Investigative Journalism and Uncovering Corruption in the Iraqi Government: Strategies for Development and Support

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Abstract

This study addresses the exercise of investigative reporting to expose government corruption against the backdrop of a volatile Iraqi environment, observing the challenges facing journalists whose vocation and freedom of expression come under ever greater political attack from abroad. Although media pluralism has been increasing in Iraq, organizational capacity shortcomings, workplace safety, and freedom protection for reporters discourage participation levels in investigative reporting. By the use of a mixed-methods design, this research quantifies Iraqi journalists' perceptions concerning the role of investigative reporting in the prevention of corruption, the issues that they face, and areas where they should be improved. From the findings, high perception of the role of investigative reporting in national security and public interest was reported with the identification of significant issues such as interference from government and inadequate resources. The article concludes with recommendations for creating an enabling environment for investigative reporting, including increased training, legal protection, and public campaigns to enable journalists to pursue accountability and truth in Iraq.

Keywords: investigative journalism, Iraqi Corruption Issues, Iraqi Journalists, Iraqi Government Policies

1. Introduction

The Arab nation of Iraq has undergone turmoil and devastation owing to both internal and external influences, encompassing revolutionary uprisings and demands for reform. The press is essential for communication and public awareness; as electronic journalism supplants conventional methods. Investigative journalism, a contentious and expensive endeavor, significantly influences public perception and identifies accountable individuals. Nonetheless, it encounters obstacles in poorer nations attributable to legal actions, censorship, inadequate protection, and criminal influence (Inas Abu Seif, 2016).

Investigative journalism in Iraq is threatened due to the absence of organization and protection. Despite the proliferation of media pluralism, Iraqi journalists are confronted with problems such as poor organizational structures, charters, and absence of job security. The practice of investigative journalism is limited to a few journalists due to the lack of legal protection, which exposes them to physical violence or threats (Hassan abuhashish, 2018). This study examines the function of investigative journalism in revealing corruption within the public policies of the Iraqi government. Institutions are striving to address these difficulties and foster democratic societies that support investigative journalism.

Investigative journalism has also been widely examined throughout the Arab world, especially in revealing corruption. Its ability to uncover parts of corruption has generated interest, especially in Jordan where it has come to be increasingly acknowledged in recent years. Another piece of research by (Hassan abuhashish, 2018) evaluated the ethics of investigative journalism throughout the Palestinian territories, with social responsibility and gatekeeping principles centering on its scope of concern. As per the research by (El-Assal, 2022), administrative corruption was most prevalent at 28.2%, and the second was economic crime at 25.6%. Investigative reporting was primarily focused on unmasking corruption, and its major emphasis was on media and news (24.3%) and explanation and analysis (23%).

Ghafoor (2017) examined the key characteristics of media coverage of problems in Iraq, focusing specifically on administrative corruption and the way Iraqi media reported this topic. This study seeks to respond to the primary question: "What is the role of investigative journalism, as perceived by Iraqi journalists, in setting priorities for exposing corruption in government policies in Iraq?" The theoretical significance of the study is rooted in its relevance, the researchers' focus on media, and the dedication of investigative journalists to uncover corruption in Iraq. It offers an

extensive perspective for investigative journalists, elucidating its nature and function in exposing governmental corruption in Iraq, while delineating the requisite talents, encountered problems, and utilized instruments in content presentation.

