Saying that the Insight team investigators had no right to feel triumphant, he alluded to the avoidable delays, the surmountable obstacles, the missed chances, the excessive caution that had meant that the newspaper “missed the whole bloody thing till it was practically too late” (Phillip Knightley, “The Thalidomide Scandal: Where We Went Wrong,” a chapter in Pilger 2004: 362-363).

When Marquez or Page or a number of other old-world journalists insist that there is nothing special that needs to be called investigative journalism, they clearly do not mean this in a literal sense. It is evident that there is plenty of superficiality, dilettantism, triviality, and
banality in everyday journalism, as it strives and struggles to engage the audience that is getting away, with grim financial implications. We encounter the banal and the dross all the time in print, on television, and online.

My interpretation of what Marquez, Page, and others who place a high value on journalism as a calling mean when they reject investigative journalism’s claim to a special or higher status is this. All journalism worth the name must aspire, and be held up, to the higher standards demanded by the profession, not necessarily as it is practised in many places but at its best. This means truth-seeking, verification, digging deep, placing facts and events in context and in historical perspective, exercising the journalistic and, where possible, the literary imagination, analyzing and commenting independently and freely, acting justly, humanely, and ethically should become an integral part of journalism. This may sound utopian but it is a utopia every serious-minded young journalist can and must aspire to.

For a broader conceptualization

Following the Marquez-Page approach, I would argue for a broader understanding of investigative journalism than most textbooks and J-school courses seem to allow. Let us start with the proposition that investigative journalism is the discipline of digging deep and bringing to light verified facts about wrongdoing, or about a matter of significance, which are sought to be covered up or are otherwise inaccessible to the public. But getting the facts right only lays the foundation for investigative work, which will not be worth very much if the reporter does not get the “meaning of events right.”

When James Cameron, the British journalist, started out as a reporter, he decided that “facts must never get in the way of the truth,” as he provocatively put it in An Indian Summer (Cameron 1974: 147). His reputation as a foreign correspondent with an original, investigative
bent of mind was made by persisting with this approach. He was clear that “objectivity was of less importance than the truth” and that “the reporter whose technique was informed by no opinion lacked a very serious dimension.” Journalists therefore were professionally obliged to present their “attitude as vigorously and persuasively as they could, to be set out for consideration, criticism, and debate.” Being scrupulous and consistent about this he held to be a vital ingredient of “moral independence”; among other things, this involved an “attitude of mind that will challenge and criticize automatically, thus to destroy or weaken the built-in advantages of all propaganda and special pleading — including the journalist’s own” (Cameron 1967: 72-73).

Journalists of the first rank are not satisfied with bringing to light a mass of material facts that they manage to unearth through diligent work, or that falls into their lap by a stroke of luck. Their real pursuit is to invest these hitherto concealed or inaccessible facts with social, moral and, often, historical meaning and weave them into a coherent and compelling story, so that the journalism contributes significantly to raising social awareness of the issues involved and also stands the test of time.

On ‘facts’ and ‘significance’

Two theoretical questions arise here.

The first is the relationship between facts, which everyone agrees must be privileged in an investigation, and interpretation and opinion, which are important in making sense of the findings or the exposé. I would propose that in resolving this question the investigative journalist needs to fall back not so much on C.P. Scott’s much-quoted dictum, “Comment is free but facts are sacred” (Scott 1921), as on E.H. Carr’s classic dissection of “The Historian and His Facts” (Carr 1961: 7-30). Like the historian, the journalist needs to steer between the Scylla of a “fetishism” of undistinguishable facts and documents, the most trivial
mixed up with the really significant, and the Charybdis of the wildest and most extreme subjective form of “disputable interpretation.” As for the discerning public, the most sensible advice must be, following Carr (1961: 23), “When you read, or tune in to, a work of journalism, always listen out for the buzzing.”

A few words on the role of documents in investigation are called for here. It is true that documents are often the best evidence and, for the informed public, they can be clinching proof of corruption or abuse of power or other wrongdoing. However, this caution issued against document fetishism by Kim Philby, one of the world’s great practitioners of ideologically inspired espionage, must be heeded: “Just because a document *is* a document, it has a glamour which tempts the reader to give it more weight than it deserves…documentary intelligence, to be really valuable, must come in a steady stream, embellished with an awful lot of explanatory annotation. An hour’s serious discussion with a trustworthy informant is often more valuable than any number of original documents. Of course, it is best to have both” (Philby 1968, 2003: 167, loc 3458-3481).

