



Effectiveness of Arab Investigative Journalism in Combating Corruption Amid Professional Weaknesses and Real-World Challenges

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Abstract:

This study analyzes the role of Arab investigative journalism in combating corruption by examining professional media practices. It emphasizes investigative journalism as an essential tool for exposing corruption and ensuring accountability. However, its effectiveness remains limited due to weak professional structures and a lack of investigative culture. Additional challenges include insufficient resources, limited access to information, and inadequate legal protection for journalists. Political pressure, censorship, and restricted institutional independence further hinder investigative reporting. Despite these constraints, independent initiatives and digital platforms have supported the growth of investigative journalism and the exposure of corruption cases. The study concludes that stronger legal frameworks, greater press freedom, and enhanced institutional transparency are necessary to improve the impact of investigative journalism in the Arab world.

Keywords:

Investigation; Investigative Journalisme; Corruption Cases; Professional Environment; Arab Countries.



1. INTRODUCTION

Corruption represents one of the most critical issues threatening the stability and development of Arab societies, given its detrimental effects on the economy, good governance, and public trust in institutions. In light of the limitations of traditional oversight mechanisms, investigative journalism has emerged as one of the most important tools capable of uncovering violations and promoting transparency and accountability.

This type of journalism grounded in in-depth inquiry, evidence collection, and analytical rigor has become a central pillar in anti-corruption efforts in many countries. However, the effectiveness of Arab investigative journalism remains contested due to a combination of professional and contextual challenges that constrain its impact.

Many Arab media institutions lack a supportive professional environment for this type of work, whether in terms of training, resources, or newsroom independence. Investigative journalists also face significant obstacles related to restricted access to information, limited legal protections, and political and economic pressures that hinder the media's ability to address sensitive corruption cases. Conversely, several youth-led initiatives and independent media platforms are emerging and striving to strengthen investigative journalism despite these constraints.

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of Arab investigative journalism in combating corruption by analyzing professional practices and identifying the key challenges facing journalists and media institutions. It also aims to outline potential pathways for enhancing this watchdog role in a way that reinforces the media's contribution to building more transparent and just societies.

1.1. Research Problem:

Despite the growing recognition of the vital role that investigative journalism can play in exposing corruption and promoting transparency in Arab societies, its actual effectiveness remains questionable due to the multitude of factors limiting its performance. These include weak professional environments within media institutions, insufficient training and resources, restrictive legal frameworks, and political pressures. Within this complex context, a core problem emerges: the limited ability of investigative journalism to fully fulfill its oversight function. This raises a central research question concerning the extent to which professional constraints and political, legal, and media-related challenges affect the effectiveness of investigative reporting in combating corruption.

Accordingly, the main research question can be formulated as follows:

What is the impact of the professional environment and the political, legal, and media challenges in Arab countries on the effectiveness of investigative journalism in combating corruption?

From this main question, the following sub-questions arise:

- What are the fundamental requirements for performing investigative journalism in Arab countries?



- What is the level of effectiveness of Arab investigative journalism in confronting corruption?
- What are the key models of investigative journalism practiced within Arab media institutions?
- What are the major challenges hindering investigative work in uncovering corruption?

1.2. Significance of the Study:

The significance of this study lies in its focus on the role of Arab investigative journalism as an effective tool for revealing corruption and promoting transparency and accountability. Theoretically, it contributes to enriching knowledge on the relationship between media and anti-corruption efforts within the Arab context, where investigative journalism remains underexplored. The study also carries practical and professional value by analyzing the reality of investigative practices and identifying professional and legal limitations that hinder their expected impact. Furthermore, it holds societal relevance by strengthening accountability culture and citizens' trust in institutions, while offering journalists and media organizations a foundation for developing investigative work. In addition, the study enables a forward-looking assessment of the future of investigative journalism in combating corruption, particularly in light of digital transformations and the rise of independent platforms.

