



Watchdog journalism reduces corruption

Journalists make frequent use of the story of one of the poorest cities in Los Angeles County — Bell, California — to explain why their work matters. In 2010, Jeff Gottlieb and Ruben Vives of the *Los Angeles Times* learned city officials in Bell were receiving some of the highest salaries in the nation. Six city officials were accused of misappropriating public funds. The reporters won the [Selden Ring Award for Investigative Reporting](#) and their newspaper [won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service](#).

This is the type of accountability reporting at stake in our current journalism environment.

Present the case to your students:

- [Timeline, Bell: 'Corruption on Steroids'](#)
- [Is a city manager worth \\$800,000?](#)
- [Pacific Time podcast: The story behind two Los Angeles Times stories](#)

Activities for students on four levels:

Flashlight: In a class discussion, ask students: Could local reporting have prevented this scandal? What is it about investigative reporting that has caused it to be cut by commercial news organizations? Are there other, non-profit types of investigative reporting? Are those outlets active in your area?

Spotlight: Globally, Harvard scholar Pippa Norris argues that the [news media is vital for triggering governance reform](#) because a free press usually means less corruption. Shouldn't the same be true in the United States? Journalists have documented the fall of reporting on state governments, for example, and other investigators have shown [the high risk of corruption in the states](#). Ask students to pick a state with a high corruption index. How many daily reporters are covering state government? How has that number changed? They should post their views on line.

Searchlight: Excellence in [investigative reporting is recognized by the Pulitzer Prize](#). Ask students to take a look at past winners and finalists, and the topics of their stories. Are there any trends? Ask students to plot the trends using a [data](#)

[visualization chart](#). Hold a class discussion of the findings. Why are some topics leading the pack? Are other topics missing? Students also should research local news sites: what notable investigations have occurred recently?

Extra-credit: Worldwide, as noted above, [studies by Norris](#) and others show a correlation between [freedom of the press and levels of corruption](#). What other things set the stage for [increased corruption](#)? Compare the corruption map to the [Press Freedom map](#). Now look at the [global governance patterns on this chart](#). Do you think the “new censors” are those from the rising group of countries called “anocracies”? Ask students to put their thoughts online in whatever format they wish.