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The Media as Watchdog

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The notion of the press as watchdog is more than 200 years old. Yet the idea of vigilant media monitoring government and exposing its excesses has gained new traction in many parts of the world. Globalization, the fall of authoritarian and socialist regimes, and the deregulation of the media worldwide have fuelled a renewed interest in —as well as a surge in efforts by various groups to support— “watchdogging” by the media.

Since the late 17th Century, Enlightenment theorists had argued that publicity and openness provide the best protection from the excesses of power. The idea of the press as Fourth Estate, as an institution that exists primarily as a check on those in public office, was based on the premise that powerful states had to be prevented from overstepping their bounds. The press working independently of government, even as its freedoms were guaranteed by the state, was supposed to help ensure that this was so.

The 1980s and 90s saw the revival of this centuries-old notion and its application especially to “transition societies” then emerging from the ruins of socialist and authoritarian regimes. It had resonance among citizens facing pervasive corruption, weak rule of law, and predatory or incompetent governments unable to deliver basic services. Today even in countries where democracy is a fairly new experiment or even in those, like China, where democracy and a free press have yet to take root, the notion of the press as watchdogs of power is embedded in the self-definition of journalists¹ and in varying degrees, also in public expectations of the media. It is, moreover, a particularly seductive notion to the international donor community, which, since the 1990s, began to publicly acknowledge that corrupt and inept governments were a major impediment to development efforts. As a result, donors who wanted to fund governance reforms also became interested in supporting the media in their performance of their monitoring function.

But is the press acting as watchdog always desirable? In countries where the media are hobbled by draconian state restrictions or driven largely by the imperatives of profit-obsessed markets, is such a role even possible? If so, what enabling conditions make a watchdog press possible? Finally, what impact has media monitoring had in ensuring government accountability? Is a watchdog press the key to reform or is it civil society, responsive government institutions, or an elite push for reform? Put differently, even if the press were an exemplary watchdog—rather than a lapdog or attack dog of power—can it actually make a difference, especially in societies that seem resistant to, or incapable of, change?

Is the watchdog desirable?

In both new and old democracies, the idea of the media as the public’s eyes and ears and not merely a passive recorder of events is today widely accepted. Indeed, the myth of the intrepid journalist doggedly pursuing the trail of wrongdoing remains very much alive, both in the media as well as popular lore. Governments, it is argued, cannot be held accountable if citizens are ill informed about the actions of officials and institutions. On a routine basis, the watchdog press monitors the day-to-day workings of government, thereby helping citizens assess the efficacy of its performance. Investigative reporting, where journalists invest time and effort to ferret out and expose wrongdoing, warns citizens about those that are doing them harm and empowers them with the information they need to demand reforms. In the end, the press ensures that the individuals and institutions that are supposed to serve the public remain transparent and are held accountable. A vigilant press is therefore key to good governance. That, at least, is the liberal democratic orthodoxy.

This orthodoxy is not unchallenged. To nonbelievers, the watchdog role should be subordinate to other, in their view more constructive, goals. Leninist views of the press, for example, which

prevailed in socialist regimes, saw the press primarily as a collective propagandist and agitator, as a partner in building socialism, rather than an entity independent—and skeptical of—government.

Similarly, the “Asian values” conception of the media, which had its heyday in East Asia in the 1990s, stressed the importance of collective, over individual, rights and welfare. This view, premised on the uniqueness of Asian societies, cast aside Western notions of a watchdog press as inappropriate for the region, where, it is asserted, citizens are willing to sacrifice individual freedoms in exchange for economic well-being. In the Asian values school, the media’s role is primarily that of helping forge social consensus for strong governments in pursuit of economic growth.

An earlier iteration of this view, fashionable in the 1970s, was the school of development journalism, which preached that in poor countries, the media should veer away from the Western fixation on conflict and disaster and should instead promote developmental goals. From this perspective, the press blunts its critical edge and instead functions mainly as information-provider and cheerleader in support of the development agenda.

Even within the liberal tradition, however, there is skepticism about whether the watchdog role of the press should take primacy. Some media scholars and critics argue that the adversarial nature of reporting erodes trust and support for government. Studies on U.S. television reporting, for example, say that TV news presents the image of government as inefficient and wasteful and that this constant barrage of reporting on government wrongdoing may lead to the public being desensitized to actual instances of misbehavior by public officials.² Western scholars belonging to the “media malaise” school of media effects say that too much negative reporting undermines support for public officials, making it more difficult for them to govern effectively. It also leads to rising dissatisfaction with governments and more broadly, with democratic institutions and democracy itself.³ Elsewhere, particularly in post-conflict societies, questions have been raised about whether adversarial media can endanger democratic consolidation and spark chaos.⁴