2. Literature Review

A literature review has been done on the topic and its summary is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of literature review

Study	Focus/Findings
(Ghaffar, 2021)	Examined the use of data journalism in investigative reporting on Egyptian websites. Found that raw numbers alone may not lead to effective journalism; the interpretation of these numbers is crucial. Emphasized the growing importance of data journalism amidst increasing digital content.
(al-Hamdani, 2021)	Identified obstacles facing investigative journalism in Iraq from editors' perspectives. Found unanimous agreement (100%) on the existence of legal obstacles. Reported various challenges, including difficulty accessing information (80%) and limited investigative culture (60%).
(Hajim, 2020)	Analyzed the role of investigative journalism in revealing human rights violations through the Areej website. Found that reports prioritized human rights abuses over legal breaches, with social and cultural rights violations ranking second.
(Naaman, 2020)	Explored Iraqi journalists' perceptions of state corruption and democracy. Concluded that journalists could actively contribute to democratic transition and that corruption is a growing challenge to democracy.
(Al-singhri, 2019)	Investigated challenges facing investigative journalism in Iraq. Found that all respondents acknowledged professional difficulties, with self-censorship at 86.6%. Highlighted sectarian divisions and governmental restrictions as major political barriers.
(Sadiq, 2018)	Examined pressures on investigative journalists and the impact of various factors on their work. Concluded that security concerns are significant, and laws regarding freedom of expression are inadequate.
(Dawood, 2015)	Aimed to define financial and administrative corruption in Iraq and proposed solutions to combat it. Noted that corruption has intensified since 1968 and became more apparent after April 9, 2003.
(Maputi, 2021)	Described investigative journalists' perceptions of their roles in society amidst challenges in South Africa. Found that their role is to expose state secrets and abuses of power.
(Al-Shami, 2019)	Investigated types of corruption revealed by investigative reports in various Arab countries. Identified administrative, financial, legislative, and judicial corruption as prevalent issues.
(Dhungel, 2018)	Analyzed investigative journalism in Nepal, revealing shifts in focus from corruption to diverse issues. Highlighted the lack of impact of current investigations.
(Dejen, 2017)	Evaluated the role of investigative reports in addressing issues in Ethiopia. Identified barriers to information access and the need for effective media monitoring.
(Hollings, 2010)	Examined sources used in investigative journalism, emphasizing the importance of documents and human sources. Analyzed profiles of investigative journalism in New Zealand.

Prior research by both Arab and foreign scholars on investigative journalism has examined various aspects, including its definition, significance, characteristics, roles, and the sources of information utilized in data collection and fact-finding. They have concentrated on data processing and analytical methodologies, yet have largely overlooked the significance of investigative journalism in exposing human rights abuses in the Arab world, as well as the conspicuous lack of research on its function in revealing governmental corruption in Iraq. The advantages of these studies can be discerned at two levels: firstly, in the principles of investigative journalism, especially concerning corruption and governmental policies; and secondly, in the methodological dimensions of field studies, highlighting a descriptive-analytical approach and survey programs as efficacious methods for acquiring precise information about the function of investigative journalism in revealing governmental corruption in Iraq.

2.1 The Difference Between Investigative Journalism and Traditional Journalism

(Al-soying, 2021) and (Mark Lee Hunter, 2019) agree on the elements of comparison between investigative journalism and traditional journalism. Table 2 illustrates this comparison as follows:

Table 2. The Difference Between Investigative Journalism and Traditional Journalism

