

Investigative journalism: a case for intensive care?

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Abstract

Is Investigative Journalism in the UK dying or can a 'Fifth Estate' model resuscitate it? This paper is an examination of whether the American subscription and donation models such as ProPublica, Spot.US and Truthout are the way forward.

In January 2009 a group of the UK's top investigative journalists met privately to discuss 'What is to be done?' about the perceived perilous state of investigative journalism. There is profound concern that the traditional media either no longer has, or wishes to employ the resources to maintain a sustainable level of investigative journalism. While the Iraq War and the Credit Crunch have revealed the desperate need for better in-depth investigative reporting, the number of viable outlets has contracted.

Investigative journalism is accepted as a core determinant of high quality journalism. The need for a critical mass of investigative journalists is widely perceived as vital to democracy as characterized by Carlyle's 'Fourth Estate' model.

The UK group is currently examining the US experience where long standing non-profit organisations like the Centre for Public Integrity and the Centre for Investigative Journalism have used the combined foundation and donation funding model. But new 'Fifth Estate' web based models are also being innovated. ProPublica, which employs a substantial number of experienced journalists, is funded by a wealthy philanthropist. Spot.US posts possible investigative projects and appeals to the public to donate to fund specific identified investigations.

This paper will address whether new funding models can be employed in the UK.

Keywords: investigative journalism; journalists; fourth estate; fifth estate; donation;

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Introduction

The investigative journalist has featured in many a movie as a seedy if honest figure who uncovers the conspiracy whatever the personal cost. But in the most recent cinematic portrayal of a British investigative journalist, in director Paul Greengrass's *The Bourne Ultimatum*, the probing reporter is peremptorily assassinated by a CIA hitman before he gets the story. It's a prescient metaphor for the current state of investigative journalism in Britain.

The death of investigative journalism has been often and prematurely announced¹. Today, even the most optimistic apostle for the resilience of investigative journalism would recognise that the genre is fighting for a sustainable future. The crisis for investigative journalism falls within seismic changes in the media, where newspapers face decline and TV is accused of no greater ambition than to be a ratings machine. This is against the backdrop of the inexorable rise of the internet where anyone can be a publisher.

Context

In communications theory the role of the media in a liberal democracy is often characterized as that of the *fourth estate*, journalists as the guardians of the public interest. In the first written reference, Carlyle quoted the earlier philosopher Edmund Burke as having said: "... there were Three Estates in Parliament; but, in the Reporters' Gallery yonder, there sat a Fourth Estate more important far than they all." (Carlyle 1841).

The *fourth estate* concept has become the shorthand for tasking the media to bring the errant state and powerful to account. The media draws heavily on its *fourth estate* role for legitimacy, seeking privileges and exclusions from legislation on the basis of that function. The genre of journalism known as investigative journalism is frequently seen to exercise a *fourth estate* function.

"Investigative Journalism has helped bring down governments, imprison politicians, trigger legislation, reveal miscarriages of justice and shame corporations. Even today, when much of the media colludes with power and when viciousness and sensationalism are staples of formerly high-minded media, investigative journalists can stand up for the powerless, the exploited, the truth" [Professor Hugo de Burgh](#) in [Investigative Journalism](#). (de Burgh 2008)

[John Pilger](#) is wary of the label investigative journalist, preferring the idea of the maverick, campaigning journalist. But he harbours no circumspection over the value of the craft. In *Tell Me No Lies: Investigative Journalism and Its Triumphs*, he praises the late Paul Foot's eleven year investigation into the 1989 Lockerbie bombing as a shining example of the genre. *"Why is journalism like this so important? Without it our sense of*

¹(Lashmar, 2000)

injustice would lose its vocabulary and people would not be armed with the information they need to fight it. Orwell's truth that 'to be corrupted by totalitarianism, one does not have to live in a totalitarian country' would then apply." (Pilger, 2005)

