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UNESCO Series on Journalism Education

A Manual for Investigative Journalists

Story-Based Inquiry

Mark Lee Hunter

Published in 2026 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France

ISBN 978-92-3-100839-9

https://doi.org/10.58338/OMDP8205

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UNESCO project management, review and editing: Nadia Anna Mandl, Khalid Aoutail, Andrea Cairola

Cover, Graphic design, Illustrations and Typeset: Anne Barcat

Cover photos: olegkruglyak3 hor, Rezona/stock.adobe.com, Freepik.com and H. J. Myers/Wikimedia Commons (Public Domain)

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Printed by UNESCO
Printed in France

SHORT SUMMARY

Reinventing Investigative Journalism in the Digital Age

In just over a decade, investigative journalism has been reshaped. Open-source intelligence, advanced data analytics, and new digital platforms have equipped investigative journalists an unprecedented set of tools to expose wrongdoing, defend truth, and hold power to account. Story-Based Inquiry has been central to this transformation since its first edition in 2009. Recognised worldwide as a pioneering method for conceiving, structuring and publishing investigations, it has influenced how investigative skills are taught and practised across cultures and continents. It helped build **a movement of over 10,000 investigative journalists.**

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This fully updated second edition builds on that legacy. Expanded to nine chapters, it integrates the latest research, innovative practices and lessons drawn from landmark global investigations. Backed by centuries of collective newsroom experience, it provides both seasoned reporters and newcomers with practical tools to turn complex ideas into compelling stories, while protecting sources and navigating today's fast-changing information landscape.

This handbook remains an indispensable resource for journalists, educators and media organisations committed to strengthening freedom of expression and ensuring accountability worldwide.

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"Since wars begin in the minds of men and women, it is in the minds of men and women that the defences of peace must be constructed"

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A Manual
for Investigative Journalists

Story-Based Inquiry

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Foreword

A free, independent and pluralistic media constitutes an essential foundation for democratic societies, sustainable development, and the promotion of transparency, accountability, and good governance. In this context, UNESCO actively supports global efforts to enhance the practice and sustainability of investigative journalism as a means of safeguarding the public's right to know. It plays a critical role in uncovering information that may be concealed and in making such information accessible for public understanding and informed decision-making. By exposing wrongdoing and demanding accountability, it also contributes to the fight against impunity, ensuring that violations of human rights do not go unchallenged. Through this endeavor, investigative journalism advances the principles of the free flow of information and freedom of expression, which are integral to UNESCO's broader mandate.

Since its first edition in 2009, the UNESCO-supported investigative journalism manual Story-Based Inquiry has contributed to reshape how investigations are conceived, organized, and published. Translated into over dozen languages, it has reportedly been widely used by thousands of journalists, scholars, schools of journalism, and media development partners all around the world. This impact has been further amplified through UNESCO's work. Through funding mechanisms such as the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) and the Multi-Donor Programme on Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists (MDP) and the Global Media Defence Fund (GMDF), UNESCO has been supporting organizations implementing projects that enhance the safety and protection of journalists, including through investigative journalism. By doing so, UNESCO contributes directly to reducing impunity for crimes against journalists and enhancing the safety of those carrying out this vital work, ensuring that limited resources are effectively converted into high-impact, public-interest reporting—the very outcomes this book seeks to inspire.

As journalism evolves through more collaborative transnational approach, digital media, digital platforms, and advanced data analytics, the profession faces both new opportunities and complex challenges. This second edition reflects these shifts by integrating the latest research, technologies, and best practices in investigative reporting. It integrates new and updated sections providing practical guidance on digital data collection and analysis, verification of online sources, and strategies for protecting sensitive information in a rapidly changing information environment.

Conceived as a bridge between the newsroom and the classroom, this edition connects theory and practice, speaking equally to journalists seeking practical guidance and to educators shaping the next generation of investigators.

Story-Based Inquiry (Second Edition) is published within UNESCO's Series on Journalism Education, which supports journalism schools and training providers with contemporary, use-ready resources. Its development has benefited from the support of UNESCO's IPDC and the MDP.

When rigorous method meets public-interest purpose, investigations do more than expose harm - they enable solutions and help rebuild trust. May this edition equip a new generation of reporters and educators to pursue facts with precision, organise evidence with discipline, and tell consequential stories that matter.