Term	Investigative Journalism	Traditional Journalism
Research	Information cannot be published until its content and events are complete. Research continues until the story is confirmed and may continue after publication. The story/event is built with the maximum amount of information available, and can be very lengthy. The report requires documents to support or refute sources' statements.	Information is gathered and reported at fixed intervals (daily, weekly, monthly). Research is completed quickly, as soon as the story is finished. The story is based on the minimum necessary information and can be very short. Source statements can replace documentation.
Sources	Good faith of sources cannot be assumed; they may provide false information. No information can be used without verification. Official information is often hidden from the reporter, as the source may be at risk from authorities or institutions. The reporter may openly challenge or reject the official narrative of the story based on information from independent sources. The reporter acts on information from sources individually, more than on information collected from other references. Sources cannot often be identified for the sake of their owners' safety.	Good faith of sources is assumed, often without verification. Official sources freely provide information to the reporter to promote themselves and their goals. The reporter must accept the official version of the story/event, despite contradictory comments and statements from other sources. The reporter acts on information collected, whether it is less significant than their sources or more important. Sources can be identified.
Outcomes	The reporter refuses to accept the world as it is and always aims to penetrate a specific event or expose it for reform, condemnation, or, in certain cases, better promotion. The report cannot be completed without personal involvement from the reporter. The reporter strives to be fair and accurate regarding the facts of the story, allowing for the identification of its victims, heroes, and perpetrators. The reporter may also pass judgment on the story. The dramatic structure of the journalistic report is essential for the story to have an impact, leading to a conclusion presented by the reporter or source. Errors by the official and unofficial reporter expose them to penalties and can destroy their credibility and media outlets.	The report is seen as a reflection of the accepted world as it is. The reporter does not expect results beyond informing the public. The report does not require personal involvement from the reporter. The reporter strives to be objective, without bias in judgment toward any party in the story. The dramatic structure of the journalistic report is not of great importance. The story does not have an ending as the news is ongoing. The reporter may make mistakes as it is inevitable, and they are often of little significance.

Investigative journalism differs from other types in the following ways:

• It addresses issues that require in-depth verification not found in ordinary inquiries, focusing on a specific perspective on a particular issue.

• It seeks to prove or disprove a specific hypothesis set by the journalist through a known mechanism that begins with a question posed by the journalist about a topic, and after research and investigation, the hypothesis may be confirmed or disproved. This grants the story significance as it is primarily based on verification; the investigative journalist must support every piece of information provided in their investigation.

(zabis, 2021) discussed the differences between investigative journalism and classical journalism, as shown in Figure 1:
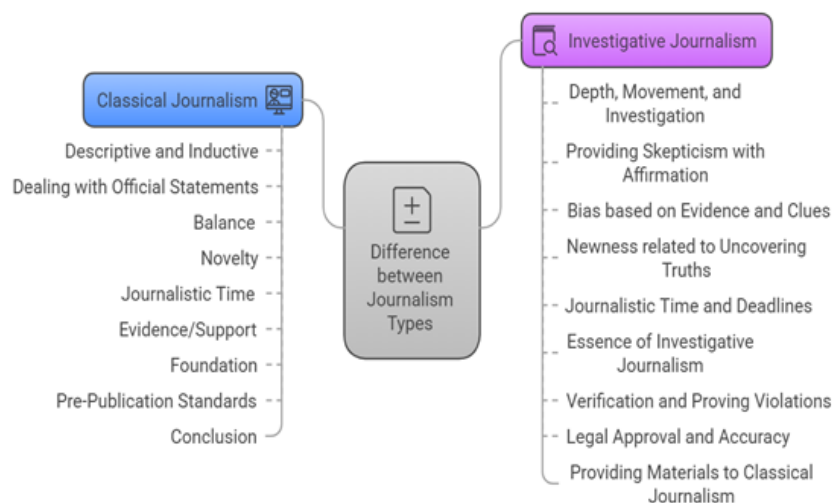

Figure 1. The differences between investigative and classical journalism

2.2 Investigative Journalism and Uncovering Corruption in the Iraqi Government

The Composite Index of Corruption Perceptions reveals considerable variations in political corruption across the Arab world. Nations such as the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia achieve relatively high rankings, scoring above 50, which signifies superior governance and integrity within the public sector. Nonetheless, despite these scores, their endeavors to tackle corruption are still regarded as inadequate. Conversely, nations like Syria, Somalia, Yemen, and Libya exhibit low rankings, with scores ranging from 13 to 17, indicative of profound instability and ineffective governance (al-Mousawi, 2022). Since 2003, Iraq has encountered significant challenges characterized by political instability, sectarianism, and a deficiency of accountability, rendering it one of the most corrupt nations worldwide. Iraq's political life is marked by endemic corruption that is fueled by frail institutions. The Arab region varies in corruption levels, but Iraq's ongoing issues identify a fundamental governance failure and a critical necessity to reform to challenge the deep-rooted corruption undermining its development and stability (Tamam, 2022).

