

INVISIBLE JOURNALISM? THE POLITICAL IMPACT OF INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM IN HUNGARY

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ABSTRACT: This paper briefly overviews the theory and history of investigative journalism and assesses the political impact of investigative reporting in post-communist Hungary on the basis of a series of semi-structured interviews with award-winning investigative journalists.

KEYWORDS: democracy, investigative journalism, media effects, watchdog

INTRODUCTION: DO THE MEDIA REALLY HAVE POWER?

The media have power, it is widely held among members of the public, politicians, and journalists. The notion of the “fourth estate,” coined by Edmund Burke, refers to the optimistic view that, in democratic societies, journalists check on the political and business elites¹. As Michael Schudson observes, “Representative democracy is a political system based on distrust of power and the powerful” (Schudson, 2003: 104). That this kind of political regime should rely on the separation of powers or, in a different approach, on a system of checks and balances, is warranted by the experience that even freely elected politicians make decisions that are driven by self-regarding interests rather than the public good and that they therefore need to be under public scrutiny. Under the “liberal” and the “social responsibility” models of the press, journalists are commonly expected to be the “watchdogs” of democracy, whose job it is to “bark” on behalf of the public whenever they disclose that the politicians use their powers for purposes other than their mandates allow them to (Siebert et al., [1956] 1963).

Of all journalists, investigative reporters are particularly expected to reveal cases that those involved try to hide from the public eye, especially corruption – that is, instances when public money is transferred into private pockets in illegitimate or illegal ways. The taxpayer has the right to know what the government spends his or her money on, as – in the words of Thomas Paine – “every man is a proprietor in government and considers it a necessary part of his business to understand [...] because it affects his property” (Paine [1792] quoted by Peters, 1998: 62). Investigative journalism, which as a profession emerged in the Anglo-Saxon countries in the 19th century and was relatively rare on the European continent until the late 20th century (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), cannot be efficient unless news media are largely independent from both the political and business elites, or at least pluralistic enough so that outlets controlled by competing elites can mutually keep an eye on those elites. It is ideally followed by the correction of the mistakes exposed, while those responsible are held to account in both the political and legal senses of the term (Chalaby, 1996; Kunczik, 2001; Ószabó & Vajda, 2001; Schulz, 2002).

¹ “There are three estates [i.e. the aristocracy, the clergy, and the middle classes] in Parliament, but in the Reporters’ Gallery yonder there sits a Fourth Estate more important than they are all” (Burke [1787] quoted by Horvát, 1997: 61).

²The term “muck-rakers” refers to a generation of investigative journalists active in the United States in the beginning of the 20th century and was originally coined by President Theodor Roosevelt in disgust; however, many of them proudly embraced the term (Aucoin, 2002).

The history of journalism offers a number of examples that seem to demonstrate the case that investigative journalism may indeed have a deep impact on politics. William Howard Russell, correspondent of *The Times* during the Crimean War, reported in 1854 on the shortcomings of medical care and catering for British troops; the resulting scandal contributed to the fall of the government in 1855 (De Burgh, 2000). Nellie Bly, the first undercover female journalist, who worked for Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World*, feigned insanity in 1887 in order to be able to reveal how brutally patients were treated in the Women’s Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell’s Island; after the ensuing scandal, the government reformed the institution and increased its budget (Csillag, 2000). Ida Tarbell, one of the leading “muckraking” journalists², exposed the monopolist endeavours of John D. Rockefeller and the Standard Oil Company in McClure’s Magazine in 1902; as a consequence, legislators limited the power of trusts (Rivers & Mathews, 1988). Reports by the US television journalist Roberta Baskin have repeatedly forced business elites to take consumers’ interests into account; for example, after she had revealed, in 1980, that some beer brands contained cancer-causing agents, new regulations were passed, limiting the concentration of carcinogenic chemicals in beers (Baskin, 2001). *The Guardian* in Britain published a list of MPs who represented lobby interests in parliament, many of whom ultimately chose to resign; some say the scandal played a major role in the fall of the Conservative Party in the 1997 legislative elections (McNair, 1998). Robert Winnet exposed British MPs’ expenses scandal in *The Daily Telegraph* in 2009; as a consequence, several members of the House of Commons and of the House of Lords were prosecuted and sentenced to terms of imprisonment (Winnet & Rayner, 2009).

