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THE BLOG

Investigating Investigative Journalism

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Review of *Democracy's Detectives: The Economics of Investigative Journalism*. By James T. Hamilton. Harvard University Press. 368 pp. \$35.

Investigative journalism is an endangered species. Facing declines in subscribers and reductions in advertising revenues, many newspapers have disappeared. Others have cut back staff and authorized less in depth reporting. Ditto the network news and radio (with the notable exception of non-profits).

In *Democracy's Detectives*, James Hamilton, a professor of communication at Stanford University, provides an extraordinarily precise and painstaking examination of the state of investigative journalism in the United States. Using a wide array of statistical measures and a case study of Pat Stith, a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for *The News and Observer* of Raleigh, North Carolina, Hamilton demonstrates that investigative reporting (involving original work about important issues that someone wants to keep secret) costing thousands of dollars can produce millions of dollars in benefits to society. And Hamilton issues an urgent warning that this essential public service is underprovided in the market. His book should command the attention of every citizen who is concerned about the implications for our democracy when sunlight, which is the best disinfectant against corruption and incompetence, is obscured and blocked.

Hamilton provides a fascinating analysis of the economics of the industry. In an era of finite resources, he indicates, a myriad of stories go untold because the costs of greenlighting them outweigh the revenues they are likely to produce. Smaller budgets also mean that watchdog journalists focus on the misdeeds of individuals rather than topics with a wider scope, such as the activities of government regulatory agencies, courts and corporations. Freedom of Information Act requests by local newspapers, for example,



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dropped by about 50% between 2005 and 2010.

And the short attention span of Americans (forty percent of visitors to *Google News* look at headlines and do not click through to the underlying story) has resulted in drastic reductions in the number of lengthy, in depth pieces.

Between 2003 and 2012, Hamilton reveals, stories with more than 2,000 words declined by 35% in the *Wall Street Journal*, 50% in the *Washington Post*, and 86% in the *Los Angeles Times*. Only the *New York Times* has increased stories exceeding 3,000 words.

Hamilton acknowledges that the “causal chain” between a reporter’s story and “the real world impact” is difficult to establish, let alone quantify. That said, he makes a compelling case that investigative journalism has led to resignations, firings, suspensions, retirements, re-election defeats, revisions in practices, policies, budgets and laws. Policy changes resulting from investigations, he claims, produced fewer murders in North Carolina; fewer hospitalizations from food-related digestive disorders in Los Angeles County; fewer fatal shootings by police officers in Washington, D.C.; more disciplinary actions against cops exceeding the speed limit in Florida.

In response to Stith’s work, Hamilton indicates, thirty-one laws were passed by the legislature and signed by the governor. They included provisions to allow the Department of Agriculture to sell produce from state owned farms on the open market and permit Human Resources to buy from vendors who offered the best price; a requirement that farm workers and employees of small businesses be covered by workman’s compensation; a moratorium on the construction or expansion of swine farms (until the problem of the disposition of waste was addressed); and a requirement that licensed professionals see a patient before diagnosing an illness.

New combinations of digital data and data-mining algorithms, Hamilton suggests, can now make it easier for investigative reporters to tell important stories with solid evidence about institutional malfeasance. Therefore, he urges philanthropists to fund “computational journalism.” But, alas, even Professor Hamilton, who is certainly among the best informed experts on journalism in this country, does not offer solutions for the crisis of news organizations created by the transformation of mass media.

Political polarization and the conflation of information and opinion associated with the rise of cable news, talk radio, blogs, and the social media, have undermined public confidence in the objectivity of the media and increased the gap between what Americans need to know and what we want to know. That gap, significant reductions in watchdog reporting, and the pervasive mistrust of “establishment” media outlets pose a grave threat to our democracy—and, as our presidential election demonstrates, open the door to demagoguery. We cannot afford to ignore these developments any longer.

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