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The History of Investigative Journalism in Australia

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INTRODUCTION

Ṭe tradition of Australian investigative journalism began with newspapers. It was a slow start. Ṭe first newspapers were printed in colonial times under government control. As restrictive controls were lifted, more mastheads appeared, freer to report the news of the day. But editors for the most part remained deferential to the authorities during the nation's early years. Journalism evolved as Australians became more literate and the number of readers grew.

Developments in the UK and the USA influenced Australian reporting too. Ṭis was evident leading up to the twentieth century with the rise of muckraking tabloids, and again in the 1960s with the establishment of specialist investigative teams following successes in the UK with similar units. During the 1970s, the high-profile Watergate investigation, which ended Richard Nixon's US presidency, glamorised investigative journalism, bringing it to vogue in Australian newsrooms. But such high-impact investigative stories are rare.

Ṭis chapter is divided into three broad sections. Ṭe first details the origins of Australian investigative reporting; the second examines the growth of Australia's press and the rise of investigative journalism in all media; and the third focuses on the evolving digital media landscape and its impact on investigative journalism in the twenty-first century. Case studies illustrate particular characteristics of investigative journalism and showcase the media organisations that did it best.

THE ORIGINS OF AUSTRALIAN INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING

Australia's first newspaper—*Ṭe Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*—was first published on 5 March 1803. It was a weekly paper with the specific purpose of delivering information from the UK to the colonies and was under government control. By 1824 government censorship had lifted, and independent newspapers emerged (Mayer 1964). Among the earliest were the broadsheets—*Ṭe Sydney Morning Herald* (*SMH*) (1831)[1] in New South Wales and *Ṭe Age* (1854) in Victoria. Ṭe noisy political debates and emerging social issues of the day began to play out in the free press.

Ὰere were some early, but rare, examples of reporting that held those with power to account. Hobart's *Colonial Times* editor Henry Melville spent time in prison for challenging the harsh treatment of prisoners in the 1830s, and exposing widespread bribery in the public houses of Hobart (Gapps 2010, p. 93). An earlier example in Sydney was the Sudd/Ὰompson case of 1826.

Sudd/Thompson case

William Charles Wentworth and Dr Robert Wardell (owners of Ὰe *Australian*—unrelated to the modern-day *Australian*), along with Edward Smith Hall (editor of Ὰe *Monitor*), publicly chastised New South Wales Governor Ralph Darling for the excessive punishment of Sudds and Ὰompson, two soldiers caught stealing calico. Sudds died within five days of being cast in iron rings, while Ὰompson spent a year in jail before his sentence was ruled illegal. Wentworth interviewed Ὰompson before accusing Darling of cruelty and torture. In response, the colony's papers were threatened with punitive licensing arrangements, while Wardell was accused of seditious libel. Darling was eventually recalled to London, and the press rejoiced (State Library of New South Wales (undated)).

REPORTING IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

In the late nineteenth century, British and US newspapers embraced the rise of 'yellow journalism' and the penny press—its key ingredients: sensationalist writing and scandalous content. Ὰese papers were so dubbed because they initially either featured the iconic yellow comic character 'the yellow kid', or cost a penny a paper. Tabloid in format, they attracted a mass readership (Lloyd 2002, p. 10). By the early twentieth century, these US papers had been labelled 'muckrakers' by then US President Ὰeodore Roosevelt, who decried the behaviour of journalists he considered had crossed the line in their efforts to expose deviance in government and beyond (Mitford 1979, p. 4). By the 1950s and 60s, however, the term had gained respectability (Mitford 1979).

At the turn of the century, the Australian weekly press revelled in muckraking, using the advantage of a weekly deadline to break exclusives about shysters and charlatans, with its left-leaning journalism usually defending the common man (Lloyd 2002, p. 12). Another term for this was 'nosey journalism' (Carroll 2012). 'Nosey journalists are likely to upset long-established non-inquisitive relationships between the media and officialdom,' said Vic Carroll (2012). 'Crimes and accidents which police and politicians might find embarrassing were early rewarding targets for such nosey journalism.' Examples could be found in Ὰe *Bulletin*, John Norton's *Truth* and, a little later, *Smith's Weekly* (1919–50).

McKnight (1999, p. 156) identifies two peaks of Australian investigative journalism in the twentieth century: the first in the immediate postwar period 'when the hopes of a post war "new order" were high'; the second responding to the 'cultural and political' revolution of the 1960s, leading to an upsurge in the 1970s and early 80s. Ὰe first was usually directed at single targets, such as an unscrupulous doctor. Ὰe second involved more systemic reporting with wider targets, such as corruption within a state health department.

REPORTING AND THE COLD WAR

Ὰe transition from single-issue muckraking to systemic investigative reporting was interrupted by another period of complacency, much like the early reporting in colonial newspapers, although this time not officially under government control. By the mid-twentieth century, the mass media in Australia, as in Europe and the USA, had become largely complicit with anti-communism as the organising principle of a broader cultural Cold War (McKnight 2008). Exceptions included labour movement publications such as Ὰe *Worker* (Suich 2012). Ὰe collaborating relationship between the press and the establishment only started to pull apart as social and political movements such as feminism and Vietnam War protests gained strength. Evan Whitton (2012), a multi-award-winning investigative journalist, believed that 'the media did not tell the customer what was really going on until relatively recently'.

According to Whitton, investigative journalism did not really appear until the late 1950s (Whitton 2012). By 1956 the Walkley Awards for journalism excellence had begun. Among the few award winners (there were only five categories; today there are 34), the Melbourne *Herald* provided investigative journalism with a human interest focus.

INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM IN THE 1950S

In early 1957 the *Herald's* police reporter Lionel Hogg did what Victoria police were unable to do and tracked down a missing Ukrainian stewardess who deserted her ship while it was docked in Melbourne for the 1956 Olympic Games. Hogg used his extensive contacts to find the stewardess, Nina Paranyuk, who moved between three safe houses across Melbourne during her two months on the run. In Hogg's four-part series, Paranyuk told how tough life was in the Baltic states during the Cold War. The series began with Paranyuk telling Hogg:

> Ever since Stalin ordered the demolition of our tiny stone Church, I have prayed for somebody or something to take me away from the USSR. That was 24 years ago. I was only 10. I had to wait a long time before my prayers were answered (Hogg 1957).

Following the series, Paranyuk was granted asylum in Australia.

Douglas Lockwood was another early investigative journalist working for the *Herald*. Lockwood tracked down a 15-year-old Indigenous girl, Ruth Daylight. Months earlier, Daylight had trekked from her remote Halls Creek community in Western Australia to visit the Queen Mother in Canberra. Lockwood contrasted the Queen Mother's regal Canberra accommodation with the 'filthy hovel, only 3 ft high, where Ruth lives with her mother and four other Daylight children' (Lockwood 1958). The story examined the poor living conditions of Aboriginal Australians.

In 1958, the *SMH* finance editor, Tom Fitzgerald, began a small-circulation journal, *Nation*, as an outlet for explainer or investigative journalism. Whitton (2012) recalled that in 1961, Max Newton began a similar type of financial journalism at the *Australian Financial Review*, while the ABC launched its dedicated television investigative program 'Four Corners'. 'They started to query the Establishment,' said Whitton. By 1965, the editor-in-chief of Brisbane's *Courier Mail*, Sir Theodore Bray, signalled a revival of the press as the Fourth Estate in Australia:

> I would maintain that to be the Fourth Estate is still one of the main functions of the press … It has also to be a watchdog of civil liberties and a protector against the petty tyranny of bureaucrats and all those clothed with or assuming authority against the common man … Newspapers clearly have a function beyond mere reporting and recording—a function of probing behind the straight news, of interpreting and explaining and sometimes of exposing (Schultz 1998, p. 43).

INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM IN THE 1960S

During the Cold War, journalism was used as the cover for spies on both sides of the American–Russian divide. A famous example was that of British civil servant Kim Philby. Philby, an undercover MI6 agent, used his journalism posting in the Middle East not only to report back to the UK, but also to act as a double agent, giving secrets to Moscow. In 1963, an Australian journalist, Phillip Knightley, was part of the London *Sunday Times* investigative team 'Insight' that exposed Philby's treachery (Evans 2010).

Knightley and the 'Insight' team significantly influenced Australian investigative reporting. The editor of *The Age*, Graham Perkin, was so impressed with the work of the *Sunday Times* and its editor, Harold Evans, that he bought the rights to republish its stories in Australia, including the Philby spy ring story (Hills 2010, p. 294). Perkin then created *The Age's* own specialist investigative unit in 1967, borrowing the *Sunday Times'* investigative title 'Insight' (Hills 2010, pp. 293–4). Under Perkin's reign, *The Age* was listed as one of the world's 10 best newspapers.

Perkin also published Knightley's iconic stories about lapses in the testing of the drug thalidomide, which was sold around the world to treat morning sickness, but which instead caused thousands of birth defects. The London 'Insight' team later wrote a book appropriately titled *Suffer the Children* ('Insight' team 1979) based on their early investigations, but they did not break the story as such.[2] That was the role of Australian obstetrician William McBride, who first identified the link between birth defects and the drug, and German paediatrician Widukind Lenz, who proved the link in 1961. The drug was subsequently removed from the market. In 2012, half a century later, thalidomide victims finally received an apology from the drug's German inventors (*The Telegraph* 2012).

Despite Perkin's newly established investigative unit, it was the tabloids and their muckraking that dominated investigative reporting in the 1960s (Carson 2012). Weekend and weekly tabloids, with their longer deadlines, led the way. Sydney's *Sunday Telegraph* was the most successful, at least in terms of its number of award-winning investigative stories. Its reporter Wallace J. Crouch won the 1963 Best Feature Walkley Award for an investigation questioning widespread kangaroo culling in New South Wales. Denis O'Brien won the same award in 1966 for investigating the damaging effects of alcohol on Indigenous communities.

The tabloid *Truth*—its circulation exceeding 400 000—was also winning awards for its investigative journalism with 'big target' stories that marked the second wave of investigative journalism. Under the editorship of Sol Chandler (1965–67), Evan Whitton started experimenting with New Journalism, inspired by US writers such as Tom Wolfe. Whitton combined Chandler's demand for insignificant details and applied Wolfe's notion of using literary techniques to write vivid non-fiction news. One of Whitton's investigations from this time blew the whistle on police corruption.

Abortion and police corruption (1969)

In the late 1960s Dr Bertram Wainer was making allegations of a police protection racket involving Victorian abortionists. For a fee, police would not pursue doctors and backyard abortionists who performed illegal abortions. Whitton seized on these allegations, publishing details of six sworn affidavits alleging police extortion. The *Truth's* revelations led to a government board of inquiry chaired by Melbourne silk Bill Kaye. Three homicide detectives were jailed. The stories and Wainer's dedicated campaign led to law reform. Whitton earned his second Walkley. He said:

> The task was made easier by the failure of other organs of the media to turn up during Dr Wainer's campaign to show that bad laws made bad cops. Police roundsmen tend to be prisoners of the source. I suspect editors made the error of believing them when they said Dr Wainer was mad and bad and there was nothing in the police corruption story' (Whitton 2012).