Investigative journalism emerged to highlight issues, particularly corruption, and has become prominent in mainstream journalism. Corruption has persisted since 1906, and the Association of Journalists and Editors in America was founded in 1976 to encourage investigative journalists. In Iraq, corruption and scandals involving politicians and businessmen are causing difficulties for journalists. The Iraqi Investigative Journalism Network "NIRIJ" was established in 2011 to provide financial, editorial, and advisory support to journalists. The network enhances journalists' skills, assists in selecting research topics, and monitors all stages of work to ensure completion. Field studies have shown the reality of investigative journalism in Iraq, methods used to expose corruption, and the obstacles faced by journalists in their search for truth (Abusev, 2016).

(Al-Yasi, 2013) study Focused on developing investigative journalism to combat corruption, but neglected documents, undermining public trust. It has strong competitive potential for print journalism, with early practices dating back to the 1970s. There was a shift from journalists exposing corruption to officials doing so post-2003, leading to diminished interest and impact today. Support from media institutions and government is essential, with permanent staff being more effective than freelancers. Journalists in foreign and Arab institutions have made significant contributions, winning many awards in Arab competitions, although a lack of teamwork compared to Western journalism persists. Change requires cooperation from authorities. Seven main constraints limit freedom in investigative journalism, according to (al-Sheikh, 2020), including religious symbols, political authorities, armed militias, security institutions, regional interference, professional organizations, and legal threats. (Hussein, 2021) also observes that 100% of the participants cited legal restrictions, 80% cited a restricted culture, 60% cited lacking resources, 68% faced workplace barriers, and 40% cited inadequate training. These are the challenges that result from the lack of protective laws and poor institutional support systems, which result in attacks on journalists and a limited ability to engage in investigative reporting, ultimately resulting in marginalized journalism with inadequate legal protection.

3. Research Methodology

The researcher employed combined descriptive, analytical, and survey research methods. This included reviewing and analyzing past references, research, and studies on investigative journalism, its function and aim in revealing corruption, the priorities and implications of revealing corruption, and the Iraqi government's policies in this regard. Survey research method was employed in order to collect data from a sample of Iraqi journalists for the period 2018-2023.

The researcher used the survey research methodology to analyze and interpret the reality of investigative journalism in the Republic of Iraq and its role in uncovering corruption issues in the state from the perspective of Iraqi journalists to determine the extent of their knowledge about it. This is a descriptive study that relies on analyzing data related to the trends and opinions expressed by the study community of Iraqi journalists, aiming to reach results that can be used to correct and reform the current situation, or to work on developing and updating it. The population for the study was 140 registered Iraqi journalists, and we employed a random sampling method, giving 140 questionnaires to the respondents. We had 100 valid samples for statistical analysis after removing the invalid ones, which we deemed the actual sample for the study. The study investigated variables including gender, age, educational background, media experience, and the ownership of the media organization the journalists work for.

The questionnaire was constructed based on the sub-questions and hypotheses related to the study's objectives. The questionnaire included three main dimensions:

- Criteria for investigative journalism (6 items)
- Its contribution to combating corruption (6 items)
- Challenges and sources (6 items)

The study relied on statistical analysis using the SPSS program, where descriptive statistics (percentages, frequencies, means) were used to analyze the sample responses, in addition to calculating reliability coefficients using Cronbach's

alpha test and Pearson correlation to verify construct validity. The statistical significance level was set at (0.05) to judge the results.

Despite the relative statistical acceptance of the sample size, the researcher acknowledges that the limited geographical coverage and the restriction of the sample to syndicate members may affect the degree of generalization of the results, which is considered one of the limitations of the study.