Another strain of criticism portrays media exposure of wrongdoing not as furthering their watchdog role but as morphing into their less edifying role as purveyor of scandal. Media as scandalmonger means that the end goal is to titillate and amuse citizens, rather than inform and mobilize them for reform. The constant barrage of media exposés reinforces the “politics of permanent scandal,” where there is unending controversy and frenzy on the political stage but not much substantial reform. Instead, scandals—just like elections—become an arena for political struggle among elites, rather than a venue for mobilizing the public to push for change.⁵ The danger, as a Hungarian scholar writing about the Balkans put it, is that “when everyone cries wolf, the public loses all interest in accusations of corruption and normalizes it. The very high level of government corruption becomes a normal fact of life.”⁶

More radical critiques of the media, on the other hand, say the opposite: that the media, far from being hypercritical, actually rarely perform their watchdog role or question the existing social order. Thus, they wonder whether the media’s purpose and organizing principle ought to be based on what they do NOT do most of the time.⁷ The watchdog doctrine, after all, dates back to an era when the “media” consisted largely of small-circulation and largely polemical newsletters and the state was dominated by a landed aristocracy. The argument then was that private ownership protected the press against state intervention. But private ownership has not shielded the press from market pressures, resulting in the downgrading of watchdog reporting in favor of fluff and entertainment. In other words, while a press autonomous of government should in theory act as watchdog, it cannot do so given the constraints of market-based media. The liberal orthodoxy—stuck in romantic, 18th-century notions of small papers fighting autocracy—therefore privileges the media’s watchdog role vis-à-vis the state while putting the press in the service of corporate power.⁸

The watchdog and government

For sure, the way the press operates in the real world rarely corresponds with normative prescriptions of how the media ought to function. All over the world, the media are seldom immune from the pressures of either—or, in many countries, both—the state and the market. In addition, the structure and ownership of the media industry as well as professional practices, cultures, and norms have a bearing on how well the press performs as watchdog. The relationship between the media and those in power is also a factor. Moreover, certain historical moments seem to be more conducive to watchdog reporting than others.

Without doubt, the institutional arrangements of democracy provide the most hospitable environment for watchdog reporting. The constitutional and legal protections for a free press as well as access to government-held information give journalists not only the right, but also the tools with which to monitor government. The checks and balances inherent in the representative system also legitimize journalistic inquiry as part of a broader framework of government accountability to citizens.

This is why watchdog reporting cannot take place in Burma or North Korea. This is also why it has emerged in new democracies, even in places like the Balkans that have no history or tradition of independent media.⁹ The burst of investigative energies in the last 20 years was largely in places where repressive regimes fell apart. After years of propaganda and thought control, citizens were hungry for information, and their appetite for news and commentary was unleashed once the restraints were relaxed. New democratic leaders not only dismantled information ministries and state censorship but also liberated the media from state ownership, paving the way for entrepreneurs who took advantage of the commercial opportunities to cater to a market hungry for news. Freed from state controls, the media took on government and also made profits from their exposés. Emboldened by their freedom, their prestige and their profits, the media in many new democracies now poke their noses into areas of public life from which they had once been barred, exposing corruption in malfeasance in both high and low places, and in areas like the military, which previously have not been subjected to press scrutiny.

What is surprising is that investigative reporting has taken root in a nondemocracy like China, a one-party state where media freedoms are not guaranteed and journalists can count on few protections. There, watchdog journalism was fuelled not so much by political, but by market, liberalization. Economic reforms initiated in the late 1970s led to media reforms in the 1990s, which included decreased government subsidies for the media. This, in turn, forced media agencies to operate as commercial enterprises as they had to depend on advertising and circulation in order to survive. Recognizing that muckraking can be profitable, journalists were encouraged to report more aggressively.¹⁰ Soon publications and public-affairs programs specializing in investigative reporting were set up, probing issues like corruption, crime, and the environment. Although the targets of the investigations were low- and mid-level officials, the new reporting represents a radical change from the past.¹¹

Despite country differences, the forces that propelled investigative reporting in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and China were broadly similar: social and political upheavals that created a demand for information; journalists and media entrepreneurs who took advantage of the loosened controls and the new business opportunities to expose wrongdoing; and a restless public that was primed for muckraking reporting.¹² In earlier eras, these same factors also spurred investigative journalism elsewhere—in the United States in the early 1900s and again in the 1970s, and in the United Kingdom in the 1960s and 70s.¹³

In all these countries, a combustible mix of social ferment, competitive media markets, and political liberalization fuelled investigative energies. But agency is important as well: a community of journalists and entrepreneurs needed to seize the opportunities created by market and social forces. The importance of journalistic agency cannot be underestimated. After all, in many developing countries investigative reporters take great risks and are poorly or modestly paid. Most of the over 600 journalists killed worldwide since 2000 were investigating crime, politics, and corruption. More than 70 percent of those killed were specifically targeted for murder, often by contract assassins. And most of them were working for newspapers and broadcast stations in democratic countries.¹⁴ Apart from physical attacks, investigative reporters have also been subjected to jail terms and harassment lawsuits as well as laws that restrict information access, all of which impede their ability to expose wrongdoing.