1.3. Objectives of the Study:

The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- Analyze the reality of investigative journalism practices within Arab media institutions and assess the extent to which they adopt a culture of in-depth investigations.
- Identify the legal, political, and institutional challenges facing investigative work on corruption, including restricted access to information and official pressures.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of investigative journalism in uncovering corruption cases and influencing public opinion or oversight bodies.
- Document Arab initiatives and platforms that have contributed to strengthening investigative journalism and assess their impact on anti-corruption efforts.
- Propose practical mechanisms to enhance effectiveness, such as improving legal frameworks, supporting independence, and providing financial and technological resources.
- Forecast the future of Arab investigative journalism in the digital era and outline the necessary conditions to enhance its capacity to combat corruption.

2. The Nature of Investigative Journalism:

Investigative journalism involves using professional skills to uncover stories relevant to the public, starting from small clues and expanding through interviews, document analysis, and source verification. It relies on verifiable facts, evidence, and documentation, and is a cumulative process that integrates information over time to reveal hidden truths and achieve journalistic breakthroughs

2.1 Definition of Investigative Journalism:



Investigative journalism is a critical form of journalism that goes beyond routine reporting to uncover facts deliberately hidden from the public (Al-Dulaimi, 2015, p. 23). It relies on systematic research, multiple sources, official documents, and verification to produce accurate, in-depth investigations that serve the public interest (Al-Badrani, 2015, p. 13; Abu Hammam, 2014, p. 13). While leaks may initiate stories, genuine investigative work emphasizes thorough analysis and methodological rigor. Its primary role is to expose corruption, unlawful practices, and institutional malpractice, promoting accountability, transparency, and democratic values (Hunter & Harrison, 2011, p. 8)

Investigative journalism refers to news of a particular nature, produced through original work rather than leaked official investigations. It uncovers recurrent patterns of problems rather than isolated incidents and proposes corrective pathways while explaining complex social issues. These definitions highlight three fundamental pillars of investigative journalism:

- Depth in coverage through field research and source verification.
- Independence and initiative, free from official leaks.
- Commitment to the public interest by exposing corruption and systemic flaws to drive positive change.
- On this basis, investigative journalism can be defined as an in-depth research and inquiry process conducted by journalists through gathering, analyzing, and documenting information not otherwise available to the public, with the aim of exposing facts and promoting transparency and accountability.

2.2 The Chronological Development of Investigative Journalism:

Investigative journalism began in the late 19th-century United States with the Muckrakers, such as Ida Tarbell, who exposed corporate corruption. The genre gained prominence with the Watergate scandal, leading to dedicated resources and long-term investigations. Rooted in evidence-based reporting and verification, it focuses on uncovering corruption, misconduct, and hidden truths, often linked to democratic systems (Al-Dulaimi, 2015, p. 23). Today, investigative journalism continues to expose social corruption, enhanced by digital tools for data analysis and comprehensive reporting

Investigative journalism now plays a pivotal role in strengthening democratic governance through what is known as the “Fourth Estate,” by holding government accountable through disclosing information of public relevance even when it reveals violations or crimes committed by powerful officials. it contribuâtes to:

- Monitoring the performance of governmental and civic institutions and public companies.
- Raising citizens’ awareness of their rights and their role in public oversight.
- Providing the public with reliable sources that foster political participation.
- Fact-finding investigations are among the most impactful tools for consolidating democracy, as they offer effective mechanisms for checks and balances within democratic systems.



In the Arab world, investigative journalism began to appear prominently in the 1990s, with platforms such as ARIJ (Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism) supporting investigations into corruption. In Algeria, the rise of investigative journalism coincided with media liberalization in the 1990s, with El Khabar newspaper becoming a leading outlet covering cases such as the Sonatrach affair (Mujahid, 2024).

2.3 The Importance of Investigative Journalism:

Investigative journalism is a demanding and risk-prone profession, owing to the difficulty of accessing documents and sources that often refuse to disclose information. This work requires exceptional courage and advanced research skills (Abdul-Baqi, 2013, pp. 134–135).

