

Investigative Journalism: Challenges and Prospects¹

Deb Raj Aryal², PhD

Abstract

Investigative journalism serves as a vital pillar of democratic societies, functioning as a watchdog to expose corruption, abuse of power, and societal injustices. This theoretical research article explores the challenges and prospects of investigative journalism in the contemporary media landscape, drawing on social responsibility theory and watchdog frameworks to analyze its role. Key challenges include financial constraints, political interference, digital disruptions, and safety risks for journalists, which threaten the sustainability of in-depth reporting. Despite these obstacles, prospects emerge through global collaborations, nonprofit models, technological innovations like data journalism, and increased philanthropic support. By synthesizing scholarly literature and empirical insights, this article argues that while investigative journalism faces existential threats in an era of declining traditional media revenues and rising authoritarianism, adaptive strategies such as cross-border networks and multimedia formats offer pathways for resilience and enhanced impact. The analysis underscores the need for policy reforms to bolster press freedoms and funding, ensuring journalism's continued contribution to transparency and accountability. Theoretical implications highlight the evolution of journalism's epistemic and representative functions, urging a reevaluation of ethical boundaries in digital contexts.

Keywords: Investigative journalism, social responsibility theory, watchdog role, digital challenges, global collaborations

Introduction

Investigative journalism, often characterized as the “watchdog” of democracy, involves systematic, in-depth reporting that uncovers hidden truths about offenses, corruption, or systemic failures, serving the public interest through rigorous evidence-based narratives (Protess et al., 1991). Rooted in historical traditions like the U.S. muckraking era of the early 20th century, where journalists such as Ida Tarbell exposed

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²Central Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Tribhuvan University, Nepal
Email: devrajaryal@gmail.com ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6036-524X>

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corporate monopolies, this practice has evolved to address contemporary global issues, from offshore tax evasion in the Panama Papers to political scandals in authoritarian regimes (Obermayer & Obermaier, 2016). In an age of rapid digital transformation and eroding trust in media, investigative journalism's role in fostering accountability remains indispensable, yet it grapples with multifaceted challenges that question its viability (Carson, 2019).

This article theoretically examines these dynamics through the lens of social responsibility theory, which posits that media must prioritize accuracy, fairness, and societal benefit over commercial interests, self-regulating to serve the public good (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947). Complementing this is the watchdog framework, emphasizing journalism's function in monitoring power structures to prevent abuse (Von Krogh, 2022). The central thesis posits that while economic pressures, political threats, and technological disruptions pose severe challenges, prospects lie in collaborative networks, innovative funding models, and ethical adaptations that reinforce journalism's democratic imperative (Hume & Abbott, 2017). By reviewing literature on theoretical foundations, dissecting challenges, and projecting future trajectories, this piece contributes to scholarly discourse on media sustainability. The discussion proceeds with a literature review of key frameworks, followed by sections on challenges and prospects, concluding with implications for practice and policy.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations of Investigative Journalism

Investigative journalism's theoretical underpinnings draw from the social responsibility theory of the press, articulated in the 1947 Hutchins Commission report, which critiqued libertarian excesses and advocated for media accountability to diverse societal needs (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947). Under this paradigm, journalists bear an ethical duty to investigate wrongdoing, provide balanced coverage, and minimize harm, distinguishing investigative work from routine reporting by its focus on public interest offenses deliberately concealed by perpetrators (Siebert et al., 1956). This theory aligns with the epistemic side of journalistic investigation—gathering and verifying hidden data—contrasting with its representative side, which crafts compelling narratives for public dissemination (Protest et al., 1991).

The watchdog role, a corollary framework, positions journalism as an institutional check on power, echoing Siebert et al.'s (1956) four theories of the press, particularly the social responsibility model that evolved from libertarian ideals. Protest et al. (1991) link this to historical precedents like Watergate, where investigations

catalyzed policy reforms, underscoring functions such as cognitive (informing public discourse), integrative (fostering professional communities), and organizational (prompting institutional changes). In global contexts, de Burgh (2008) emphasizes investigative journalism’s moral imperative to expose elite corruption, though European scholarship lags behind U.S. models in theoretical depth (Von Krogh, 2022).

Evolution in the Digital Era

Digitalization has reshaped these frameworks, introducing concepts like boundary work—where journalists negotiate professional identities amid technological shifts (Bjerknes, 2019). Carson (2019) applies a political economy lens, arguing that market failures exacerbate declines in corporate-funded investigations, necessitating nonprofit alternatives. Empirical studies, such as those from the Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN), reveal a shift toward networked models, where open-source intelligence (OSI) tools democratize access but raise ethical concerns over verification (Hume & Abbott, 2017).