[Professor Steve Barnett](#) has observed that a fundamental premise is that a vigorous journalistic culture – and in particular challenging investigative journalism – is vital for a healthy democracy. He says: *"Without it, executive or corporate wrongdoing will not only continue but can eventually corrupt the body politic. I believe that this process of investigative journalism – of breaking important stories rather than simply reporting or recycling public relations handouts – is under serious threat."* (Allan, 2005, pg 329)

If investigative journalism is in decline that presupposes there have been better times. Whether there has been a 'golden age' of investigative is a matter of debate. If there was, it is widely perceived to be the 1970s and 80s, in the wake of 1974 [Watergate scandal](#). The 1970s saw television create a high quality, fiery brand of investigative journalism whereby John Pilger, *World in Action* and *This Week* took on the Vietnam war, torture and fascism, industrial disease and injury, child labour, major miscarriages of justice and major corruption stories. Hugo de Burgh also identifies a boom in TV investigative journalism in the mid 1990s.²

Many of the media's most outstanding ethical, moral or legal challenges against the State and the powerful over recent decades have been undertaken by journalists that are employed as investigative journalists.³ Therefore the bulk of the media's *fourth estate* role has fallen to a relatively small number of journalists. [The Centre for Investigative Journalism](#) uses a figure of around 75 to 125 working reporters in the UK who are readily identified as specialising in serious investigations.

Recent changes

Investigative journalism exists in a media landscape that is rapidly changing:

- The globalization of the media has resulted in a smaller number of more powerful corporations.
- Dramatic and continuing cutbacks in staff and resources in the traditional media
- Downward pressures result in editorial subject matter that has less to do with the public interest and more to do with potential entertainment value.
- Relaxation of the public service requirement on non BBC broadcasting companies has allowed some of them to dispense with in depth current affairs.
- The costs of legal actions against the media are now a major deterrent against probing confrontational journalism in the cash strapped media.

² "An systematic trawl of a database for 1995 (*Programme Reports, 1995*) suggests that in that year alone on UK terrestrial television there were 300 discrete programmes that could be classified as investigative, this total excluding magazine programmes with investigative elements." (de Burgh 2008, pp 6). It is worth noting that many of the programmes cited no longer exist and few have been replaced.

³ For a list see de Burgh, 2009

- The rise of the internet is having a profound effect on the traditional media.

There is a wide perception the quality of the traditional media is in decline. This is supported by growing body of empirical research, most notably by Cardiff University. (Lewis et al 2008) (Davies 2008) One of their most disturbing findings was the high percentage of apparently self generated stories in the national mainstream news media that was in practice taken directly from PR material or news agencies.

In January 2009 the Reuters Institute published a detailed analysis of the likely impact of the digital revolution on the economics of news publishing in the UK. Among the conclusions of the report was that, in the UK and elsewhere, news publishers are increasingly building digitally mechanised factories, equipped to feed content to a range of media platforms, all day and all week.

“Under pressure to exploit content across multiple platforms, many publishers are morphing into a form that favours the processing rather than the generation of content.” The report goes on to conclude that the PR industry is booming as journalism restricts its proactive remit: *“PR’s route to the audience has never been so straightforward. Increasingly, the news that is available to UK citizens is developed by people presenting the interests of their clients, rather than those of diverse media, but this shift is rarely transparent.”* (Currah 2009)

Among news and current affairs professionals it is widely believed that investigative journalism has suffered disproportionately in the current media environment. Former Sunday Times Insight team editor, [Stephen Grey](#) claims that cutbacks have severely reduced the number of investigative journalists able to work in the UK. *“I think it’s been absolutely savage in Great Britain. It’s quite a long trend that’s been going. You have seen major investigation shows in Britain collapse. There is very little investigation going on - Telly as well as newspapers.”* (Stourton, 2009)

Another former Sunday Times Investigative journalist Nick Fielding claimed in May 2009 that there is 'very little serious investigative journalism is going on' in the UK. Citing job losses at the Guardian and industry speculation over the future of the Independent newspaper, Fielding said of the British Press: "It's an industry which is massively in crisis at the moment." (Townend, 2009)

Hard evidence?