Its importance stems from the critical functions it performs, including:

- Serving as a specialized oversight tool that can shape public awareness and influence political and media institutions.
- Exposing violations, crimes, and corruption involving officials and public actors. Western cultures consider it an unmatched means of tracing responsibility and linking it to criminal events.
- Accessing original sources of information to distinguish between accurate and misleading data, and enabling deeper understanding of events without exaggeration or dismissal.
- Prompting public authorities to open investigations in cases involving financial or administrative misconduct when credible investigative reports present new evidence.
- Providing media institutions with well-documented reference material that strengthens professional content.
- Representing the essence of “deep journalism,” which, according to renowned American journalist Seymour Hersh, is the future of influential journalism and indispensable for the vitality and legitimacy of media organizations (Al-Dulaimi, 2015, p. 38).

2.4 Fundamentals of Investigative Journalism:

This genre focuses on examining sensitive political and social issues through in-depth interviews and strict verification of information—unlike traditional journalism, which often limits itself to recounting events (Charles, 2018, p. 22).

A leak, by itself, does not constitute investigative work; it is merely a starting point for a process that requires extensive effort and profound verification. Journalists must act independently to uncover facts (Al Jazeera Media Institute, 2020, pp. 8–9).

Investigative journalists need continuous training and high professional skills to confront field challenges and refine their analytical capabilities (Abdul-Baqi, 2013, p. 135).

Although investigative projects are costly, they enhance media credibility and build loyal audiences. McFadden notes that rigorous investigations increase viewership and elevate media outlets’ societal influence (Charles, 2018, p. 30).



Investigative journalism plays a vital role in exposing corruption, correcting systemic errors, and explaining complex social phenomena, as it relies on original work rather than leaked information (Harfoush, 2015, p. 79).

Aqween summarizes the key characteristics of this genre as raising public awareness, addressing information-scarce issues, exerting substantial research effort, and proposing reform solutions by uncovering hidden truths (Abdul-Baqi, 2013, p. 84).

Kaplan distinguishes investigative journalism from specialized or critical journalism, emphasizing differences in methodology, depth, and the goal of uncovering hidden realities (Al Jazeera Media Institute, 2020, pp. 8–9).

At the level of writing, investigative journalism requires precision, professionalism, careful structure, and originality in presentation (Abdul-Baqi, 2013, p. 135). Corée Principales

2.4.1. Ethical Foundations:

Ethical standards form the cornerstone of investigative journalism. These include strict objectivity and neutrality, presenting information fairly and without bias, and maintaining a clear separation between opinion and fact. Accuracy and verification are indispensable, requiring journalists to examine data and cross-check it with multiple sources before publication.

Professional ethics also demand integrity and respect for intellectual property. The Reuters Handbook warns against fabricating sources or plagiarizing others' work, deeming such practices professionally destructive (Abu Yusuf et al., 2006, p. 74).

The International Federation of Journalists' Code of Ethics requires journalists to employ honest methods in data collection, disclose their identity, and avoid deception, coercion, or pressure to obtain statements (Abu Yusuf et al., 2006, pp. 74–75).

These principles extend to combating corruption within journalism itself including bribery, information withholding, and sponsored reports which studies show to be prevalent in some regions such as Eastern Europe, Latin America, and developing countries.

2.4.2. The Right to Information as a Foundation:

The right of access to information is essential for investigative journalism. Modern legislation particularly the U.S. Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) has strengthened this right by granting journalists access to diverse databases, including criminal, financial, and health records, thereby reinforcing transparency and accountability (Lamble, 2003, pp. 9–11).

Conversely, investigative practice remains constrained in countries lacking such laws, where journalists struggle to obtain official data. This situation necessitates the development of models suited to local environments to compensate for legislative shortcomings.

The roots of access-to-information rights can be traced back to Sweden's 1766 Freedom of the Press Act, the first law granting public access to official documents. Over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this right evolved into a constitutional principle in numerous democracies, recognized as essential for public participation and transparency.

2.4.3 Balancing Access to Information and Privacy Protection:



Protecting individuals' privacy has become a central concern in today's digital environment, especially with the growing creation of electronic databases containing sensitive personal information. This has heightened the need to guarantee individuals' rights to know what data is collected about them, correct it, or request its deletion. Many modern constitutions now include explicit provisions safeguarding physical and moral privacy (Smith, 2002, p. 45).