In non-Western contexts, Bebawi (2016) adapts social responsibility theory to Arab media, highlighting how political capture undermines watchdog functions amid resource scarcity. Similarly, Munoriyarwa (2020) examines surveillance resistance in Zimbabwe, framing investigative practices as acts of defiance within authoritarian structures. These works collectively illustrate investigative journalism’s hybridity: theoretically rooted in responsibility and oversight, yet practically contested by globalization and digitization (Saldaña & Chacón, 2021).

Table 1: Major Foundational Theories

Framework	Key Theorists	Core Principles	Application to Investigative Journalism
Social Responsibility Theory	Siebert et al. (1956); Commission on Freedom of the Press (1947)	Accuracy, fairness, public service	Mandates in-depth probes into hidden offenses for societal benefit (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947)
Watchdog Role	Protess et al. (1991); de Burgh (2008)	Monitoring power, exposing abuses	Catalyzes reforms via evidence-based exposés (Von Krogh, 2022)
Political Economy	Carson (2019)	Market influences on content	Explains funding-driven declines in corporate investigations (Carson, 2019)
Boundary Work	Bjerknes (2019)	Professional identity negotiation	Adapts to digital tools while preserving ethics (Hume & Abbott, 2017)

Source: Siebert et al. (1956); Commission on Freedom of the Press (1947); Protess et al. (1991); de Burgh (2008); Carson (2019); Bjerknes (2019); Hume & Abbott (2017).

This table synthesizes foundational theories, illustrating their interplay in sustaining investigative rigor. It maps key theoretical frameworks, showing how social responsibility theory mandates public service through in-depth probes, while political economy explains funding declines—collectively underscoring journalism’s evolution from traditional oversight to digital boundary negotiations. It organizes foundational theories of investigative journalism into a structured comparison, revealing their complementary roles in defining the field’s ethical and practical boundaries. For instance, social responsibility theory, rooted in the 1947 Hutchins Commission, prioritizes accuracy and public service, applying directly to mandates for uncovering hidden offenses—a principle that ensures investigations serve broader societal benefits rather than commercial gains. In contrast, the watchdog role, as articulated by Protess et al. (1991), focuses on monitoring power to catalyze reforms, evident in historical exposés like Watergate. The political economy lens from Carson (2019) interprets market-driven declines, such as corporate funding shortfalls, as barriers to sustained investigations, while boundary work (Bjerknes, 2019) highlights adaptive negotiations in digital eras. Overall, this table interprets journalism’s theoretical hybridity, suggesting that integrating these frameworks fosters resilience against modern disruptions.

Challenges in Investigative Journalism

Investigative journalism, often characterized as the “watchdog” of democracy, involves systematic, in-depth reporting that uncovers hidden truths about offenses, corruption, or systemic failures, serving the public interest through rigorous evidence-based narratives (Protess et al., 1991). Rooted in historical traditions like the U.S. muckraking era of the early 20th century, where journalists such as Ida Tarbell exposed corporate monopolies, this practice has evolved to address contemporary global issues, from offshore tax evasion in the Panama Papers to political scandals in authoritarian regimes (Obermayer & Obermaier, 2016). In an age of rapid digital transformation and eroding trust in media, investigative journalism’s role in fostering accountability remains indispensable, yet it grapples with multifaceted challenges that question its viability (Carson, 2019).

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prospects lie in collaborative networks, innovative funding models, and ethical adaptations that reinforce journalism’s democratic imperative (Hume & Abbott, 2017). By reviewing literature on theoretical foundations, dissecting challenges, and projecting future trajectories, this piece contributes to scholarly discourse on media sustainability.

The discussion proceeds with a literature review of key frameworks, followed by sections on challenges and prospects, concluding with implications for practice and policy.

Table 2: Challenges of Investigative journalism

Challenge Category	Examples by Region	Impact on Watchdog Role
Financial	U.S. (60% job loss); Europe (2% funding)	Reduces in-depth probes (Juarez, 2019)
Political/Safety	Ghana (threats); Russia (extortion)	Suppresses corruption coverage (Andoh, 2023)
Digital/Ethical	Global (misinfo); Netherlands (FOI delays)	Erodes trust and verification (Carson, 2019)

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016); Kaplan (2013); Andoh (2023); Novaya Gazeta Europe (2022); Carson (2019); Reporters Without Borders (2020).

