

CHAPTER 5

INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING

JAMES DOOLEY

Staff Writer

Honolulu Advertiser



“Why isn’t there more investigative reporting in Hawai‘i?”

All reporting is investigative. So-called investigative reporters do the same things all other reporters do. They collect information and write it into stories.

There are no special techniques. You don’t have to wear a raincoat or exchange code words with golden sources. The only time I do things like that is to satisfy the expectations of people who have information I want. They’ve seen *All the President’s Men* and want to rendezvous in underground garages. That kind of thing is fun once in a while, but not as a steady diet.

A matter of time. The only true distinction between investigative and standard reporting is time. The investigative reporter gets more time to work on stories, which means greater latitude in picking subjects to cover. How to use that luxury of time—choosing good subjects—is the single most important aspect of investigative reporting and the most difficult to execute.

Investigative Reporters and Editors, a national organization established after a reporter for the *Arizona Republic* was murdered in 1976, defines investigative reporting as independent work that leads to meaningful social change. It sounds high-flown, but I suppose this is as

good a definition as any.

What it really means is that you don't scrounge around the police station or U.S. attorney's office trying to get details on the latest criminal investigation. You do your own work on a subject that hasn't been covered before and that badly needs exposure. All it requires is luck, timing, good editors, patience, and a thick hide.

There are some misses along the way: you know a story is true but you can't document it; or you finally realize a story is not true. But that's okay. Save the research; it will come in handy someday, probably in an unexpected way, but eventually it *will* connect to something else.

Stories are everywhere. An old television show about journalism, *Lou Grant*, once had an episode in which a reporter and editor were walking down the street, arguing the proposition that everyone they passed on the sidewalk was a potential Pulitzer Prize news story. I agree with that proposition, but I would take it a couple of steps farther. The story possibilities weren't just in everyone they passed, but in every thing. From the sidewalk under their feet (who laid it? how much did it cost? how'd they get the work?), to the food in their stomachs (where'd it come from? who shipped it? is it nutritious?), to the sky above them, they were surrounded by potentially great news stories. That's the wonderful thing about journalism. It's everything: life and death, mundane and magnificent. The ability of a reporter and editor to realize the news potential of a subject is a key to their success. Too often in this business we pay too much attention to the immediate and lose sight of, not just the future, but the past as well. There *has to be* time for it all.

Another thing I would add to the curbside discussion of the investigative reporter and editor is that all stories are related. Somehow or other, sooner or later, you will find that the most disparate of subjects are connected in unforeseen ways.

Hawai'i has taught me this. It is a journalism laboratory, rich and fertile. Most stories can't run away. Those that try can now be tracked down with the help of newsroom computers.

Hawai'i has a good public records law and a civil service that is, with a few notable exceptions, honest and hardworking. Some of my best stories have come from bureaucrats so sorely offended by waste or abuse that they just couldn't keep quiet about it any longer.

And in Hawai'i, more so perhaps than in other places, one story leads to another. Pull one out of the ground, follow its roots, and you've got a million more. We have a joke in the newsroom that the staff is really working on just one big story . . . we just don't know what it is yet. Someday it will all come together.

One big story. I'll cite one story and list some of the peripheral stories that are connected in one way or another to it—just some of them because I don't have nearly enough room here for all. Plus, I don't know them all.

I did a series of stories back in the early 1980s about secret land partnerships here, commonly known as "huis," that included influential public officials as investors.

One of the partnerships I discovered had quietly bought and sold a piece of property at Nukoli'i on Kaua'i several years earlier, turning a \$4 million profit. The land itself turned out to be the subject of an intense antidevelopment campaign raging on the Garden Isle just at the time I discovered the hui. Luck and timing.