THE GROWTH OF AUSTRALIA'S PRESS AND THE RISE OF INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

In the 1960s and early 70s—a time of great political and social change—two national newspapers appeared: *The Australian* and *the National Times*. *The Australian*, established by Rupert Murdoch in 1964, did what no other paper was doing at the time: it combined the latest overseas design with clever, innovative journalism (Hills 2010, p. 227).

Seven years later, in 1971, Fairfax started its national weekly broadsheet, *the National Times*. Founded by Vic Carroll (then the *Australian Financial Review* managing editor), its mission was to analyse and uncover news behind the news (Fairfax Media 2011). Over 16 years, it broke many national stories through investigative journalism. Under the editorships of Max Suich and Whitton, its circulation exceeded 100 000. Subsequent editors David Marr, Brian Toohey and Jefferson Penberthy shifted its focus from social issues to investigating corruption and networks of influence (Schultz 1998, p. 200). But the financial woes of proprietor Warwick Fairfax Jr saw it sink.

INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM IN THE 1970S

By the 1970s investigative journalism was in fashion for several reasons, including the glamorisation of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's Watergate investigation for the *Washington Post* (Henningham, 1990). And no discussion of Australian investigative journalists would be complete without John Pilger, the controversial, Australian documentary maker who started his career in print with Sydney's *Sunday Sun* before eventually moving to London. Walkley-winning investigative journalist Paul Robinson recalls: 'his 1970 documentary about dissension in the ranks during the Vietnam War was profound and timely, as were his documentaries about the atrocities of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia' (2012).

Former tabloid and broadsheet editor Bruce Guthrie (2010) said the maverick editorship of *The Age's* Perkin (1966–75) also contributed to the rise of investigative journalism in local newsrooms. In addition, this period heralded the start of university graduates choosing journalism as a career, as opposed to it being seen as a craft. Robinson, who was one of the first university graduates entering journalism, explains:

> I was part of a changing world that rebelled against the Vietnam War, was suspicious of authority and contemptuous of the strict morality of past generations. Journalism was the job of a lifetime. It presented the opportunity to challenge authority, to be close to the decision-making process and a chance to play a critical part in political life (Robinson 2012).

Perkin's *Age* investigative unit, initially made up of reporter John Tidey and writer John Larkin, took time to develop. By November 1973, it was a 'dedicated investigative outfit with a full-time staff of three', headed by Ben Hills (Robinson 2012). Early successes included Hills' and Philip Chubb's revelations about Victoria's corrupt housing commission land deals (1974), which contributed to the Hamer/Thompson Government's downfall (Robinson 2012).

The author's own research shows investigative journalism in the 1970s had a broad social reform agenda, with the majority of stories targeting corporate or government power. *The National Times* and *The West Australian* produced the most Walkley-winning investigative journalism in the 1970s (Carson 2012).

The National Times won four consecutive Walkley Awards for best newspaper feature in 1975, 1976, 1977 and 1978. It was unusual compared to other newspapers of the era, in that it regularly engaged in commentary and feature writing. Its investigative stories would sometimes run beyond 10 000 words. Other papers tended to report news 'straight'.

The National Times' award-winning investigative stories included: a three-part series about Vietnam (Whitton 1974); the collapse of Australian commodities trading company the Gollin group (Gottliebsen 1978) and an inside account of when prison guards attacked inmates at Sydney's Long Bay jail (Summers 1976). The paper had several pioneering female Australian investigative journalists, including Marian Wilkinson, Anne Summers, Wendy Bacon, Deborah Snow and Adele Horin.

The West Australian published some quality investigations and won a number of Walkleys in the 1970s due to the work of Catherine Martin. Her investigation into the use of the now disreputable Tronado microwave machine then used to treat cancer (Martin 1975, p. 1) won the 1975 Walkley for Best Piece of Reporting. Two years earlier she had won a Best Feature Walkley for her two-week expedition reporting on the health conditions of Indigenous Australians and how bush nurses coped with treating diseases and malnourishment (Hurst 1988, p. 135). Martin's celebrated investigative series in 1978 exposed the deadly effects of blue asbestos on mining workers' health. Her final story in this series led to CSR, the owner of Western Australia's blue asbestos mine, establishing the Wittenoom Trust. The trust provided $2 million to affected former employees over 10 years, but CSR did not acknowledge legal liability at the time (Hurst 1988, p. 57). For this, Martin won not only the Best Piece of Reporting award, but also the inaugural Gold Walkley.

In terms of examining government power, the standout example during the 1970s came from Melbourne broadsheet *The Herald*, which ultimately contributed to the end of the Whitlam Government.

The loans affair: 'Khemlani tells' (1975)

Ὰe Whitlam Government sought to borrow about $4 billion from oil-rich Arab nations to fund large-scale natural resource and energy projects. Ὰe Federal Minister for Minerals and Energy, Rex Connor, was accused of bypassing the Treasury-approved model for raising funds by using an intermediary to tap into monies from the Middle East. By mid-1975, the controversy over the attempt to secure the funds saw Connor's authority to raise the money revoked.

Herald journalist Peter Game (1975) located and interviewed the London-based commodity trader and intermediary, Tirath Khemlani. Connor denied Khmelani's version of events. Khemlani, a meticulous record keeper, flew to Australia and provided Game with telexes between himself and Connor contradicting the minister's denials. Ὰe *Herald* published the evidence on 8 October 1975. A week later, after receiving a copy of the telexes and a statutory declaration from Khemlani, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam dismissed Connor as minister for misleading Parliament. Opposition Leader Malcolm Fraser used the 'extraordinary and reprehensible' example as one reason for using his numbers in the Senate to block supply. Ὰis led to the Australian constitutional crisis that saw Whitlam dismissed from office by the Governor-General, Sir John Kerr.

INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM IN THE 1980S

At its best, investigative journalism provides transparency and accountability of public figures and institutions. It shines a light where cover-ups and corruption prosper. Crime reporter David Richards achieved this when he investigated corruption within the Federated Ships, Painters and Dockers' Union.

Union murders and mayhem (1980)

Richards' 1980 four-part series in Australia's oldest news magazine, *Ὰe Bulletin* (1880–2008), was the ammunition the Fraser Government needed to launch the Costigan Royal Commission.

Richards' research involved funeral parlour stake-outs, secret interviews at Pentridge with criminal Billy 'Ὰe Texan' Longley, and working closely with police. He uncovered murders, thefts, and a 'ghosting' scheme where waterside workers collected pay packets for hours not worked. Ὰe subsequent Royal Commission unearthed much more.

Ὰe Costigan Royal Commission (1980–84) found evidence of 36 murders and attempted murders of union associates. It also discovered wrongdoing beyond union ranks. It used advanced computer programming to expose white collar crime and tax evasion, including the infamous 'bottom of the harbour' schemes. Ὰis caused the Fraser Government embarrassment because it had failed to outlaw them. Ὰe final report, filling 20 volumes, led to the reversal of High Court tax decisions, and the establishment of the National Crime Authority. At one point, the reputation of media magnate Kerry Packer—ironically *Ὰe Bulletin's* owner—was called into question by the *National Times*. No charges were brought against Packer, who strenuously denied any wrongdoing, but he was branded with the everlasting moniker, 'the Goanna'.

'*The Age* tapes' (1983–84)

Australia's major media organisations often argue that self-regulation is an important element of a free press, and that the media are best able to judge what is in the public interest. But this is not always a simple judgment. Sometimes the end is thought to justify the means. Take, for example, the investigative story known as 'Ὰe *Age* tapes' (1984).

Ὰe *Age* faced a dilemma: to publish the transcripts of illegal Australian Federal Police recordings, or to refrain because of their dubious acquisition and legal status. Ὰe *Age* chose to publish (interestingly, the *SMH* chose not to) (Schultz 1998, p. 215).

Ὰe controversial series of reports documented links between organised crime in New South Wales, police and government, resulting in corruption allegations against former Attorney-General and High Court justice Lionel Murphy. Ὰe transcripts of police telephone intercepts were of calls

between Murphy and New South Wales solicitor Morgan Ryan who was facing criminal charges at the time. Ryan had high-profile 'underworld' clients and the transcripts allegedly showed that he sought information from Murphy about whether certain police were corruptible (Wilson 1986, p. 1). Murphy was charged with attempting to pervert the course of justice and was tried twice; he was found guilty on the first hearing, but not guilty on the second. Ryan had been convicted in 1983 of conspiring to help 22 Koreans enter Australia illegally, but the conviction was quashed on appeal, and the retrial was later dropped (Robinson 1987, p. 1).

The *Age* tapes led to seven separate inquiries and the Stewart Royal Commission. The New South Wales Government responded to the series by passing the *Listening Devices Act 1984*, to tighten the law (Schultz 1998, p. 215).

Fairfax produced the most investigative journalism in the 1980s (Carson 2012). It was a prolific freelancer in Western Australia, Jan Mayman, who collected the 1984 Gold Walkley for *The Age*. Her stories about police brutality within a West Australian Indigenous community exposed the death of 16-year-old John Pat, who died in police custody at Roebourne.

The 1980s was also a golden era for television investigative reporting. Chris Masters' report for *Four Corners* about police corruption in Queensland, 'The Moonlight State', proved that Sir Larry Lamb, the former editor of *The Australian*, was wrong when in 1982 he told *the Bulletin* that, 'Television is no good at all at the big investigative type of story' (Schultz 1998, p. 61). 'The Moonlight State' confirmed that the media had become 'equal contenders' in the existing power dynamic, and not, as previously thought, 'cooperating servants' to authoritative figures (Schultz 1998, p. 224).

'The Moonlight State' (1987)

Queensland's Fitzgerald Inquiry was sparked days after 'The Moonlight State' aired. This enormously important story, which was separately investigated by *The Courier Mail's* Phil Dickie, documented the role played by Queensland's senior police and government officials in illegal drug, gambling and prostitution rackets. It resulted in the imprisonment of Police Commissioner Sir Terence Lewis and several government ministers, and the later resignation of the Premier, Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen.

Allegations of corruption and unethical practices against the National Party Government were not new. Quentin Dempster's earlier ABC documentary, *The Sunshine System*, showed how Queensland had not worked properly for 70 years. However, what Dickie and Masters did was to firmly establish a pattern, and provide an historical context for how the corruption had been able to develop and flourish. Masters (2011) explains:

> It wasn't just the revelation of a set of facts that indicated that police and government had a corrupt relationship with criminal entities, etc; there was a three-dimensional story there about institutional corruption and the exploitation of public innocence. There was a history story there as well as a news story.

FROM PRINT TO BROADCAST AND BEYOND

The ABC hired its first radio journalist in 1934. It was not until 1967, however, that it began its half-hour morning current affairs program, *AM*, which had occasional investigative stories, as did niche programs such as *The Health Report*, hosted by Dr Norman Swan. Swan won the 1988 Gold Walkley for exposing the fraudulent medical research of Dr William McBride (unrelated to McBride's famous work linking thalidomide to birth deformities). Yet radio's only dedicated investigative program is Radio National's *Background Briefing*, which has consistently won Walkley Awards for its investigations, including Mark Aaron's series in the 1980s on Australia's policy of accepting ex-Nazis as refugees.