While the list of cases similar to those briefly described above could be continued, and most members of the public and of the journalism community have little doubt that the media have power, many media scholars are sceptical about the media’s political impact. James Curran suggests that investigative reporting has but a limited political impact even in established democracies such as the United Kingdom, which he attributes to the cleavages manifest within the British journalism community: the media are divided along political and business interests, that is, they do not represent the public at large but particular interest groups. Outlets loyal to the government

of the day are hostile toward those critical of it, and do not cover investigative reports in which other outlets disclose abuses of power by the government (Curran, 1997). István Wisinger notes about one of the most celebrated instances of investigative journalism, the McCarthy case, revealed by Ed Murrow on CBS television between 1950 and 1954, that “the senator’s removal from office [...] took a fairly long time” (Wisinger, 2008: 56)³. Daniel C. Hallin observes – when analysing Watergate, a series of stories published in *The Washington Post* between 1972 and 1974, which famously attracted many young people to the journalism profession and even inspired a movie⁴ – that Nixon, had he avoided confrontation, and had he had the majority in Congress, could probably have stayed in office. Hallin argues that Carl Bernstein’s and Bob Woodward’s investigative work was a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for Nixon to fall, and suggests that “*myths of media power* often lead us to avoid dealing with the reality of historical developments [...] which may be disturbing to us” (Hallin 2001: 24; emphasis added). To be sure, what works in one country may not work in another. While the British MPs’ expenses scandal led to major political and legal consequences, the Hungarian MPs’ expenses scandal, occurring at about the same time and highly similar in nature to the one in the United Kingdom, entailed virtually no political or legal sanctions at all, as it was countered in a joint effort by the political elites (Bajomi-Lázár & Tóth, 2010). The political institutions and culture prevalent in a country may add to, or mitigate, the impact of investigative journalism on politics.

Investigative journalism emerged in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in the beginning of the 20th century (Tomsics, 2006). In the interwar period, when Hungary regained independence but lost most of its former territories, and, at first, a centre-right then far-right authoritarian regime prevailed, it was practically non-existent. Under state socialism, which emerged after World War II in Hungary, journalists were expected to be the “soldiers of the party” rather than the “watchdogs of democracy.” Investigative journalism re-emerged toward the end of the 1980s when the party state was gradually losing ground. Its efficiency, however, has been frequently questioned by media scholars. When discussing abuses of power revealed by the media in the first ten years of the “Third Republic,” declared on 23 October 1989, Tamás Terestyéni introduces the concept of the “weakness of the public sphere” and suggests that media scandals

³ The McCarthy case inspired the movie *Good Night, and Good Luck*, co-written by George Clooney and Grant Heslov, directed by Clooney, and starring David Strathairn (2005).

⁴ *All the President’s Men*, based on the book of the same name by Carl Bernstein and Robert Woodward, directed by Alan J. Pakula, and starring Dustin Hoffmann and Robert Redford (1976).

had undermined only temporarily the popularity of political parties, while those personally responsible for them got away without real sanctions (Terestyéni, 1999). According to Miklós Sükösd, who offers an analysis of the aftermath of investigative reports published in the political and cultural weekly *Élet és Irodalom*, such reports had a very limited impact: “there is no discussion, no reply, no reform of the system behind the scandal” (Sükösd, 2000: 19). On the basis of interviews conducted with senior editors, Emília Krúg confirms the theory of the “country with no consequences,” originally introduced by the political scientist and columnist Tamás Fritz (Krúg, 2007).

In the context of Hungary, Miklós Sükösd speaks of “clan journalism,” Éva Vajda of “campaign journalism,” and Mihály Gálik of “dossier-journalism” (Sükösd, 2000b; Vajda, 2001; Gálik, 2004). They all refer to the same phenomenon: Hungarian journalists oftentimes publicise information that has been leaked by various political forces and thus they are instrumentalised in political power games. In Hungary, where – like in many other former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe – polarised pluralism prevails, most journalists, media outlets and media companies are informally associated with political parties and interest groups, and tend to use double standards in reporting. The resulting black-and-white representations of reality create competing media agendas and news frames with little or no similar issues and readings; the reader/viewer/listener gathering information from different outlets on the very same day may have the impression that the journalists of competing media outlets live in different universes, not one and the same country.

Sükösd, Vajda and Gálik all agree that investigative journalism, in the Anglo-Saxon sense of the term, is the exception rather than the rule in Hungary, which they explain with the lack of financial resources, the small Hungarian media market being unable to produce major profits that could be reinvested into investigative reporting, while suggesting that investigative journalism is a costly business. But statements about the lack of investigative journalism in Hungary are, to a degree, countered by figures. The József Soma Göbolyös Foundation, which grants a specific award to investigative reporters, has received about 30 applications annually in recent years, which means that one major investigative piece was publicised every sec-

⁵ Email communication by András Lóke, head of the board of the foundation (7 December 2013).

ond week on average⁵. It should then follow that there is investigative journalism in Hungary, and yet it remains invisible or unnoticed: it is largely inefficient in that the ensuing consequences fall short of public expectations. It is also noteworthy that most of the investigative reports are published in relatively low budget weekly magazines rather than more profitable news sites and television channels, but then this might also be explained by a division of labour among outlets: weeklies have traditionally been specialised in news analysis and background, while news sites and television channels in the daily news coverage of political events. Investigative journalism is, of course, more costly than mere news reporting; yet no evidence confirms statements about a direct link between an outlet's financial capacities and the frequency and efficiency of its investigative activities.

