



# Handbook on Investigative Journalism



European Union



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# Handbook on Investigative Journalism

The purpose of this pocket-sized handbook on Investigative Journalism (IJ) is to share the basic journalistic tools that Sri Lankan journalists may require to build investigative stories while out in the field.

The tools are based on the Investigative Journalism Resource Book co-authored by Transparency International Sri Lanka (TISL) and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES).

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# What is IJ?



Investigative Journalism (IJ) has a variety of meanings but essentially, it is inquiry-based, sound story telling.

It is also known as ‘watch dog’ journalism, “muckraking” and ‘journalism of outrage’.

Wikipedia defines investigative journalism as a form of journalism in which reporters deeply investigate a single topic of interest, often involving crime, political corruption or corporate wrongdoing.

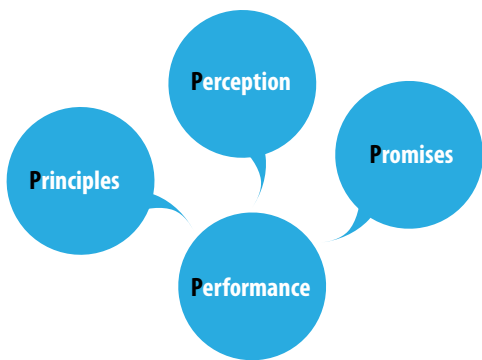
According to the Dutch Association for Investigative Journalism, VVOJ, it is ‘critical and thorough journalism’.

The popular website [www.mediadictionary.com](http://www.mediadictionary.com) defines investigative reporting as “the type of reporting that involves the journalist having to do a lot of research to discover more detail, often an exposé of something that somebody is trying to cover up”.

Much of investigative reporting focuses on corruption.

At its core, investigative reporting means comparing the principles, public perception and promises of authorities and institutions with their actual performance or record.

The handbook suggests the use of a formula (4-P) when assessing actual performance or record.



**The 4-P Formula**

# What is Corruption?



The word ‘corruption’ has no single, comprehensive and universally accepted definition and would differ from country to country and from culture to culture.

The leading non-governmental organization that spearheads anti-corruption initiatives the world over, Transparency International (TI), defines corruption as abuse of entrusted power for private gain.

TI further differentiates between “according to rule” corruption and “against the rule” corruption. Facilitation payments where a bribe is paid to receive preferential treatment for something that the bribe receiver is required to do by law, constitutes the former. The latter, on the other hand, is a bribe paid to obtain services the bribe receiver is prohibited from providing.

## Classifications

**Grand corruption:** Grand corruption is corruption that pervades the highest levels of national government, leading to a broad erosion of confidence in good governance, the rule of law and economic stability.

**Petty corruption:** Petty corruption can involve the exchange of very small amounts of money, the granting of minor favours by those seeking preferential treatment or the employment of friends and relatives in minor positions.

**Active/passive bribery:** “Active bribery” usually refers to the offering or paying of the bribe, while “passive bribery” refers to the receiving of the bribe.

**Political corruption:** The abuse of public power, office, or resources by government officials or employees for personal gain, ie: by extortion, soliciting or offering bribes.

**Corporate corruption:** Corporate criminality and the abuse of power by corporate officials, either internally or externally.

## Acts of corruption

**Bribery:** Bestowing of a benefit in order to unduly influence an action or decision affecting others to influence the outcome

**Embezzlement:** The fraudulent appropriation of funds or property entrusted to one's care and owned by someone else, by virtue of his or her position or employment that provides access to such funds or property

**Fraud:** Intentional deception, trickery or breach of confidence, perpetrated in order to profit or to gain some unfair or dishonest advantage. It is the false representation of a matter or fact- by word or conduct.

**Extortion:** Use or threat of violence or the exposure of damaging information, to extract money or other resources



**Favouritism:** The abuse of power and discretion by the practice of giving special treatment to a person or group

**Nepotism:** Favouritism shown or patronage granted to relatives

**Cronyism:** Improper appointment of friends and associates to positions of authority which favours friends and associates without regard for their qualifications

**Influence peddling:** Public, political and corporate sector insiders peddling privileges acquired exclusively through their official status that are usually unavailable to outsiders

**Insider trading:** The act of making profit by trading non-public information of the organization

**Abuse of discretion:** Involves the abuse of discretion, vested in an individual, for personal gain

Courtesy: The United Nations Anti-corruption Toolkit

# How do I write an investigative report?



Here is a brief but sound guide to build an investigative report in ten steps, courtesy of the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) and author of *Ten Steps to Investigative Reporting*, Lucinda S. Fleeson.

