Digging for (Ratings) Gold
The Popularity and Profitability of Television Investigative Journalism

Jesse Abdenour, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
The New York Times and CNN Just Published Bombshells

CNN Beefs Up Investigative Reporting

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In Trump's America, the competition for investigative journalists is fierce

BY BENJAMIN MULLIN · MARCH 16, 2017
The New Value Of Old-School News

Investing in hard-nosed, impactful investigative reporting may be the best way for TV stations’ local content to pop

By Michael Malone
mmalone@nbmedia.com | @BCHikeMalone
My Research

• Evidence of investigative journalism’s popularity and profitability

• **What** is investigative journalism?

• **Why** is it attractive?

• **Which** aspects are most attractive?
Local TV: So What?

- #1 news source for U.S. adults

*Pew Research Center (2015, 2016)*
The Cost of Investigations

• Local TV I-Team: $500,000 annually
• Long hours
• Can’t capitalize

Hamilton (2016); Malone (2014)
Conventional Bottom-Line TV Approach

- Cut resources
- Cut staff
- Get younger
- **Quick & sensational** stories: breaking news, fires, murders, weather, etc.

*Higgins-Dobney & Sussman (2013); Waldman (2011)*
CBS12 Investigates

Old Makeup, Brushes, Sponges
Causing Skin Irritations and Aging

WPEC-TV, West Palm Beach
Quality Sells

Higher-quality news associated with:

- Larger audiences
- More revenue

“To build the news around something other than public affairs is to build it on sand.”

Belt & Just (2008); Cho et al. (2004); Patterson (2000); Sridhar et al. (2011)
Does quality investigative journalism sell?
Quality Investigative Journalism

1. Original reporting
2. Concealed information
3. Public Interest

Benjaminson & Anderson (1990); DeFleur (1997)
Quality Investigative Journalism

1. Original reporting

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3. Public Interest

Benjaminson & Anderson (1990); DeFleur (1997)
Concealed Information

Original evidence that would otherwise be hidden from the public

• Deliberately suppressed

• Concealed by law

• Widely available, but used to reveal a pattern

de Burgh (2008); Investigative Reporters & Editors (2017)
Concealed Information

- Reciprocal Altruism
- “Cheaters”
Public Interest

A powerful entity (public or private) has harmed someone’s:

• health

• quality of life

• safety

• money or property

*Cordell (2009); Ettema & Glasser (1998)*
Public Interest

Archetypal “myths” or “themes”

• Big guy vs. little guy
• Individualism
• Journalist restores order in a senseless world

Content Analysis

• 2014-15

• 80 stations (NYC to Glendive, MT)

• 394 newscasts

• 398 stories
Data Analysis

Control Variables:

- Public ownership
- Market size
- Competition
H1: Investigative Quantity

All Stations (N=80)

Investigative Stories + TV Ratings

β = -.124

Not supported
H2: Investigative Quality

Stations conducting investigative journalism (n=38)

Concealed Information + Supported TV Ratings

β

.361**

**p<.01
H3: Investigative Quality

Stations conducting investigative journalism (n=38)

Public Interest ➔ TV Ratings

+ 

β

Not supported
H4: Investigative Quality

Stations conducting investigative journalism (n=38)

Investigative Quality Score + 

TV Ratings 

Supported

\[ \beta = .385^{**} \]

\[ **p < .01 \]
H5: Investigative Quality

Stations conducting investigative journalism (n=38)

Investigative Story Length + Supported +

TV Ratings  \( \beta = .305^* \)

*\( p < .05 \)
Summary

Quality Factors associated with larger audiences:

• Investigative Quality Score (overall quality)

• Concealed Information

• Investigative Story Length
Summary

Factors **NOT** associated with larger audiences:

- Investigative **Quantity**
- Public Interest
Conclusions

• Investigative journalism helps solve the commercial news dilemma

• Concealed information: worth the “dig”

• Quality > Quantity
Thank you.