This paper is to assess the political impact of investigative reporting in Hungary on the basis of a series of semi-structured interviews with seven award-winning investigative journalists who have exposed major scandals in the 2000s. It is focusing on the following questions: 1. Is there any meaningful investigative journalism in Hungary and, if so, is it any different from that in the Anglo-Saxon countries? 2. Do leading investigative journalists in Hungary ever encounter political and business pressures while doing their job? 3. Where does the information their reports are based on usually come from? 4. What consequences have followed the exposed corruption cases? Below is what they said⁶.

INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM IN HUNGARY AND IN THE ANGLO-SAXON COUNTRIES

“There is investigative journalism in Hungary, but it is different from that in the United Kingdom and the United States where it is done on a higher level. There [in the above-mentioned Anglo-Saxon countries], it is not exceptional for a case to be revealed in full detail, for society to boycott those behind it, and for the judiciary to do their job,” says Tamás Bodoky, who used to work for the news site *index.hu* and is now chief editor of *atlatszo.hu*. “In Hungary, the whole system is rotten, and corruption is the main rule. Political parties pretend to be at war with one another, but they are fighting within the frames of the system only. They know a lot about each other and, at the end of the day, make a deal.”

⁶ The interviews were conducted in August and September 2009 by Ágnes Lampé.

Erna Sághy, who used to work for the weekly *Figyelő* and is now employed by HVG, agrees that the classic genre exists in Hungary. “An investigative journalist will go as far as he or she can to understand and to disclose the case. Such was for me the story of Omninvest while I worked for Figyelő. The company stated that they had discovered the remedy against bird flu in co-operation with the Office of the Surgeon General and would start producing the vaccine. At the press conference, I asked the Deputy Surgeon General a logical question: how much did the Hungarian state spend on this? At first, she did not reply, but then she said she could not speak of this. It became immediately clear that there was something wrong about all this. I, of course, went after the story, and got as far as a journalist can in disclosing where the state’s money had been channelled to.”

Antónia Rádi, of the weekly *HVG*, also thinks there is investigative journalism in Hungary – to the extent that the market can sustain it. “There is a need, contrary to allegations, for those who sell quality, not fake, journalism, even though sometimes the whole of the media make a mistake as they did when they released a statement by Attila Petőfi, head of the National Investigation Office, suggesting that the series of assassination attempts against the Roma was committed by a lone criminal, meaning ‘dear co-criminals, you may now come and denounce your fellows.’ Petőfi used the media to deliver a message to criminals.”⁷

⁷ In 2008 and 2009, nine attempts were committed against Roma communities in small villages by a gang of four, killing a total of six people, including a five-year-old boy.

According to András Pethő, of the news site *origo.hu*, the reality of the Hungarian media is completely different from that in the Anglo-Saxon countries. “American journalists often told me about the FBI or some other authority launching an investigation on the basis of stories they had exposed. True, articles there are better documented. Here, in Hungary, allegations are often questionable, and the articles are packed with deductive statements, journalistic speculations, and unconfirmed information. Some journalists even fail to ask those involved to comment.” Pethő adds that “I may be lucky, but so far no correction request has been submitted, nor lawsuits have been launched against me. If I disclose a story in full detail, and can document all data, there should not be a problem.” Investigative reporting requires a specific journalistic mentality, he says: it is usually practiced by those who go beyond the mere transmission of primary information. “Should a big story come up in the Anglo-Saxon

countries, each and every outlet would go after it and treat it as their own. Thus there emerges a proper contest among news outlets, and follow-up is granted. By contrast, in Hungary, when an outlet deals with a story, other ones will likely ignore it,” Pető further explains.

Éva Vajda, who used to work for the weekly *Élet és Irodalom* and the bi-monthly *Manager Magazin*, thinks the situation in the Anglo-Saxon countries is different in that the other sub-systems of society work better. “The reason why Watergate has become a major scandal is not that *The Washington Post* did not give up over time but that the investigation committee of the Senate and then the public prosecutor were doing their jobs properly. In a transition society like ours, you can hardly expect everything to work. Things just do not work. The press does not, either. It does not ask the real questions, but keeps speculating: what is behind the story, who has made a telephone call, and who is the major advertiser? It is doing a number of things it should not.”

POLITICAL AND BUSINESS PRESSURES

According to Nóra Somlyódy, of the weekly *Magyar Narancs*, underfunding is a major issue for investigative reporters in Hungary. “Currently, you can hardly find an outlet that would be able to sustain investigative journalism or would have the ambition to do so. Independent sources, such as grants, may be accessed on an ad hoc basis, but often run out, while major cases cannot be uncovered from the funding available,” she says. “Still, I am optimistic. I hope the prestige of investigative reporting will improve over time, and, ten years from now, we will have a different situation.”

