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Mattias Hoz 10th Grade Berkeley High School

Investigative Journalism and Democracy in the 21st Century

One of Journalism's most important roles in society has become its most endangered. The Fourth Estate's capacity to be an investigative institution is crucial to the well-being of American democracy because of its ability to shed light on issues that have been willfully ignored or purposefully concealed. In this way, investigative journalism recognizes issues, cover-ups, and corruption within our society and seeks to resolve them via exposure to the public. But in recent years, this endeavor has been under threat: The FOIA requests from journalists dropped by almost half between 2005 and 2010 (Hamilton, 2016).

Investigative journalism is a central element of a free and effective democracy. At the very origins of our society, America's first leaders spoke to the importance of a fully-informed electorate. In Thomas Jefferson's own words, "I have looked on our present state of liberty [and democracy] as a short-lived possession unless the mass of the people could be informed to a certain degree" (Jefferson, 1805). Within Jefferson's statement lies the core of the Fourth Estate's duties to our society. These are, in the simplest terms: to prepare citizens and voters—those indirectly responsible for choosing how our nation should be led and what positions to take up—by informing them.

During September of 2013, ProPublica, a leading institution of investigative journalism, concluded their nearly two-year study into the effects of Tylenol. During their investigation, they had uncovered documents detailing the drug's true dangers as a pain-reliever which, for decades, had been marketed as "safe, fast pain-relief," and a drug that "hospitals use most" (Osnos, 2018). Despite these assurances of safety, ProPublica had revealed that an alleged 1,500 Americans died due to an over-ingestion of Tylenol. Furthermore, ProPublica's findings indicated that both Tylenol's manufacturer, McNeil Consumer Products, and the FDA had known about the true nature of Tylenol's risks for many years. This can be seen as an instance of journalism at its best:

deep and critical investigation into an overlooked problem, leading to a better-informed populace and possibly life-saving information that those profiting from Tylenol sought to hide. Consumers now know the risks—and might look out for politicians too friendly with some pharmaceutical companies.

It's critical that we—as a collective group of constant media-consumers—do our best to protect this key aspect of journalism. In our world, there aren't enough groups whose sole purpose is to truly do good for the many, the only reward being the creation of a more just and honest society. Investigative journalists are some of these precious few. The American public, who are served by the Fourth Estate's constant endeavors to educate on issues that are too often hidden from plain sight, should take steps to cherish and protect it. As Glenn Greenwald put it, "Secrecy is the linchpin of abuse of power...transparency is the only real antidote" (Greenwald, 2014). Investigative journalism's future is unclear. But one thing is: if a concerted effort isn't made soon to save it, we will lose an essential piece of our open, democratic society.

Works Cited

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