The pathology is clear: even as democracy provides the optimum conditions for watchdog reporting, many democracies in the world are unable to provide adequate protections for journalists. And yet, neither murders nor lawsuits have succeeded in gagging the press. In democracies like the Philippines, Mexico, and Colombia, where the journalist casualty rates are among the highest in the world, the muckraking zeal does not seem to have been severely dampened. One exception is Russia, but other factors apart from killings, including the public mood and the takeover of independent media by businesspeople close to the Kremlin, may explain why Russian media have tended toward acquiescence in recent years.¹⁵

The watchdog and the market

There is no argument that state controls are an impediment to watchdog journalism. There is far less consensus about the role of the market. On one hand, market liberalization and competition have encouraged the emergence of, and in many places, also sustained, investigative reporting. But at the same time, market pressures are a major obstacle to its continued viability. Democracies all over the world suffer from these contradictions. Most everywhere, the complaint is the same: Because most of the media are organized as for-profit enterprises, the performance of democratic services is often secondary to profit-making. Sometimes there is a fit: profit motives spur concern for the public welfare. But often the goals collide. There is a design flaw: Critics say that privately owned media, independent of the state but slave to the market, are at best, episodic and unreliable watchdogs.¹⁶

This view gained currency in the U.S. in the 1980s, with the emergence of big media conglomerates and the takeover of family-owned media enterprises by giant corporations.¹⁷ The dumbing down of the news and the dominance of entertainment values in the media have been blamed on the rise of profit-hungry media behemoths. Even so, many big news organizations supported investigative reporting, partly because of the prestige it brought and partly because their profits could sustain it. Today, as new media and new technologies threaten the business model that has supported journalism for the last century, the resources for watchdogging are being slashed. There is therefore renewed criticism of the shortcomings of profit-oriented media and much more critical thinking about alternatives, including nonprofit models for sustaining watchdog reporting.¹⁸

Elsewhere, the evidence is mixed. In Europe, a study by the Dutch-Flemish Association for Investigative Journalists, known by its Dutch initials VVOJ, showed that the leading outlets for investigative reporting are national newspapers, public-service broadcasters, and in some countries, weeklies and Sunday papers. Local media and commercial broadcasters rarely invested in investigations, said the study, which included both Eastern and Western Europe, Turkey, Russia, and Ukraine. Concerns about profitability do not seem to be the driving force. The history of the newspaper, newsroom culture, and editorial leadership are more important determinants of

whether a news organization would invest in watchdog reporting.¹⁹ While in the past tabloids competed for scoops on political malfeasance, they were now shifting their rivalry to the coverage of celebrities, the VVOJ study said. In the older democracies of Western Europe, therefore, the market does not now seem to be propelling or repressing investigative energies. Instead these energies are channeled to certain types of media.

In contrast, in China, the market has proved to be a real boon to muckraking. It could be that in countries where one party monopolizes political power and controls the media with a heavy hand, profit-oriented media provide probably the only check on power and a competitive media market can spawn muckraking in various forms. In post-authoritarian Latin America, mainstream publications that were part of media conglomerates began investing in high-quality investigative reporting in the 1980s. With their economic power and political influence, they could risk exposing wrongdoing in government without fear of financial or political repercussions. "Profits," wrote Silvio Waisbord, "laid the groundwork for watchdog journalism, spawning a politically confident press uncompromised with government interests."²⁰

In post-dictatorship Southeast Asia, the emboldened media with an eye toward profit and market share exposed corruption and malfeasance in public life in both the prestige and tabloid press. Television, in particular, uncovered sleaze and corruption to attract viewers. Gotcha reporting, such as exposés of state employees receiving bribes, often dramatized with the use of hidden cameras, became part of the menu of prime-time television news, together with showbiz gossip and reports on the bizarre and the supernatural.²¹ Reporting on malfeasance can indeed give a media organization competitive advantage, but it does not ensure that once the eyeballs tire of corruption, the media's gaze will not shift elsewhere. If watchdogging were primarily a marketing gimmick, then it can be sustained only so long as the gimmick works. Financially viable muckraking presumes a public that is interested in the exposure of wrongdoing.

Investigative reporting is expensive and time-consuming. It requires an investment in staff and resources. It is also risky. Sometimes, however, the political and prestige rewards can offset the financial costs, as is the case in Latin America and Southern Europe where news organizations conducted exposés in order to promote the pragmatic political or economic interests of various groups or because of petty personal rivalries.²² In Russia, and to some extent in Latin America and Asia, journalists are sometimes used to promote a political or financial agenda through the publication of well-timed leaks. In many instances, these journalists, many of them underpaid, receive money from interested parties. The term *kompromat* in Russian refers to black PR or the publication of dossiers prepared by the political or business rivals of the subject of the exposé. In Latin America, this is called *denuncismo*. Whatever the name, this type of compromised investigative reporting is driven neither by the market nor by journalistic initiative but by vested interests that cripple the autonomy of journalists and news organizations.

No doubt financial viability brings independence as well as the capacity to support muckraking reporting. In theory, for-profit, privately owned media can support production of exposés because of their resources and their autonomy from government. That they do not always do so is another issue. But the question that arises is what happens if privately owned media are not profitable. In some countries, state subsidies and citizen contributions, as in the case of public-service broadcasters, or philanthropic support provide an alternative source of funding for watchdog reporting.