András Bódis, of the weekly *Heti Válasz*, agrees that money is a key question. “The problem with investigative journalism is that it is practiced by low-budget papers rather than profit-making commercial outlets.” Sometimes, the media owners are the obstacle. “Even though the article on Strabag was an issue with the publisher, the problem was solved, and *Heti Válasz* eventually published it,” Bódis adds⁸. This, however, may be rather uncommon, as the media often encounter a great deal of business pressure. “There is a network of companies in Hungary,” according to Bódis, “which controls nearly the whole media spectrum, from commercial television onwards, via quasi-party newspapers until local papers. It is not just greedy and

⁸ Highway and underground construction has been a major business in Hungary since the early 2000s. A company called Strabag has earned 360 billion forints (over one billion British pounds) between 2003 and 2007. The company was said to be informally associated with the Alliance of Free Democrats party, the minor coalition ally of the Hungarian Socialist Party between 2002 and 2008.

dirty party politics that is in control. The business sphere is no better. Moreover, party politics, media and business elites are mutually intertwined and overlapping and work as one single unit, as their key figures rely on and mutually support one another.”

According to Vajda, there are opportunities, one just needs to be ready to grab them. “In November 2005, we published on our front page an article about the fights between András Sugár and Elek Straub in the Matáv-case⁹. I had spoken with 40 people, so I had an insider’s view on the company, I had my sources. We could write about Straub’s dismissal because we had covered, earlier, the company in detail. I did not need to be friends with the company accountant so that he or she could be my whistle-blower,” she recalls. “No one should be afraid of lawsuits. It is the fault of the media if they decide not to publicise an article for fear. Those involved in a particular case would often give it a try [and threaten the outlet with a lawsuit]. True, one needs to be able to recognise when a client’s outrage is well-founded, when stakes are high, and when mistakes would entail serious financial risks [for the outlet]. But we should not throw away our pens just because someone somewhere does not like what we are writing about,” Vajda adds.

⁹ Elek Straub, CEO of the telecommunications company MATÁV/Magyar Telekom, resigned in 2006, two years before the expiry of his mandate, after the company had been fined for channelling money to off-shore companies.

WHERE DOES THE INFORMATION COME FROM?

“The basic idea and information are usually leaked. Journalists themselves rarely find a trace. Most of the time, it is a rival [of the ones involved in a corruption case] who sends them an anonymous letter or email,” says Bodoky. “My article about the off-shore billions of the Hungarian Electricity Private Limited Company was based on a letter that had been mailed in a post office in the city of Tatabánya and including ten pages from an inner report of the company. It was written in an accountant’s language and had no name on it, but it was good enough for me to start investigating. It took me almost six months, I had to gather a great deal of information about the company, including from abroad, and I spoke with at least twenty people, always personally.” Sometimes all Bodoky has in the beginning is a name, just as he did when he started to write an article about the National Research and Technology Office transferring research and development funds to off-shore companies.

Rádi says her paper never pays for information, but adds she does not think this method should always be dismissed. “These days, people are trying to sell complete files and secret tapes. Data coming from sources like that can at best be considered basic information. Every detail needs to be double-checked and verified.” When reading the company register, annual reports, public tenders and other data bases, Rádi often finds information on her own that she can use. “This is how I found the Kaya Ibrahim story and ultimately got to the companies of Lajos Simicska who, at the time, worked as an entrepreneur¹⁰. The idea to study his companies – which had already attracted some media attention in the early 1990s – occurred to me when I heard the news that he would be appointed head of the national tax authority. In a similar vein, I found the basic information accidentally when I exposed how the National Development Agency had transferred 200 million forints¹¹ to [the private commercial television channel] TV2 for the soap opera ‘Good Days, Bad Days’ in order for them to include in the script a story about a tender advertised by the European Union [in 2008].”

“Information would not fly in through your window,” says Sággy, who always conducts a number of background interviews before she finds information that she thinks is worth to be exposed in more detail. “I often receive documents, too, but I always try to find out whose interest it is to ‘inform’ me. I make sure no ‘helpers’ lead my hand. Journalists can find the key information if they try.” Sággy was the first to report about the case of the faked invoices former Minister of Finances János Veres and his business partner János Kabai had been involved in. “Veres says he had quit the company before the crime was committed. I was, however, told [...] that invoices had been faked earlier, too, that is, at the time Veres still worked for the company. In fact, the minister later quit the company so that the authorities would lose sight of him while he could continue operating the system unnoticed. I, of course, treated this piece of information with criticism,” she says. “Kabai had already been prosecuted and sentenced at the time. I wanted to read his file, but I was thrown out of the office of Chief Judge Zoltán Lominiczi as many as five times, based on a law, passed in 2003, which was a serious limitation on press freedom and which basically provided that only those involved had the right to see criminal files.” At the end of the day, however, Sággy reached the court. By virtue of a directive issued in the late

¹⁰ Lajos Simicska, party cashier of the centre-right Fidesz party, was involved in the Kaya Ibrahim/Josip Tot case during which, in 1998, ownership of about a dozen companies informally associated with Fidesz was transferred to two immigrant workers, as a result of which the losses and debts of the companies accumulated in previous years became unredeemable.