**Step 01:** Broaden the definition of investigative reporting. Tell how systems work and fail and look for systemic problems.

**Step 02:** Build institutional support for your product. Develop a minimum story and build a mentor system.

**Step 03:** Build and maintain sources. On an off the record, two independent sources, correct attribution and avoiding plagiarism are key to success.

**Step 04:** Educate yourself about your subject. Search for new things and research.

**Step 05:** Look for documents. There may be more available than you think.

**Step 06:** Get out of the office and observe: Make your story come alive! Learn to be an excellent observer and use all five senses.

**Step 07:** Assess, assess, assess. This means developing a sound minimum story to fall back on.

**Step 08:** Verification and confirmation are important. Bear in mind the rules applicable to confrontation interviews. (p.27)

**Step 09:** Tackling the big story: Organize your material. This is when case studies and dramatic graphics can be of absolute use.

**Step 10:** Investigative reporting amidst daily journalism is tough. But do make the time.

# Why should I follow a Code of Ethics?



Ethics are a system of standards, principles and values defining what is correct in terms of professional conduct. They are the industry's best practices.

Journalism ethics are often converted into a professional code of ethics. The principles contained in these codes are referred to as the “canons of journalism”. In some countries, there are applicable codes for the entire industry while institutions tend to develop their own code of conduct.

These journalistic codes are designed as guides to help practitioners to deal with numerous difficulties such as conflicts of interests, gifts and influence peddling etc; when dealing with ethical dilemmas. The codes and the canons provide journalists a framework for self-monitoring and self-correction.

How you do investigative reporting is as important as what you find. Unethical practices can invalidate or devalue the most important findings. Here's a checklist of what to avoid, especially when going undercover.

### **Avoid the following:**

- Reporting for personal gain
- Personal or political agendas
- Conflicts of interest
- Favouritism
- Sensationalism
- Plagiarism (this has legal ramifications in addition to ethical concerns)
- Fabricating “fact” and quotes

# Sting operations



Undercover or “sting journalism” is not the rule but the exception. Though at times carelessly carried out for quick acquisition of information, stings should be the last resort to access information and should be undertaken only when all avenues are firmly closed. Stings also expose journalists to dangers.

There are special ethical considerations applicable to sting operations.

- Deception is to be used only for absolute public interest.
- It is a tool to be used only when other forms of accessing information are exhausted.
- It should be based on the sound judgment that what is revealed through the investigation outweighs the deception involved in using a hidden camera
- Should subsequently reveal the deception to readers and viewers

- Explain to them why the deception was necessary to complete the story

# How do I pitch a story?



Reporters who find a potential investigative story will have to convince their editors and program directors that the extra time and expense will be worthwhile. The following template will help with story pitches.

The “minimum story” that will result from this investigation is: \_\_\_\_\_

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The “maximum story” we can hope to get from this investigation is: \_\_\_\_\_

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## **Working Hypothesis:**

This story will tell readers/viewers that:

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Why this story is important:

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How much time do I expect the story to take?

\_\_\_\_\_ Days

\_\_\_\_\_ Weeks

I will need the following help and/or resources to complete my story:

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Here's what the Colombo-based head office can do to connect me to the officials of the Central Government to enhance this story:

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Here's how my story can be duplicated by other regional reporters to make it a national story:

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# What are my/my editor's expectations?



Reporters and editors will have different expectations of each other during the production of investigative stories. Here's a list of those reasonable expectations.

Discuss them with your editor before launching the story.

## Here's what I expect from my editor:

- Commitment to publish the story
- Help facilitate the story, calling to vouch for reporter
- Willingness to stand by the reporter, if necessary to intervene
- Cover expenses and to make bonus payment for good work
- Give a fair amount of time to develop the story
- Byline credit

## Here's what my editor expects from me:

- The story to be delivered in the correct format
- Periodic updates, especially about new developments
- Exclusivity (I will work on this story for no other news outlet)
- Co-operation with the relevant desk in Colombo and its reporters
- Follow ethical guidelines
- Realistic appraisal, what is the least and most
- Timely delivery
- Good quality reporting

# How do I look for a source?



## Electronic searches

Before you talk to your editor or start interviewing sources, it is prudent to conduct a basic Internet search on your investigative topic using the following trustworthy search engines and Websites.