Indeed, some of the most sophisticated and fearless watchdogging is being done by independent, nonprofit entities devoted to investigative reporting. A recent study showed that some 40 such groups have emerged since the late 1980s in such diverse places as Romania, the Philippines, Jordan,

and South Africa.²³ These groups are largely funded by foundations or international donors. They fill a gap in media systems where market, ownership, or political pressures make investigative reporting by commercial or state-owned media difficult if not impossible. These centers are involved in training and reporting and serve as models of excellence that are helping raise the standards of local journalism.

Elsewhere, startup ventures by individual journalists are taking the lead in cutting-edge investigations. In Malaysia, the Web-based news site Malaysiakini is filling the information gap in a country where the media are in the hands of the ruling party and its business allies. The site is funded partly by foundations and partly by subscribers. In India, Tehelka, a newspaper startup that had its origins on the Web, is doing classic muckraking involving sting operations and undercover cameras in a country where private media are immensely profitable and have a tradition of independence from government.

There may be sound economic arguments for this. An economist using game theory posits that older, bigger, and more established media companies will tend to undertake investigations only when the expected gain from exposure is large enough to justify the expenditure. On the other hand, new and emerging media entities that have little to lose are more likely to take the risk on muckraking reporting that allows them to establish a foothold, particularly in nascent media markets.²⁴ Unsurprisingly, a study done in the 1990s by a Swedish editor concluded that in Europe, newsrooms that were in bad shape financially tended to do more substantial investigative reporting.²⁵ One reason could be that they needed to compete with the market leaders. Throughout Europe, many big and profitable news organizations did not do investigative reporting at all. In contrast, many more small and financially strapped media had a tradition of exposure journalism.

In sum, watchdog reporting has been done under a variety of conditions. The type of media ownership, the size of the news organization, its financial viability, and profitability are not in themselves sufficient factors in determining whether watchdog reporting can take root and be sustained. Investigative reporting has been spawned in a variety of market conditions and has been undertaken as much to enhance profits as to further political, professional, or prestige goals. The structures that best support watchdog journalism vary over time and across countries: These could be competitive, nonstate media as in contemporary China; big and profitable private media companies in Latin America; or noncompetitive, publicly funded broadcasters in Northern Europe.

Competition appears to be a factor, which means that newsrooms are more likely to invest in exposés if these give them a competitive edge over their rivals. But competition alone is not a predictor, as media companies can compete in other areas as well; exposés do not always guarantee an audience. Moreover, the rise of nonprofits as well as citizen journalism Web sites engaged in watch-dogging changes the equation, if only because they do not factor in profits and competitive edge in their calculations. The market is not unimportant. But it is not the rock on which the fate of watchdog journalism rests.

The watchdog and the profession

It is interesting, but not surprising, that when journalists study themselves, they tend to stress agency over structure.²⁶ Academic studies, in contrast, tend to do the opposite, analyzing the structures that shape media development by creating the impediments as well as the opportunities to which journalists and media organizations respond. Journalists do take structural conditions seriously, but they also point to where interventions, either by individuals or news organizations, can make a difference. The VVOJ study of investigative journalism in Europe, for example, lists “preconditions” for watchdog reporting (press freedom, access to information, laws that facilitate

rather than impede the ability of journalists to conduct investigations). But it devoted more substantial research on what conditions in newsrooms and what kinds of journalists tended toward muckraking and what motivated them to do so.

Digging newsrooms, according to VVOJ, had more creative staff and allowed their reporters more freedom. In addition, they had stronger, more competent, and less authoritarian management. Journalists trained in investigative techniques also tended to practice these more. As elsewhere, European investigative reporters had political, personal, and professional motives for muckraking, VVOJ said. Political motives dominate in countries where the media have political affiliations and so news organizations work on exposés to promote partisan political goals. Personal motives take precedence where the media are no longer politically aligned but have not yet become professional. In this instance, investigations are conducted mainly by “lone wolves,” freelancers or staff reporters in newsrooms that do not provide much support for exposés. These highly motivated individuals driven by the watchdog ethos initiate and catalyze interest in investigative reporting in their news organizations and in the media at large. Certainly, many of the nonprofit investigative reporting centers that have recently flourished in new democracies are driven largely by individuals of this kind. They are essentially lone wolves working at the margins of the mainstream, which is not (yet) hospitable to watchdog reporting.

Professional motives take pre-eminence when investigative reporting has been institutionalized in newsrooms and the media as an industry have become professionalized (e.g. journalists are academically trained, there are professional standards to which they must comply, their news organizations take a neutral stance, etc.) The VVOJ study outlined a linear progression from partisan to professional muckraking.