¹¹ Nearly 600,000 British pounds.

1990s, journalists could take a look at the files of on-going criminal investigations with the special permission of the head of the court. “This is how I got the opportunity. They placed four huge boxes in front of me, all full of documents, statements, and other investigation files. None of it was of any use, but I found a sheet attached to it: an indictment by a former suspect who had delivered the faked invoices at a time when Veres was still among the owners. This was the basic information I needed so that I could start work. Step by step, I got the whole picture about the ‘invoice factory’ operated under Veres. But the idea that I found the information myself escaped the minister who was convinced that his opponents had delivered it to me. I must add that after a scandal of a similar scale, the one responsible would immediately resign [in a more democratic country]. Here, however, politics defended Veres.” The only consequence of the case was that the directive enabling journalists to take a look at criminal files was cancelled.

According to Pethő, the information needs to be double-checked in all possible ways. Most of the time, he himself finds the story. “Every now and then, I take a look at publicly available data released by the ministries. In 2007, I found a contract on the web page of the Office of the Prime Minister about a study that turned out to be a patchwork of various materials [published elsewhere earlier]. After I published the article, an acquaintance of mine gave me a phone call: ‘Let us meet if you are interested in similar cases.’ He told me about a company receiving commissions worth millions of forints from the National Development Agency without a public contest. After the story about the Office of the Prime Minister came out, the deputy chief secretary of Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány was fired. But the one about the National Development Agency had no consequences whatsoever, as it was more complicated and they could find an explanation more easily.” Pethő further recalls that “after a while, one piece of information will bring you another. After the article about the National Development Agency came out, I read all the comments received. One of them suggested to me that its author was very well-informed. I wrote to him, we began to exchange emails, and he sent me plenty of useful background information whose reliability I could double-check using other sources. I started work in early February 2008, and the first article was ready for publication in March. The next article took me three months to write, even though

I also worked on some other, minor, stories in the meantime.”

Vajda suggests that the situation was much better ten years ago than it is now. The political culture was more constructive and there was more hope that this place will once become a normal country. “It was not easy, but you could convince people that as a journalist you wanted to write about the real world and needed no bullshitting. Thus during our background interviews our informants often told us the truth. When I worked for *Élet és Irodalom*, we too have received packages with documents. But, before publicising the information, we always double-checked it. The point was not who had delivered it to us and for what reason, as we often found that the true story was not what the sender wanted it to be. Today you have many more ‘targeted stories,’ which is partly because everything is politicised, and partly because now you have a number of PR experts, and those of them who are true professionals know how to mislead journalists, many of whom are just too lazy to rephrase a press release.” Every story is ‘targeted’ in some way, as was the case with the ‘duel’ between István Kocsis and vice-mayor of Budapest Miklós Hagyó in 2009. “We published a portrait about Kocsis, CEO of the Budapest Public Transportation Company, some years ago in *Manager Magazin*, but the press at the time was not interested enough to confront him with his past, even though as the chief privatiser at the State Privatisation Agency he had played a key role in many important cases since the mid-1990s. In a proper country, every aspect of his life would have been exposed long ago. But in Hungary, those in the journalism profession have not made a self-assessment in twenty years. They blame it all on politics, saying that those are not doing their jobs properly,” Vajda adds.

Unknown or anonymous informants reach *Magyar Narancs*, too. “We treat these stories, data and documents with caution. We take a look at the source and take into account what interests may be served, should the case be exposed. The public image of the journalist, according to which he or she relies on ready-made information and uses it immediately and without criticism, is just fake,” says Somlyódy. “Once the freshly appointed CEO of a major company called us, saying that he would like to expose the misdeeds of his predecessor, but we always keep our distance. *Magyar Narancs* usually does its own research and investigation. It is important for us to gather data

¹²The story of high and possibly unwarranted primes at the Budapest Public Transportation Company became a major scandal in 2009–2010 and likely played a major part in the fall of the socialist government in the 2010 elections.

¹³This complicated case, which began in 2008 and is still on the agenda, suggests that secret service methods were used in order to gather data on senior politicians and involved representatives of the Hungarian Democratic Forum and of the Hungarian Socialist Party.