The ABC also pioneered television investigative journalism, broadcasting *Four Corners* (from 1961), then *This Day Tonight* (1967–79). Graeme Turner (2005) wrote that 1967 was about the time that hard-hitting investigative reports replaced *This Day Tonight's* polite interviews. Hosted by Bill Peach, the program produced a generation of Australian journalists, among them: Gerald Stone, Richard Carleton, Caroline Jones, Mike Willesee, Mike Carlton, Allan Hogan, George Negus, Peter Luck,

Andrew Olle, Clive Hale, Manning and Stuart Littlemore. In 1973, Mike Carlton, Littlemore and Peach's report into illegal gambling in New South Wales highlighted the program's financial and editorial commitment to investigative reporting.

Investigative television programs at Channel Nine have included *Sunday* (1981–2008) and long-time stalwart *60 minutes* (from 1979). Even in its last days, *Sunday* was winning awards, including three Walkleys for Ross Coulthart and Nick Farrow's 'Butcher of Bega' story. They found victims to tell the story of Dr Graeme Stephen Reeves, who deliberately mutilated and sexually abused up to 500 female patients while working as a gynaecologist and obstetrician at various hospitals across Sydney and the New South Wales hamlet of Bega. Reeves was deregistered and jailed.

Channel Seven's past investigative program contributions have included *Witness* (1996–98), hosted by investigative journalist Paul Barry, and *Real Life* (1992), which enticed Gerald Stone to come back to Australia from the USA. Seven currently produces *Sunday Night*, with Coulthart on staff.

Many award-winning investigative television programs were unable to hold audiences and were replaced with populist, tabloid formats offering consumer and celebrity stories. This was the case for Ten's *Page One* (1988–89) and its successor *Public Eye* (1989). Despite luring journalists such as Kerry O'Brien, Chris Masters and Maxine McKew, they were unable to attract large audiences (Turner 2005, p. 41). Current programs that do some investigative reporting include SBS's *Dateline* and the ABC's *Foreign Correspondent*, *7.30* and *Lateline*.

INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM IN THE 1990S

Following the Australian stock market crash in 1987, and some high-profile business collapses such as Victoria's Pyramid Building Society, the 1990s was the start of an upswing in investigative business reporting, which peaked in the 2000s (Carson 2012). This was particularly evident at the *Australian Financial Review*, with many examples including Pamela Williams' Gold Walkley-winning series about the political manoeuvrings behind the 1998 Waterfront dispute. Jonathan Holmes (2011) observes that in the 1990s investigative reporters followed up the collapse of the stock market, but they were slow to expose wrongdoers as the drama was unfolding. 'The big bank collapses that happened in Victoria and South Australia went largely unnoticed and were not exposed by anyone's journalism as they should have been,' he said. According to Holmes, it was not investigative journalism's best decade, although there were some exceptions, such as Paul Barry's exposé of the dodgy dealings of billionaire Alan Bond.

The standout award-winning papers in this decade were *The Courier Mail* and the weekly *Sunday Age* (Carson 2012). In 1993 the *Sunday Age's* Paul Robinson undertook a three-month investigation into Australians involved in sex tourism in Thailand and the Philippines. The exposé led to the enactment of new laws making it an offence to commit sexual offences against children while travelling abroad.

The Courier Mail's most notable investigations included David Bentley's 1995 Gold Walkley for exposing author Helen Darville as a literary hoax. Darville wrote the award-winning novel *The Hand that Signed the Paper*, claiming to be Helen Demindenko, an author with Ukrainian heritage writing from family experience about the Holocaust. *The Courier Mail's* Paul Whittaker also won two Walkleys for exposing government corruption. The first was for the 'Net Bet affair' in 1999, with Hedley Thomas. This investigation linked the company that won Queensland's first internet gaming licence to three Labor Party figures who were likely to financially benefit from the deal. Two ministers were forced to stand down as a result. The other was 'Operation Wallah', which revealed a secret investigation where the Criminal Justice Commission and the Australian Federal Police were at odds about pursuing prostitution and gambling rackets in Queensland, raising the question of political intervention. The Criminal Justice Commission probe uncovered possible breaches of US and Australian laws relating to a multimillion-dollar fraud involving government defence contracts, the bribery of company officials and the illicit trade of huge quantities of computer semi-conductors (Whittaker 1995).

The Courier Mail produced many investigative stories in the 1980s and 90s, but when it became a tabloid in 2006, like its sister paper the *Adelaide Advertiser* (which converted from broadsheet to compact in 1997), their Walkley Award-winning investigative journalism all but ended.

THE EVOLVING DIGITAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE AND INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The changing economic and technological landscape of the news media has led some critics to argue that Australian news media no longer fulfils its Fourth Estate function. Among them is former Federal Minister Lindsay Tanner, who criticises shallow, sensationalist reporting, particularly of political personalities at the expense of policy coverage (2011).

Criticism of the news media is also expressed more broadly through increased public cynicism. Regular polling shows that the media lacks public trust and that journalists are poorly regarded compared to other professionals (Essential Research 2008). British academic Bob Franklin (2008, p. 3) said a widespread downmarket approach to news is a direct threat to investigative journalism. Franklin (2008, p. 15) used the term 'newszak' to describe a raft of changes to the style and content of newspapers, including, 'a retreat from investigative journalism and hard news to the preferred territory of "softer" or "lighter" stories'. This trend is also sometimes referred to as 'dumbing down' and the 'tabloidisation' of news (Schudson 2003, p. 93).