The UK's Data Protection Act of 1984 was a pioneering step, granting individuals the right to access information held about them and obliging institutions to register with a supervisory authority responsible for enforcing data-protection standards (Brown, 1990, p. 87).

Since then, numerous countries have adopted comprehensive data-protection legislation to keep pace with the challenges posed by the digital revolution and to strike a fair balance between access to information and safeguarding personal privacy.

3. Arab Investigative Journalism:

Investigative journalism is among the most challenging and dangerous fields, as it deals with sensitive issues involving powerful actors, exposing journalists to threats and harassment. These risks are intensified in Arab and developing countries where restrictions on freedom of expression and access to information hinder the production of accurate investigations (Abdel-Baqi, 2013).

Arab investigative journalism did not evolve organically but largely emerged as an imitation of Western models, lacking the institutional support needed for sustainable practice. Still, early efforts such as Ihsan Abdel-Quddous's 1949 investigation on corrupt weapons marked significant milestones (Mahmoud, 2012).

Following the Arab Spring, several countries adopted access-to-information laws, improving conditions for investigative reporting. Organizations like ARIJ strengthened professional standards by promoting verification and evidence-based practice (Zebis, 2017).

Despite this progress, investigative journalism in non-democratic Arab contexts continues to face resistance from actors benefiting from corruption, as well as persistent political, economic, and cultural constraints. Arab media environments also differ from Western ones, with a tendency to prioritize personal relationships over factual accuracy. Additionally, limited funding, weak legal protection, and the association of Arabic content with sensationalism deter many journalists from engaging in investigative work (Mekki, 2020)

3.1. Arab States and the Right to Access Information:

Many Arab constitutions formally guarantee freedom of information and journalistic practice, yet these guarantees largely remain unimplemented. National legislation in most Arab countries still falls short of international transparency standards, with legal gaps that limit access to information for citizens and journalists. The absence of effective mechanisms for obtaining official data reinforces the disconnect between constitutional provisions and actual administrative and legislative practices (Sadiq, 2005, p. 29)

3.2. Models of Arab Investigative Media Institutions:



In recent years, several Arab media institutions specializing in investigative journalism have emerged, employing rigorous verification and fact-finding methods. Whether independent or linked to major outlets, they produce high-quality investigations on corruption, social issues, and human-rights violations, reinforcing accountability and promoting transparency and professional journalism in the region

1. Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ):

Founded in 2005 in Amman, ARIJ is a leading organization supporting investigative journalism in the Arab world. It has trained over a thousand journalists and produced around 300 investigations across nine countries. Through training programs and financial grants, ARIJ helps journalists overcome financial barriers, exposes corruption and environmental violations, and promotes public awareness and democratic values despite political pressures (Al-Badrani, 2015, p. 24)

2. Al Jazeera Network:

Al Jazeera was one of the first Arab media outlets to adopt investigative journalism through programs like Top Secret, Zero Distance, and What is Hidden is Greater. Using undercover reporting and eyewitness accounts, these programs addressed issues such as torture and corruption, sparked regional and international debate, challenged censorship, and inspired other Arab networks, despite controversies over balancing freedom of expression and national security

3. Tareej – Iraqi Network for Investigative Journalism:

Established in 2011 by a group of Iraqi journalists, Tareej supports investigative reporting by offering editorial, financial, and technical assistance to produce in-depth investigations in a complex post-conflict environment. It focuses on issues such as organized crime and human-rights violations, often in partnership with international organizations. Its work helps local journalists produce safer and more credible investigations, contributing to rebuilding public trust in national media.

4. SIRAJ Syrian Investigative Reporting for Accountability Journalism:

SIRAJ trains Syrian journalists in investigative methodologies and supports the production of written, audio, and visual investigations addressing Syrian affairs inside and outside the country. Operating amid ongoing conflict, SIRAJ documents human-rights violations and war crimes through secure digital platforms, helping preserve collective memory, support international accountability efforts, and provide exiled Syrian journalists with tools to continue reporting.