There has not been a lack of academic attention on how professional norms, practices, and values affect how the media do their work. Most of the scholarly research looks at how these norms evolved as a response to larger changes in media and society. For example, the norm of journalistic objectivity is said to have emerged in the United States in the late 19th century as a response to both the elevation of science and the scientific method and the rise of newspapers that depended on advertising and circulation for their sustenance. Unlike the party presses of an earlier era, these newspapers attracted bigger audiences by promoting impartiality and factuality rather than partisanship and polemic.²⁷

Professionalization in the media, some studies have argued, took place where the mass circulation press was strong and the increasingly large-scale and profitable media organizations that evolved needed professional standards and practices—as all large organizations do—in order to operate efficiently.²⁸ All these developments were themselves a consequence of capitalist development, the rise of mass democracy, and an assertive middle class.²⁹

Like VVOJ, these scholars see a progression from partisan to professional media. Certainly, this was the case in Latin America, where the ideological press monopolized watchdogging in the 1960s and 70s. But things changed in the 1980s and 90s, when big mainstream publications that were carriers of the ideology of professional journalism dominated the investigative scene.³⁰

If this trajectory is the standard path of media development, then it could be argued that it would be futile for developing countries still in the earlier phases of the development arc to aspire for the kind of professional investigative reporting done in big newsrooms in North America and Western Europe. They would need to wait for the structures to evolve to make this kind of journalism the norm. In the meantime, the flame of muckraking would be kept alive by journalists and media organizations sustained by political or personal, rather than professional or institutional, agendas.

But yet again, the Internet puts a damper on all these calculations. The first decade of this century has seen the rise of muckraking blogs and Web sites, some of which do not adhere to 20th-century standards of professional journalism, partly because they are not part of large organizations that need to be governed by professional norms. Many of these new entities are not run by professional journalists but by savvy individuals who report and write unencumbered by the ideology of professionalism. Some of them in fact are critical of the standards and practices associated with the mainstream media. In the U.S. and elsewhere a range of new-media muckrakers challenges traditional professional norms. They could be foreshadowing the next step in the trajectory, a sort of post-professionalization phase brought about by the different values and norms—as well as the different news imperatives—that prevail in the online world.

In the developing world, where the media are not professionalized to the degree they are in the West, the pre- and post-professionalization phases coexist. For example, in China, where the mainstream media remain under Party control, the blogosphere, despite sophisticated Internet surveillance, has provided a home for watchdogging by citizens. There were 136 million Internet users in China by the end of 2006 and tens of millions of blogs. While only a fraction of these deals with public affairs, the political bloggers take seriously their role as watchdogs of power, even if many of them remain Communist Party supporters.³¹

China is an illustrative case of how the self-definition of journalists (and indeed, of citizens) can evolve over time. Hugo de Burgh conducted interviews with Chinese journalists and concluded in a 2003 paper that “across the generations and regardless of the medium within which they work, Chinese journalists do at present have a passion for that journalism which scrutinizes authority and delves into the failings of society.”³²

This was certainly not the case for a long time. De Burgh posited that this new ethos could be a reflection of a change in the way the Chinese see themselves and their relationship with authority. But this new watchdog role is complex, not quite what it is in the West, where investigative journalists expose not only derelictions of duty but also expand notions of duty beyond what is legally defined or normally accepted by society. Chinese journalists, said de Burgh, “are both upholders of the order and its critics, both limiting discourse to acceptable topics and extending moral boundaries.”

This shows that journalists are constantly redefining their roles in response to both institutional and economic changes as well as the expectations of their audiences. Normative role definitions are adjusted to the reality in which journalists find themselves. In China, social and economic changes created an environment that required the media to be more responsive to their audience. Striving to adjust to these changes, Chinese journalists found inspiration both in Western notions of watchdog reporting as well as the example of Chinese activist-journalists writing in the early part of the 20th century.³³ They were also responding to a more aware and restless citizenry angry about corruption and malfeasance. But at the same time, many of them were believers in the ambitions of China as a resurgent global power and in the idea that the media’s role is as much to establish public confidence in government as it is to expose betrayals of the public trust.

The journalist as watchdog, therefore, is a role that is defined differently across countries and cultures. That definition is fluid, often contingent on the existing social, political, and economic conditions and a reflection as much of the historical moment as it is of pre-existing structures and media cultures. Journalists are inspired by liberal democratic notions of the press as watchdog but they draw from the well of their own culture and history as well. They adjust their role definitions to the demands of their audiences, their news organizations, and of the times in which they live.

Among journalists, watchdogging is not universally seen as a role that the press ought to play. This is the case even in mature democracies. David Weaver's study found that while the vast majority of British and Finnish journalists believed in the watchdog function, only 30-40 percent of German and French reporters did.³⁴ And certainly it is possible, as it was in China, that these perceptions will change. De Burgh and others have argued that it could well be that the pre-eminence of the watchdogging ethos rises and ebbs over time, depending on the appetite of consumers. Certainly in the United States, public interest in investigative reporting peaked in the early 1900s and again in the 1970s; in the intervening period, watchdogging did not capture the imagination of many journalists or the public. In the UK, the interest in exposure journalism peaked in the 1960s and again in the 1980s.