So is there hard evidence that the number of investigative journalists and outlets are really in decline? To establish conclusive trends over time for investigative journalism is fraught with empirical problems. Investigative journalism is not yet extinct so it is still a question of degree. Not all investigative journalists spend all their time investigating. Anyone can call themselves an investigative journalist, as there is no professional qualification. Equally many reporters who do not operate under the moniker undertake occasional or one-off investigations. In television, most investigative journalism has been broadcast within current affairs series like *Panorama* and *Dispatches*. Distinguishing

exactly which programme is investigative and which is not, is a difficult task. There are TV and radio series of investigative journalism but they tend to be short lived and a small part of the overall canon.

Appendix A contains four charts showing the number of major UK Newspaper, TV, radio and magazine outlets offering investigative journalism, over time since 1970.

(There are many variables that prevent a straight statistical analysis.⁴ The author intends to develop and refine this data.⁵)

Observations

While, at this point, the chart remains crude, certain trends emerge. Observations from the chart were supported by a literature review and conversations with working journalists. For the last decade a debate about declining media standards and resources has occurred within the media and academy. Anecdotal observations give an insight to changes over time.

Newspapers

While the number of investigative journalists grew through the 1970s into the 1980s, a relative stable number existed across the industry in 1980s and 1990s. The 2000s have seen a shedding of jobs. The proportion of reporters on staff who are readily identifiable as investigative journalists would now seem lower than any time since 1980.

TV

Again the 1970s and 1980s the number of venues for investigative journalism grows. There is a sudden boom in the mid 1990s, especially for programmes dedicated to investigative journalism. But it is relatively short lived. Major TV news organizations, the BBC, C4 News, and to a lesser extent ITN and Sky retain some investigative capability. The core of investigative practice is retained within BBC1's *Panorama*, C4's *Dispatches* and in a more popular format *Tonight with Trevor McDonald*. The stand alone investigative strand has disappeared. There has been a major move from staff to freelance employment.

Radio

Investigative journalism on radio has held up better than the other media and is now as ever almost all delivered within the BBC umbrella. In BBC radio there remains a strong tradition of probing journalism based on the public interest. Radio 4 and to a lesser extent Radio 5 deliver accessible programmes on subjects long since rejected by counterpart TV editors as too worthy and ratings death. These programmes include *File on Four*, *The Investigators*, *Face the Facts* and *You and Yours*. *The World Service* is often forgotten

⁴ In TV and radio, the number of strands, the number of programmes per strand, the programme length, the transmission time, the type of staff, changes in editorial selection of material. Separating out the perceived demise of investigative journalism from the perceived demise in current affairs is also a challenge for academic research.

⁵ Future charts will include: an estimates of the number of investigative staff employed in UK TV, radio, newspaper and magazine journalism over the period 1970 - 2009. The author is also configuring a related research project that looks at the casualisation of investigative journalism.

but produces high quality in depth investigations. Radio is the one bright light in this report.

Magazines

Outside the mainstream media a small number of magazines have hosted outstanding investigative journalism over the years including *Private Eye*, *New Statesman*, *Time Out*, *City Life* and *Computer Weekly*. *Private Eye* is still active, as is *Computer Weekly* on an occasional basis but other magazines rarely now undertake investigations or no longer exist.

Does Investigative Journalism still have a value?

In evaluating investigative journalism over the last four decades, consideration must be made to the societal changes that have occurred to the audience. These include fluctuations in audience interest in investigations both in terms of specific stories or more generally. What do the public want to watch, listen to or read now compared to 1970? The former editor of *C4 Dispatches*, Dorothy Byrne said in 1999 that she believes it is more and more difficult to surprise audiences with investigative journalism because they increasingly believe corruption to be widespread. (de Burgh, 2008)

Most investigative journalists would prefer the audience to perceive their genre as reflecting the highest standards of journalism, but in truth the genre has always had a seamy side and by no means confined to tabloid newspapers. Journalists' justifications for breaching the privacy of the individual have to be weighed on the scales of public interest. Too often the scales tip the wrong way. The increasing obsession with celebrity has seen investigative techniques utilised to more prurient ends. Professor de Burgh in the introduction to the second edition of his text book on investigative journalism has some salutary observations about changes since it was first published back in 2000.

