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Investigative Journalism and Its Impact on Society

Investigative journalism involves research, investigations, and reporting of truth to advocate for justice and positive change. According to the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), citizens' right to information and facts is part of human rights and democracy (ICIJ, 1). Different societies are threatened by misinformation, which creates division, confusion, alienation, and harm to the people (ICIJ, 1). On this note, investigative journalists are critical to uncovering hidden information and exposing wrongdoings in different sectors of politics, corporations, the environment, and health, among others (Carson & Farhall, 1901). In the environmental sector, investigative journalism can expose misconduct and violations likely to be hidden, manipulated, or misreported to the public. Such efforts can help create public awareness, advocate for justice, truth, and accountability, and enhance health and well-being. This research explores the impacts of investigative journalism by exposing environmental misconduct, such as the cases of the Flint water crisis and the chemical spill in Ohio East. Therefore, this research helps us understand how investigative journalism can impact society and the profession.

Context and Background

With the rising climate change and pollution concerns, environmental misconduct like pollution poses a critical challenge to society (Fuller et al. 535). Such misconducts are diverse and may include poor waste disposal, improper use of agricultural chemicals, and pollution. Since these crimes adversely impact the environment, the culprits will likely evade public scrutiny and accountability. According to Fuller et al., deaths related to modern pollution risk factors caused by industrialization and urbanization have increased 7% since 2015. Investigative journalism is vital to help society uncover these misconducts, injustices, and abuse of power that affect many people (ICIJ, 1). In the United States, investigative journalists have helped expose myriad environmental scandals and bring the perpetrators to justice. For instance, the Flint Water crisis and the East Palestine train derailment in Ohio were exposed by investigative journalists. Different journalists were determined to uncover the truth instead of the government misinformation used to manipulate the public.

According to the CDC's National Center for Environmental Health (NCEH), the City of Flint changed the municipal water source from Lake Huron to the Flint River in April 2014 (CDC 1). A few months later, different reports emerged about water contamination, as witnessed by corroding water pipes, and behavioural and health issues like skin rashes, hair loss, and itchy skin on residents (CDC 1). By October 2016, the Flint residents were directed to stop drinking the municipal tap water because of possible lead contamination (CDC 1). The municipal government immediately denied liability and reconnected the Lake Huron water, but massive damage was already done to residents (Denchak 1). Flint City was declared an emergency on January 16, 2016, when different government investigators and journalists were already involved in the case

(CDC 1; Denchak 1). Investigative journalists, such as Erin Brockovich, played a crucial role in exposing the crisis and explaining all the hidden details about the cause and effects (The Late Show with Stephen Colbert). Their tireless pursuit of the truth led to congressional hearings, criminal charges, and a \$600 million settlement for Flint residents.

In another case, a Norfolk Southern freight train derailed in East Palestine, Ohio, on February 3, 2023, and the officials misreported a severe environment and health crisis (EPA 1; Emily and Brian 1). According to the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), about 20 train cars contain hazardous materials, including ethylene glycol, vinyl chloride, and butyl acrylate (EPA 1). Some of these cars exploded, spilling their contents into the nearby streams, ditches, and neighbourhoods. Despite the massive news reporting all over America, only private investigative journalists exposed the severe degree of chemical intoxication released to the environment (Emily and Brian 1). The joint efforts of journalists, scientists, doctors, and citizen activists led to the exposure of health hazards, impacts on communities, and containment shortfalls. Investigative journalists exposed how officials used inaccurate tests and samples to declare “below safety screening levels” and residents to return to their homes before they all started experiencing nausea, headaches and breathing problems (Emily and Brian 1).