In the end, a watchdog self-definition helps channel journalistic energies to investigations in places where states and markets create enough of an opening for this kind of reporting. But it certainly helps to have audience interest and public demand for exposés. While public interest in watchdogging may be inconstant and fleeting, however, the institutionalization of government monitoring and investigative reporting in journalistic practice may help ensure that the watchdog function remains alive. Journalism schools play a role in instilling the watchdog ethos and teaching investigative skills to future generations of journalists. Press associations and other professional organizations that do training in investigative skills also help. News organizations that adhere to high standards of investigative reporting help build a tradition of watchdog journalism and provide a model that others can emulate. All these efforts help sustain the notion—indeed, the myth—of watchdog reporting, even if the practice itself flags.

The watchdog's impact

The proponents of watchdog journalism have high hopes for what it can do, especially in the control of corruption. By exposing wrongdoing, they say, the press prompts investigations of those involved in malfeasance and catalyzes changes in laws and regulations. It helps shape public opinion against corrupt governments and generate public hostility against those who abuse their office.³⁵

In the U.S., media scholars Protess et. al. found that investigative reporting can produce three types of policy effects: The first type is described as "deliberative," meaning the reports result in official commitments to discuss the problems raised and the possible solutions; thus, studies may be commissioned or government bodies may initiate hearings to deliberate reform initiatives. "Individualistic" results take place when sanctions are applied against individual persons or enterprises accused of wrongdoing. "Substantive" reforms happen when the investigations result in tangible changes in rules, laws, procedures, or policies or new governmental units or bodies are created or public funds are reallocated.³⁶

All of these are not in the realm of possibility; they have happened. There are countless examples from all over the world of how watchdog reporting has helped cause the downfall of governments, reforms in law or policy, and the creation of new mechanisms of government accountability. But it should also be said that many well-documented investigations end up in oblivion. They may make waves, win awards, generate controversy for a couple of weeks, but the wrongdoings they expose are not acted upon. Certain institutions remain impervious to reform, while others may initiate changes only to backslide into the practices of the past.

In his study of investigative reporting in Latin America, Waisbord said that factors unrelated to the quality of journalistic work affect the impact of an exposé. These include the timing of the report's release, the prestige of the news organization, and the production values of the investigation.³⁷

Scandals involving well-known figures and sensational details get more public attention as do investigations that appeal to the public's voyeuristic appetites. But, as he showed in the case of Argentina, while the "Gate" type of scandals generate buzz, especially in political circles, they are largely met with public indifference. Where the public is accustomed to high-level political corruption, scandal fatigue can result. In contrast, scandals on issues that affect citizens directly—such as human rights abuses in Argentina in the late 1990s—are able to engage publics not usually interested in politics.³⁸ In addition, the balance of political forces is an important factor. Accountability, he said, hinges on the combined actions of a network of institutions such as the judiciary, parliament, political parties.

The Southeast Asian experience affirms these findings. The different outcomes of journalistic investigations on official assets—one in the Philippines, and the other, in Thailand, both in 2000—show that the impact of investigative reports is contingent upon the configuration of social and political forces at a particular point in time and on the ability of interested publics to mobilize against the wrongdoing that has been exposed. A great deal also depends on how the debates on the revelations of wrongdoing are framed in the public discourse.

In the Philippines, a team of investigative reporters uncovered how then President Joseph Estrada, a former movie star who publicly paraded his four mistresses, concealed the assets of his multiple families. The reporters revealed that he was building grand houses and buying Jaguars for his paramours, acquisitions that were not reflected either in his asset disclosures or his income tax returns but which were purchased through front companies or nominees. The reporting implied that the reason for the nondisclosures was that Estrada had been accumulating wealth from illegal sources and could therefore not make a full disclosure without incriminating himself.³⁹

These reports, together with the public revelation by one of the president's closest friends that he was making millions from payoffs made by illegal gamblers, were so scandalous that they let loose all the forces that had previously been held in check by the president's popularity. Various groups entered the fray: opposition political parties; the Catholic Church, which had always had low regard for the womanizing and alcoholic president; citizens' groups with a reformist agenda; and the business community, which from the beginning had serious doubts about the president's capacity to govern. The media, too, sensed that the market was ready for more aggressive reporting and calculated that Estrada, now on the political defensive, would not crack down on the press.

As the press made public more revelations about Estrada, opposition congressmen initiated an impeachment charge against the president. The investigative reports and the revelations of the gambling whistleblower provided the initial evidence for the impeachment trial. When it seemed the trial was going to be compromised, with the refusal of the majority of senators to accept incriminating evidence against Estrada, hundreds of thousands of Filipinos massed up in the center of Manila in a "people power" uprising that ousted the president in January 2001.

The debate on Estrada was framed in moral terms: his excesses were seen as transgressions of the standards on how officials should behave. The Catholic Church, which played a key role in the anti-Estrada movement, ensured that the debate would be fought on moral grounds. The key actors in the uprising were mainly middle-class reformers, professionals, students, office workers, and key sections of the Manila business community, the same constituency that took part in the 1986 revolt against Ferdinand Marcos.