The second question relates to the requirement of significance. Like the term ‘public interest,’ significance does not allow precise definition. It is easier to identify what is not significant in this context, namely the “trivial, obvious…[and] self-serving” (Pearlstine 2007: 260), not to mention the titillating and the prurient, which are the stock-in-trade of tabloid journalism. In starting an investigation, an individual journalist or, more typically, a news organization need not apply the stronger ‘public interest’ test. That will come in when the journalist considers employing active deception, such as a disguise or a sting, as an investigative tool. What the reporter and his or her editorial supervisors need to do before committing time and resources is to apply a common sense test to satisfy themselves that the matter to be taken up for investigation is of relevance to the community at large.
What we learnt from the Bofors investigation

Bofors is, at least arguably, independent India’s most important political corruption scandal. This has nothing to do with the size of the bribes involved, US$ 50 million, which is an insignificant proportion of the corruption involved in 21st century scandals, such as the 2G spectrum affair. Bofors might have had its ups and downs, its ebb and flow, in the public mind; some of the key players died during the course of investigation and prosecution; and the legal case eventually came to a dead end. But unlike previous and subsequent corruption scandals, Bofors remained on the national political agenda, active and visible or lurking in the shadows, for a long time — because the political, moral, and systemic issues it raised were both deep-seated and dramatic. The distinction of Bofors was to serve over more than a decade as a continuous symbol and metaphor for political corruption at the top. Its unravelling, in stages, in the press helped well-informed and politically conscious Indians to gain a real insight into how various institutions perform in relation to corruption.

The Bofors investigation was not the work of any one star journalist but a collective enterprise, which I happened to lead and do much of the writing for. An explosive broadcast by Swedish Public Radio had begun it all, and for more than 18 months from April 1988, when The Hindu’s Geneva stringer, Chitra Subramaniam, struck gold in Stockholm, The Hindu owned the investigation — thanks to its exclusive relationship with the highly privileged confidential source she had found and persuaded to cooperate with us. I must add in all fairness that during this period a few other publications in Sweden and India, notably India Today, contributed significant information and insights that helped fill in some gaps and make better sense of the incomplete complex story.

The scandal revolved round the Rajiv Gandhi government’s decision to purchase from the Swedish arms manufacturing company an advanced 155 mm howitzer system. The transaction was valued at SEK 8.41
billion or Rs 1,437.72 crore at the prevailing exchange rate. It turned out that unacknowledged payments aggregating US$ 50 million — termed “commissions” and calculated on a percentage basis — had been paid by Bofors into secret Swiss bank accounts after the contract was won on March 24, 1986. The US$ 50 million payoffs were in flagrant violation of the repeated assurances that were piously sought and obtained from Bofors by the Government of India. The evidentiary basis for the investigation was documentation leaked to The Hindu, in instalments spaced over months, by the confidential source. The key documents made available were copies of bank papers, transaction documents, secret contracts, and a diary and notes kept by Martin Ardbo, the Bofors chief executive, which had been seized by the Swedish police.

What we learnt fairly early on in our investigation was that the documents in hand or in the pipeline were vital to the story, but the story should not get lost in the web of complexity that seemed to lie ahead. There were also false trails, leading to persons who were in no way involved in the scandal. For example, a leading lawyer, going by unrelated events, wrongly accused Amitabh Bachchan of involvement in Bofors and this was prominently reported in a section of the press. But our investigation showed that this was completely baseless and we had no hesitation in making this clear.

But above all, we learnt that making sense of the documents, fitting them in a larger picture that was gradually taking shape, was what the investigation was essentially about. No journalistic investigation could be complete and there would always be gaps to be filled that we could not fill. We could leave that to the police investigation and the prosecution, whenever that might happen.

As more and more details emerged, we needed to zoom out to get a historical perspective and then the Bofors-India kickback story seemed to come alive. Now it could be understood in terms of five modes of action. The first was the decision-making on the choice of howitzer and the motive
for the crime clearly lay here. The second comprised the arrangements for the payoffs. The third was the cover-up and crisis management. The fourth was the journalistic investigation and exposé. The fifth was the Central Bureau of Investigation’s criminal investigation, assisted by the Swiss Federal Police and the Swiss courts, and prosecution before Judge Ajit Bharihoke’s Special Court for CBI cases.