Implications on Society

Investigative journalism exposes issues concealed deliberately by others or behind chaotic, distorted information that hinders understanding (Kaplan 1). Unlike leaking secrets, investigative journalism does more systematic investigations and research to unearth information vital for the community. Doing so creates public awareness about potential environmental threats, social vices, and misconduct. By exposing environmental injustices and

highlighting the dangers posed by pollution, investigative journalists raise public awareness and provoke widespread concern (Carson & Farhall, 1906). This increases public pressure on relevant authorities and policymakers to address these hazards and implement stricter regulations. For instance, investigative journalists contributed immensely to public awareness about Flint City municipal water contamination by revealing hidden secrets and educating the people and media campaigns for intervention.

Furthermore, investigative journalism impacts society by uncovering wrongdoings by corporations or government agencies; this helps to advocate for accountability, justice, and reforms. In the case of the Ohio chemical spill and toxic gas pollution from the train accident, government officials misinformed the public about the degree of exposure and risks. After intentionally burning the train cars with toxic chemicals, Gov. Mike DeWine of Ohio declared East Palestine safe within two days (Emily and Brian 1). This was a case of intentional government cover-up in collaboration with the Norfolk Southern freight company (Emily and Brian 1). However, the investigative journalists acted swiftly to uncover the truth and push for multiagency investigations on crime and health risks (Emily and Brian 1). Through their efforts, state and federal governments engaged in containment measures, criminal investigations, and compensation for the victims. Therefore, investigative journalism was critical to pushing for accountability of culprits, justice for the victims, and reforms to deter future misconducts with environmental and health hazards.

Moreover, investigative journalists empower communities and victims of concealed prejudice and vices to fight for their rights. By providing the public with facts and detailed information, these journalists empower citizens to actively call out the culprits, cooperate with intervention measures, and

advocate for change (McClure Haughey et al.). Since the citizens are the most potent forces for change, empowering them to remain vigilant and pursue their rights is essential to building a democratic and safe society. On the same note, investigative journalism impacts society by advocating for proper sanitation, health, and well-being of the people. For instance, government officials denied the truth in the Flint City case until investigative journalists confirmed the link between rising health issues and municipal water. By doing so, the journalists helped to identify environmental and health hazards that affect public health and well-being.

Lessons Learned

Several key lessons can be learned from the impact of investigative journalism on environmental misconduct. Investigative journalists are vital in holding powerful entities accountable (Kaplan 1; McClure Haughey et al.). Relative to the profession, there is a lesson that through professional commitment and dedication, investigative journalists are essential for ensuring transparency, environmental protection, and respect for human rights and public health, among others. For instance, in the case of Flint City water contamination and Ohio chemical pollution, investigative journalists were responsible for research, interviews, data analysis, and investigations to reveal the truth and hold the culprits accountable for their crimes. Such a successful job requires personal commitment, value for humanity and societal wellness beyond the influence of influential, corrupt individuals.

Another critical lesson is that the success of investigative journalism requires the collaboration of relevant stakeholders and adequate resources. The work of investigative journalism is sensitive, important, and likely goes against the wishes of powerful parties. This means that success requires the shared commitment of different journalists, experts, and community members. For

example, the ICIJ boasts a network of more than 290 trusted journalists and reporters from 105 countries and territories (ICIJ, 1). By pooling their resources and expertise, they can uncover complex environmental issues and ensure their findings are inclusive and accurate. The research also has a lesson on the power of digital media platforms, like social media and online news outlets, as powerful tools for disseminating investigative journalism and engaging the public. For instance, Erin used social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube to share information and raise the alarm about the Flint City water crisis—many other reports were available on online blogs and non-mainstream media with organic content.

Conclusion

Investigative journalism is critical to uncovering hidden information and exposing wrongdoings in society. In the environmental sector, investigative journalists can expose misconduct and violations that are likely to be hidden, manipulated, or misreported to the public. Such efforts can help create public awareness and advocate for justice, truth, accountability, and compensation for the victims. Through the lens of the Flint City crisis and the Ohio chemical spill, the research highlights the role and importance of investigative journalism in creative public awareness, advocating for justice and reforms. For professional growth in investigative journalism, integrity, commitment, collaboration, and resources are integral to the success.

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