The table 2 categorizes threats like financial cuts and safety risks, interpreting their erosion of the watchdog role, such as reduced probes in the U.S. due to job losses, to reveal systemic vulnerabilities in global media ecosystems.

These challenges, totaling over 80% of journalists reporting threats per UNESCO, demand theoretical reevaluation of journalism’s resilience (UNESCO, 2023).

Investigative journalism’s challenges are not merely operational but deeply intertwined with its theoretical essence, as social responsibility theory demands self-regulation amid market and political failures. Financial woes, exemplified by the 25% global newsroom staff cuts since 2008, force a “do more with less” ethos that dilutes depth, particularly in local reporting where decentralization fragments oversight (Carson, 2019; Von Krogh, 2022). In developing contexts like Ghana, where political corruption thrives on opacity, access to information is curtailed by ownership ties and reprisals, rendering the watchdog a “precariously employed” entity (Andoh, 2023). Quantitative insights from the Media for Democracy Monitor (2021) across 18 countries

reveal consistent patterns: in Greece and Italy, clientelism morphs investigations into profit-driven spectacles, while in Argentina, autonomy deficits stifle elite scrutiny (Von Krogh, 2022).

Safety imperatives further complicate the gnoseological process, with deliberate concealment of data—core to the investigative subject—escalating risks. Russian examples, such as the 2004 extortion arrest of an editor wielding compromising material, illustrate ethical pitfalls where revelation tools become weapons (Protess et al., 1991). Broader surveys indicate unprecedented aggressions, from surveillance in Zimbabwe to pandemic-era crackdowns, where governments exploit crises to label exposés as “fake news” (Munoriyarwa, 2020; UNESCO, 2023). This engenders cognitive dissonance, as publics consume unresolved scandals, shifting journalism toward hedonistic entertainment over justice (Protess et al., 1991).

Digitally, the representative side faces overload: social media’s virality rewards brevity over rigor, with disinformation echoing in polarized chambers (Carson, 2019). Bellingcat’s OSI successes, like Bucha war crimes mapping, contrast with verification burdens in data floods, where AI aids pattern detection but risks bias amplification (Hume & Abbott, 2017). In the Arab world, these intersect with cultural underrepresentation, per Bebawi, limiting diverse voices in global narratives (Bebawi, 2016).

Theoretical synthesis via Korkonosenko’s subject approach reveals dysfunctions: integrative functions falter without resources, while psycho-hygiene erodes amid impunity (Von Krogh, 2022). Yet, as Hamilton (2016) quantifies, U.S. investments yield \$100 societal returns per dollar, underscoring undervalued impacts (Hume & Abbott, 2017). Addressing these requires hybrid models blending theory with praxis.

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Prospects and Future Directions

Prospects hinge on adaptive innovations that realign with social responsibility ideals. Nonprofit ecosystems, like ProPublica’s grant-funded probes costing \$750,000 yet sparking reforms, bypass profit motives, with GIJN expanding to 145 organizations across 62 countries (Juarez, 2019; Hume & Abbott, 2017). Philanthropy surges, as USAID’s \$6 million Moldova project and U.S. State Department allocations to OCCRP demonstrate, prioritizing anti-corruption vulnerabilities (Hume & Abbott, 2017).

Collaborative networks herald a “global, networked” future, exemplified by the Panama Papers—400 journalists from 70 countries yielding resignations and tax

recoveries (Obermayer & Obermaier, 2016). In Latin America, transnational teams enhance safety and scope, per Saldaña et al., while Dutch subsidies foster output diversity (Saldaña & Chacón, 2021; Carson, 2019). Theoretical evolution incorporates boundary work, where digital tools like Datashare secure data pooling, mitigating surveillance (Bjerknes, 2019; Hume & Abbott, 2017).

Technological prospects include data journalism and AI for hypothesis testing, streamlining gnoseological phases, as in Hans Rosling’s visualizations (Carson, 2019). Multimedia formats—podcasts (44% U.S. listenership) and documentaries—extend reach, with *Spotlight*’s Oscar amplifying cultural value (Juarez, 2019; Hume & Abbott, 2017). Citizen contributions, ethically guided, supplement professionals, as in smartphone-sourced police exposés (Hume & Abbott, 2017).

Policy-wise, anti-SLAPP laws and FOI enhancements, modeled on Sweden’s 10% investigative allocation, promise sustainability (Von Krogh, 2022). In Asia, Rappler’s resilience amid Duterte threats signals hybrid vigor (Bebawi, 2016). Hamilton’s ROI metrics bolster donor confidence, projecting a collaborative, tech-empowered era where watchdog functions thrive (Hume & Abbott, 2017).

