

Postprint: An Analysis of Undercover Reporting in the New Media Era

Authors: Chen Xu

Date: 2023-10-08T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

Undercover investigation is an indispensable component of news gathering methods. In the new media era, how can a qualified journalist conduct safe, effective, and legal undercover investigative reporting? This paper intends to explore strategies for undercover reporting in the new media era from four aspects: legal analysis of undercover journalism, preliminary preparation, equipment operation, and post-processing.

Full Text

Analysis of Undercover Reporting in the New Media Era

Abstract: Undercover reporting represents an indispensable component of journalistic interviewing methods. In the new media era, how can a qualified journalist conduct safe, effective, and lawful undercover investigative reporting? This article explores strategies for undercover reporting in the new media era through four key dimensions: legal analysis, preliminary preparation, equipment operation, and post-production processing.

Keywords: new media era; undercover reporting; strategies

Chinese Library Classification: G212

Document Code: A

Article ID: 1671-0134(2017)04-067-02

DOI: 10.19483/j.cnki.11-4653/n.2017.04.013

Author: Chen Xu

Undercover reporting refers to the investigative method where journalists conceal their identity and employ secret yet lawful means to obtain news materials in pursuit of truth. Undoubtedly, the new media era demands greater professionalism and higher standards from journalists engaged in undercover work. Under the premise of legality, leveraging the vast information advantages and

ingenious technological benefits of new media to effectively acquire critical first-hand factual materials and amplify their dissemination constitutes the essential path to successful undercover reporting.

1. Legal Analysis of Undercover Reporting in the New Media Era

Undercover reporting serves as a sharp sword for media oversight of public opinion, yet it remains controversial in practice. During undercover operations, journalists must astutely analyze and judge whether their methods cross legal boundaries. If lawful, they must ensure safe and effective execution; if not, they must promptly regulate their own behavior.

Notably, in controversial participatory undercover investigations, clarity on legality is paramount. For instance, regarding privacy rights: surveillance in public spaces does not constitute trespassing or infringement, whereas intrusion into private spaces does. Observing, following, photographing, and attempting to communicate with subjects in public areas is not considered trespassing; however, secret filming in private residences or bedrooms violates privacy rights. Even when motivated by exposing illegal activities, the means and process of undercover reporting cannot break the law or cross legal boundaries.

In practical operations, journalists must carefully select appropriate undercover methods. Conventional methods employed by domestic and international media include identity transformation, disguise, secret filming and recording, stake-outs, and undercover employment. Southern Weekend intern journalist Liu Zhiyi worked undercover at Foxconn for 28 days before writing “The Mystery Behind Foxconn’s ‘Eight Suicides’,” which shocked the national press. This successful undercover operation stemmed from the newspaper’s investigative series on the Foxconn suicides. Since other reporters could not enter the factory due to age restrictions, Liu’s younger age made him eligible for recruitment. The appropriate selection of undercover employment as a method ensured the investigation’s success.

2. Preliminary Preparation for Undercover Reporting in the New Media Era

As the adage goes, “preparation ensures success, while unpreparedness invites failure.” Undercover reporting typically targets unknown insider information—the kind of explosive revelations commonly seen in headlines. Compared with overt interviewing methods, this approach carries higher safety risks, requires greater flexibility, and demands superior adaptability. Consequently, preliminary preparation assumes critical importance. Thorough preparation significantly reduces safety risks and provides a foundation for smooth undercover operations.

First, new media should play a “connecting thread” role in actively discovering

appropriate clues, finding informants, and reporting undercover topics. In traditional undercover reporting, leads often came from word-of-mouth or personal connections. In the new media era, channels and scope for finding undercover topics have expanded dramatically. Journalists can utilize network media to quickly, timely, and accurately identify topics and informants. For example, by browsing various online information sources and major portals, journalists can monitor what issues netizens are currently concerned with and which posts generate strong public response. Topics discovered through this approach better capture public attention. Additionally, journalists can leverage the social nature of new media to extensively connect with the public, cultivating and developing a substantial network of “informants” to provide more leads for undercover topic reporting.

Second, journalists must carefully select appropriate undercover methods. Conventional methods include identity transformation, disguise, secret filming and recording, stakeouts, and undercover employment. The selection should be based on careful analysis of which method best serves the investigation while remaining within legal boundaries.

Third, implementing appropriate safety measures to protect undercover journalists' personal security is essential. In October 2013, during a one-day tour in Shangri-La, a tour guide demanded payment of 320 yuan for a Tibetan family visit after boarding the bus. When the undercover journalist refused this forced consumption, the guide forcibly removed them from the bus in a desolate, uninhabited area. How could the journalist's safety be guaranteed in such a situation? The team had prepared safety measures: a van from the undercover team had been closely following the tour bus, and the journalist immediately boarded this vehicle after being removed. Of course, the most reliable preparation involves contacting and coordinating with police before conducting undercover work to enhance emergency response capabilities.

3. Equipment Operation Techniques for Undercover Reporting in the New Media Era

As the saying goes, “to do a good job, one must first sharpen one's tools.” Similarly, to effectively conduct undercover reporting and preserve valuable first-hand news materials, undercover equipment is indispensable. With continuous technological development, various undercover devices have emerged, including common equipment like mobile phones and DV cameras, as well as specialized devices such as covert cameras concealed in watches, lighters, buttons, pens, and bags.