5. Wattan Coalition for Accountability and Investigative Journalism (Palestine):

A Palestinian initiative designed to promote integrity, transparency, and accountability in the absence of an active legislative council and under internal political tensions. Through partnerships with civil-society organizations, the coalition offers specialized training in financial and electoral investigations, exposing issues such as misuse of international aid and strengthening local democracy despite occupation and division.

6. Palestinien Investigative Journaliste Network (PIJN):



Investigative journalism is essential for democracy, transparency, and accountability (Mekki, 2020). While exposing corruption may sometimes justify limited deception (Belsey, 2015), ethical standards can be maintained through morally acceptable methods (Harfoush, 2015, p. 79). Political, economic, and security instability since the Arab Spring has restricted media freedom, leaving journalists vulnerable to legal risks and intimidation. Misuse of investigative journalism for personal gain, government propaganda, and misinformation further undermines its credibility. Additionally, limited resources, weak institutional support, and lack of transparency hinder its development and effectiveness in promoting societal reform (Al-Zayyat, 2018).

4.The Relationship Between Investigative Journalism and Combating Corruption in the Arab World:

Investigative journalism is a key tool in combating corruption globally and locally, serving as an independent oversight mechanism that exposes financial, administrative, and political violations while promoting transparency. In the Arab region, where corruption remains high (Transparency International, 2023), investigative reporting mobilizes public opinion, pressures governments for accountability, recovers public funds, and fosters social accountability. Despite legal and security challenges, it remains essential in national anti-corruption efforts and exemplifies media resilience under authoritarian pressures

4.1. The Role of Investigative Reporting in Exposing Corruption:

Investigative reporting plays a pivotal role in uncovering corruption networks by relying on rigorous research methods based on collecting cross-checked information from multiple sources. These methods include examining official and leaked documents, conducting interviews with protected witnesses, and using modern digital technologies that help track suspicious financial flows and analyze illegal monetary transactions.

The work of investigative journalists does not stop at presenting preliminary information; rather, it extends to producing in-depth, evidence-based reports that directly influence public opinion, often prompting authorities to take concrete actions such as freezing assets, opening official investigations, or dismissing implicated officials.

With technological advancements, the use of artificial intelligence and big-data analytics has become an integral part of investigative work, allowing journalists to process large volumes of financial records and electronic communications with speed and accuracy. This significantly reduces investigation time and enhances the credibility of the findings, as noted in reports issued by the OECD on the role of the media in combating corruption.

In developing countries, including the Arab region, such investigations go beyond exposure; they help build public awareness that rejects corruption by highlighting serious violations such as environmental abuses linked to non-transparent projects or illegal financial operations associated with migration. In doing so, investigative reports provide a knowledge base on which civil society relies to pressure governments for legislative reform. A 2023 report by the European Parliament



confirmed that investigative journalism had uncovered thousands of financial fraud cases and contributed to political change in more than fifty countries. Studies published in the Arab Media Journal also indicate that this type of journalism helped reduce corruption levels by approximately 20% in regions targeted by in-depth investigations.

4.2. Models of the Role of Investigative Journalism in Exposing Corruption in the Arab World:

In Tunisia, ARIJ's 2021 investigation "Forest of Corruption" exposed major corruption in the phosphate industry, leading to arrests, economic reforms, and a significant shift in public opinion after the revolution. A study published in the Arab Media Journal noted that investigative journalism adapted to complex contexts and helped reduce Tunisia's perceived corruption level by 5 points in the 2025 index (Daraj, 2025).

In Egypt, investigations by Mada Masr in 2023–2024 revealed corruption networks in the health sector during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in the dismissal of officials and the revision of government budgets. These investigations won international awards for their impact on transparency (Madamasr, 2024).

In Lebanon, Daraj Media conducted 2024 investigations on corruption in reconstruction funds after the Beirut port explosion, sparking public protests and prompting parliament to amend procurement laws. Earlier investigative documentaries on "Beirut Port Corruption" (2015) uncovered massive administrative corruption, contributing to anti-corruption movements and triggering official inquiries (ARIJ, 2023).

In Yemen, despite ongoing conflict, investigative journalism achieved notable progress. ARIJ's 2023 reports exposed financial violations in the distribution of humanitarian aid, raising public awareness and supporting international accountability efforts (ARIJ, 2023).