Another threat to investigative journalism is the time, commitment and cost required to authenticate or discard a story. In the digital age, the media cycle is fast and focused on breaking news, and—increasingly—opinion and commentary. Investigative journalism needs employers who are committed to producing it. 'It can get very expensive,' said multi-award-winning investigative television reporter Ross Coulthart (2011), who also said he feels lucky to still have the support of his commercial network, which recently allowed him to travel to four countries while pursuing one investigative story.

Investigative journalism yields a greater chance for lengthy litigation against the journalist, the publisher or both. And there is also the emotional cost. Masters (2011) said that even when you want to say goodbye to stories, you can't because sometimes you spend years defending them in court. 'It is easy to get really angry with how lonely you feel, when you are in a big fight that goes on forever, and it seems that so often you have to wear most of it on your own,' he said.

INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM 2000–20

Despite this, investigative journalism hit a second peak in the early 2000s, even higher than that of the 1970s (Carson 2012). Against the predictions of many, and noting that *The National Times* ceased publication in 1987, the volume of investigative stories increased. The most popular story topics were crime and corporate corruption. While Australian masthead circulations fell, the amount of investigative reporting did not —at least not at the end of the first decade of the 2000s.

In the early 2000s, Fairfax continued the trend of the previous two decades and produced more investigative journalism than any other print organisation. In this decade, the financial tabloid, the *Australian Financial Review*, produced more investigative stories than previously. Its topics were evenly divided between individual and corporate corruption. It included a profile on high-flying stockbroker Rene Rivkin and his undisclosed Swiss bank accounts (Chenoweth et al. 2003, p. 1). This team effort won both the 2004 Gold Walkley and the Business Journalism Award. The following year, the late Morgan Mellish wrote a 3500-word profile on Liberal Party donor and multimillionaire businessman Robert Gerard, who was being investigated by the Australian Tax Office for allegedly avoiding tax using an elaborate and fraudulent offshore insurance scheme. Gerard had been awarded a medal of the Order of Australia by Prime Minister John Howard and appointed to the board of the Reserve Bank for five years (Mellish 2005, p. 58). Corporate stories focused on shareholders who lost millions following the collapses of financial companies, including Opes Prime and Storm (Chenoweth et al. 2008, p. 1; Hughes 2009, p. 1).

Two other trends became apparent in that decade. The first was the increase in syndicating stories across mastheads within the same group. Fairfax began this in the late 1980s and by 2010 the practice had grown exponentially. The other was print media's collaboration with outside media organisations; for example, the use of *WikiLeaks* material as a starting point for investigative stories in Fairfax mastheads.

The Age and the ABC have also teamed up to gain greater audience share, most notably on the 'Money Makers'. Mark Baker (2012) explains the decision to share resources with the ABC:

> I saw it as a good opportunity to raise the profile of the story because we had been plugging away at it for over a year or so, at that stage, and we had had significant impact: the police investigation was under way and all the rest of it. But the story was hard to get traction outside of Victoria. After 'Four Corners' the story got a new lease of life and got a better national profile and we were then able to drive it to new heights, and then of course we saw charges being laid and the story continues to evolve, so it was a good deal.

The 'Money Makers' (2009)

Journalists Richard Baker and Nick McKenzie uncovered Australia's biggest bribery scandal involving the Reserve Bank of Australia's subsidiary currency firms, Note Printing Australia and Securency. Australia's foreign bribery laws were enacted for the first time, charging the firms and local and international senior managers with corruption offences. *The Age* stories claimed bribes were paid to secure bank-note-making contracts overseas, including in Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and Nepal. Three years after the story broke, Reserve Bank Governor Glenn Stevens told a 2012 federal parliamentary committee that his deputy was warned in writing of corruption inside the bank's operations in 2007 (McKenzie & Baker 2012, p. 2).

Despite the official ABC collaboration, there was remarkably little acknowledgment or follow-up from other media about this international corruption story, particularly from print. Several journalists have privately attributed this to the toxic competition between Fairfax Media and News Limited. Masters (2011) said the media's failure to follow up a good story is a grave disservice to the public. 'One of the reasons that these stories aren't going further, is because sometimes the competition is so poisonous that a story won't have carriage because competitors refuse to acknowledge that it existed,' he said.

INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM TODAY

The future of investigative journalism in the 2010s is unclear. Up until 2010, the *SMH* and *The Age* had produced more investigative journalism than any other masthead in the past seven decades. In June 2012, however, Australian newspapers suffered a crushing blow. Both News Limited and Fairfax announced major changes to the operations of their newspapers. Fairfax would close its Sydney and Melbourne printing presses, and the *SMH* and *The Age* would become tabloid in 2013. Fairfax announced paywalls for its online content from 2013 and the loss of 1900 jobs, with a quarter of these coming from the editorial floor. Similarly, News Limited announced editorial job losses, the number undisclosed, and greater sharing of its content and resources across its mastheads (Norrie 2012).

The then Managing Editor at Fairfax Media, Mark Baker, acknowledges that legal costs, salaries to retain experienced journalists, and travel and time expenses make investigative journalism a multimillion dollar enterprise (2012). However, Baker also said that the digital media landscape provides new opportunities for investigative journalism. In an environment where news is ubiquitous and free, investigative journalism offers readers unique information for which they might be prepared to pay. 'We need to do more of it, not less … where we want to make money is on the strength and credibility of our investigative journalism,' he said prior to Fairfax's restructure. Similarly, in 2010, *The Australian* emphasised investigative journalism in its national mantle, launching a dedicated unit led by Hedley Thomas (Mitchell 2011).