What was the hard information we had on decision-making on the howitzer? The documented evidence showed that from 1980 the Government of India was looking out for a state-of-the-art 155 mm howitzer system to meet defence operational requirements that were said to be urgent. The competition was short-listed in December 1982 to M/s Sofma of France, M/s AB Bofors of Sweden, M/s International Military Services of the United Kingdom, and M/s Voest Alpine of Austria. In November 1985, the Government of India’s choice, based on advice from Army Headquarters and a recommendation by the Negotiating Committee, narrowed down to Sofma and Bofors.

The official record also showed that between October 1982 and February 1986, the Indian Army did no fewer than seven evaluations of the relative merits of the howitzer systems offered by the bidders. In the first six, the Sofma 155 mm TR howitzer was decisively preferred to the Bofors gun. Financial considerations also gave the French manufacturer what looked like an unbeatable lead. However, it became clear, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and a small group of Ministers and officials who knew his thinking had made up their minds to award the contract to the Swedish arms manufacturer and to no one else. Since they knew no way to make Army Headquarters budge from its preference for the French gun, they patiently waited it out, notwithstanding the supposed urgency of the Army’s strategic requirements.

When General A.S. Vaidya’s retirement neared and even before General K. Sundarji formally took over as Army chief, the Prime Minister and his confidants moved swiftly to clinch the decision for Bofors. With
Army Headquarters reversing in February 1986 a succession of earlier professional judgments that had gone against Bofors, the stages of final decision-making were telescoped and rushed through, resulting in the formalization of the choice of Bofors on March 24, 1986. Subsequently, the CBI charge-sheet revealed that after the Negotiating Committee recommended, on March 12, the issuance of a Letter of Intent to Bofors, the file was approved by five officials and three Ministers on a single day, March 13, and was finally approved by Rajiv Gandhi on March 14.

The decision-making mode could now be related to the payments mode, that is, the contracted arrangements for secret payoffs into the Swiss bank accounts. We could see now that these two modes constituted a neat set, belonging to the past and the government could do nothing about this. And the other three modes of action — the cover-up and crisis management, the journalistic investigation, and the CBI’s criminal investigation and prosecution, which were all continuing — also constituted a coherent set.

It can be seen from this that investigative journalism is not just about technique, documentation, and data analysis, although these are essential requirements for a complex investigation. They must be consciously understood to be a means to an end, a coherent, nuanced, compelling story that would make sense to an informed public, raise awareness of the vital issues, perhaps serve as a catalyst for progressive change or reform, and justify the time, effort, and resources invested in the investigation.

Fitting ‘investigation’ in a larger frame

Let me now return to investigation as one of the core tasks that George Brock predicts will be “the foundation on which journalism in the 21st century is going to be rebuilt.” When you actually reflect on these four tasks — verification, sense making, bearing witness, and investigation — you realize that they fold neatly into the well-established central
functions that serious news media perform in society. I have written on this subject and will only offer some shorthand observations here.

The two extremely valuable central functions may be termed (a) the *credible-informational* and (b) the *critical-adversarial*. An accompanying condition — which evolves over time, typically as an outcome of a democratic or working people’s struggle — is that the political system, for whatever reason, gives newspapers and other news media free or relatively free rein, and a public culture of valuing these functions develops. Performed over time, the two central functions working together build *trust* in the press and, or more accurately, in individual newspapers or other news media organizations.

There are also valuable derivatives of the two central, twinned functions. The first derivative is the agency of the press in *public education*. A second is serving as a *critical forum* for analysis, disputation, and comment, in which different opinions and ideas are discussed, debated, and have it out. An idealized conception of this is attributed to the American playwright Arthur Miller: “A good newspaper, I suppose, is a nation talking to itself” (Miller 1961). A third derivative is *agenda building*. Socially conscious media can trigger agenda-building processes to help produce democratic and progressive outcomes; and this they can do best when an authentic public opinion and a congenial context of attitude, feeling, and critical democratic values and practice exist.

