

## **BOOK REVIEW**

David Spark

*Investigative Reporting: A Study in Technique*

**Oxford: Focal Press, 1997. 271pp. ISBN 0-240-51543-9**

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If you dig up previously hidden information and challenge the affected party to deny it, does that make you an investigative reporter? Not at all, says David Spark, freelance writer and author of *Investigative Reporting: A Study in Technique*. For him, investigative reporting is “not only making an allegation but producing conclusive evidence and reporting it clearly and simply” (p. 1). This is the premise on which the book is based as the author shows the reader exactly how to make claims, produce documentary evidence and present the story to make the best impact.

By using the word ‘technique’ is David Spark referring to a way of carrying out a particular kind of reporting? Or is he talking about skill or ability in the field of investigative reporting? The answer is ‘yes’ to both questions. *Investigative Reporting: A Study in Technique* analyses the method required for investigative reporting and also showcases the work of journalists who are skilled in this kind of reporting.

How credible is a book on investigative reporting by an author who is not an investigative journalist himself but rather “a freelance writer of

wide experience”, according to the book’s blurb? Does his credibility compare, for example, with that of William C. Gaines, award-winning investigative reporter and author of *Investigative Journalism: Proven Strategies for Reporting the Story* (2008)? By and large, it does at least at two levels. The first is that although not a trained investigative reporter himself, Spark has demonstrated a good knack as well as flair for the field to which he is literally a novice. At the second level, he engaged not only a style to tell the reader all there is to know, particularly in terms of technique and everything else required to succeed in the trade, but he also thoroughly searched and researched the issues carried in the book together with a wide consultation with many industry players. As is obvious, and captured vividly in the preface to *Investigative Reporting: A Study in Technique*, David Spark acknowledges the contribution of about 60 investigative journalists whose varied experiences and works formed the bedrock of the book (pp. 239-242). These contributions lend credibility to and continuous relevance of the book from the time of its publication to today. The author’s analyses of several well-known cases, including the Kim Philby master spy investigation (pp. 114-119) and the Maxwell investigations (pp. 137-147) afford the young investigative reporter rich insights into the technique needed for success in the field. In this way, he has been able to give the readership a bird’s eye view of this rather complicated genre of journalism.

The study of the technique employed by these skilled practitioners and the many cases the author highlights make this book unique in the marketplace of literature on investigative reporting. But a critical question has to be answered. Why would a book, published nearly two decades ago, be of any premium for a review? The answer is simple: in the particular case of Ghana, as is elsewhere in much of Africa, investigative journalism is only a “just begun” enterprise, literally. And so, this book provides not only a lesson but a historical context from which to understand the nuances of investigative journalism and its changing dynamics (as part of the overall developmental agenda).

In terms of structure, the book is divided into twenty chapters. The first two chapters define what investigative reporting is and list the qualities of an investigative journalist. Chapters 3 to 10 are devoted to the technique, needed in finding stories, pursuing inquiries, finding people, dealing with documents, conducting interviews, writing the stories and avoiding legal land mines. Chapters 11 to 20 illustrate the use of investigative reporting technique in a wide variety of well-known cases, covering espionage, corporate fraud, social and consumer affairs, crime, security and intelligence, local government, sleaze and corruption overseas.

The greatest strength of the book lies in the first chapter. Only eight pages long, it focuses on what to identify as the essence of investigative reporting. Early in the chapter, the author makes the claim that investigative reporting is not impartial and unbiased. Borrowing the words of BBC journalist, Roger Cook, investigative reporting is supposed to be “biased...against fraud, criminality and injustice” (p. 2). Again, the author states that “reporters keen on investigative work side with the less powerful and the forgotten” (p. 6). These two features, (bias against wrong and fighting for the people), prescribe the investigative reporter’s mindset. Essentially, they represent the most critical part of any investigative reporter’s technique. This hands-on knowledge is particularly significant in transitional democracies like Ghana which are associated with various forms of perceived and real corruption and power abuse. In many cases, journalists get the flak for being, in the eyes of some sections of the society, ruthless and biased, when in reality they are only taking the right dosage for the prescription given them as investigative reporters. In Ghana today, for example, corruption is a major subject in the public and media sphere. Many have credited this to the active watchdog role of the journalist in general and the investigative reporter in particular. The best Ghanaian example is Anas Aremeyaw Anas who, on behalf of “the less powerful and the forgotten”, has investigated “fraud, criminality and injustice” in utility companies, orphanages and the courts, among others. Thus, any book such as Spark’s that offers the tools, skills, knowledge and the aptitudes to

sharpening the craft is welcome news, the epoch of publication regardless, especially when it is relevant to the changing times.