“In the first edition of this book there was enthusiasm about investigative journalism: as a distinct genre of journalism; as a vital means of accountability, almost the fourth estate itself; as the rough draft of legislation. Then it was widely thought that investigative journalism was a valuable public service endangered by new technology and crass management. Now when every medium trumpets its work as investigative journalism, it is often written off just another squalid trick up the sleeves of money-grubbing media moguls. Fashions change.”(de Burgh 2008)

There is little doubt that editors still value investigative journalism as an attention grabber, for revenue if not for democratic service. Important, well executed, investigations are still a major draw of readers and viewers. Even those editors who are not prepared to invest in investigative journalism will exploit the kudos it provides, by recasting routine journalism as an investigation.⁶

There is mounting criticism that media news organizations are now little more than a mediation service for Public Relations, investigative journalism is offered as a partial antidote. (Currah, 2009) (Lewis et al, 2008) Investigative journalists point out that their

⁶ The author has had personal experience of this trend.

form of journalism is the antithesis of press release generated news as they pride themselves on generating their own unique stories.

Neither is there is a shortage of potential recruits to investigative journalism. There is a small but regular demand for investigative journalism training in Universities. City University's MA in Investigative Journalism recruits 20+ high caliber applicants a year. Investigative Journalism training seminars by the top proponents sell out.

The Future.

The perception among investigative journalists is that there will be fewer and fewer 'homes' for investigative journalism. As observed above, the BBC now provides a disproportionately high percentage of the remaining investigative journalism.

The BBC paradox

There is a paradox. There is no argument that the BBC broadcasts excellent investigative journalism. The expectation for any home for investigative journalism must be that it will not shirk the *fourth estate* role, on which the credibility of all journalism rests.

To challenge the State and by definition the Government of the day journalism must be robust and independent. The BBC might have theoretical independence through a board of governors but is funded by the licence fee and its existence and charter is legislated by the Government. Historically there have been many occasions, especially before 1970, when the BBC has been far too close to the Government. There has also been a long history of confrontation between government and the BBC. The *Real Lives* episode and The Zircon affair of the 1980s were high profile examples.

But the most high profile and recent confrontation lead to the [Hutton Inquiry](#). Most readers will be familiar with these events and we will not repeat them here. They stem from [Andrew Gilligan](#)'s two-way broadcast in 2003 accusing the Government of willful distortion in a dossier published to support UK intervention against Saddam Hussein.

The Hutton inquiry has had a long term impact on the BBC. While BBC editors maintain that they would investigate wrongdoing at the highest levels without fear or favour, the author's conversations with experienced BBC journalists suggest a more varied landscape, and no little hint at self censorship. Since Hutton the BBC has not gone head to head with the government over an investigation and until it does we will not be able to judge the BBC's mettle.

Should the BBC be the primary upholder of the *fourth estate* even if by default? Bruce Ackerman and Ian Ayres professors of law at Yale University observed in a recent Guardian article. "The problem with a BBC-style solution is clear enough. It is one thing for government to serve as one source of investigation but quite another for it to dominate the field. A near-monopoly would mean the death of critical inquiry."

It appears that no one is saying that there is no public demand for a contemporary investigative journalism, only that no one wants to pay for it. Stephen Grey, the

investigative journalist who revealed much of the CIA's rendition programme, says that the one cheering factor about investigative journalism is that there is still a public demand for serious revelation. *"That's why I am not totally pessimistic because every piece of what we find out as investigative reporters people want to hear, they want to know about the CIA's rendition programme."* (Stourton, 2009)

A critical mass?

Aside from the reduced number of staff investigative journalists who report reductions in resources available to them, experienced freelance investigative journalists report they are finding it hard to get new commissions. Few younger reporters are now able to migrate into investigative journalism. There are now so few full time working investigative journalists, the question is whether it possible to sustain a critical mass of such reporters who are experienced and schooled in the difficult professional, legal and ethical aspects of the craft. One of the biggest problems is that freelancers says they now find that the media have largely stopped providing 'seed money' for experienced journalists to make the detailed inquiries often needed to ascertain whether a story is viable. Even if the story is later published this cost is rarely reimbursed in retrospect.