At about the same time that Estrada was being subjected to a public scrutiny of his assets, a similar investigation was happening in Thailand. A Bangkok-based business biweekly revealed that Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra hid \$50-million worth of shares in the names of, among others,

his driver, housekeeper, security guard, and maid. Thaksin, a telecommunications and media tycoon, was among the richest businessmen in Thailand. A former police general, he had a history of using his political clout to build his business empire.

The press exposé led to an investigation by the National Counter-Corruption Commission, which ruled that Thaksin had intentionally concealed his assets as part of a “dishonest scheme.” The ruling was brought up to the Constitutional Court, which acquitted the prime minister in a split vote. But unlike in the Estrada case, there was no uprising on the streets of Bangkok as a result. Why the different outcomes for essentially similar cases brought to the public attention by diligent investigative reporting done in the same year?

The answer lies not so much in the failure of investigative reporting but in the success of a media-savvy prime minister in changing the parameters of the debate and in framing the discourse in different terms. The press and civil society groups in Thailand looked at the Thaksin case as part of a continuum of political reforms that had been undertaken in the country since it was hard-hit by the 1997 Asian crisis. To them, it was a simple matter of the rule of law: The prime minister lied in his statement of assets; therefore, he should be punished. Thaksin, however, “invoked popularity against the rule of law.”⁴⁰ He succeeded in convincing large segments of the public that what he did—using nominees—was part of normal business practice. In the face of a critical press, he brought his case directly to the public and courted popular opinion by instituting populist measures. Riding on the phenomenal success of his telecommunications empire, Thaksin told Thais that he alone could boost the economy and get rid of poverty.

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.⁴¹

Certainly, one reason the Estrada investigation caught fire was that it had all the tabloid ingredients—sex and scandal, mansions and mistresses. The issues concerning Thaksin were far more complicated and far less sexy. For the most part, the most successful investigative reports have been those that focus on individual wrongdoing, on stories with clear villains, rather than on more complex issues that have to do with social inequity, injustice, harmful public policy, or social and political structures that lack accountability. Estrada’s excesses, for example, could be seen in the light of the problems inherent in the Philippines’ presidential form of government, where the chief executive holds extraordinary powers unchecked by existing oversight mechanisms. The media, however, failed to frame the story in a larger context: It was primarily treated as the story of individual excess, rather than one of systemic flaws.

Structures and systems are hard to explain. Journalists throughout the world are accustomed to dealing with the current and the empirical; they are generally handicapped in handling systemic, historical or structural questions. Even if they had this skill, however, such content would find scant

space in the commercially oriented media. Stories that have a human and dramatic element sell better. It is also easier to correct wrongdoing committed by an individual rather than one that involves systemic or structural change. Investigative journalists, therefore, try to humanize and dramatize their findings by portraying individual characters and using literary and dramatic devices to highlight the wrongdoing that they expose.⁴² They also try to frame their stories in a way that makes them easily understandable to, and appreciated by, the public.

For sure, the framing can be wrong—if not utterly so, at least partially. The classic of the genre, the reporting on Watergate, has been widely regarded since the 1970s as the touchstone and archetype for investigative reporting worldwide. The Watergate investigation, more than any other in contemporary times, showed the power of the press in a democracy. But more recent critics say that Watergate’s verdict, as framed by the liberal press— that “Nixon was uniquely disgraceful, his direct abuses of power and violation of the law, unprecedented”—was wrong.⁴³ Other presidents were guilty of equal, or even greater, betrayals of the public trust.

Watergate is instructive in other respects. To begin with, the press did not uncover Watergate on its own: government investigators and Congress all played a role.⁴⁴ Others go so far as to say that Watergate was driven not so much by the media or public opinion but by political insiders. The political elite drove the reporting and this resulted in Watergate being defined as a legal issue, rather than a systemic one.⁴⁵ Certainly many media investigations in the developing world are Watergate-like in their inception and framing.

Unsurprisingly, Protess and others were skeptical of the “mobilization model,” which says that exposés, by changing public opinion and mobilizing publics, ultimately lead to policy reforms. There may be a link between press exposure and policy changes, they say, “but the link is weak and unreliable.”⁴⁶ The media may change public attitudes but they don’t necessarily mobilize the public to participate in political life. The press may be more influential in molding the attitude and behavior of political elites, who are much more sensitive to how the media report on them. Protess et. al. examined six investigative reports and found that policy changes that result from exposés are sometimes triggered not so much by public outrage but by prepublication transactions between journalists and officials. The relationship between muckraking reporters and policy makers was not always adversarial, but may be cooperative, when press and policy agendas overlap.

All these considerations, however, do not negate the fact that ultimately, whatever the constellation of factors that led them there, exposés of wrongdoing in public office can help make personnel and policy changes possible if the environment is ripe for reform. They can sometimes also mobilize the public, but they are often more successful in getting officials to act. While watchdog reporting may push the wheels of change and reform, however, the media have little control of the direction these take and the obstacles they face. The impact of watchdog journalism is often diminished by the inertia of governments, the unwillingness of elites to take action, the weight of bureaucratic cultures that are resistant to change, a law-enforcement system that is incapable of punishing wrongdoing, and an apathetic and cynical public.