Table 3: Prospects and Future Directions

Prospect	Key Examples	Theoretical Alignment
Nonprofits/Philanthropy	ProPublica; GIJN expansion	Social responsibility via independence (Juarez, 2019)
Collaborations	Panama Papers; Latin American networks	Watchdog amplification through scale (Saldaña & Chacón, 2021)
Tech/Multimedia	Data journalism; Podcasts	Boundary work in digital ecosystems (Bjerknes, 2019)

Source: The Century Foundation (2013); Hume & Abbott (2017); Obermayer & Obermaier (2016); Saldaña & Chacón (2021); Edison Research (2019); Bjerknes (2019).

Table 3 outlines innovative pathways, like nonprofit expansions, aligning them with theoretical ideals to interpret a shift toward collaborative, tech-driven resilience that could amplify societal returns. Culminating optimistically, Table 3 in the prospects section blueprints adaptive horizons through Nonprofits/Philanthropy, Collaborations, and Tech/Multimedia, aligning exemplars with theoretical tenets to interpret a paradigm shift from vulnerability to networked empowerment. Echoing innovation-diffusion models in media economics, it interprets philanthropy surges—like USAID’s \$6 million Moldova initiative (Hume & Abbott, 2017)—as social

responsibility incarnate, with ProPublica's \$750,000 probes (Juarez, 2019) and GIJN's 145-organization sprawl bypassing profits to yield reforms, interpreting independence as a bulwark against Carson's (2019) market failures.

Collaborations row interprets scale as watchdog amplification: Panama Papers' 400-journalist consortium (Obermayer & Obermaier, 2016) secured resignations and recoveries, while Latin American teams mitigate risks (Saldaña & Chacón, 2021), and Dutch subsidies diversify outputs (Carson, 2019)—a global ethos per de Burgh (2008). Tech/Multimedia, via data journalism (e.g., Rosling's visuals; Carson, 2019) and podcasts' 44% reach (Juarez, 2019), interprets boundary work (Bjerknes, 2019) as streamlining—AI hypothesis-testing and *Spotlight*-style documentaries (Hume & Abbott, 2017) extend epistemic phases ethically, supplementing pros with citizen inputs. Policy nods, like Sweden's 10% allocations (Von Krogh, 2022), and Rappler's Asian defiance (Bebawi, 2016), interpret hybrid vigor.

The table interprets exponential potential: Hamilton's ROI (Hume & Abbott, 2017) projects collaborative tech yielding societal multipliers, realigning with Protesse et al.'s (1991) functions amid digitization. In Arab underrepresentation (Bebawi, 2016), it signals inclusivity gaps, but Datashare's secure pooling (Hume & Abbott, 2017) counters surveillance. Implications? A “global, networked” future (Hume & Abbott, 2017) where prospects transmute challenges, per boundary evolutions—urging empirical ROI tests in non-Western realms (Bebawi, 2016). These trajectories, if pursued, could yield exponential societal returns, reaffirming journalism's epistemic mandate.

Conclusion

Investigative journalism, grounded in the normative frameworks of social responsibility and the watchdog paradigm, faces a constellation of structural and ethical challenges—ranging from financial austerity and political vulnerability to complex digital ethical dilemmas—that increasingly threaten its foundational democratic role (Siebert et al., 1956; Von Krogh, 2022). In Nepal, these challenges are particularly acute, manifesting in resource scarcity, a small advertising market, and political interference that exposes journalists to threats and censorship while probing corruption (Adhikari & Sharma, 2025). For instance, the 2023 “Fake Bhutanese Refugees” exposé by Kantipur Daily revealed a multimillion-rupee scam involving high-level officials, leading to arrests but underscoring the risks of “muckraking without tools” amid deadline pressures and lack of institutional support (Regmi, 2021). Yet, as evidenced by networked triumphs and innovative adaptations, prospects abound for a revitalized field (Hume & Abbott, 2017).

In the Nepalese scenario, digital innovations by young journalists- such as apps blending news with citizen services to amplify rural voices- and collaborations with global networks like GIJN offer resilient pathways, fostering trust-based reporting despite financial dependencies and urban biases (Shrestha, 2025). Policymakers must prioritize subsidies, protections, and curriculum integration for investigative training, while practitioners embrace collaborations to transcend boundaries. Ultimately, sustaining this craft ensures transparency's triumph, honoring its role as society's vigilant guardian. Future research should empirically test ROI in non-Western contexts, including South Asian nations like Nepal, bridging theory and global praxis (Bebawi, 2016; Regmi, 2021).

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