The relationship of the core tasks of contemporary journalism, as identified by Brock, to the two historically established central functions can be represented thus: (a) the credible-information function (‘verification,’ ‘witness’); and (b) the critical function (‘sense making,’ ‘investigation’). The real point is that they are interconnected — and perform best when they perform together, in symphony, a truth that Marquez and the great truth-seeking journalists have always known.
Taking the wide-angle view

It must be clear by now that I am in favour of the wide-angle view of journalism that sees investigation as one of its core tasks, rather than as a super-speciality or a sequestered discipline. This does not mean that for news organizations, increasing investigative bench strength, or forming special investigative teams for particular projects, is the wrong way to go. But it does mean that a much larger pool of journalists, educated and trained in the precepts and practice of quality journalism, can be drawn into the core task of investigation than current professional practice seems to allow. Motivating and empowering this larger pool of young women and men to do thorough, thoughtful, and carefully supervised investigations into subjects of social and moral significance could have dramatic effects in terms of developing capabilities, improving work culture, and raising quality in the profession.

Once you take the wide-angle view, you will discover that the corpus of published investigative work is vast, varied, multi-sourced, and richly themed; it features the names of many famous journalists, whom I will not even attempt to list, and some great novelists, most notably Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens, and Marquez.

Let us take this unconventional example of high-quality investigation: young reporter Marquez’s story of Luis Alejandro Velasco, the full title of which is *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor who drifted on a life raft for ten days without food or water, was proclaimed a national hero, kissed by beauty queens, made rich through publicity, and then spurned by the government and forgotten for all time*. As investigative reporting of lasting value, which is unlikely to find its way into the textbooks of the field, it is eminently worth reading, along with “The Story of This Story,” as recalled by the author 15 years later (Marquez 2014).

Originally published in the Columbian newspaper *El Espectador* in 1955, the captivating story ran for 14 consecutive days and saw the circulation
of the newspaper almost doubling, with readers “scrambling…in front of the building to buy back issues in order to collect the entire series.”

Let us take a few minutes to look at Marquez’s investigative method and accomplishment. The news peg was the turning up of the sailor Velasco, “half dead on a deserted beach in northern Colombia,” following the disappearance of eight crew members of Caldas, a destroyer of the Columbian Navy, who had fallen overboard “during a storm” in the Caribbean Sea. The country was under a dictatorship and the press was censored. Velasco, who had been co-opted and feted as a hero by the military regime, had cashed in on his ordeal and told his story “piecemeal many times” before he showed up at El Espectador, asking how much it would pay him for the story. The initial reaction to what looked like a “rehash” was negative and Velasco was sent away but, as Marquez recalls it, the Editor, acting “on a hunch…caught up with him on the stairway, accepted the deal, and placed him in my hands. It was as if he had given me a time bomb.”

It turned out that the shipwrecked sailor had “an exceptional instinct for the art of narrative, an astonishing memory and ability to synthesize, and enough uncultivated dignity to be able to laugh at his own heroism.” Over twenty daily sessions of six hours each, Marquez took extensive notes, “sprang trick questions to expose contradictions,” and wrote an accurate and thoroughly verified account of the sailor’s ten days at sea on a life raft that was “so exciting that my only concern was finding readers who would believe it.” It was agreed, partly for this reason, that the story would be written in the first person and signed by Velasco.

The big break for the story came when, asked by Marquez to describe the storm that had caused the disaster, Velasco said with a smile, “There was no storm.” This fact was confirmed by another source, the weather bureau. The truth, which had been suppressed and was revealed for the first time now, was that “the ship, tossed violently by the wind in heavy
seas, had spilled the ill-secured cargo and the eight sailors overboard.” This meant that “three serious offences had been committed: first, it was illegal to transport cargo on a destroyer; second, the overweight prevented the ship from maneuvering to rescue the sailors; and third, the cargo was contraband — refrigerators, television sets, and washing machines.”

When the dictatorship woodenly denied that the destroyer had been loaded with contraband, the newspaper, using a list provided by Velasco of fellow crewmen who owned cameras, was able to follow up with a special supplement that clinched the argument. The supplement presented the complete story, illustrated by photographs of groups of sailors and behind them the boxes of contraband with the factory labels. The sailor, the newspaper, and Marquez had to pay a heavy price for this “exhaustive digging” into the truth, but that is another story.

Let me take another example, this time from India, of original, off-the-beaten-track investigation which has had social and moral significance. This is P. Sainath’s prolonged, relentless, and ongoing investigation of farmer suicides (Sainath 2016), which during the period 1995-2014 aggregated more than 300,000. Here India’s most famous rural reporter combines the use and critical analysis of official data with spot reporting, vivid and influential ‘human interest’ storytelling, bringing the numbers alive. Typically, he works against an attitude of official denial and cover-up, but there have also been positive responses from some Members of Parliament and a few political leaders. This suggests that investigative journalism need not always meet with adversariality.