For the statistical analysis, the researcher compiled the questionnaire items, input the data into a computer, and utilized SPSS software for statistical analysis. Frequency tables were generated for the survey items, then accompanied by cross-tabulations to examine the variables, emphasizing the relative distributions. This allowed to calculate the statistical measures, including Cronbach's Alpha correlation coefficient to assess the internal consistency of the study items, as well as the means, standard deviations, variances, frequencies, and percentages. Figure 2 illustrates the work flow for the statistical analysis process.
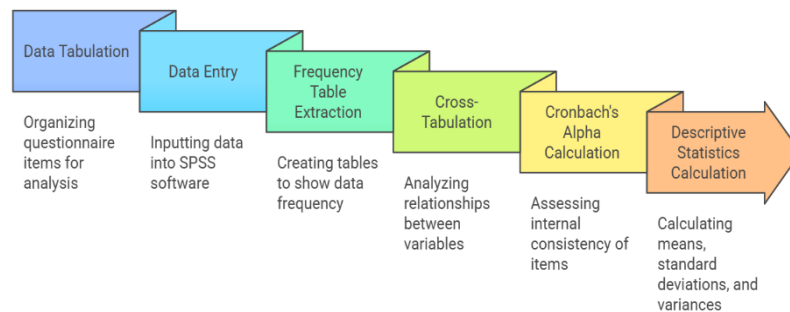

Figure 2. Statistical analysis process

4. Statistical analysis (Study Results)

4.1 Validity and Reliability

The research tested the validity and reliability of the questionnaire applied. The pilot questionnaire was tested by experts and supervisors to establish the word integrity, clarity of questions, and suitability for use in the study, therefore establishing face validity. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed for each item against the total score of its respective dimension, demonstrating strong and acceptable correlations for construct validity. The reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, which varied from 0.449 to 0.785, with the third dimension concerning the advancement of investigative journalism exhibiting the highest dependability. The validity coefficients, derived as the square root of the reliability coefficients, varied from 0.670 to 0.886, reflecting the general validity and consistency of the questionnaire items. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient and the validity coefficient for the first and second dimensions were relatively low, while for the third dimension, they were high, indicating the reliability and validity of the items and the ability to rely on them.

The results of the internal consistency reliability test using Cronbach's alpha coefficient showed that two of the study's dimensions recorded coefficients less than 0.6, where the reliability coefficient was 0.449 for the first dimension and 0.485 for the second dimension, while the third dimension recorded 0.785. Although the first two values are lower than statistically acceptable value, this is an indication of the nature of certain items that may need to be re-phrased or broadened in future studies. It is important to note that studies on sensitive topics such as corruption can also be affected by political and social contextual factors influencing the responses of the participants.

4.2 Methods of Data Analysis

The researcher conducted the statistical analysis of the responses from the questionnaires and used the SPSS software, which included the following statistical methods:

- Descriptive Statistics: it consists two parts that are shown in figure 3.

- Tests: Used to verify the study hypotheses.

- Significance Level of 0.05: Used to accept or reject the study hypotheses.

- Calculating the frequencies and percentages for the research sample, which includes the following:

– First Dimension: Role of Investigative Journalism in Uncovering Corruption Issues.

– Second Dimension: Obstacles Facing Investigative Journalism from the Perspective of Iraqi Journalists.

– Third Dimension: Ways to Advance and Develop Investigative Journalism from the Perspective of Iraqi Investigative Journalists.

Figure 3. Descriptive Statistics in research analysis

4.3 Answering Research Questions and Hypotheses

- What is the role of investigative journalism in uncovering corruption issues?

- What are the obstacles it faces from the perspective of Iraqi journalists?

- What are the ways to advance and develop it from their perspective?

To answer the study's questions, the researcher relied on the means and standard deviations for all the items, and we agreed to use the sign test (T-test) to find out whether the mean of the questionnaire's degree reached the sample's neutrality level or not. We followed the probability value for each item in the questionnaire. If its value was greater than the significance level (a=0.05) according to the data extracted from the SPSS statistical analysis program, then the mean of the study sample's opinions about the presented problem would not differ significantly from the neutrality degree.

