

# Democracy's Detectives

*The Economics of Investigative  
Journalism*

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# Introduction

Fraud, and its unraveling, can both build a business.

Throughout the 1850s, Johnson's Sixteenth Street distillery was an unlikely and (for some) unwitting starting point for milk destined for children in New York City. Each week, thousands of barrels of swill, a slop-like by-product from the distillery, flowed via underground conduits to stables where Johnson boarded close to two thousand cows for milk dealers paying nearly twenty dollars per cow per year.<sup>1</sup> Inside the stables, diseased cows who fed upon the slop were milked in conditions of filth to yield a swill milk much inferior to the product sought by parents. Outside, the wagons of milk dealers, often adorned with labels of rural counties, lined up to convey the swill milk to unsuspecting homes and to establishments that would often adulterate the milk by adding water and chemicals to disguise the milk's composition. Buyers at the end of the food chain often purchased a liquid marked "Pure Country Milk," but would be hard pressed to iden-

tify where the mixture really came from. Parents whose children contracted illnesses from the milk could not easily determine the source of the maladies, since there were many possible pathways to disease. Misleading consumers brought profits to Johnson and the milk dealers, and illnesses to children consuming the mislabeled milk.

Exposing these frauds through original pictures and stories offered Frank Leslie a simple business plan: provide content not available elsewhere. In 1858, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* was a weekly compilation of drawings and news competing in New York City with daily partisan newspapers and *Harper's Weekly Journal of Civilization*. In its May 8, 1858, edition, *Leslie's* began the first installment of the swill milk crusade by stressing the newspaper's product differentiation:

We have entered upon this task with the determination to pursue it to the end. We shall not in any way attempt to exaggerate the evil, or give to it a warmer coloring than truth demands. We have waited in vain to see this subject taken up seriously, earnestly, fearlessly and persistently by the several daily papers, but we have waited in vain. Politics or subjects of local interest bearing immediately upon private and personal objects, occupy exclusively the serious attention of the daily editors, while the subject of which we now

treat is passed over with an occasional and indifferent remark.<sup>2</sup>

When the reporting generated great public outcries and scrutiny of the milk trade, *Leslie's* again emphasized the competitive nature of the market by describing the story's impact relative to those of other outlets, saying "We have already achieved more than all the medical protests and the united daily and weekly press of the city together have hitherto effected in suppressing the swill milk trade in New York and Brooklyn."<sup>3</sup> The paper credited its impact to the distinctive use of illustrations, a defining characteristic of *Leslie's*:

We felt that the only chance of making an impression upon the public mind was to appeal to their sense of sight, and since the pen had repeatedly failed in awakening popular indignation or legislative action, to call in the aid of the pencil. With what success this has been accomplished is evident to all.... Thousands who had dozed over the most elaborate descriptions of diseased cows, running with sores, reeking with corruption, and, as it were, literally rotting above ground for the sole purpose of inoculating with their foul leprosy every healthy infant, were horror-struck when the artist brought before them the sickening spectacle.<sup>4</sup>

Acknowledging that the swill story was increasing sales, the paper repeatedly claimed that profit was not the motive, stating, “The sale of our paper, enormous as it has been, will not return us in profit one tithe of what we have expended and must continue to expend. We bear this expense unaided and most willingly, in the hope that our money, our time and our labor will not be thrown away, but will purchase for our fellow-citizens a future and glorious immunity from a terrible evil which has so long and fatally afflicted them.”<sup>5</sup> Yet *Leslie’s* explicitly prompted readers to buy the next issue by promising more results. In the first installment of the swill milk investigation, the paper listed milk routes with information gathered by workers/reporters referred to as “detectives.” At the end of the list of routes, the newspaper promised: “Our corps of detectives will continue their investigations day and night, and we shall publish their reports in our next. Further revelations and illustrations of the nefarious swill milk trade will appear in our next issue.”<sup>6</sup> Leslie’s investigative reports quickly translated into financial gains. As historian Michael Egan found:

The popularity of his exposé effectively saved his business. In 1857 Leslie claimed to have 90,000 subscriptions, but he was embroiled in a fierce battle with the newly established *Harper’s Weekly*. By the end of 1858, Leslie boasted a subscription total of 140,000,



with special issues selling considerably more copies. This rise in subscriptions was in all likelihood directly attributable to Leslie's investigation of the swill milk controversy; during his exposé Leslie reduced and eventually eliminated his gossip columns in favor of presenting news and editorials.<sup>7</sup>

Leslie's newspaper used the operation of Johnson's Sixteenth Street distillery and cow stables to illustrate the deception and harms of the swill milk trade. Readers saw sketches depicting filth and crowding in the stalls, a diseased cow left outside the distillery to die, a gleaming milk dealer wagon outside the stable with the misleading label "Westchester County," and even the off-site dissection of a "putrefied" cow carcass and its pile of intestines.<sup>8</sup> Multiple editions reported the addresses of houses and establishments that received milk from wagons loaded up at Johnson's.<sup>9</sup> The newspaper's "detectives" noted the names on the wagons too. Some gave the impression of carrying country milk through signs denoting Orange or Westchester County, many carried no name at all, and, as scrutiny increased, drivers began to cover over the names on their wagons. By questioning the superintendent of the swillery, Leslie suggested that Johnson secured milk for his own family from a cow separated from the swill stables and fed on grain and hay. The newspaper also published an affidavit from a witness who saw Alderman

Michael Tuomey, on the day after he was appointed to head up the Swill Milk Investigation Committee, visit Johnson's Fifth Avenue "palace" (i.e., home) for several hours. This evidence of fraud in the marketplace and its political protection did not come cheaply. As *Leslie's* observed on the first day of the series:

Every possible obstacle has been thrown in our way in our attempt to investigate facts, and take accurate observations and drawings. Our artists have been assaulted with stones and sticks; our agents dragged from their wagon, and the wagon smashed into pieces and thrown into the creek. Our friends have been threatened with death and houses to be burned, in short everything that could be done has been done to stop inquiry and prevent exposure, but we shall persevere in spite of all opposition till we have laid bare the whole system of domestic murder.<sup>10</sup>

The swill milk crusade is notable journalism for several reasons. More than forty years before the advent of the muckraking era, Leslie championed a type of reporting easily recognizable today as investigative. The series presented new information arising from original reporting, about a topic of clear importance to the community, when others (including milk dealers and the politicians protecting them) were trying to keep their actions shrouded from

public view. The revelations' impacts show how changing the distribution of information in markets and politics alters the distribution of power. Short-term effects included changes in business such as stable cleanups, expanded opportunities for pure milk sellers, and reduced chances to deceive customers about where the product originated. Longer-term impacts included the defeat of politicians who favored fraudulent operators and eventual passage of a New York state law aimed at eliminating swill milk sales.<sup>11</sup> Reader interest in the often sensational news increased circulation, and that brought new advertisers.

Leslie's unraveling of fraud shows how investigative reporting could build a journalistic business, by providing pictures and text not available from competing publications. He made his case using data and documents, a familiar combination in modern data journalism. Part of the data including milk route information that provided addresses where swill milk deliveries were made, the type of establishment receiving, often the number of cans or quarts delivered, and the name on the delivery cart, was newly assembled by his "detectives." Part of the data was from statistics assembled by others, including reports of the chemical composition of swill milk and trends in children's deaths in New York City.

~~While Leslie's exposé of the swill milk trade is the most famous investigative tale from Sixteenth Street, more than a century of coverage in the *New York Times*~~