The People’s Archive of Rural India (PARI), a not-for-profit multimedia digital platform founded and edited by Sainath, is an exciting work in progress and close to my theme. Describing itself as “a living journal, a breathing archive” and relying almost wholly on voluntary work, it has begun to generate and host valuable multimedia reporting on “the everyday lives of everyday people” in India’s countryside that is not
available anywhere else. It is also in the process of creating a database of relevant “stories, reports, videos, and audios from as many sources as we can.” The digital content is free to access and the imaginative project has attracted a groundswell of goodwill, support, and talent from all parts of India. PARI has showcased some high-quality original reportage that has begun to win professional recognition and awards. It has an ambitious plan to create “informative and lively” educational resources for students, teachers, schools, colleges, and universities on the realities of rural India and to involve large numbers of students in creating, enriching, and learning from these resources. PARI’s work of exploration, experimentation, and truth-seeking across rural India is one of the brightest spots of public-spirited journalism in the developing world and indeed anywhere.

In 1991, *Frontline* magazine did a detailed investigation that showed that at least 73 weavers in the Guntur and Prakasam districts of Andhra Pradesh had died of starvation, or starvation-related causes, between August 30 and November 8 (*Frontline* 1991). The official stance was denial based on quibbling over technical definitions of ‘starvation death.’ The investigation relied on the cooperation of a Congress Member of Parliament, Pragada Kotaiah, a pioneer of the organized weavers’ movement in the State. The journalists, working with his network, were able to assemble a village-wise list of names of weavers who had died, with the reported cause of death entered against each name. So from mere numbers, the story now had verifiable names of those who had died of starvation or starvation-related causes, village-wise. The journalists combined data-gathering and rigorous analysis provided by a trained economist who accompanied the team with interviews with the surviving family members and descriptions of their plight.

Three major conclusions emerged from the investigation. “First, the general conditions of life of the weavers of Guntur and Prakasam
districts are so desperately low that survival itself is a fragile, delicately poised matter...Here, weavers subsist on painfully low levels of nutritional intake; they have access to very poor health care facilities; their weakened bodies are susceptible to all manner of infections and diseases...Any crisis — a family problem, a reduction in income — is certain to accelerate the downward spiral, further lowering nutritional intake and reducing the body to the threshold of mortality. The final cause of death may be an infection; it may be something else.” The second conclusion was that “none of the survival strategies normally resorted to by people in crisis” seemed to be available to the Andhra weavers. For those who sought to migrate to nearby towns, there were “simply no jobs.” Thirdly, Frontline’s case studies suggested that the recent economic measures adopted by the Central and State governments had “in effect tipped the weavers over the edge,” with the sharp increase in yarn prices that followed the 1991-92 Budget precipitating the crisis “perhaps more than any other single factor.”

I believe that in this case the long-form investigation, along with the resultant coverage in other news media, had a significance impact on informed public opinion and led to some constructive policy responses at the State and national level.

The question of impact

Every journalist working determinedly to unearth the truth desires impact. In the informed public’s mind, the success of investigative journalism is often judged on the basis of its impact, whether it is able to generate change in the desired direction. But there are obvious problems with applying this criterion. For one thing, it greatly exaggerates the role the news media play, assigning to them a power to shape the larger external environment that they clearly do not have. Making a splash, even a big splash, is not the same thing as doing reform or generating change in the desired direction. Secondly, the impact of journalism on complex socio-economic and political realities is extremely hard, almost impossible, to measure. Even in the case of the most celebrated
investigation of the last 50 years, Watergate, the jury is out on whether it made any real difference to politics in the United States and it would certainly be a gross and absurd exaggeration to say that it ‘brought down a President.’ Thirdly, an investigation may proceed on the right track, with a sound approach, the right tools, and a lot of hard work, but there is no guarantee of success; it is well recognized that luck plays a role, sometimes a leading role, in the success of an investigation. It follows that it is unjust to the investigating journalists to judge the quality and merit of their work on the basis of impact.

Let me now turn to two other problematical issues — the frequent, almost endemic resort to deception in investigative journalism, and dealing with anonymous and confidential sources.

**Deception in investigation**

The only qualities essential for real success in journalism are ratlike cunning, a plausible manner and a little literary ability.

