

Burnout Among Investigative Journalists: Causes and Solutions

Spencer Norris
Mark Horvit, Committee Chair

ANALYSIS

Hed: “Burnout Among Investigative Journalists: Causes and Solutions”

Dek: Investigative reporting can be a lonely grind. It doesn’t have to be.

Eric finds his work addictive. An investigative reporter at a major for-profit news site, his stories have won awards and sparked outrage over national hot-button issues. And like most addictions, there was a cost.

Eric’s name, along with those of everyone else interviewed for this project, has been changed so that he could speak candidly about his experience. For the four years of the Trump administration, he was plugged in at all times, ignoring editors’ pleas for him to take time off and working weekends voluntarily. He would often have his phone out at the dinner table with his family.

“I look back and it’s like holy cow, I truly spent four years working on these stories and took absolutely no time for myself, my family. In some ways I kind of regret it, you know?”

“At least for me, I start questioning, at what cost? At what cost was it like, my physical health? Mental health? I think all of that had an impact.”

Eric said he wasn’t sure whether he had burnt out, but the job’s toll is familiar to reporters everywhere. Burnout has evolved into a bona fide crisis in the news industry. In 2011, a study found that three out of every four reporters under the age of 34 were considering leaving the industry. Demands to do more with less have only grown since.

Jobs are disappearing overnight. The work comes home. Hours are long, the pay is low, and reporters are often expected to sacrifice family time to do the job.

But there's an extra layer for investigative journalists. Each story can have consequences. People can be killed, saved, imprisoned, liberated, ruined, vindicated, or a combination of all the above. The reporter can get sued for doing their job. And to top it off, they may be disliked by their own peers in the newsroom because of the perceived perks and favoritism afforded to them by editors. In a word, investigative journalists have different stressors than others in the newsroom.

I spoke with nine investigative reporters working at print and digital publications — four from for-profits and five from non-profits. All but one had at least one decade of experience in the industry, capping at nearly 50 years. They are from newsrooms spanning the country, all from newspapers, websites and wire services, with past experiences that run the gamut from academic fellowships to a lifelong career in print. All were granted anonymity so that they could speak honestly about their experiences with burnout: what they went through, why it happened, and what can be corrected in the nation's newsrooms to prevent this from happening to more investigative reporters.

The problems they face are as old as the newspaper industry, but seemingly have gotten worse as the news cycle has accelerated. How does a job centered around slow, methodical work survive in an industry that favors speed? Even for the hard-boiled types, it can be challenging to survive when the business, and sometimes your own peers, seem hostile to the existence of your job.

But many of the reporters interviewed thought that *something* can be done to make the job sustainable for their mental health — to move the needle away from unrealistic pseudo-heroic stereotypes, and toward an image of investigative reporters as people with human needs.

On Content, and an Investigative Reporter's Hatred of It

'Content' may be a trigger word for Eric. It's not clear, but he's obviously upset about what it's doing to his profession.

"It became less about the journalism and more about content," he said. "Content, I hate that word." One more time, for effect. "*Content.*"

"I started to feel the business side creep in, because people would talk about *content*" — emphasis his own. "I was like 'wait a minute, these are stories! This is journalism! Why do you refer to it as content?'"

Research on burnout suggests that employees are more at risk when they see the business's mission diverging from their own values. The reporters I spoke with often mentioned the value of impact and accountability in their work. Reorienting newsrooms around speed and cheap headlines can disillusion reporters who got in the game to make a difference — and leave them worried about saving their jobs.

"No matter how much great work you do, it does not equate to job security," Eric said. "And so that creates anxiety, because you just never know when your time is up."

"What I've come to realize in all my years as working as a journalist is that journalism is a business. It's a business where people make money," he said. "Speaking truth to power, giving voice to the voiceless, those are critical components of being a journalist. It's impossible to do that if the business is not sustainable."

Everyone working in journalism is facing the crunch to do more with less. What makes the problem uniquely bad for investigative reporters is that their work usually isn't built for speed like the rest of the newsroom, or even profit. The methodology of slow, impact-driven work is undermined by an industry that increasingly demands *anything* for the front page and fails to reward quality.

To fill copy, editors may pull their investigative team into dailies. Ben, who worked as an investigative reporter at a non-profit daily in a major east coast city, wasn't thrilled about this strategy.

"I found it extremely stressful, and it meant I wasn't focusing on my project," he said. "These are stressful projects," he said, "because it's not only your name and your reputation, but there's legal repercussions."

"God forbid you have an error, which suddenly calls into question your entire piece. Are you going to get sued?"

Ben worried that he would be evaluated based on all of the hard-hitting projects he wasn't doing, instead of the shorter stories that his editors had asked for. It was a complete mismatch between his expectations and his editor's demands.

"Editors want it all. They want that big, brassy project that they see other outlets do, but they also want you in the paper or whatever medium it is every day or every week," he said. After a few years in his newsroom, Ben left to pursue other avenues.

