

What's so good about investigative journalism? (Harvard Part III)

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No kind of journalism is more shrouded in myth than the investigative reporter. Films like [All The Presidents Men](#) deified the heroic hack who unpeeled the layers of lies to reveal the inner sordid secrets of society. But if you can't trust journalists, how can you trust them in the watchdog role? 

Investigative journalist-turned-investigative journalism academic [Sheila Coronel](#) is pretty much the global authority on this genre around the world. She's done it as well as anyone and now she is talking about it at [Harvard](#).

She points out that market freedoms liberate journalists to do more critical reporting. But do the same commercial forces mean that investigative journalism turns into crass 'muck-raking'? Sheila locates this in transitional societies – the USA in the last 19th/early 20th century, many parts of Asia right now. But she sees it as evolutionary. Better investigative reporting emerges out of the market for scandal.

So, as Sheila puts it, the 'circus-dog' function turns into the 'watchdog' role for the news media.

Of course, now it's more complicated than that, as Ms Coronel points out. As investigative journalism becomes institutionalised in mainstream media it can become limited. As the public encroaches upon the area of investigative media, so the very idea of 'watchdog' journalism is challenged.

And does it make any difference? Can it actually make the public overly cynical about government? Coronel's excellent [paper](#) for this conference gives two great examples. In one case a media investigation brings down a bad politician. But in another similar case it does not. The journalism had different effects. Partly it depends on the political circumstances that surround the media scandal. But it is also about how the media frames the charges that it makes:

"The difference between the Philippine and Thai cases was not just in the way the debate was framed, but also in the mood of politicized publics. Both Thaksin and Estrada were popular heads of state with large electoral mandates. Both also represented a departure from the past: Thaksin was a modernizing businessman, not a crusty bureaucrat; Estrada, a movie actor, not a greasy politician.

Both were elected to head countries with a free press, recent histories of popular mobilization, and an influential and politically active middle class. The difference was that in the Philippines, the political class made up of a significant section of the elite, the Church, NGOs, and the middle-class were so scandalized by the boozing, thieving, and womanizing Estrada that they wanted him out. On the other hand, in Thailand, the business community, the politicians, and the public supported Thaksin and bought into his vision of the prime minister as CEO. They were willing to overlook his transgressions if he could deliver—and to some extent, he did."

I agree with [Ellen Hume](#) from [MIT](#) who says that it might be wrong to describe the investigative journalist as a 'myth'. They are very much a reality say Ellen, albeit various in form and not without faults. "There's a lot of crap out there" says Ellen, but there's also a lot of opportunity. Ellen points out that new communication techniques such as [crowd-sourcing](#) that allow journalists to work with the public to investigate issues give the watchdog new teeth.

[This is a core part of my argument in [SuperMedia](#) and I look forward to seeing Ellen's [Centre For Future Civic Media](#) help evolve these techniques. I would really like to see just about every centre for the study of investigative

journalism devote their time to finding new ways to exploit new technology and engage with the public. It will make the journalism more effective and efficient. But it could also change the nature of how journalism acts as a watchdog and the impacts that it has.]

I personally also think there is a danger of separating out 'investigative' journalism from general journalism. Good reliable, independent, routine reporting can have a bigger impact in the medium and long-term than a one-off scoop revelation. Journalism as a whole has a 'watchdog' role.

Last word to Sheila who points out that even in the most difficult media markets such as Russia or parts of Africa, there appears to be public appetite for journalism to take on this function:

"...the outcomes of press exposés are seldom certain. They can even end up with the press being at the losing end, if its motives and methods are challenged. No doubt, press exposure of corruption has the potential to catalyze governance reforms and to remedy some of the deficiencies that hobble the media, but it does not always succeed in doing so. At best, therefore, watchdog reporting—for now—offers a tool, a window for raising the level of discourse, for engaging the public, and reconstructing a public sphere much diminished by the onslaught of the market and the strictures of the state."

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