But Spark also makes a strong argument for succeeding as an investigative reporter. He notes that a thoroughbred of a journalist with a generous amount of scepticism rather than cynicism would analyse a statement and ask questions which would lead to the exposure of its letter and spirit. In other words, he literally puts his compass on every statement in order to avoid publishing public relations-induced material or politically-laced spin. For Spark, while the straight forward or “normal” journalist depends on official sources, the investigative reporter, on the other hand, moves beyond those and contacts unofficial sources. The latter is the marrow to all journalism and the vein to all scoop (but without a coup). Indeed, they are the rarer breed who feed the need of the reader. After all, many a successful investigative piece is borne out of serendipity.

Spark also writes extensively of the qualities that are common to successful investigative reporters, including the following: they have a sense of politics and history; they are obsessive but not too obsessive; they read extensively; they are outraged and emotional about wrong doing; they have a moral conviction to keep going, and so on. And, drawing from the experiences of many well-known journalists, he identifies the many skills, special circumstances and common factors involved in different types of investigations. It is particularly instructive how he elaborates the processes in getting indifferent informants to give information. This, to Spark, is the difference between the “peripherals” and the “cogs”, from among cohorts in the industry.

But he doesn't leave out the dangers involved in the profession and the stress and strain with legal systems. He reveals, among other facts, that it is illegal to seek personal information from a source that is not authorised to do so. One may have noticed through reoccurrence that many investigative journalists would make use of any source, so far as some reliable information can be obtained from the source. The trend, however, seems to be that the illegality of this act is only valid when the investigation is unsuccessful. However, a successful investigation that

reveals truth many a time gets away with the act. The end then justifies the means here; a good book by all standards.

However, a little drawback of the book is its focus on specific British investigative cases. Throughout, the author refers to cases that would be familiar to an audience conversant with British culture, politics and business of the 80s and 90s. A reader without a knowledge of what made the headlines in those days could easily get bogged down in detail and be discouraged from reading further. At times, it is difficult keeping up with the minute detail of over a dozen investigative cases. Perhaps, a good balance between typically British examples and other examples from other places would have been a healthy therapy, particularly as a good book such as this would find itself in societies other than British. Of course, the author refers to real cases in his book *but, (we are sure)*, if he had provided less specifics and more emphases on technique, he would have been more faithful to the title of his book, better engaged his readers and made the text more readable.

*Investigative Reporting: A Study in Technique* is a detailed investigation and analysis of the way to conduct investigative reporting. Although, primarily written for British audience as evidenced by the vast majority of illustrations it employs, it is at the same time a useful resource worth the while for Ghanaian audience as it is for any audience anywhere. His synthesis of their experiences is a commendable effort and the reader benefits from the multiplicity and richness of their perspectives. What the book lacks is by way of end-of-chapter summaries and questions for further discussion (after all, it is a textbook!). Yet it more than compensates with a solid analysis of investigative reporting technique and a broad range of case studies. Spark's [hand]book has been called the most comprehensive on investigative journalism. It is clearly one of the very best! In fact, Spark's book is in sync with the relatively recent publication on the same topic: Gaines's (2008) *Investigative Journalism: Proven Strategies for Reporting the Story*. On account of its high quality, Gaines's book has recently received a review in the *Ghana Social Science Journal*, Volume 13, Number 1, June 2016, pp. 164-166. Complementing Spark's work,

this book emphasises, among others, that the craft goes beyond matters in the public domain and exposes the twaddle of the powerful in a bid to protect the powerless, while putting their own lives and careers on the line. For all these reasons, we recommend it, and, particularly, to students, journalists, budding investigative reporters and a public, especially those interested in political and corporate investigations.

## **Reference**

Gaines, W. C. (2008). *Investigative Journalism: Proven Strategies for Reporting the Story*. Washington, DC: CQ Press.