Despite these, Aymo Brunetti and Beatrice Weder argued that watchdog reporting is “potentially a highly effective mechanism of external control” against two particularly pernicious types of corruption.⁴⁷ The first type is extortive corruption where a government official has the power to delay or refuse service in order to get a bribe. The authors posited that the press can provide a vehicle for voicing complaints about such extortions. Victims, they said, have a strong incentive to expose this type of corruption to journalists. Press reports, in turn, increase the risks of exposure of corrupt bureaucrats, and over time, act as a deterrent to official extortions. The press, however, is even more effective against collusive corruption, the authors argued. When there is collusion, both

bureaucrats and their clients have no incentive to expose malfeasance, as in the case of extortive corruption. In a free-press system, however, journalists are motivated by competition and a professional ethos to expose wrongdoing, thus unraveling collusive arrangements and making them public.

In the long term, its proponents argue, watchdog reporting help sets off a virtuous cycle of media and governance reforms. Carefully researched, high-impact investigative reports help build the media's credibility and support among the public. The press as an institution is strengthened if journalists have demonstrated that they serve the public interest by uncovering malfeasance and abuse. Not only that, a credible press is assured of popular backing if it is muzzled or otherwise constrained. Investigative reporting is also seen as contributing to journalistic freedom. By constantly digging for information, by forcing government and the private sector to release documents, and by subjecting officials and other powerful individuals to rigorous questioning, investigative journalists expand the boundaries of what is possible to print or air. At the same time, they accustom officials to an inquisitive press. In the long term, the constant give and take between journalists and officials helps develop a culture—and a tradition—of disclosure.⁴⁸ In the end, even if in the short-term, exposés make little impact, they educate citizens and provide information, a process that over time enriches democratic discourse.

Such role is particularly important during democratic transitions, when the media are still asserting their autonomy from government and helping construct the new rules of engagement with officials. While some critics say that aggressive reporting on government wrongdoing may translate into the withdrawal of support for democracy, more recent studies of “third-wave” democracies indicate that this may not be so. Citizens may in fact see critical reporting as an indication that the checks and balances of democracy are at work. In their study of the media in new democracies in Europe, Schmitt-Beck and Voltner found that despite the rise of adversarial and sensational news reporting in post-authoritarian media, on the whole, media exposure is conducive to democratic consolidation and helps build support for democracy.⁴⁹

The watchdog's dark side

There are, however, contrarian views. Some view media exposés not as part of a virtuous cycle of media and political reforms but as a component of the “politics of permanent scandal” that characterize modern democracies.⁵⁰ In this view, a competitive media coupled with democratic institutions and structures to scrutinize wrongdoing create a hothouse environment for scandal politics. This type of politics becomes a permanent feature of democracies and does not necessarily result in either cleaner governments or more responsible media. Instead, scandals lead to cynicism rather than a renewed commitment to democratic values and institutions. They are therefore dysfunctional.

They also draw public attention away from other, perhaps more crucial issues that require action. In many developing and transition societies, accusations of corruption—played out in the media—are part of the arsenal of political contestation. The charges of malfeasance, sometimes made by media organizations friendly with the accusers, have become regular media fare. Even when the charges are true, wrote Andras Sajo, these may “distort democratic politics as the political competition centers upon the opponents' (un)cleanness” to the detriment of other issues that the public needs to address.⁵¹ Transition societies, he added, are particularly prone toward such distortion because many actors both nationally and internationally are interested in (and fund) the exposure of corruption in these countries: “Exposure has become professionalized.”

To others, however, scandal and exposure can play a functional role. One argument is that scandals are “rituals of collective absolution which reaffirm the social order.”⁵² Through scandal, the public becomes part of a morality play and public life is cleansed in the process.

Another perspective knocks down the doomsayers despairing about the adversarial projection of politics. From this point of view, the media, despite the dominance of scandal and exposure, generate useful political information whose quality and quantity exceed that which was available to citizens of an earlier age. They keep citizens informed, although what citizens can and should do with such information is another question. But, as Brian McNair asked: “Is there, from the point of view of the efficiency and integrity of the democratic process, an optimal upper limit, as well as lower, on the quantity of information flowing in a society, and the amount of critical scrutiny exercised by the media over elites and their rhetoric?”⁵³

Perhaps the most attractive perspective settles for the middle ground: Scandal and exposure are contested spheres. Their outcomes therefore are uncertain. The media and politicians can profit from scandal as much as lose from them. They may lead to the renewal of a political system as much as to disaffection with it. Citizens may find them mere distractions, but they can equally become outraged and engaged.⁵⁴

The media’s performance of its watchdog function is perhaps best seen in the same way. As shown in the examples above, 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.

It also keeps alive the most beloved of journalistic myths: that of the press as the guardian of the public interest.⁵⁵ And that, in the end, may be the most enduring impact of watchdog journalism: it sustains the belief among both journalists and citizens that exposure and vigilance can check the abuses of power. It keeps the faith.

END NOTES

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