¹⁴Various state-owned companies controlled by the minister of economics made contracts between 2005 and 2010 with the private company Dataplex, part of the portfolio of Wallis, that had earlier been owned by future prime minister Gordon Bajnai. According to allegations, the state suffered a 1.2 billion forints loss in total.

from various sources, not just those involved, and to confirm every piece of information. One source is never enough.”

Bódis also dislikes “ready-made” materials. “It is always fishy, as journalistic control is missing. We too have received the package about the Budapest Transportation Company and the Hungarian Electricity Private Limited Company that was mailed from the city of Tatabánya, but we did not use it, as this would have been a ‘timed’ and ‘directed’ story that has not been exposed by a journalist. That is not investigative reporting. Besides, it would have unfolded a chain reaction, the media being instrumentalised. To be sure, the Budapest Transportation Company ‘bomb’ was a precedent: had it not exploded, we would never have learnt about the primes paid at the company. Under the pressure of some articles, new guarantees were eventually built in the system.”¹² Bódis adds that the general view of the media is that they would release any information immediately. “Politicians are convinced that the media use ‘ammunition’ received from elsewhere. This is indeed the case some of the time, when the media are just a puppet. For example, communication was ‘directed’ when the case of the UD Joint Stock Company was revealed¹³. György Szilvász, the minister in charge of the supervision of the secret services, gave instructions to four journalists on a daily basis about what to write and how to do it. What would you call a journalist like that? I think it is fundamental that the journalist should be in control.” Bódis has repeatedly found news stories by accident and then, using information obtained earlier, he discovered how these were interrelated. “For example, the Dataplex case, involving [former minister of economics] János Kóka, began by accident and was based on a piece of information found eighteen months earlier¹⁴. The Sukoró case began when someone paid a visit to the mayor of a Budapest district and saw a document on real estate development on his desk. That person could take a look at the dossier, and I met him by accident, and these small pieces of information were enough for me to get started.”¹⁵

NO CONSEQUENCES?

“What is important is not what the desperate or the scammed leak; this is how it goes everywhere. What is a true ‘Hungaricum’ is that most of the exposed stories have no consequences. This is, however, no surprise, as both the Office of the Attorney and the police are

under [political] control, which is not the journalist's fault," according to Bodoky. He adds that there are some refreshing exceptions that may give journalists a sense of success. "In connection with what happened on 23 October 2006, we managed to modify the narrative about 'legitimate' police intervention¹⁶. We received a number of readers' letters and phone calls saying that things had not been quite the way the police were framing them. Of these, I did not deal with anonymous sources, as I needed concrete stories." Bodoky exposed Gergely Varga, former spokesman of the Office of the Budapest Attorney, too. "I went to court hearings to report on them, and once, there was Varga, shouting at the witnesses and 'warning' them of the consequences of false witnessing. One of them recorded this on his cell phone. At the time, we did not know yet that Varga also worked as an attorney. And then, when in January 2008 he became the spokesman of the office, we found the recording. He was eventually fired, that is, he could no longer work as a spokesman, but continued work as an attorney. Since then, his other businesses have also been exposed. The other day he was caught while bribing someone, and he had an intimate relationship with one of his clients."

In 2000, network administrators whispered to Bodoky that the Office of National Security installed hacking servers with internet service providers. Ervin Demeter, the minister supervising the secret services at the time, first did not give a straight answer, but Bodoky kept on asking him questions, so eventually he admitted it at a press conference. However, a number of cases have had no consequences. "Back in the day, government sources leaked information about some doubtful business transactions which had taken place under the previous government at a public utility company owned by the state. I went after the story and figured out that the incumbent government was not completely innocent in those business transactions either. When I revealed the case, they were threatening to file a lawsuit against me, and a major state-owned company called us to say they would withdraw their ads. At the end of the day, politics won, I could not go on with the story," says Bodoky. Another case, however, was publicised: someone in the sports committee of parliament had signed an official document instead of his fellow party members. "When we exposed the case, they were threatening us and said they would go to the police, even though a graphologist had confirmed that all signatures were of the same hand. At the end of the day, I

¹⁵ A major project to build a casino complex near Budapest was launched under Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány. According to allegations, the transaction by which land was sold to a company for the investment made a huge loss to the state. The case is still pending.

¹⁶ On the anniversary of the 1956 revolution, demonstrators began major riots in the streets of Budapest that were crushed by the police. Even though many of the demonstrators' actions were violent in nature, the opposition blamed the government for the brutality of the police action.

myself denounced them for faking the document, and the case went up to the Office of the Chief Attorney, but it was eventually hushed up. The party involved fired an administrator, and the investigation was terminated. Yet parliament outvoted the Chief Attorney in connection with the case,” Bodoky continues.

