

HOW JOURNALISTS CAN REMOVE A PRESIDENT

Western ideals of Investigative Journalism

By Jan Gunnar Furuly, Deputy news editor, daily Aftenposten, Oslo, Norway

In 1974, US President Richard Nixon was forced to leave his office thanks to the power of two journalists from the Washington Post; Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. Following two long years of thorough journalistic research the American reporters introduced a new standard of news gathering: Investigative Journalism.

In all Western countries it is acknowledged that true democracies need investigative journalists. The investigative journalist is like a watchdog who continues to bark about all types of wrongdoing, corruption and misuse of power - no matter what problems he or she experiences. This is the way in which a small journalist can remove a big President.

The Watergate-saga was born after Woodward and Bernstein in the early 1970s started to follow up a tip alleging that the President's office had arranged a break-in at the Watergate headquarters of the Democratic National Committee, in order to tamper with evidence in an ongoing criminal investigation. Through prolonged hard work and a secret source in the White House, often referred to as "Deep Throat", the two journalists were in the end able to prove abuse of power and a conspiracy to obstruct justice led directly by the President. The newspaper won the Pulitzer Prize for public service and secured its place

for eternity in the annals of American journalism.

The ability to remove a President, or any other important figure, over mis-use of power, is of course not the daily work of a journalist. Indeed, in a lot of countries it would be quite impossible - as the powerful keep a firm grip on their positions. Harassment, arrests and imprisonment are usual tactics against investigative reporters in a long and sad list of countries.

Remember - no story is so important that you should risk your life for it. But in a lot of democracies journalists are able to dig up stories that make an important impact on society. Today, investigative journalism in western media is mostly driven by these traditional parameters:

- The story must be of importance to society.
- The story should focus on violations of what is right.
- The journalist himself must prove and describe the facts of the story.
- The journalist must confront the people who are responsible.
- The story should have consequences.

Legendary investigative journalist Bob Greene from the US newspaper Newsday, who has

won the Pulitzer prize twice, gives this definition: "Investigative journalism is the gathering of information that would have been kept secret, if it wasn't for the journalist". He also says: "It must be your own investigation. It must be of importance". Swedish media professor Lars Furhoff (1938-1986), put it in these simple words: "All journalism should be some kind of investigative journalism". To be able to conduct investigations, the journalists must be given special working conditions. The most important factor is access to information (human sources, written documentation/electronic data).

Most western countries have very transparent societies, where journalists are able to look into all kinds of aspects of that society. For example, a Norwegian journalist is able to trace the following information both rapidly and easily:

- Who owns a company?
- Who are the board members?
- Who are the owners or board members of a certain company active in others?
- Annual income, tax and fortune of any citizen in Norway?
- Who owns property and where?
- Who owns a car/boat and which one?
- Have any politicians received gifts in recent

- years?
- Who is married to whom, and what is written in their marriage contract?
- The home address of an individual and where he or she lived previously?
- What letters has a particular Ministry or Directory sent or received in the last few years? (Copies of any letters to and from the ministries and the rest of the state bureaucracy are available to journalists).
- What are the previous and upcoming debates/issues in parliament?

All this information is now available through public computer databases, very easily accessed by journalists. By collecting information from these sources the jour-

nalists are able to uncover hidden patterns and connections, which are not at all visible in daily life. A good rule among western journalists, when it comes to finding good stories, is to: "Follow the money". Also, find the story where the "small man" has met a wall in his fight with the power elite.

To get high quality investigative reporting it is important that the journalists work is carried out according to certain ethical guidelines. All news organizations have their own ethics rules, and nationally and internationally there are "codes of ethics for journalists". Some of them can be read here: <http://www.uta.fi/ethicnet/ethicnet.html> One of the most important factors is that journalists work independently of their sources, media owners, politicians or companies, and that they never write stories for their own benefit. As a major rule an investigative journalist should never write a sto-

ry if he or she has a personal or economic interest in the story.

Some mistakes you should try to avoid as an investigative journalist:

- Do not break the law.
- Do not bribe your sources.
- Do not compromise yourself.
- Do not compromise your sources - protect secret sources.
- Do not pretend that you are somebody else.
- Do not get personal
- Do not be a judge, do not take sides.
- And in the end: Do not give up.

Finally : Who's side are we on? Our golden rule should be: We shall protect the small people, not destroy them. Go for the big bandits, not the small thieves. They are often victims too.