In the past news journalists, especially investigative journalists, were at pains to distance themselves from the sources of funding for their organizations. There is now recognition that such delicacies are no longer possible. A rump of investigative journalists who are currently practicing feel that innovation is needed. They say there is a desperate need for a mechanism for seed funding news projects and that new sustainable 'homes' need to be developed that bring continuity of experience and funding. There has been serious discussion for some time among investigative journalists about creating new business and publishing models to pay for the work.

In January 2009 more than a dozen investigative journalists some with 40 years of experience, supported by advisers with legal and financial expertise, gathered in London's Soho to discuss what could be done to keep investigative journalism healthy. Those present included the freelance Stephen Grey, Gavin McFadyean of the Centre for Investigative Journalism, David Leigh of The Guardian, freelance Nick Davies, freelance Andrew Jennings and the author (the London Group). They opened a running discussion about new ways to reinvigorate investigative journalism.

The United States, where investigative journalism faces similar problems, has already seen a great deal of innovation to revitalise investigative journalism. But US models are not a straight fit for the UK, as the organization and funding of the media in US has been different. In the US the public service broadcasters survive by a donation and foundation model. In the US there are many foundations that provide, by UK standards, massive sums to maintain quality and standards in journalism.

In March 2009 Arianna Huffington at the online news site [Huffington Post](http://www.huffpost.com) made \$1.75m available for investigative reporting. Her comments about funding are perceptive: *"In the two biggest stories of our recent time - the war in Iraq and our financial meltdown - investigative journalism did not fulfill its mission," Huffington said: "We all have a real*

stake in not only preserving what investigative journalism is but in making it better.....And there are very many talented journalists who are out of a job. So we are bringing together supply and demand." (Guardian, 2009)

The Washington DC based [Fund for Investigative Reporting](#) has provides funds for seeding stories in the US for many years. There is no UK equivalent.⁷

At the time of writing a new donation model of investigative journalism, the Manhattan based [ProPublica](#), is still within its first year. ProPublica is led by Paul Steiger, a former managing editor of The Wall Street Journal. Lead funding comes from the Sandler Foundation, with philanthropist Herbert Sandler serving as Chairman of ProPublica and other leading philanthropies also provide support.

"ProPublica is an independent, non-profit newsroom that produces investigative journalism in the public interest. Our work focuses exclusively on truly important stories, stories with "moral force." We do this by producing journalism that shines a light on exploitation of the weak by the strong and on the failures of those with power to vindicate the trust placed in them.

Importantly, ProPublica editors retains the journalist's imperative that investigative reporting is at its best when it makes attention grabbing headlines. ProPublica has the advantage of high level access to the NY Times, CBS 60 Minutes, and PBS Frontline as well as many well-known regional papers.

The concept of investigative journalism operating externally to the traditional media funded by a mix of sources including donations has been given the title 'The fifth estate model.'

Also important are two other US models. Both have national mainstream print and TV outlets and connections. They are both University based, and address major, national scandals. The first is collaboration between a university journalism department and media organization. The high profile investigative journalist, [Lowell Bergman](#), has developed a base at University of California – Berkeley, Graduate School of Journalism where with University and private foundation support Bergman brings graduate students into professional practice with PBS Frontline and the New York Times. Both organizations have offices within his building and he and his students have won the Pulitzer Prize in 2004 for investigative reporting.

The second centres round [Chuck Lewis](#), the founder of the [Center for Public Integrity](#) and President of the [Fund for Independence in Journalism](#). Both organizations have raised millions in donations to support investigative research and reporting. He is based in the School of Communications, American University in Washington DC and like the Berkeley case produces investigative reporting with University and foundation support.

⁷ The Fund was founded in 1969 by the late Philip M. Stern and has consistently provided grants to investigative journalists outside the mainstream journalism. it should be noted provides only small support funds, mostly to projects already under way that are in need of completion funds.