-- Nicholas Tomalin in *The Sunday Times Magazine*, October 26, 1969

This may sound like a parody but ‘ratlike cunning’ has the ring of truth to it, especially when we are on the subject of investigation. I do not know of any investigative journalist of standing who has not practised deception in some form or another in pursuit of the ‘truth’. Deception practised in journalism takes many forms, ranging from misleading behaviour, such as making the subject of the investigation believe the journalist is his or her friend, misleading averments and ‘white lies’ through impersonation and clandestine recording to practices that go to the edge of the law and professional ethics. The range is vast and the forms are too numerous to catalogue here.

The generally agreed rules relating to the use of deception in investigation are no different from the rules that apply to all journalism, except that failure to follow them is likely to carry a higher risk while doing sensitive investigations.
The first rule prohibits resort to deception unless it becomes clear that the information sought by the journalist, on a matter of significance, cannot be obtained in a straightforward way. The second rule requires that the ‘public interest’ test be applied if the deception contemplated is serious and would not be countenanced in the normal professional course. The third rule lays down that any investigation that relies on deception must be closely monitored by an editorial supervisor with sufficient experience to make calls on what is and is not legitimate from the standpoint of professional ethics. It has been suggested that “The Washington Post’s Watergate triumph fostered a culture there and elsewhere in journalism in which everyone wanted to be ‘Woodstein,’ coupling hard work, creativity, and confidential sources to bring down the rich and the powerful” and that “one painful result” was the fraud perpetrated on the newspaper and its readers by Janet Cooke, who had concocted the story of an eight-year-old heroin addict and even won a Pulitzer Prize for it (Pearlstine 2007: 172). Had the rules been followed, the debacle would not have occurred — it was as simple as that.

There are, of course, exceptions to the rule. No rules could apply to the extraordinary investigative work of the German writer, undercover journalist, and lone wolf, Günter Wallraff. However, the creative forms of deception — disguise, identity change, and deep infiltration — he practised on his own authority for his best work have been not just in the public interest, but in the interest of “those working and subsisting at the bottom of the industrial heap” (Pilger 2004: 158). Wallraff’s most influential investigation — assuming the guise of a Turkish Gastarbeiter or ‘guest worker’ to experience and expose sub-human conditions and practices in the illegal German labour market (Wallraff 1988) — is the stuff of legend in Germany.

**Use and abuse of anonymous and confidential sources**

It is well recognized today that “the use and misuse of anonymous sources and their most important subset, confidential sources” (Pearlstine 2007: xv) is a minefield that has claimed many casualties
and also taken a toll of the public’s trust in journalism. This is more or less a global phenomenon. With no common understanding and no rules laid down by most news organizations for proper professional and ethical behaviour towards such sources, confusion and uncertainty reign within the profession. The problem is particularly serious for India where the misuse of anonymous sources by journalists, and the misuse of journalists by evidently powerful unnamed sources carrying an agenda or promoting special interests, is a morbid dance that can be witnessed virtually every day on the pages of newspapers and on news television.

The problem is actually two problems — (1) dealing with sources who insist on remaining anonymous for good or bad reasons, and (2) protecting anonymous and confidential sources against official or judicial attempts to force disclosure.

Norman Pearlstine’s impassioned insider account, *Off The Record: The Press, the Government, and the War on Anonymous Sources*, highlights the crisis of source protection for US journalism during the George W. Bush presidency (Pearlstine 2007). The former Editor-in-Chief and current Chief Content Officer of Time, Inc. was widely criticized and even reviled for his decision to obey a court order and hand over reporter Matt Cooper’s notes to a grand jury in a scandal known as ‘Plamegate’. But the book is not merely a defence of Pearlstine’s actions. It reveals the complexity and fraught state of source protection in American journalism; the reality that many journalists have not just been vulnerable but have been seriously compromised by their privileged sources; and uncertainty and confusion within news organizations about the differences between ‘confidential’, ‘anonymous’, ‘not for attribution’, ‘background’, ‘deep background’, and ‘off the record’. Pearlstine’s preoccupation, understandably, is with source protection under fraught circumstances and the Editorial Guidelines he provides as an appendix in *Off The Record* concentrate on instructing journalists how to deal with this problem.
By contrast, source protection against official or judicial attempts to compel disclosure does not seem to be a priority issue for Indian journalism. The literature on the subject is weak, as is the discussion on it within the profession. However, the issue has the potential to become more salient for Indian journalism, especially if the investigative function develops and becomes more prominent and aggressive. Gautam Bhatia, lawyer and blogger on constitutional issues, has a thoughtful little section on “Shield Laws” in a recently published book on free speech under the Indian Constitution (Bhatia 2016: 320-322). It turns out that “Indian jurisprudence on the issue is yet to take off”; the National Law Commission made an aborted attempt to get “a variant of a shield law” in place; “various High Courts…have not been sympathetic to the proposition”; and, somewhat worryingly, the Supreme Court of India, in a challenge to the Prevention of Terrorism Act, “upheld a provision that required compelled disclosure to the investigating officer” (Bhatia 2016: 321-322). In an article published ahead of the book, Bhatia floated the suggestion, in passing, that “in the absence of any law, Article 19(1)(a) could play a direct role in the matter,” and concluded hopefully that “either a strong shield law, or a definitive Supreme Court ruling, is required to fill the current vacuum…” (Bhatia 2014). That’s about it.