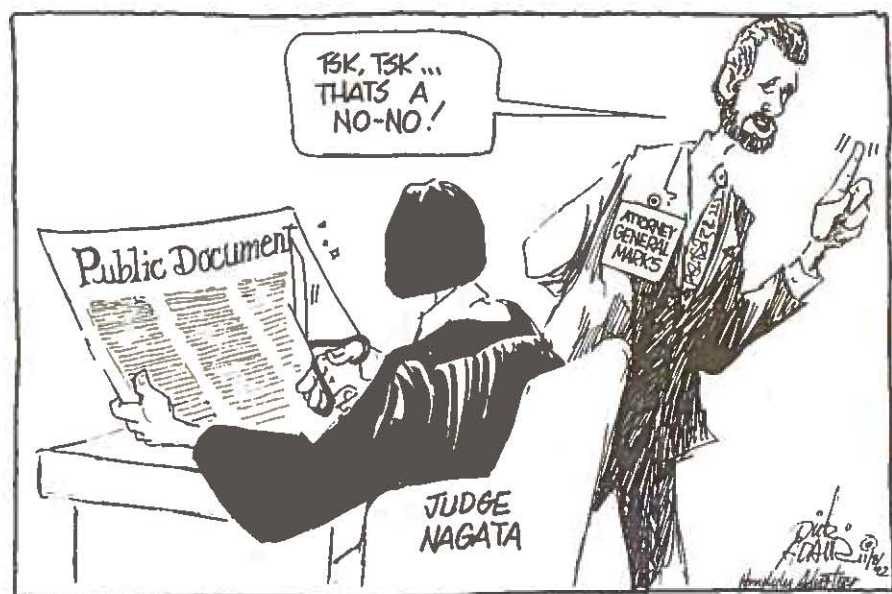
Investors in the Nukoli'i hui, I learned, included a state supreme court justice, the son and daughter of former governor John Burns, and John E. S. Kim, a convicted tax evader and former lobbyist for Amfac (the state's largest corporation at that time). Amfac had sold Nukoli'i to the hui. A key Amfac executive later turned up as a hui investor.

Another investor was Edwin Honda, a state circuit judge who earlier had been director of the State Department of Regulatory Affairs (DRA), the agency that is supposed to oversee public registration of business partnerships.

I asked Honda if he thought the hui should have been registered. He told me the question had never come up when he was the boss of the DRA (which was when the Nukoli'i hui was formed). So I addressed the question to DRA official Russel Nagata, who later became state comptroller. Nagata told me the hui probably should have been registered, but later he changed his position when interviewed by George Cooper, coauthor with Gavan Daws of *Land and Power*.

Years later, I accidentally discovered that Nagata, while serving as state comptroller, had doctored a copy of a state record before giving it to me. He had carefully excised a portion of the memo which concerned state protocol spending, to make it look like I had received a complete

document. The missing paragraph concerned Bank of Hawaii vice president Dolly Ching's role in providing credit cards to state officials for their use in charging protocol expense. At the time, Ching was a member of the Judicial Selection Commission, which later selected Russel Nagata to be a state district judge.



All related. Are you getting the picture here? The original Nukoli'i story, written in 1981, was connected to the doctored documents story written in 1992, which was connected to the Judicial Selection Commission story, which was connected to other Dolly Ching stories I then wrote.

Back to Nukoli'i now. Another investor was a little known state bureaucrat named Yukio Takemoto, later plucked from relative obscurity to become director of the Department of Budget and Finance in the Waihee administration. Takemoto became a central figure in a later series of stories I wrote on non-bid and sole-source state purchasing. My starting place for that series was not Takemoto's department but the purchasing division in the Department of Accounting and General Services, headed by . . . Russel Nagata. That department maintained a list of non-bid contracts awarded by most, but not all, departments of

the executive branch. The list was a gold mine of stories.

One of the first nuggets concerned a non-bid contract awarded by Takemoto to GTE Hawaiian Tel to supply a new telephone system for the executive branch. The \$1 million contract later grew into a \$3 million job. It was awarded on a non-bid basis in part because of the phone company's monopoly position in Hawai'i telecommunications, which in turn is regulated by the Public Utilities Commission (PUC).

In 1992, I wrote a story about how members of the PUC, along with Takemoto and assorted other officials, were the phone company's guests at a week-long social bash and professional golf tournament at the Royal Ka'anapali golf courses on Maui.

Those courses were built by Amfac (a familiar name) with the invaluable political assistance of Masaru "Pundy" Yokouchi, a Maui power broker and developer who had organized . . . the Nukoli'i hui.

The same Ka'anapali golf courses also served as collateral for a \$60 million operating loan granted Amfac in 1991 by the State Employees' Retirement System, the \$5 billion public pension fund operated out of Yukio Takemoto's budget department.

Now are you getting the picture?

This is not a conspiracy theory. Many of the connections and relationships recited here may be accidental or incidental results of life in an island state. But they are connections nevertheless, part of what I increasingly perceive to be one huge, organic News Story.

Connecting dots. That's really what the news business is: exploring, chronicling, and investigating life. Everything is connected in one fashion or another, whether by accident or design.

The work is not costly, expense account-wise. You do run up some legal bills, but so does every other line of work these days. I have never been sued for a story I've written. There have been threatened lawsuits—the only kind of threat editors take seriously—but no actual suits. And to a great degree, the work gets easier as you go along. You build up files, develop a network of sources, and start connecting dots.

Why the field has been left largely to me in the past decade or so by local news organizations is something I can't answer. Certainly there have been occasional and quite successful efforts by other local reporters—but no sustained commitment, as far as I can see, by any medium except the *Advertiser*.