In the new media era, equipment operation techniques are rapidly evolving. Selecting appropriate equipment and mastering different usage techniques constitute required coursework for qualified undercover journalists. This section addresses equipment operation from two perspectives: technical operation and situational requirements.

Information backup represents a crucial aspect of undercover equipment operation. If sudden exposure occurs and the undercover subject demands deletion of recorded footage, the importance of backup determines the operation's success or failure. For instance, after adding an email account to an iPhone, various audio and text materials can be uploaded to email for backup purposes.

Equipment selection and combination also warrant careful consideration across different undercover scenarios. For example, when journalists from Nanchang TV's Legal Channel Task Force infiltrated "Juewei Duck Neck" production facilities to expose operational malpractices, the undercover process proved extremely challenging. Before entering production warehouses, journalists were required to wear elbow-length rubber gloves and undergo body searches. In such circumstances, which undercover device should be selected? In fact, spy glasses became the critical breakthrough for collecting materials in this investigation. The subsequent exposure of insider information owed much to the spy glasses' effectiveness.

Analysis of undercover equipment usage in investigative reports from domestic and international media reveals that device selection varies by occasion. For instance, in saunas, bathhouses, or venues involving illegal sexual activities, spy watches and glasses are inappropriate. However, for stakeout investigations or direct confrontational interviews, watches and glasses are optimal choices.

4. Post-Production "Momentum Building" for Undercover Reporting in the New Media Era

Post-production generally refers to creating special effects through three-dimensional animation and compositing techniques using actual footage, then editing clips into a complete film with sound production. Materials obtained through undercover reporting must also undergo these processes before public exposure. However, for undercover reporting in the new media era, this "procedure" alone is insufficient. This section specifically addresses how to utilize new media platforms to disseminate collected and organized undercover materials to create "momentum."

4.1 Weibo

Real-time reporting of undercover investigations to expose insider information, leveraging Weibo's topic, repost, and comment functions to generate public pressure on investigation targets.

4.2 WeChat

Timely news updates pushed through WeChat that quickly ferment in "Moments," triggering online dissemination.

4.3 Websites

Online live streaming through video websites, with major media and portals forwarding content, providing channels for real-time discussion and sharing to further build momentum for news stories.

In the new media era, undercover investigations require not only reporting but also “momentum building”—using online media to expand influence, leveraging public pressure, prompting strong attention from relevant departments and enterprises, achieving significant dissemination effects while obtaining positive social impact, and ultimately unleashing the power of undercover reporting.

5. Key Principles of Undercover Reporting

5.1 Ensuring Absolute Legality: No Breaking the Law

Undercover reporting must not cross moral boundaries and must adhere to legal principles. Journalists have no special privileges and cannot violate the law. Although laws and regulations do not specifically govern undercover reporting, this does not mean journalists can cross legal boundaries.

5.2 Ensuring Objectivity and Comprehensive Evidence

Whether materials obtained through undercover reporting can serve as judicial evidence depends on whether the evidence is solid and comprehensive. As the most direct factual materials, undercover reporting materials are undoubtedly authentic. However, during undercover operations, evidence collection must be comprehensive and flawless to avoid providing grounds for legal challenges.

5.3 Confidentiality of Undercover Materials

Confidentiality of undercover materials represents a crucial detail that cannot be ignored. For example, undercover manuscripts and audiovisual materials stored on computers should be password-protected. During post-production, materials must not infringe upon relevant parties’ portrait rights or privacy rights; when necessary, mosaic processing should be applied and “non-normal filming” labels added. Taking the strict confidentiality mechanism of the Task Force as an example, undercover topic reporting is only disclosed to the team leader, with all peers and interested parties kept completely uninformed.

5.4 Ensuring Personal Safety

Although undercover journalists should prioritize protecting undercover materials through various ingenious methods, personal safety remains paramount when physical security is threatened. In the “Juwei Duck Neck” incident, when the undercover journalist’s identity was accidentally exposed and they were demanded to delete materials, the journalist remained calm and avoided conflict. Using the excuse of going to the restroom, they successfully uploaded

information to email, then deleted the audio materials in front of the subject—protecting both the materials and personal safety. Additionally, police support can be secured, with officers stationed nearby during undercover operations to immediately intervene and prevent situations from escalating if danger arises.

6. Conclusion

In the era of rapid new media development, journalists conducting undercover investigations must master certain strategies—from preliminary preparation and equipment operation techniques to post-production “momentum building”—while ensuring legality. The path to successful undercover reporting in the new media era lies in fully utilizing new media’s vast information advantages, leveraging its ingenious technological benefits, and harnessing public power to “build momentum” and expand influence and dissemination effects.

References: [1] Cai Fei. Types and Applicable Principles of Journalistic Undercover Reporting[J]. China Radio, 2012(12): 64-67.

[2] Liu Cheng, Yao Hong. Preliminary Preparation and Operational Techniques for Investigative Interviews—How to Conduct Undercover Investigative Reporting[J]. China Media Technology, 2012(22): 60-61.

(Author’s Affiliation: Hangzhou TV Comprehensive Channel)

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.