Figure 4. The first axis - the role of Investigative Journalism in revealing corruption cases

The analysis of the data in the figure 4 shows that investigative journalism plays a significant role in bringing into perspective the problems of corruption in Iraq, as evidenced by the degree of agreement and acceptance by the respondents of the study. The sum mean score of the first axis items is 1.40, standard deviation 0.24 and relative weight 47.00, reflecting a highly positive perception of the investigative journalist's role. Furthermore, the level of significance, 0.000, below 0.05, reflects a statistically significant correlation between investigative journalism and the need to expose corruption in government policy. The highest mean score of 1.59 was recorded for the question about investigative journalism's concern for corruption issues involving national security, reporting the extent of its interest in addressing various facets of corruption in Iraq.
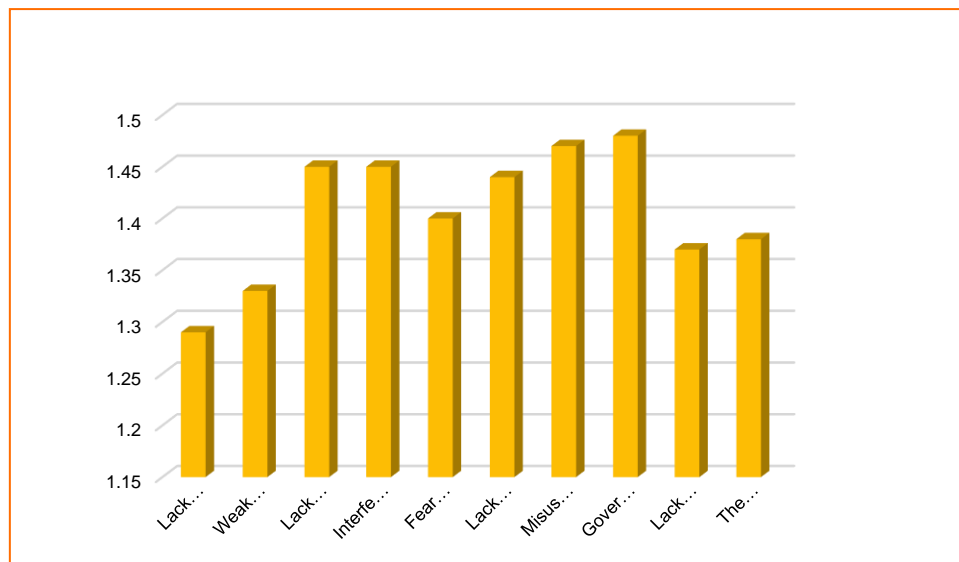
Figure 5. The second axis - the obstacles facing investigative journalism from the point of view of Iraqi journalists

Figure 5 indicates that the arithmetic mean of all the items under the second axis is 1.40, having a standard deviation of 0.25 and a relative weight of 47.00, but the significance level is 0.000, which is below 0.05. This shows a high degree of concordance between the sample population in the research on the items in this axis and confirms a statistically significant correlation between the difficulties faced by investigative journalists and the significance of exposing corruption in government policies in Iraq. Most specifically, the maximum arithmetic mean is of item eight, in the context of the intervention of the government in questions of investigation on political issues, and its mean, standard deviation, and relative weight are 1.48, 0.61, and 49.00, respectively.
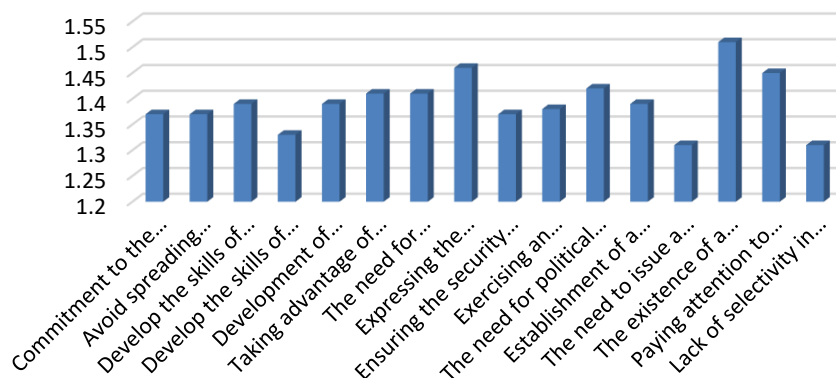

