

Political bias plagues transparent flow of information

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EXCLUSIVE

Nowadays, media outlets have a responsibility to inform public opinion and reflect realities in the society. Hence, they are regarded as the voice of people in combating economic corruption and promoting social justice. People always expect the media to expose corruption. Presently, moral, social and

political corruption is rooted in economic corruption. Injustices and problems of human societies stem from acts of avarice and greed by profit-seekers for obtaining wealth through illegitimate means. Corruption is becoming rife in some societies as a result of disregarding ethics and spirituality.

In such circumstances, investigative journalism as a sort of whistle-blowing method, is pushed to the forefront to take the lid off abuses of power, corruption, mismanagement and deviations. In line with securing social justice, this method will help foil attempts to cover up realities in societ-

ies and will also stop activities of corrupt individuals. To review the role of investigative journalism in tackling corruption in societies, Iran Daily has conducted an interview with Mohammad Taqi Roghaniha, a media veteran with a long history in journalism and media management.



Please tell us about your background in media and journalism.

When I was a student in 1980, universities were closed following the Cultural Revolution. Since I was interested in news writing and pursued cultural activities at the university, I was willing to work for a cultural and media organization. The Islamic Republic News Agency was recruiting at that time. So, I started working there as a reporter. Maybe this was a coincidence. Later, I was appointed as a manager in one of IRNA's offices. In 1990, I was appointed as IRNA's political editor-in-chief. A year later, I became the executive vice president of the news agency. In 1994, I began working for IRNA's office in London and five years later I became IRNA's deputy CEO. I left IRNA in 2005 and continued my profession in the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting. In 2013, I was appointed as IRNA's CEO and managing director of Iran Newspaper. Ultimately, I left the media profession in 2018 and now I am teaching communication and journalism at the university.

In the last edition of your book titled 'Applied Reporting for Mass Media' that was published in 2012, you touched upon different dimensions of investigative reporting. Please tell us about that.

Basically, in reporting, the reporter goes through deep layers of events and news. However, in investigative reports, the process is deeper. In investigative reporting, journalists try to explore and examine all the components and parts related to events. In fact, the unknown parts of the story are discovered and all its hidden angles are exposed to the public. This is considered the most difficult and stressful media work, and those who enter this field must prepare themselves to be pressured from various sides, because there are stories and topics that threaten the interests of individuals and sections of society. In fact, secrets are revealed that many want to remain untold. The profession of investigative journalism requires a patient and accurate person due to such difficulties. This kind of work has been largely disregarded in Iran because of the weakness of journalism and the pressures and dangers that were mentioned. Hence, a journalist who deals with such an issue will have to face problems and consequences.

What is your assessment of the process of investigative journalism in the world? How has it changed over the past years? This model of journalistic work has been discussed in the media

across the globe for more than a century, and it is discussed especially in Europe and developed countries. I will not answer this question as a review of the process of developments, because I did not review it academically. But, naturally, the more the society moves towards development and freedom of expression, the fields of investigative reporting will expand. In fact, the openness of the political and social environment paves the ground for better focus on investigative reporting. You see one of the most historic debates about

Investigative journalism is considered important and influential in finding the root causes of corruption and ways to expose and combat it. Now, can we say that this form of journalism is close to reaching its ultimate goal of enlightening public opinion and showing realities?

Investigative journalism is very important. Ordinary news reporting cannot be very effective in society in the sense that it cannot clarify the hidden angles of events. But if we want to examine all aspects of an event, "why this

related news.

As it was mentioned, there are outstanding examples of investigative journalism in the world, from the Watergate scandal to the Panama Papers and the Spotlight case (sexual abuse of children by priests in the West). But there have not been any particular instances in Iran. What is the reason for that and do we have investigative journalism in Iran?

First, I said that this type of journalism is associated with risks and problems that create a lot

of high-level cooperation with IRNA and Iran Newspaper. Were there any investigative reporting in these media outlets during that time?

We prepared a series of investigative reports under the title of special news, but of course these reports were not available to the public and were mostly given to the authorities. For example, in the field of addiction, a series of investigative reports were prepared to further draw the attention of officials to the situation of the society which had good effects.

changed. Currently, the society is vaccinated against these issues. Once there were concerns about what would happen if those pieces of news were published! Presently, due to the development of satellite networks and cyberspace, all people have access to all kinds of news and information, and those sensitivities of the past have disappeared.