Another distinct difference with the UK is that enlightened listeners, viewer and readers in the US are used to dipping their hands in their pockets to support public service broadcasting and publication. That said recent internet journalism ventures like [Truthout](#), have found that donations in the post credit crunch world difficult to come by. Its mail-outs feature nearly as many pleas for donation as it does stories.⁸

Those looking for new outlets for investigative journalism recognise that the internet offers the greatest opportunities and yet is the biggest challenge. On the one hand it's a cheap means of distribution that can reach potentially huge audiences. On the other hand readers do not expect to pay for information on the internet. Only a tiny number of media organisations have successful subscription models working on the internet. These are largely business publications like the FT selling highly specialized information to customers who are prepared to pay for the privilege.

[Spot.US](#)

Another internet approach is being taken by Spot.US, a community based investigatory website within a very specific region. It engages with its local public by asking them what they think should be investigated. It also lists potential stories offered up for research by journalists and the site's visitors are requested to offer donations, no matter how small which accumulate until such time that investigation becomes viable (or not). Spot.US is a nonprofit project of the Center for Media Change and funded by various groups like the Knight Foundation. It describes itself on its website:

"We are an open source project, to pioneer "community funded reporting." Through Spot.US the public can commission journalists to do investigations on important and perhaps overlooked stories... ..It's a marketplace where independent reporters, community members and news organizations can come together and collaborate.

Spot.US appears to be a successful model in a particular context but does have its limitations. For journalists to flag up their targets, especially in a fourth estate context, before they investigate would create a raft of problems. It's always been a maxim of good investigative journalism not to tip off your target earlier than is absolutely necessary. Another example of low-cost journalistic enterprise is the [Voice of San Diego.com](#), a website responsible for the recent dismissal of two redevelopment agency chiefs, one of whom is facing criminal charges. Launched in 2005, it has a young staff of less than a dozen. Its audience is small, about 18,000 monthly unique visitors. The Voice of San Diego has several wealthy backers who are not demanding a 100% return on their 'investment'. But they have seen increasing revenue come back from the San Diego constituencies from advertising. It is small and has a loyal local base.

"Voice is doing really significant work, driving the agenda on redevelopment and some other areas, putting local politicians and businesses on the hot seat," says Dean Nelson, director of the journalism courses at a San Diego university. "I have them come into my classes, and I introduce them as, 'This is the future of journalism.'" (Greenslade, 2008)

⁸ Truthout is more an aggregator featuring articles op-ed in tone rather than investigative.

The [MinnPost](#), based in Minneapolis, is a much more business-minded site, with a start up fund of \$1.5m from several founders, including Joel Kramer, a former editor and publisher of the city's Star Tribune newspaper. Started last year, it sells advertising and seeks readers' donations. There are only five full-time employees, but it uses more than 40 paid freelance contributors. (Greenslade, 2008)

Writing recently in the Guardian, Yale academics Bruce Ackerman and Ian Ayres made a strong case for a national endowment to fund investigative journalism: *“The crisis in reporting comes at the worst possible time, when a broad range of industries are lining up for big bail-outs. We generally oppose government efforts to second-guess the market. But this case really is special. Liberal democracy can survive a crisis in the auto or construction industry, but it cannot do without a vibrant fourth estate.* (Ackerman and Ayres, 2009)

The difficulties faced by UK and European investigative journalists is perhaps reflected in that the Belgium based, [European Fund for Investigative Journalism](#), launched in March of this year with a fund of just Euros 20,000 for distribution.⁹ This is in stark contrast to the US where, even in stricken times, millions of dollars have been raised.

UK models

Roy Greenslade observed in 2008 *“In Britain, sadly, there is no innovation on the scale of these many US-based examples. We are, as so often, way behind America in such matters. We are still wedded to centralised mass media, clinging on to models created in the 19th century”*.

“I concede that the US journalism is regionally based, and that does encourage people to launch local projects on a relatively low budget. It's also true that British newspapers, especially at the national level, are still holding power to account (though I'd guess that statement is open to debate too).