Those mismatched expectations are baked into the analytics software that many newsrooms now use to track employee performance. Rebecca, an investigative reporter at a for-profit metro daily, said that the metrics used by her newsroom don't account for the different job expectations of investigative reporters.

"You may be rated, like, horrible, because you haven't had a byline in a month," Rebecca chuckles. "So you just feel threatened, like, oh my gosh, whoever buys our paper is going to say, like, why do you have this investigative team? What are their metrics? Okay, they did one story in the last sixth months and it got less clicks than from [a] clickbait piece of crap that was aggregated from another site, that's not even really journalism, like a recipe or something." Big investigations "never beat the clickbait stuff. It just makes you wonder, should I get off the I-team? Am I exposed here?"

Not only can the comparative lack of hits leave investigative journalists professionally exposed, but it can be deflating. Imagine the pit in your stomach when something you have worked on for months or years is poorly received. Eric had those feelings creep in while reporting on the second Bush administration, when stories about wars in the Middle East and the CIA's torture program failed to produce any meaningful change. Those feelings bubbled back up over a decade later, under Trump.

"It felt like it just didn't matter what we were reporting," he said. "It was a very sort of enlightened moment, almost like an epiphany in some ways, where it was like constantly chasing a story. But what do you do when you discover that whatever you're reporting doesn't matter? When the news cycle changes by the second? By the second, by the minute, there's always something new." Projects that take months, years to research, can fall off the front page before you can blink.

The beat reporters reading this might frown, hearing accomplished investigative journalists saying they have to work quickly and that their stories don't get as much play as they would like. Some of the sleuths interviewed are acutely aware of how their peers may feel.

Lone Wolves and Golden Kids

Rebecca dislikes the favoritism afforded to investigative reporters at her newspaper. She disliked it when she was a beat reporter, and she dislikes it now that she's on the I-team.

"I remember how I thought about the I-team when I wasn't on it," she laughs. It wasn't just the extra time to work on stories; it was the conference trips, the extra leeway, and awards season. "I would always notice the I-team winning all these awards, and I would think, are you kidding me, that they get to spend work time, like, filling out contest

forms?” she said. “When I was a beat reporter, I didn’t have the time to go to the bathroom, let alone try to submit for contests.”

The freedom that investigative reporters enjoy on the job is a double-edged sword. The I-team is often a dream job earned through years of exceptional work. But research suggests that community in the workplace is an important factor in regulating burnout. Some journalists I spoke with said they felt that I-team members have a target on their back because of the perks that they are afforded over the beat reporters.

“There’s maybe a resentment, I don’t know, in other newsrooms, and maybe even in mine, a little bit of resentment that like, oh, you know, this person doesn’t have to write 500 f**king Covid stories,” Rebecca said. “It’s just another factor in making the job harder to enjoy every day.”

The distance between Rebecca and the other reporters in the newsroom grew, literally and figuratively. She’s the type to keep candy and a second chair at her desk in case anyone wants to drop by. But like many other papers, her investigative team is seated separately from the rest of the newsroom. On the other side of the divide, Rebecca started to feel some of the shade that she previously reserved for the I-team.

“Because you work so hard as a regular reporter. Every year we have less people, and you’re working your ass off,” she said. “Let’s say someone from the I-team sends you a story tip. I know they’re just thinking like, ‘f**k you, I don’t have three months to work on a story!’”

“I wanted to be liked. I enjoyed being one of the reporters, and I never wanted to be on a higher tier or anything like that,” she said. “When you get on the I-team, you’re not management, but you’re something else.”

It can be lonely at the top. Higher expectations and a lack of belongingness can put an investigative reporter, who likely worked hard to earn their title, in a tough spot.

“That can create a toxic environment where you’re working on your projects, and you feel this added pressure that it’s got to be amazing because it sort of feels like everyone else in the newsroom kind of hates you a little bit,” Ben laughs.

Investigative reporters are swimming against the current of an industry that is more demanding than ever. Editors expect them to do more work without compromising on quality, carrying responsibilities that weren’t in the job description. If they are able to secure a job that protects their mission to dig and investigate, it can mean perceived favoritism and social isolation. And when their stories do break, the ever-accelerating news cycle can sweep months of work away, like it never happened. These problems have existed for a long time but they have only gotten worse, as most traditional newsrooms shrink and investigative work gets cut.

But there are other options. There are structural changes that can be made to the way investigative journalists and the newsroom operate, which recognize the reality of the industry while protecting the reporter’s mission of accountability.

What Can Be Done?

Everyone has their own rhythm to their work. The structure of an investigative beat comes down to the reporter and the demands of the newsroom. But there are some common factors that can contribute to burnout among investigative journalists, as well as possible solutions.

Editors, Take Note. In any job, friction between management and their direct reports can lead to burnout. Multiple reporters said that editors need to be better clued in to their needs, both as journalists and as human beings.

First, that means clear expectations. Journalism is one of a handful of professions where it has become acceptable to ask employees to drop everything they are doing and

take on responsibilities that aren't in the job description. The subtext is often clear: it's an expectation, not a question. This degrades the sense of fairness and control over the job, limited as it is.