Figure 6. The third axis - ways to promote and develop investigative journalism from the point of view of Iraqi investigative journalists

Figure 6 indicates that the arithmetic mean for all items in the third axis is 1.20, with a standard deviation of 0.27 and a relative weight of 46.00, while the significance level is 0.000, which is below 0.05. This reflects a high degree of agreement among the study sample regarding the items in this axis and highlights the relationship between enhancing and developing investigative journalism from the perspective of journalists and the prioritization of exposing corruption in government policies in Iraq. Notably, the item with the highest arithmetic mean is item fourteen, which pertains to the existence of a sound democratic environment free from internal political and partisan conflicts that hinder investigative journalism, with a mean of 1.51, a standard deviation of 0.63, and a relative weight of 50.00.

The results of this study intersect with the findings of previous studies, such as the study by (Al-Hamdani, 2021), which confirmed the existence of legal and institutional obstacles that hinder investigative journalism in Iraq. The results also showed a variation in journalists' awareness of their investigative roles, despite the availability of specialized training. Linking the results to the agenda-setting theory, the findings support the hypothesis that journalists, despite the challenges, are capable of influencing the general media agenda and directing attention to corruption issues when a free and safe environment is available.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study results underscore the vital function of investigative journalism in exposing corruption in Iraq, with notable findings revealing that journalists acknowledge its significance, especially concerning national security and public interest. Nonetheless, obstacles such as the exploitation of investigative journalism for personal benefit, inadequate access to contemporary technology resources, and insufficient financial support impede its efficacy. Recommendations involve the establishment of massive training programs for journalists, enhancing public awareness of the need for investigative journalism, and creating a safe and enabling environment for journalists to work autonomously. Empowering the strength and safeguards for investigative journalists is crucial in order to enable them to pursue successfully truth and accountability in society. The article concludes with suggestions for establishing a facilitating environment for investigative reporting in Iraq. These recommendations include the implementation of public campaigns, legal protection, and enhanced training to empower journalists to pursue accountability and truth.

Recommendations

1) Advocate legislation with media input; challenges include political opposition; measure success in terms of numbers of laws enacted and threats minimized.

2) Offer grants and enable coalitions; challenges include media fragmentation; measure success in terms of union membership gain and advocacy achievements.

3) Initiate public campaigns and work with local influencers; challenges are public lack of interest; success will be measured by enhanced media support for journalists and event participation.

4) Collaborate with global organizations for training; challenges include limited budgets; measure success in terms of numbers of trained journalists and confidence gain.

5) Form alliances with global media and promote exchanges; challenges are logistical; success will be measured by number of collaborative projects undertaken and participant response.

Future Research Directions

1) Future research should explore the direct impact of investigative reporting on political accountability and public policy in Iraq, and the degree to which robust investigations have resulted in legislative change or reforms.

2) A comparative study between investigative journalism in Iraq and other war zones is needed to ascertain best practices and methodologies that can be used in the Iraqi context.

3) Describe the use of new media and technology and how such tools are utilized to make reporting more effective and compelling for individuals.

4) Describe the change in the perception of journalism in Iraq, specifically within the context of recent political change, with an attempt to determine the degree of possibility to rebuild and preserve trust in the media.

5) Discuss the physical and psychological health of Iraqi journalists, analyzing the effect of violence and threats on their professional activities and mental health, and how they can be safeguarded.

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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