Even after the announcement of cutbacks, newspapers are still the largest employers of journalists in Australia. Few Australian stand-alone websites have the resources to perform ongoing investigative journalism. The online sphere only began receiving Walkley Awards for its investigative journalism in the early 2000s. Those winners were almost entirely made up of the traditional print media producing online stories, with the exception of the ABC, which won a Walkley for its online coverage in 2002 with 'The Timber Mafia'.

As Birnbauer discusses in Chapter 2, media websites have collaborated with traditional media internationally with great success. For example, *The New York Times* partnered with online newsroom *ProPublica* to win the 2010 US Pulitzer Prize for investigative journalism. *ProPublica* is a not-for-profit organisation that secures philanthropic funds to produce investigative journalism in the public interest. Its philanthropic model offers a future for investigative journalism, and has been replicated elsewhere, including Australia.

Another online model that might provide a future for investigative journalism is *WikiLeaks*, which is discussed in detail by Hrafnsson and Dreyfus in Chapter 3. Like *ProPublica*, *WikiLeaks* has collaborated with traditional media to extend its audience reach. Whitton (2012) said that by definition *WikiLeaks* is investigative reporting because 'it exposes wrongdoing'. In 2011, the Walkley Board awarded *WikiLeaks* the prize for most outstanding contribution to Australian journalism for delivering an 'avalanche of inconvenient truths'.

The honour divided industry opinion. Some viewed the web-based organisation as akin to a warehouse for information, which is then retailed by others. Nonetheless, *WikiLeaks'* recognition did underscore a successful partnership with traditional media to expose wrongdoing and hidden truths.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has outlined the origins of the Australian investigative journalism tradition, evolving from the deferential media of the colonial era, to the muckraking stories of the late nineteenth century, with its antecedents belonging to both the UK and USA. Australian watchdog reporting has experienced peaks and troughs in newsrooms, with a notable lull during the Cold War years when the fear of communism was high. With some exceptions, this period engendered a largely unquestioning relationship between the press and the establishment. The social and political upheaval of the late 1960s, the US Watergate scandal in the 1970s, university education, and the standout *Age* editorship of Graham Perkin inspired a second wave of watchdog-style reporting in Australian newsrooms, resulting in historic outcomes in the public interest.

Each decade in recent times has offered a different contribution to investigative journalism. The evening papers had early success in the 1950s, followed by the weekly tabloids in the 1960s. Broadcast investigative journalism evolved throughout the 1960s and 70s and experienced great success thereafter. But to date, it has been Australia's broadsheet newspapers that have done more investigative reporting than any other media. In the digital era, *WikiLeaks* and other story collaborations between various media organisations seem to be heralding a new approach to investigative reporting. While the print business model supporting investigative journalism has changed—making its future less certain—the need for public scrutiny and accountability of those with power remains as necessary as ever.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1   To what extent have 'yellow journalism' and muckraking journalism influenced the development of modern investigative journalism?

2   In what ways have the types of stories undertaken by investigative journalists changed over time?

3   Of the journalists and editors mentioned in this chapter, who do you consider has had the strongest influence and why?

TASK

1   Access two of the stories discussed in this chapter (one from an early era (pre-1970s), and the other from a later era (1990s and beyond)). See if you can identify how the stories were researched. List the sources and documents mentioned, any strategies the journalist may have used, and any difficulties they may have encountered in pulling this story together.

What does the story say about the difficulties confronting investigative journalists? Have the approaches changed over time?

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NOTES

1   *The Sydney Morning Herald* was first called *The Sydney Herald,* and it is the oldest continuously published newspaper in Australia. It become a daily in 1840 and changed its name to *The Sydney Morning Herald* in 1842.

2   However, it was not until Knightley and the investigative team's long-running newspaper campaign in the 1970s that £28 million compensation was paid out to UK victims, a substantial increase on the earlier 1968 settlement, by the UK manufacturers Diageo.

CASE STUDY   # THE MAKING OF AN INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST

Richard Baker

I knew I wanted to be a journalist when I turned 16.

My family had moved to London for a few months and I spent weekends ploughing through editions of newspapers such as *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Sunday Times* and *The Observer*.

I found I was getting to the end of stories about people or subjects I knew nothing about—and not just stories from the sports pages (I was and remain a sports nut).

Perhaps it was because winter was looming, the days short and dark, and I had little else to do.

But I prefer to think that it was the great writing, the immense variety of topics and the sating of my natural curiosity that inspired me to pursue a career in journalism.

Of all the stories I read, the ones that had me most hooked were those that took me somewhere new and gave an insight into a world that had, hitherto, been secret.

These were the stories the rich and powerful wanted kept from the public. Although it has become a cliché, it remains a pithy and accurate description of investigative journalism.

When I arrived back in Australia and returned to my high school, I was set on becoming a journalist: the journalist who got the story behind the story.

After completing an arts degree majoring in journalism, I was fortunate enough to begin a cadetship at *The Age* in 1999. But I would have gone to the smallest country paper to get a start.

From there I had stints as the rural reporter and covering Victorian politics. Both were good training grounds for an aspiring investigative reporter.

Rural reporting for a city paper forced you to think outside the square just to get a run and taught you the importance of making the effort to meet people face to face. I found country people had far more time for a reporter from a big city paper if you actually travelled to see them rather than just talked over the phone.

Politics was a place to build a network of contacts across political parties, the public service, police and lobbying types. It was also a competitive environment that kept you sharp.

And so in 2005, I joined *The Age's* investigative team under the editorship of the mercurial Andrew Jaspan. The senior man in the team was Gary Hughes, a multiple Walkley-Award-winning journalist.

