

Investigative journalism in Iran: An insider's perspective

Media deserves more 'tolerance' from authorities



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INTERVIEW

Today, the media, given their duty to shed light on public opinion and reflect the realities of society, are regarded as the clear voice of the people in the fight against economic corruption and the advancement of social justice. One of the public's constant demands is for the media to bring to light corruption and misconduct lurking beneath the surface of society.

In today's world, the ever-increasing growth of economic corruption is a serious problem for societies and lies at the root of other forms of corruption — including ethical, social, and even political. The greed of opportunists, who go after wealth through illicit means and take advantage of their influence, privileges, and connections, lies at the heart of much of the injustice and problems facing humanity. The scope of corruption is spreading in societies these days as people drift away from morality and spirituality, and it is creeping up to the highest levels of management.

This is where investigative journalism, as a form of watchdog journalism, steps in to monitor actions, abuses, corruption, mismanagement, and deviations. Journalists, in this way, prevent the covering up of truths in society and put a stop to the activities of wrongdoers.

To get to the bottom of the state of investigative journalism in Iran and the obstacles it faces, Iran Daily conducted an exclusive interview with Hossein Moslem, a seasoned journalist and editorial board member of Iran newspaper.



Hossein Moslem, the seasoned journalist working for Iran Newspaper, sits down for an interview.
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IRAN DAILY: Could you briefly tell us about your background and how you got into journalism?

MOSLEM: I was born in 1968 in Tabriz. From childhood, I loved reading books, and during high school, I got hooked on reading newspapers. In the 1980s, a newspaper called Mahd-e Azadi was published in Tabriz. I would buy it every day and read it with great enthusiasm. I always had a feeling deep inside that one day I would write for that paper. And that's exactly what happened. After a while, I started sending in short literary pieces to the newspaper office, and my work would get published — even though my name was never mentioned. Back then, there was no expectation for a newcomer's name to make it into the paper. After my final exam in the fourth year of high school, as summer vacation began and before I even thought about university entrance exams, I was invited to work at the newspaper, given my previous experience. Interestingly, for the first two or three months, I was not recognized as an official member of the team — I didn't even have a stool to sit on. Sometimes, standing for so long would leave me so exhausted that my legs would be screaming in pain. Out of sheer fatigue, I would go sit down on a step in the yard and massage my legs. Only after three months did they finally give me a chair and a tiny desk, where I would sit and transcribe the Friday prayer sermons every week. Even so, I did this work with passion. I should add that the first time my name appeared above one of my pieces, I was so thrilled I couldn't sleep all night. First thing in the morning, I rushed out and bought the newspaper from the nearest newsstand. On the way back, I felt like I'd become Gabriel Garcia Marquez and was now one of the world's top writers. These were, after all, the dreams and feelings of my youth. In any case, I kept at it until I moved to Tehran. Since 1996, I have worked steadily at various newspapers, right up to now. Since 2012, I have been working in different sections of the Iran newspaper.

There have been many definitions of investigative journalism. Based on your experience, how would you define it, and how important is it?



Investigative journalism, as the name suggests, is a form of journalism rooted in discovery. Typically, the project an investigative journalist takes on to uncover the truth is a continuous, long-term, and grueling endeavor. If I were to give a historical example: In 1872, a journalist named Julius Chambers was working in New York, and I believe the first investigative report belongs to him. He posed as a psychiatric patient to report on the dire conditions in a mental hospital. After about two weeks of being admitted, he finally published a report in the New York Tribune that brought about a huge transformation in American hospitals. The situation in 19th-century psychiatric hospitals was so dire that people could be admitted for the slightest reason, but after the report was published, 12 people who had been wrongly institutionalized were released, and major changes were made to the management and even the laws governing psychiatric hospitals across America.

Usually, an investigative journalist kicks off their work by relying on available data, then digs into research and information gathering. Investigative journalism is so important that the world's top newspapers are measured by the track record of their investigative reports. This line of work is fraught with danger, however. That's why, in 1997, investigative journalists set up a consortium by the name of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), which at the time included about 70 countries and 200 newspapers. In 2017, this consortium became an independent organization that stands up for investigative journalists facing threats and dangers from, for example, drug cartels, military cartels, arms deals, money laundering, and government corruption. Still, the media itself must support investigative journalists not only legally but also in terms of job security and finances since preparing an investigative report can take more than a year. A criminal case may end with the

arrest of the criminal or murderer, but in investigative reporting, the end of such a case is only the beginning — or the continuation — of a story that uncovers deeper corruption and leads to even bigger legal cases.

How influential do you think new communication platforms have been in boosting the status of investigative journalism in the fight against corruption? For example, to what extent has the rise of social and virtual networks made it easier for journalists to put together investigative reports?

Tremendously so. These days, the internet and virtual messaging platforms open up an ocean of information in various fields and languages, making research and data gathering far easier than before. Of course, navigating this vast ocean of information requires a special skill: knowing how to sort out information by importance and fact-check it since you're faced with a flood of data online, much

of which lacks accuracy or credible sources.

Naturally, new communication tools have gone a long way toward helping journalists in all areas. In the past, you had to rely solely on library resources, but now, with a simple search, you can get your hands on a wealth of information. This has greatly smoothed the path for journalists, and with the imminent arrival of smart web technologies and bots, the job will only get easier. As Marshall Howard Berman, the American author, says in his remarkable book "All That Is Solid Melts into Air," modernity is a "double-edged sword". In other words, while modernity is essential and has made life easier, it also comes with its own pitfalls. Currently, tools like messaging apps and artificial intelligence have come to the aid of journalism, but the flip side is that such tools often call into question the authenticity of data. For instance, distinguishing a genuine news photo from one generated by AI is now so difficult that even experts can be thrown off.

In terms of laws and legal matters, what challenges do investigative journalists face in our country? To what extent do the higher institutions or the media itself have their backs? Frankly, under current conditions, if an investigative journalist digs into many of the sensitive issues society is grappling with, even if they uncover something significant and want to bring it to light, they will have to shoulder the costs themselves. There's no denying that we face obstacles in political, economic, and even social spheres that have, in effect, put a damper on investigative journalism in many areas. I'm not saying investigative journalism is impossible in Iran, but it must be said that selecting stories freely and seeing them through is extremely difficult.

In our country, and generally in places labeled as the Third World, if you zero in on any topic, it can easily be spun as political, and you may be branded as having a political agenda. Naturally, this means the groundwork for investigative reporting is lacking. However, at lower levels and with less sensitive topics, investigative work can be done — provided the journalist feels secure and knows they'll



Journalists Carl Bernstein (L) and Bob Woodward, whose reporting on the Watergate incident won a Pulitzer Prize, make phone calls in New York City, the US, on June 17, 1974.

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Journalists work alongside other staff members in the newsroom of Iran Newspaper.

● HOSSEIN NAGHIZADEH/IRAN DAILY