Have there been previous stories on the same topic? What hints or clues can you find about the agency or authority in previous coverage?



### Have I checked the following?

**Google**- [www.google.com](http://www.google.com)

**Wikipedia**- [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)

**Facebook**- [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)

**YouTube** – [www.youtube.org](http://www.youtube.org)

**YouTube** - <http://www.ipaidabribe.com>

## Official and other Websites

Government of Sri Lanka-  
<http://www.priu.gov.lk/>

NGO Secretariat-  
<http://www.ngosecretariat.gov.lk/>

Sri Lankan Parliament-  
[www.parliament.lk](http://www.parliament.lk)

Transparency International Sri Lanka-  
[www.tisrilanka.org](http://www.tisrilanka.org)

## Websites based overseas

World Bank – [www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org)

Asian Development Bank – [www.adb.org](http://www.adb.org)

BBC Sandeshaya Online –  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/>

Lessons learnt and reconciliation  
Commission – <http://www.llrc.lk/>



## Human sources

A good investigative journalist will have a wide network of human sources. The best kind of human sources are “insiders” who feel disturbed by the corruption or abuse they see and proactively share information in good faith.

Human sources can provide direct information or direct towards vital information. It is important to know the ground rules when dealing with human sources.

**On-The-Record** The information and quotes can be used with direct attribution of quotes to the source and the source fully identified

**Background** The information and quotes can be used, but the source cannot be identified by name. Instead, the reporter uses a description of the source.

**Off-The-Record** This means the reporter cannot use any information or quotes from the interview, nor can he even tell others he talked to the source

**Deep Background** Provides vital background information and help create the setting for the story. Cannot be identified or quoted. Information needs to be substantiated by other sources.

It is important that journalists take all possible steps to protect their sources. Bad handling of sources can result in sources being physically harmed, harassed or threatened.

Sri Lanka does not have whistle-blower protection laws.

Nevertheless, *Section 5.1 of the Sri Lanka Code of Professional Practice – The Editors’ Guild of Sri Lanka* clearly states: “Every journalist has a moral obligation to protect confidential sources of information, until that source authorizes otherwise.”



## Documents

Paper or electronic records are the lifeblood of investigative reporting. Here is a checklist for collecting and organizing your documents.

### Organizing Documents:

- Saves time
- Helps reveal patterns in the story
- Allows reporting teams to coordinate better

### My check list:

- I have made copies of every paper document
- I have put the clean copies in a safe place, out of the office
- I lock all my documents up every night
- I shut down my computer every night



- I have organized documents by date to make a timeline
- If I were to divide the documents according to subjects, they would be the following;

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

# How do I authenticate documents?

It is imperative that you make sure the paper and electronic documents you collect are authentic—that they were really created by the person or agency you are investigating, and are not fake documents. Use the following questions to help validate your documents.



## Paper:

Would it be reasonable to think this person had access to the material?

Is he or she an expert on the subject?

What is his or her motivation?

Does the source have a history of lying?

Will another human source vouch for the source?

Is the document recent?

Can its content be verified? If so, who will?

Are there any internal consistencies in language or markings?

Is there an expert to whom I can show this document?

Did I show them to my editor?

Did this document “conveniently” surface? Could it be a plant?

How and when will I present the most important documents to the target?



## Website “reality checks”

**Authority:** Is the site operated by a recognized expert or reputable organization?

**Accuracy:** Sites with factual and spelling mistakes should be avoided.

**Appearance:** Is the site well constructed? Sloppy, amateur productions are trouble.

**Intent:** Does the site fulfill its mission?

**Currency:** Is the information up-to-date?

**Recommendations:** Do reliable experts, organizations recommend it?

**Connectivity:** Does the site link to other trusted and well-reputed sites?

**Depth:** Has it done a thorough job in covering a subject or issue?

**Understandable:** Does the content make sense? Is it straightforward?

**Credibility:** Does the information make common sense? Are assertions supported?

# How do I conduct a “confrontation” interview?



After you have gathered all your information, you will conduct a final “confrontation” interview with the targeted official or agency representative to lay out your findings and ask for responses. Here’s a checklist of how to prepare for this key interview.