In Algeria, investigative journalism monitored major corruption cases, including the sentencing of a former Minister of Labour and Social Security to seven years in prison for embezzling 600 billion centimes from the Social Security Fund a case that drew wide public attention and resulted in strong judicial follow-up (Reuters, 2025). Additional cases involved former prime ministers Ahmed Ouyahia and Abdelmalek Sellal, along with other high-ranking officials, who were convicted in major corruption scandals related to the misuse of public contracts, money laundering, and illicit dealings- exposed through sustained media investigations. In the Sonatrach scandal, journalistic and judicial investigations revealed corruption in procurement and asset acquisition, including the conviction of the company's former CEO for approving the purchase of an overpriced Italian refinery (Middle East Monitor, 2025).

5. Challenges to the Success of Investigative Journalism in the Arab World:

Despite its accomplishments, investigative journalism in the Arab region faces severe challenges including security threats, assassinations, government censorship, and restrictions on access to information. For example, journalists in North Africa have been attacked for exposing violations in development projects. A 2025 study noted that these obstacles also include



insufficient funding and limited professional training, which restrict the dissemination of investigative reporting.

Success in this field requires expanding press freedom, ensuring protection for journalists and their sources, and allocating financial awards that encourage investigative work as seen in the Palestinian “AMAN” initiative (2023), which trained 24 journalists on corruption-related investigations. Partnerships with international organizations such as the GIJN further enhance journalists’ ability to overcome local censorship and increase their impact.

Media outlets in developing societies, including Arab countries, face interference from ruling regimes and powerful elites, making investigative practice extremely difficult and sometimes nearly impossible (Abu Ni‘ah, 2018, p. 45).

The most significant challenges include:

- Avoidance of accountability by officials and the reluctance of civil-society and private-sector institutions to provide information.
- Fear among affected individuals of legal or security retaliation, leading them to request anonymity, especially in politically sensitive or criminal cases.
- Limited numbers of skilled investigative journalists capable of producing politically, socially, or economically significant work.
- Insufficient protection for journalists who expose corruption, leaving them vulnerable to threats and extortion.
- Financial constraints within media institutions, particularly those lacking external funding.
- Cultural, social, and political pressures such as tribal, partisan, or familial influence that prevent the exposure of corruption.
- Self-censorship by media organizations to avoid conflicts that may jeopardize their survival or funding sources.
- Difficulty accessing confidential or undisclosed information, including documents, evidence, or victim testimonies, which are essential for any successful investigation.
- The need to keep pace with technological advances, including modern tools for recording, filming, and data analysis, which require substantial training and financial resources.
- Time constraints and professional pressure, as journalists may face tight deadlines incompatible with the lengthy nature of investigative work, which often takes months or years, exposing them to pressure from affected actors (Shahin, 2021, p. 16).

Researcher Al-Din Mahmoud identifies additional factors that hinder the emergence of comprehensive investigative journalism in the Arab world:

1. Most media and publishing laws in Arab countries do not provide protection for journalistic material addressing corruption, particularly when it involves political elites.
2. The absence of clear editorial policies that enable skilled investigative journalists to work within structured professional environments.



3.The lack of political will among many Arab regimes to engage seriously with corruption-related media investigations.

4.Limited governmental responsiveness to investigative reporting, as media-led anti-corruption campaigns rarely result in concrete outcomes and often end without action (Mahmoud, 2000, p. 34)

6. CONCLUSION:

TArab investigative journalism plays a vital role in exposing corruption and revealing administrative and financial violations. However, its effectiveness is limited by weak professional environments, insufficient protection for journalists, and a lack of media independence in many Arab countries. Political, economic, and social pressures along with limited resources and technology further constrain investigative work.

Despite these challenges, successful cases show that journalists can overcome obstacles through strong professional standards and rigorous methods. Collaboration between media outlets, NGOs, and civil society also strengthens the impact of investigative reporting. Ultimately, improving professional conditions, enhancing journalistic skills, and ensuring legal and ethical protections are essential for boosting the effectiveness of investigative journalism, which remains crucial for promoting transparency in Arab societies.

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