The real problem for Indian journalism is the licence it provides to official, corporate, and other privileged sources to use and abuse its columns and broadcast space, hiding behind the veil of anonymity. If they are free from scruple, these sources are able to wield power and influence without responsibility — promoting official agendas and special interests, attacking and, at times, scandalizing opponents and opposing views, planting self-serving stories and, from time to time, plain disinformation. Since the justification for the demand of anonymity and confidentiality is rarely questioned by reporters, and since the deals struck routinely between reporter and privileged source to grant confidential status are rarely monitored and supervised properly
within the newsroom, the misuse of sources by journalists, and what is even more damaging, the misuse of journalists and the news media by privileged sources, have assumed epidemic proportions.

Granting anonymity and confidentiality to sources who are in a position to provide important information, especially for sensitive investigations, will always remain a legitimate and productive part of professional journalism. But as policy, the use of anonymous sources by reporters must be discouraged — and, in some notorious cases, it must be absolutely prohibited before it causes further damage to the reputation and credibility of the news organization. This is where clear, precisely formulated, and well-publicized editorial guidelines are badly needed in Indian newsrooms.

When it comes to granting confidential source status to anyone, it will be hard to improve on Pearlstine’s guideline:

Most conversations with unnamed sources are not ‘confidential’…In general, Confidential Source Status should be reserved for sources who are providing information that is important and in the public interest, and who, by doing so, are risking their lives, jobs, or reputations. Reporters should alert editors as early as possible during news gathering that they are collecting sensitive information from sources who may seek or expect confidentiality. Reporters and editors should refrain from granting Confidential Source Status without the explicit approval, prior to publication, of the publication’s editor-in-chief. If the editors ultimately decide they cannot grant Confidential Source Status, the reporter or a top editor should inform the source that while we are willing to litigate vigorously to protect our sources, we cannot guarantee confidentiality. If the reporter, editor, and source cannot reach an understanding, the publication cannot publish the information (Pearlstine 2007: 264).
Summing up

There is great merit in Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s assertion that “all journalism should, by definition, be investigative” as well as in his admonition to young journalists to understand that “ethics are not an occasional condition but should always accompany journalism like the buzz accompanies the blowfly.” When Marquez and a number of old-world journalists insist that there is nothing special that needs to be called investigative journalism, they clearly do not mean this in a literal sense. What they mean to convey especially to young journalists is that all journalism worth the name must aspire, and be held up, to the higher standards demanded by the profession, not necessarily as it is practised in many places but at its best. This approach reflects the high value they place on journalism as a calling or profession.

When you take the broad view of journalism that sees investigation as one of its intrinsic and core tasks, rather than as a super-speciality or a sequestered discipline, a vast and wonderful vista opens up of work that is truth-seeking, richly themed, exploratory, imaginative, creative, literary, and, above all, passionate about freedom, humanity, and justice.

Taking the wide-angle approach does not mean that news organizations should not increase investigative bench strength, or form special investigative teams for particular projects. They should, of course. But it does mean that a much larger pool of journalists, educated and trained in the precepts and practice of quality journalism, can be drawn into the task of investigation than current professional practice seems to allow. Motivating and empowering this greatly enlarged pool of young women and men to do thorough, thoughtful, and carefully supervised investigations into subjects of social and moral significance could have dramatic effects in terms of developing capabilities, improving work culture and raising quality in the profession.

While investigating, exploring, and experimenting, journalists of the first rank are not satisfied with bringing to light a mass of material facts that they manage to unearth through diligent work, or that falls into
their lap by a stroke of luck. Their real pursuit is to invest these hitherto concealed or inaccessible facts with social, moral and, often, historical meaning and weave them into a coherent and compelling story, so that the journalism contributes significantly to raising social awareness of the issues involved and also stands the test of time.