By contrast, Rádi thinks a good article is the very consequence. “Should the court or the police prosecute the bad guys, the journalist would also be harassed, his or her documents confiscated, and he or she would be questioned about who the informants were. I would not appreciate that.” Yet she too has had cases with legal consequences. “I disclosed in an article how Imre Ragács, former CEO of Hungarian Television, commissioned the company of his adopted daughter to produce television programmes. He was charged for malfeasance.” The journalist of *HVG* has not been threatened personally but has been sued many times. “This is not Russia; the barons with a life-long history of misdeeds would not hurt us. True, I never sign my articles about the far-right, as I would not like to see my flat exploded by a Molotov cocktail.” Rádi finds that those who feel offended by an article prefer to launch a lawsuit in defence of their personal rights, claiming between 800,000 and 1,000,000 forints in compensation¹⁷. And this is not including the lawyers’ fee, which may amount to hundreds of thousands of forints in addition. “To be sure, no publisher is happy about that. But *HVG* has never refrained from the publication of an article under threat or pressure. It should be noted that correction replies are hardly ever submitted to the paper. Recompense is a big business. “There are lawyers specified in this field, looking for cases and clients, and offering their services. Basically anyone can be sued for just about anything. If I quote, word by word, a press conference, an official statement, or a speech delivered in parliament, I can easily find myself in the court. No other country in the world has a regulation like that. A BBC journalist would not understand,” Rádi explains¹⁸.

¹⁷ About 2600 British pounds.

¹⁸ After the interview was conducted with Rádi, in late September 2009, Hungarian parliament amended the relevant provision of the Civic Code and cancelled the ‘objectivity clause’ limiting journalists’ freedom.

Sághy exposed, while still working for *Figyelő*, malfeasances by the Centrum Parking company. Even though outdoor posters all around Budapest advertised the story with the front page of the paper on, at first there was no reaction whatsoever. The article had a striking message: the leading parties – the centre-right Fidesz party and the centre-left Hungarian Socialist Party – had, behind the scenes, joint-

ly established and run the car parking business. “Then the Hungarian Democratic Forum party held a press conference, [party chair] Ibolya Dávid waving around *Figyelő* and calling for an investigative committee to be established in parliament. The case provided her with an opportunity to act in public; this is when the party’s anti-corruption campaign was announced. That is how the whole country learnt about the article and I got invited to a number of television shows [to tell about the case]. Centrum sued us, but we won the case.” Sággy has had several lawsuits. “But I have not received one serious threat, ever. When you go public, you are under protection. They may be threatening to launch a lawsuit against you in order to scare you off, but you do not need to take it seriously all of the time. Just deal with it.”

Vajda does not share the general scepticism about the impact of investigative reporting. “Some of my articles did have an impact. Including on me. We published an article in *Manager Magazin* in 2006 about why Hungarian Telecom did not have an annual balance and suggesting that Elek Straub, CEO of the company, would likely be dismissed over the investigation, which eventually happened. True, in the meantime, the owner of the paper dismissed us, while Straub continues to be a respected member of society. Perhaps this is what most journalists have in mind when they say articles have no consequences. But this view is a reflection of Eastern European structures and of the sense that those who have power can do whatever they like as they will get away with it, no matter what. At the same time, journalists also use it for the purpose of self-justification.”

According to Somlyódy, recent experiences have shown that it is an illusion to expect investigative articles to lead to direct consequences. “But a well-documented case can be of use at a later point in time, as it can become a source. Despite what you often see, written facts are not just being ‘out there’ but may have an impact on public opinion. An interesting case is that of the real estate business in Budapest’s District 7¹⁹. It has been explored in detail by various journalists, yet one may have had the impression that it would have no consequences, should there be no political pressures. But an article by itself is never enough to reach legal consequences,” she adds. Lawsuits and the threats of lawsuits are common with *Magyar Narancs* as well. “Statements like ‘I will never buy Magyar Narancs again,’ ‘I will never

¹⁹ Various buildings in District 7, whose municipality was of a socialist and liberal majority, were transferred to foreign investors below their market price in the mid-2000s. After an investigation was launched, several local politicians were arrested.

give an interview to you again,' and 'I am going to sue you if you publish this' are made on a daily basis. This is a threat, psychological warfare, rather than anything else. Our chief editor goes to court every week. And the law is not on our side: when facing the court, the paper has to prove its statements, not those involved their innocence," she continues.

But wonders do happen, sometimes. "In connection with the Sukoró case, we saw what had never been seen in Hungary before," according to Bódis. "Technological details of the land exchange were investigated at the initiative of the Office of the Attorney and forwarded to the Office of the Chief Attorney." Bódis has been sued repeatedly, too. "I could sue myself for every single article I have ever written. Lawsuits usually focus on words and expressions rather than on substance. For this reason, I do not make statements in my articles any more but circumscribe the information in order to avoid being sued for violation of personality rights or libel. [Former Minister of Education and senior member of the Alliance of Free Democrats party] Bálint Magyar makes a fortune suing journalists for huge sums. But I have never been seriously threatened. To be sure, the 'big fish' do not give you a phone call. They just let you know that they would like to place an advertisement in your paper for a huge amount of money. Business influences are much more common [than political influences] and happen all across the Hungarian media."