The Reuters' Report makes a different but important point: *“Practically, however, there are significant cultural and institutional barriers in the UK, which lags significantly behind other countries in the overall level of philanthropy – notably, the tax benefits that accrue from charitable giving, or the presence of philanthropic institutions and foundations.”* (Currah, 2009)

So what can be done in the UK? The costs of setting up any form of traditional media are prohibitive and no one believes an investigative journalism only magazine or newspaper is viable. The London Group research shows that the most popular model is for a small bureau, with an editor, which assists journalists to conduct investigations with seed money and expertise and then helps sell onto the mainstream media for one time use. Copyright would remain to allow publication on a website to promote the bureau's brand.

⁹ By the end of that month the EFIJ had received applications from 29 journalists requesting grants to the value of Euros145,000.

Using the internet for investigative journalism is still exploratory. The [Guido Fawkes](#) website has scored notable revelations on its mostly political gossip and opinion website. Here is the site's own description of its success:

“Examine the front page media agenda last month: Smeargate, Snouts in the Trough, MPs expenses and of course, the developing “Gordon is bonkers” meme, all topped off nicely with a round of mea culpas on the inside comment pages from the shamed copy takers in the Lobby. Not forgetting the Damian McBride coup de grâce, and resignation tribute. Whose acid house tunes were the media elite humming? Many thanks to you the readers and the advertisers who make this blog more profitable than both the Guardian and Independent combined.”

The legal implications for online publication, with their added international dimension are still developing and unclear. If anything, the early evidence suggests that internet journalists are more vulnerable to legal action. Britain's repressive media law remains a major stumbling block for those who want see the internet's advantages adapted for investigative journalism. The cost of fighting litigation is an increasing problem for the UK media. Appearing before the culture, media and sport select committee, in April 2009, Guardian Editor Alan Rusbridger and Ian Hislop, the editor of Private Eye, said the press was growing wary of running controversial stories about large companies and rich individuals because of the potential cost of dealing with legal action. Rusbridger said that the Guardian had spent £90,000 on pre-publication legal work to make sure a recent series on tax avoidance was free of errors. *“With these kinds of sums, work it out for yourself: there are very few organisations that are going to do that kind of journalism in future faced by that kind of penalty.”* (Tryhorn, 2009)

The philanthropic or large donation model would be the simplest funding model, though not without inherent issues. It would be challenging as there is a very limited history of philanthropy for 'good cause' media initiatives in UK. New donors would have to found and courted. Again Britain's media laws act as a deterrent and major donors may find themselves vulnerable to legal actions where they may be cast as the publishers.

The question is posed as to whether any new model can be partially or self funding using a combination of income streams. There are forms of advertising that could be run without fear of compromise. Micropayments are still in their infancy but appear to have potential. If the public are reluctant to pay subscriptions the argument goes that they may be prepared to make 'micropayments' for access. The problem up to now is that the basic charges for credit card transactions have made this method not viable. However new approaches similar to Paypal are being trialled.¹⁰

Some doubt that payment models would work for funding investigative journalism. *“Except for the financial press, newspapers have failed to convince readers to pay for online access – and there is no reason to think that readers will suddenly succumb to the*

¹⁰ Columbia Journalism Review (2009) The Micropayment Model: Why do we keep coming back to the micropayment business model? See: www.cjr.org/news_meeting/micropyaments.php

charms of PayPal,” commented Bruce Ackerman and Ian Ayres. (Ackerman and Ayres 2009)

At least one team of radio journalists is currently discussing a radio variant of the Spot.US model. The model of a not-for-profit organization, supported by a fund, providing expertise and high level contacts in the media is the most promising. The legal problems discussed above remain a serious problem. Initially at least, such a bureau would function principally as a production house, rather than a publisher, although it would be vital to have a website to highlight the stories that it has uncovered. The ProPublica model, adapted to the UK environment, is favoured with discussions with more than one group of possible benefactors. It is estimated that such a project would need a start up fund of between £1m and £1.5m. But many feel it is not an impossible venture and may help investigative journalism survive the current upheavals in the media.

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