

Why investigative reporting in the digital age is waving, not drowning

Written by Andrea Carson, Associate Professor at La Trobe University. Department of Politics, Media and Philosophy, La Trobe University

You don't need to look far to find doom and gloom stories about traditional media in the digital age. Yet linking media hardship to a view that [investigative journalism is dying](#) is a misconception.

Yes, media outlets face many challenges. Last week's 600-page [ACCC report](#) showed traditional media organisations face a difficult economic environment as advertising and audiences have migrated to online tech giants like Google and Facebook.

Since the turn of the century, media companies' revenue has been in free fall. Thousands of journalism jobs have gone, scores of mastheads have closed. Certain types of reporting, particularly on regional and local news, remain under threat for established Australian media outlets.

Then there were the recent [Australian Federal Police raids](#) on News Corp and ABC journalists, highlighting the political and legal pressures reporters face in the post-September 11 era.

Read more: [**Media raids raise questions about AFP's power and weak protection for journalists and whistleblowers**](#)

By doing their jobs reporting on stories in the public interest, journalists risk fines or even jail time. And their sources, the whistleblowers, face similar or worse fates.

Media freedom is a pressing global problem. Using the Australian example, human rights lawyer Amal Clooney warned at the recent [Defend Media Freedom conference](#) in London that the decline in press freedom is not limited to non-democracies like North Korea.

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Another gloomy tale for news outlets is falling levels of public trust as more fake news confuses people about what is real and what is not. In turn, powerful world leaders from Donald Trump to Rodrigo Duterte [weaponise the term “fake news”](#) to weaken news media’s legitimacy.

These pressures on journalists matter because, as the ACCC reported, the news media play an important role in our democratic health. They inform us, and hold the powerful to account.

Notwithstanding the market failure of news, my new book, [Investigative Journalism, Democracy and the Digital Age](#), finds that the watchdog role of journalism – investigative reporting – is adapting to its austere media environment. It is enduring, even thriving, in the digital age.

I undertook a nine-year study of investigative journalism in liberal democracies. This showed that journalists and their outlets undertake investigative reporting – which I define as a relatively uncommon form of journalism requiring more time and effort to unearth public interest information that others prefer were kept hidden – for different reasons. Some are commercial, to increase revenues; others are purely ideological with a commitment to be the “fourth estate”; others are a mix of the two.

In any case, we are witnessing a seismic shift in reporting practice. The old model of single-newsroom investigations marked by cut-throat rivalry has given way to a new model of multiple newsrooms cooperating and sharing information to expose systemic wrongdoing. A case in point is The Age and Sydney Morning Herald teaming up with Channel Nine’s 60 Minutes this week to expose the [dodgy dealings of Crown Casino](#) and apparent regulatory failure.

Investigative collaborations can challenge global power in ways not previously possible. For example, the reporting of the Panama Papers brought together almost 400 [International Consortium of Investigative Journalists](#) (ICIJ) members to shine a spotlight on global tax avoidance. These stories led to governments recovering [US\\$1.2 billion](#) through lost taxes and penalties.

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The ICIJ is just one example of more than [100 non-profit](#) investigative reporting organisations in 50 countries driving the new model of global investigative journalism.

Through 50 interviews with media experts, including investigative journalists from across the globe, analysing six decades of Australian newspapers, and analyses of prestigious journalism awards in Australia, Britain and the USA, I find that although traditional media has experienced immense hardship, it's time to debunk the myth that investigative journalism is dying.

Instead, investigative journalism is often protected from newsroom cost-cutting.

It is in better shape than other forms of journalism because of its value to corporate branding and/or the public interest. Evidence-based investigative reporting re-establishes its publishers as quality media outlets in the digital age – when competition for attention is fierce – by offering unique public interest stories for which audiences are prepared to pay.

Here are seven of the book's key findings.

1.

The digital age is a renaissance period for investigative reporting. This has been made possible through collaboration and scaling up investigations to national and transnational levels.

2.

The downside to scaling up investigations is that local inquiries may suffer. Investigations may also be more narrowly targeted to assure a story outcome. This means there is less tolerance for “fishing exercises” than in more profitable times for media.

3.

There are different models of collaboration and established media play a critical role in all of them. Some partnerships have been more successful than others. WikiLeaks collapsed, in part, because power in the partnership was not distributed equally, and personal relationships were strained.

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4.

Data journalism plays a vital role in enabling reporters to interrogate information and find patterns in the data indicating systemic wrongdoing. This includes incorporating social science methods such as statistical analysis to reveal “hidden truths”.

5.

Mass anonymous data leaks combined with large-scale investigative collaborations push back against national governments’ national security laws that hamper journalists’ access to, and use of, sensitive documents and hinder whistleblowers’ capacity to speak out.

6.

Investigative journalism is evidence-based reporting. This makes it a vital counter-narrative to fake news. Verified news returns authority to mastheads and media brands, which can offset falling public trust in media. This is illustrated by the “Trump bump” – an increase in donations and newspaper sales for outlets undertaking investigative reporting. ProPublica, a specialist US investigative reporting bureau, [tripled its philanthropic income](#) from US\$14.3 million in 2016 to US\$43.5 million in 2017 after Trump’s election and demonisation of journalists.

7.

There is no single solution for funding news or investigative journalism this century (yet). Rather, what is evident is the role of experimentation, adaptation and flexibility to find effective ways to fund investigative reporting. These include crowdsourcing, [philanthropy](#) and paywalls. Typically, news outlets adopt a hybrid funding model that relies on multiple revenue streams.

Read more: [How 'access journalism' is threatening investigative journalism](#)

While my book does not ignore limitations to investigative reporting, the evidence gathered suggests watchdog reporting’s future is one of optimism.

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This matters because, in the words of one interviewee, Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter [Brant Houston](#), when all other means of redressing injustice fail, investigative journalism is the “[court of last resort](#)”.

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