If investigative reporters will be required to jump in on daily stories regularly, that needs to be outlined before they are even hired. Mismatched job expectations create tension and anxiety for reporters, which can stage them for burnout.

Second, editors must maintain a realistic understanding of what is possible. If there is no feasible way of shrinking a year-long investigative story down, editors can't ask for it in three months. If they decide that the I-team needs to pitch in on breaking news, they must also understand that this will push back the time horizon for bigger projects. And if that happens, editors cannot unfairly penalize them for doing what they were asked instead of following their job description. Editors must evaluate what their priorities are in advance, lay them out for the investigative reporters, and then stick to their word.

Failure to recognize these issues can lead to resignations. Multiple reporters who spoke for this project either quit their jobs or pondered doing so because their newsrooms failed to address these points effectively.

At the other end of the spectrum, a strong relationship between the investigative reporter and leadership can foster both a healthy work environment and better journalism. Eric was able to execute a major international reporting project under the tutelage of his editors. "They kind of guided me on how to do the reporting that was needed for [this] series of stories. Next thing you know, I reach out to my sources, and I actually got the information. I couldn't even believe that I was actually able to get that information, to pry loose details, simply by kind of following [his editor's] instructions." Despite decades of experience, he said he had grown under his editors.

Support from on high counts for a lot. Reporters tend to be happier folk when their superiors treat them fairly, set clear expectations and have their backs.

Time Constraints. The pressure to publish isn't going away, but that doesn't mean that investigative journalists need to give up their watchdog credentials.

Despite being an investigative reporter, Tim publishes at least once every couple of weeks, sometimes multiple days in a row. His beat is built for speed, and he likes it.

"It's nice to be left alone to work on something, but at the same time, being left alone for that long, that would actually bother me in a different way," he said. Tim works at a major metro daily and works as a 'quick-turn' investigative reporter, ferreting out accountability stories from breaking news. Getting his work out more often keeps him in the game while drawing on a collection of sources that other reporters might not have. "I've kind of done such a mix of things, I might know someone from some story like six years ago about some really obscure subject. So I feel like when I can help out, I actually value the opportunity to do that."

Structuring a beat as a series of smaller investigations isn't new, but it is effective. Bob Woodward developed his brand as an investigative reporter by breaking watchdog stories on smaller scandals, according to "The New Muckrakers" by Leonard Downie Jr. If editors want more stories out of their I-team, they can work with the reporters to accelerate their beat without forfeiting the mission of accountability, framing it as an opportunity to break meaningful stories more often.

With that said, there's no substitute for time. Some stories can't be turned in a month or two. For the journalists working on long-term projects, it may be non-negotiable. It comes down to what the reporter wants and what the newsroom needs.

Collaboration. Multiple investigative reporters said that working with people on other beats would be a boon, elevating their work while breaking down the isolation they were experiencing.

“I would love to have more collaboration with other reporters in the newsroom and give them more teaming up between the I-team and the beat reporter team, and saying, hey county reporter, you anchor this, I will help you, because I have more time, I can pull records and stuff,” Rebecca said. “Then there would be more bylines, but also, it would share some of the awesomeness of the I-team with everybody else in the room. I think it would be better for the paper too.”

That model can play out in a variety of ways. Managers can throw the full weight of the I-team behind a particular beat, or have individual investigative reporters embed with different beat teams for an extended period of time. Or maybe they jump in for one story before hopping to the next desk, like Tim. In rare cases, investigative journalists may find a permanent reporting partner that they collaborate with across multiple projects, like Donald Barlett and James Steele. Any which way, fewer lone wolves and more packs means opportunities to foster collaboration and camaraderie, which is hard to argue against.

It’s worth noting that many of the above issues are theoretically mitigated by the structure of non-profit investigative newsrooms. When the newsroom’s singular mission is investigative reporting and everyone has roughly the same privileges, there are fewer questions about isolation and unfair treatment. And on paper, there’s less reason to worry that the newsroom’s mission of accountability will be aped and turned into a content mill.

But no matter where a journalist works, it is still a stressful job that asks much of its practitioners — often too much for a healthy human. Excessive hours are a constant,

regardless of what newsroom a reporter is in, how much time they get on their stories, or how much collaboration there is. As a long-term strategy, it isn't sustainable. 60-hour weeks come at a cost, almost always borne by the reporter.

After countless hours covering the Trump administration, Eric became aware of that cost.

His colleagues “woke up one morning, and that’s it, it’s over, lost their jobs,” he said. “That kind of forces you to look back, take stock and, you know — ‘what have I been doing?’ Oh my god, I sacrificed all my time. Time with my family, or time with myself, or whatever, for the job. I actually argue that once you start looking at that, that could actually cause some burnout.”

Maybe we should stop asking what needs to be sacrificed to do the job, and start asking what we can save for ourselves while doing work that we’re proud of.