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS: MYTHS AND EXPERIENCES

The lessons of the interviews conducted with award-winning investigative reporters can be summarised like this:

1. The majority of the interviewees agree that the quality of investigative journalism in Hungary falls short of that in the Anglo-Saxon countries. In particular, many reports are often based on speculation rather than well-documented facts.
2. According to the majority of the interviewees, Hungarian investigative reporters are put under political and business pressures every now and then, but these pressures are lighter than in those post-communist countries – such as Russia – where investigative reporters' health and life is, some of

the time, also at risk.

3. The interviews suggest that the largely pessimistic picture drawn by media researchers needs to be reconsidered to a degree. Schematic views about “clan journalism,” “dossier-journalism,” or “campaign journalism” may be at odds with facts. While the interviewees confirmed that competing elites try to instrumentalise the media in their power games and, for this purpose, leak information that may be detrimental to the reputation of their rivals, most journalists treat the information received with scepticism and do their best to double-check it; moreover, they try to uncover corruption themselves. There hardly is any general rule defining the extent of autonomy Hungarian investigative reporters have when dealing with the information they get hold of and when searching for abuses of power by themselves; such practices are largely dependent of the professional ethos of their newsrooms and their personal devotion to professional ethics.

4. The majority of the interviewees question the general view that investigative reporting has no consequences – but then the interviewees do not represent the Hungarian journalistic community (as we interviewed only those whose investigative reports have made some noise). While spectacular cases of investigative reporting such as Watergate in the United States or the MPs’ expenses scandal in the United Kingdom are not known in the brief history of Hungary’s Third Republic²⁰, Hungarian investigative reporters have repeatedly forced those involved in corruption and other abuses of power to explain and to defend their position, and some of the protagonists of their investigative reports have resigned – to be sure, people like that had occupied lower ranks in the political and business hierarchies. And, while legal consequences have rarely occurred, or are still awaited because it usually takes years for the Office of the Attorney and the courts to process the cases revealed, the political parties involved have suffered a loss of popularity, that is, some political consequences have been clearly manifest. In particular, the case of the Budapest Public Transportation

²⁰ A major exception to this rule was the resignation of Pál Schmitt, President of Republic, in 2012, after the news site *hvg.hu* exposed that he had committed plagiarism when writing his Ph.D. thesis in 1992, but this case occurred after the interviews had been conducted.

Company (a state-owned company on the verge of bankruptcy but distributing major primes to its senior managers) was a major issue during the 2010 election campaign and likely contributed to the massive fall of the Hungarian Socialist Party in the 2010 elections.

The interviewees have confirmed that most outlets fail to keep the corruption cases revealed earlier on the agenda. New issues and events, many of which are produced by busy spin-doctors on the payroll of political parties, remove abuses exposed by investigative reporters from the agenda virtually overnight.

Perhaps even more importantly – but this is added by the authors of this paper, not the interviewees – political elites also fail to keep stories of their rivals' misdeeds, revealed by the media, on the agenda. Typically, they do not even urge the Office of the Attorney and the police to investigate these, even though anti-corruption slogans are a key element of their rhetoric, on all sides of the political spectrum. Their reluctance to do so may be explained by behind-the-scenes agreements and mutually beneficial arrangements among parties. Should they break the law of silence and urge the proper investigation of corrupt practices, they would launch a chain reaction of scandals that would undermine their own reputation, too – as the case of the Centrum Parking company, in which both of the leading parties were involved, demonstrates.

The interviews also suggest that the existing but limited political and legal impact of investigative journalism may also be attributed to the fact that national commercial television channels, which reach many more people than daily and weekly papers do, hardly ever engage in investigative reporting or cover investigative reports publicised in other outlets. More specifically, mainstream commercial channels only report on simple cases whose narratives may be captured by their audiences without particular effort, including cases such as that of the Budapest Public Transportation company, a state-owned venture on the verge of bankruptcy, whose top managers were granted high primes that may be difficult to justify.

In sum, the relative inefficiency of investigative journalism should likely not be attributed to the lack of devoted journalists and outlets or to the lack of the financial resources needed for investigation but

to the fact that investigative reporting is typically practiced by low-budget outlets – such as the weeklies *Magyar Narancs* and *Élet és Irodalom* – that reach few people, while radio stations and television channels attracting massive audiences largely ignore it. At the same time, political elites do not feel urged to react to allegations that most voters have never heard of.

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