Sensitive issues are usually raised and highlighted in cyberspace and then the official media follow suit. But official media outlets have never taken the first step and failed to expose such issues. What is your opinion?

That is simply right. We don't have independent media and the media are mainly affiliated to certain political groups. At different times when political rivalry between political groups intensifies some disclosures are made with specific political biases. But the move is not aimed at showing the truth. They rather seek to achieve their factional goals and demands. Hence these disclosures do not influence public opinion and are not in line with the mission of journalism.

Can we conclude that political bias harms investigative journalism and basically media work?

That is right. Political inclinations have afflicted media work both for the news and reports that are published and for those that have been prevented from being published. Of course, this is not limited to our country, there are definitely powerful lobbies everywhere in the world that prevent the publication of a series of news and reports due to their interests. For example, if you in the West wanted to write a report about Israeli crimes in Palestine, naturally you would face severe restrictions and the power lobbies would not allow such a thing. For example about the Holocaust, if someone wants to do an academic research he/she will be prevented let alone a journalistic disclosure.

What solutions do you suggest for improving the role and status of investigative journalism among the country's media?

As media staff, we cannot do much. Maybe if the country's socio-political atmosphere becomes more open and the country's officials have determination to provide such conditions; then we can expect the situation to change. But if a journalist wants to investigate a subject of an investigative report, he will be arrested after some time. Naturally, no one will enter this field and we should not expect any special results.

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Still from the movie Spotlight (2015)
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investigative journalism in the Watergate Scandal, when two Washington Times reporters exposed the issue of election fraud during the Nixon era. It was the result of investigative journalism that lasted nearly two years from the time Nixon was forced to resign. Of course, the ground was ready for doing this investigative work and the conditions of the American society accepted the publication of the report. Journalists also had the necessary courage to press ahead with their research. This was an outstanding example in the discussion of investigative journalism that was recorded in history. Even now, investigative journalism is underway in the world but these reports are adversely impacted by political issues. As a result, no one can say that all of them are considered honest and accurate reports. This is because at times those who wield power and political influence publish things in line with their goals and interests as investigative reports. They also add or remove things to these reports in order to distort realities.

happened, how this happened, what actions were taken and what actions can be taken"; in fact, we have started investigative journalism. And only with this type of journalistic work can we find clear answers to these questions.

When we refer to the history of investigative journalism, we see that most topics pertain to economic issues. One of the famous examples of this topic is the Panama Papers, which is related to money laundering, tax evasion of famous people and even politicians across the world. Why do investigative journalists focus on economic issues?

Of course, political reports are not lacking in this regard, but economic issues are more important to the public and journalists due to their importance in people's lives and livelihoods. On the other hand, economic corruption is more common. In fact, there are various types of corruption in the economic field, and people show great interest and sensitivity to the

of pressure on the media and journalists. Therefore many people try not to enter this field at all because they want to remain immune from these pressures. Journalists have at least come to the conclusion that their reports do not yield many results, and most of the pressure is on them until their investigative reports can have an effect on solving the problem, and therefore they are not enthusiastic enough to go after investigative journalism. There is an idiom which says "Don't trouble trouble until trouble troubles you". For these reasons, investigative reporting has no good standing in our country. The examples of existing reports are mainly descriptive reports which do not go into the depth of the issues. Investigative reports mostly pertain to social issues and I have not come across any significant examples of investigative reports about economic and political corruption in these years. It can be said that we are years away from reaching investigative journalism.

You had nearly four decades

The reports that you mentioned were not published for public opinion. So do they fall within the scope of investigative journalism? Why weren't they made available to the public?

Since these reports had not been prepared for the public, they did not fully match the definition of investigative journalism, but the process of preparing the reports was based on an investigative journalism approach. Investigative reports were not available to the public because it was believed that their release could cause concerns in the society. However, we are now witnessing the free flow of information in cyberspace and satellite channels. Maybe at that time, our mentality was that publishing this news could be very dangerous, while the situation has now changed.

What factors have been effective in changing this mentality?

First, the property of the news is that it establishes a foothold over time. On the other hand, the conditions of society have gradually