What struck me about Hughes was the meticulous nature of his research. When he got his teeth into an issue, he made sure he had a mouthful of flesh before he published.

Though the membership of the investigative team has undergone several changes, I have remained and continue to enjoy my work there.

My definition of investigative journalism has sharpened over the years. In essence, I believe all journalism should have an investigative edge. After all, there is no point giving the public what it already knows. Good journalism should be motivated by the desire for truth.

But in today's ever-shrinking, budget-conscious newsrooms, the rounds reporters are so stretched to file across the day for print, online, iPad and smartphones that they do not always have the opportunity to probe as deep as they would like.

That privilege and responsibility rests with the few in the investigative team who are given time and resources to peel back the layers of a story.

I believe classic hard-core investigative journalism can be boiled down to two elements.

First, as I mentioned before, it is giving the public information that they should know but would not if it were not for good journalism.

Second, the real power of investigative journalism is unearthing something that is of benefit to society.

This can range from exposing corruption at the highest levels of government to giving a voice to those without one in order to right a wrong.

A recent example of this at *The Age* was when my colleague Nick McKenzie and I uncovered 36 unexpected, unnatural or violent deaths of patients in Victoria's public mental health system.

We spent months with the families of three of the victims and told the story of their frustration because health authorities had, to varying degrees, covered up rather than explain what happened.

In the wake of the September 2011 series, Premier Ted Baillieu announced a review of the 36 deaths. Six months later, his government declared a series of reforms about the way deaths in the mental health system are responded to by health services, with an emphasis on respect for the grieving families.

It is an example of investigative journalism in the public interest leading to change for the better.

So what is a typical day like for me at *The Age's* investigative team? Apart from beginning with a strong coffee, a common feature is a conversation with McKenzie.

Over the past few years, we've worked successfully on several big stories as a team. It works because we have compatible personalities and work ethics.

We share tips, contacts and pool our knowledge. It means we can cover more bases faster and have more stories bubbling away.

We collaborate and, at times, argue over the strength of our information and quality of our writing. This process has proven to be a vital element in ensuring one reporter does not become captive to a source or too bent on a particular theory.

While it might not be for everyone, we have found working as a team to be an invaluable asset.

Perhaps our most successful joint effort is our three-year (and ongoing) project to unearth bribery and corruption across Asia and Africa by the Reserve Bank of Australia's currency-printing subsidiaries, Securency and Note Printing Australia.

There is no way we could have uncovered the network of agents and tax havens through which federal police allege bribes were paid to government officials in Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam and Nepal if we did not pool contacts and share the fruits of our labours.

This is an example of a story that can only be done by a dedicated, well-funded investigative team. There is no way a reporter answering daily to the whims of the news desk could have got a tenth of the story.

The Reserve Bank of Australia scandal is a perfect example of the difference that investigative journalism can make. It has led to Australia's first prosecutions for foreign bribery and to proposed legislative change to beef up anti-corruption laws.

One of the most important facets of investigative reporting is getting out and talking to people. Not many good stories come from sitting in the office and staring at the screen. It was something I learned doing the rural round.

Human conversation in this day is more important than ever for several reasons. First, contacts or sources feel more comfortable spending time face to face. It's about establishing a relationship and trust.

Each week I make an effort to get out and see various people from all walks of life. I may have no pressing reason to have a coffee with a particular person, but I know they value you making the time just to have a chat about what is going on without feeling they are being pressed for information.

I find that these conversations might not immediately lead to a story. But they may plant the germ of an idea in your head that you build upon months later.

Face-to-face contact is also important for source protection. With more government agencies and private corporations taking an aggressive attitude to leaks of information—even those clearly in the public interest—one way to protect a source is to minimise all electronic contact.

It is routine for call-charge records to be checked to trace phone calls and triangulate on a source. Email leaves a trail.

So, despite the advances in modern technology, it is increasingly preferable to go back to methods of communication from another age.

These can be using snail mail to a PO box. Or an agreed meeting point away from CCTV for a face-to-face chat.

For all an investigative journalist's skill and determination, the biggest key to successful reporting is the whistle-blower.

They are the people on the inside who have the conscience to expose corruption and wrongdoing, often at considerable personal and professional risk.

They are the sparks that lead to the best and most important stories. Investigative journalists, no matter how skilled, cannot possibly know what is going on inside the crooked mining company that is dumping toxic waste or in the police squad that is leaking information to bikie gangs.

The only people who do are the whistle-blowers.

It is the responsibility of investigative journalists and those who publish or broadcast their work to do all they can to protect and look after those who come to them seeking to expose wrongdoing.

It is a delicate and often complicated balancing act, for the journalist also has a duty to report in the public interest.

The biggest danger to investigative journalism is the willingness of governments, police and security agencies, private corporations and wealthy individuals to go after the source of the story.

This is evidenced by leak investigations in the public sector, phone-bugging operations by police and anti-corruption bodies, and legal action by corporations and individuals.

Such situations are immensely stressful for both the journalist and source. In addition, they are a further financial drain on the media companies that fund investigative journalism—an already expensive way of gathering news.

But protection of whistle-blowers is fundamental for any media outlet or individual journalist that takes public interest reporting seriously.

Investigative reporters also need a thick skin. You have to expect some blowback when so much of your work threatens, rightly or wrongly, the reputations, careers and finances of many powerful entities or people.

But for all the threat of legal action, government investigations and hostile critics, the job is addictive.

Nothing has ever compared to the thrill of going home the night before publishing a big, important story, knowing that all hell will break loose in the morning.