Worldwide, journalism and the news industry are struggling, in this digital age, to reassert their relevance and value under profoundly changed and changing circumstances. This ongoing transformation has, in various degrees, disrupted and destabilized the game, whatever spin one chooses to put on this. Investigative journalism of quality and relevance is valuable in itself, in what it can do for ordinary folk and for society, typically holding up truth to power. But it can also play an instrumentalist role in re-energizing and re-vitalizing the whole field of professional journalism that often seems to be tired, dispirited, losing steam, and shedding value. In India and South Asia, the news media are still in growth mode, but there are indications that the global trends will catch up with us sooner than we think. Imagine what a regular flow and, over time, given our human resources, an explosion of high-quality investigations, carried out in the public interest on subjects that matter, can do for the vitality and social value of reporting. Imagine what this can do for trust in, and engagement with, professional journalism and the news industry in our part of the world. That is the challenge and opportunity I present before you today.

References


Marquez, Gabriel Garcia (2010), *I’m Not Here to Give a Speech* (London: Viking, Penguin Group), 112-113. “Journalism: The Best Job in the World” was the opening speech given at the Forty-second Assembly of the Sociedad Interamericana de Prensa (SIP; Inter-American Press Society). *I’m Not Here to Give a Speech* is a collection of Marquez’s speeches, most of them translated from the Spanish, on issues that interested him through his career.


PARI (People’s Archive of Rural India), https://ruralindiaonline.org


N. Ram, Chairman of Kasturi & Sons Limited, Publisher of *The Hindu* and group newspapers, and former Editor-in-Chief of *The Hindu* and group newspapers, is a political journalist. He has written on a range of socio-political subjects and specialized in investigative journalism.

Ram is a Trustee of the Media Development Foundation (MDF), which administers the Asian College of Journalism (ACJ).

Along with Susan Ram, he is the biographer of the Indian writer, R.K. Narayan.

Ram was elected president of the Contemporary India Section of the 72nd session of the Indian History Congress (2011). Honours include the Padma Bhushan (for journalism), 1990; Sri Lanka Ratna (2005); the Asian Investigative Journalist of the Year Award from the Press Foundation of Asia (1990); the B.D. Goenka Award for Excellence in Journalism (1989); and a Columbia J-School Alumni Award (2003).
Lawrence Dana Pinkham, a professor of journalism at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, was Dean of the Asian College of Journalism between 2001 and 2003.

A graduate of the University of Maine and the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, Larry Pinkham worked as a reporter for the Providence Journal, the Wall Street Journal, and United Press before joining the Columbia journalism faculty in 1956.

He remained at Columbia for 16 years, teaching print and broadcast journalism, and creating new programmes that aimed at updating the school’s traditional curriculum.

During the student demonstrations against the Vietnam war and university governance in 1968, Pinkham joined with other Columbia faculty members in an attempt to protect the demonstrators from police violence. The attempt failed, and in protest he resigned from his position as director of the journalism school’s broadcasting program.

Pinkham left Columbia for UMass in 1972, and served as chair of the institution’s new journalism program from 1976 to 1981.

Pinkham was raised by working-class grandparents in Bangor, Maine, during the Great Depression. It was only after having enlisted in the Navy during World War II that, thanks to the GI Bill, he was able to attend college. In New York, he was introduced to progressive political ideas and came to understand that the social injustice he had witnessed firsthand while growing up was inherent in the capitalist system.

In his 19 years on the Massachusetts faculty, Pinkham divided his time between Amherst and China.

During a sabbatical year in 1979, shortly after the resumption of relations between China and the United States, he was invited to teach journalism in Beijing as a visiting professor at the Graduate Institute of Journalism, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Pinkham returned to teach in China several times, for a total of eight years.

In 2001, Pinkham accepted an invitation to serve as distinguished visiting professor and dean of the newly founded Asian College of Journalism in Chennai. His wife Joan Pinkham, who accompanied him, taught supplementary English at the ACJ.

Pinkham died on February 28, 2010 at Cooley Dickinson Hospital, Northampton, Mass., following a heart attack. He was 83.
Asian College of Journalism
Second Main Road, Taramani, Chennai 600 113. India
Telephone: 91-44-2254 2840 / 2254 2842 – 47
Website: www.asianmedia.org