## Preparation

Have I prepared an “insurance” version of my story?

Have I read over all my notes?

Have I reviewed important documents?

Have I made copies of documents I want to show during the interview?

Have I written out the three or four most important questions?

Have I written out follow-up questions to those questions?

Have I included “tripwire” questions to test the target’s veracity?

Have I located a working tape-recorder for the interview?

## **During the interview**

Have I established the on-the-record ground rules?

Have I put the tape recorder on and set it on a table?

Am I demonstrating professionalism by sticking to business?

If I feel anxious or emotional, have I paused to let it pass?

Have I allowed silences that prompt the target to continue speaking?

Am I taking notes on the target's emotions and body language?

Am I making sure I get the quotes from the target, not a spin-doctor?

## **After the interview**

Have I emptied my mind and let the important points settle in?

Have I transcribed the interview?

Have I offered the target a "playback" to confirm accuracy?

Do I have the opportunity to do follow up work?

# How do I refine my story?



Investigative stories are often complicated. So, writing or producing them can be difficult. The following prompts will help you find your introduction and think through different sidebar stories to accompany the main piece.

Meanwhile, you also need to think of visual and electronic elements that need to be included.

Prompt: This fully reported story tells readers that.... \_\_\_\_\_

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Besides the main story, here are the other stories I can do based on my material

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

I have the following story-telling elements to go with my story:

- PDFs of Documents
- Charts
- Graphs
- Photos
- Links to Websites
- Video
- Sound bites

# How do I do a final check?



Investigative stories often involve powerful people and institutions. These stories require additional care to ensure everything is completely accurate. A simple mistake in a story will discredit weeks of reporting and editing. Courtesy of Craig Silverman, at the Regret the Error Website, here is a checklist for fact-checking.

## While reporting

- Ask sources to spell name and title
- Record or transcribe interviews
- Verify claims with reliable sources
- Save links and other research
- Ask sources what other reports got wrong



## Final checks before submission

- Numbers & Math
- Names
- Titles (People, books etc)
- Locations
- Compare quotes to notes/ recording
- Quote attribution
- Definitions
- URLs
- Spelling & Grammer
- Spellchecker Errors

## Story specific items

- .....
- .....
- .....
- .....

# How do I ensure my safety?



Speaking truth to power entails risks, especially in a post-war society like Sri Lanka. Remember: No story is worth losing your life. Take the following precautions to make sure you, your family and your colleagues aren't put at a greater than necessary risk.

Safety requires identifying potential threats and minimizing your vulnerabilities.

## Precautions:

- Make a safety plan with your editor
- Always assume your conversations are being monitored, especially on mobile phones
- Never discuss something extremely sensitive on the phone or in private
- Do not allow work colleagues or cleaning persons near notes or computer
- Make a back-up safety plan with your editor
- Use code words to activate the safety plan

- Turn computer screens away from windows
- Always turn off computers at the end of the day and password protect the machines and important files
- Never open an e-mail or attachment from someone you don't know
- Lock up computers and files every night
- Use special programmes, not the normal "trash" file, to delete sensitive computer info
- Back up all documents, store in a safe place outside of newsroom or office
- Keep a back-up battery for your mobile phone
- Vary meetings places and times
- Arrive at meetings early and try to use public transport and not your personal vehicle

## What do I do if I receive a threat?

- Note the exact time and date
- Check caller ID
- Write down the exact wording of the threat
- Try to figure out why the threat is being made
- Extract as much information from the caller as possible
  - Who are you?
  - How do you know about this?
  - Have we met?
  - Are you calling on someone's behalf?
  - What exactly are you upset about?
- Tell the caller that your editor, not you, are in control of the story
- Immediately notify your editor  
Immediately call police, if you can trust them
- Immediately check if loved ones are safe
- Get to a pre-arranged safe place
- Consider going public with the threat

## What do I do if I am being followed?

- Note exact time, date and place you have initial suspicion
- Immediately inform your editor and a highly trusted person
- If being chased, remove and discard mobile phone battery

## NOTES

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## Handbook on

# Investigative Journalism

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