SYLVIE COUDRAY
Director for Freedom of Expression,
Media Development and Media and Information Literacy;
IPDC Secretary, UNESCO

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION
Mark Lee Hunter

Where we began

You are reading the fruit of a long and wide collaboration. Without Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ), and in particular its co-founder, Pia Thordsen, and its first executive director, Rana Sabbagh, the first edition of this book would never have existed. It is also the first trans-cultural manual and method in the field, and without the Global Investigative Journalism Network, which was founded (in 2003) just before ARIJ, there would have been no forum to develop the ideas in this book, and no global audience for it. Without UNESCO, who now oversees the project's dissemination on a global scale, there would never have been over **a dozen translations**[1] by journalists who wanted the text in their native languages.

Pia and I couldn't imagine such an impact in 2007, when we sat down after an ARIJ training session – at the time, practically the only investigative reporters in the Arab World were the ones we were teaching – to outline the book. She'd heard me speak at the Global Investigative Journalism Conference at Amsterdam in 2005. My subject was the use of hypotheses in investigative reporting.

We didn't know then that the renowned investigative team of James Steele and Donald Barlett had begun using hypotheses, the foundation of our method, when they worked alongside social scientist Philip J. Meyer in the 1970s. Among other exploits, their work was among the first avatars of what became known as computer-assisted reporting. I still can't understand why the insight that instead of just waiting for a story to emerge from a hot stew of facts, you could conceive of a provisional story and then verify it, didn't go mainstream in journalism at the time. It already was, of course, in scientific, scholarly, medical and law enforcement circles, among

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others. Maybe it was because journalists were taught that you can't decide what the story is until you have "all the facts". That was doubly false, you'll never get all the facts, and every working journalist I ever knew walked into a room with an idea of what story they'd take away from it – a hypothesis that dared not speak its name, because that wouldn't be "objective".

I discovered the tool by reverse-engineering my best stories. In scholarly terms, that's called using case studies to develop theory – a skill I learned from my friends and mentors Yves Doz, Marc Le Menestrel, Henri-Claude de Bettignies, Luk N. Van Wassenhove and Maria Besiou at INSEAD, a leading business school that paid for my research over two decades beginning in 2001. Until then, I literally did not understand what I was doing as an investigator.

Our first task was to define what distinguishes investigative reporting from news reporting, the esssential skill taught in journalism schools. The Watergate generation had taken care to say that their innovations were just "good old-fashioned journalism", mainly to dampen the anxiety that followed their emergence. Not quite, and neither is it true that "all journalism is investigative journalism", as a second-rate scholar once said to me in a bullying tone. As John Ullman said in his introduction to the landmark first edition of *The Reporter's Handbook* (1982), covering a sports event is not the same job, in principle or in practice, as investigating it.

Pia and I then outlined a three-part procedure: Define and verify a hypothesis; create a map of the actors in the story; and construct a "masterfile" database from the findings that can be edited and rewritten into a finished, documented story. In other words, we connected the beginning of an investigation to its end through an integrated, iterative method.

What we changed in this edition

Those elements became standard features of investigative journalism practice, I think in large part because they articulated what practitioners were already doing by instinct. This time we've tried again to take them to a new level, with a key addition. When I wrote Story-Based Inquiry, I neglected to discuss the use of timelines in designing, archiving and composing investigations. That was simply strange, because I'd already written a true crime book based, precisely, on a 400-page timeline. Be that as it may, three years after the manual was published by UNESCO, Luuk Sengers and I co-wrote a pamphlet, ***The Hidden Scenario***[1] (with support from the Logan Foundation), that added this fourth core element to the method. Luuk worked closely with me in developing the concepts and techniques from the first

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edition into their detailed and enriched present form over a decade and a half. Our annual presentations at The Centre for Investigative Journalism in London enabled us to refine not only our ideas, but also how to teach them. His contribution to the method is evident in several chapters of this manual.

We've provided numerous new examples of current best practices. In particular, Eva Constantaras, Emma Prest, Coco Gubbels and Paul Radu demonstrate how to expand our key concepts from solo practices to collaborative tools – a necessary evolution as cross-border collaboration becomes a central feature of our movement.

The field of open source intelligence (OSINT) has exploded since our first edition, and we revised our chapter on the subject with help from Bellingcat, Paul Myers, Manisha Ganguly and Henk Van Ess. We expanded our material on interviewing. We've also added new material on undercover work, in which we've tried to balance appreciation of the benefits and risks.

Nils Hanson, who covered quality control in our first edition, updated his work here. He's accompanied by Clothilde Redfern, a leader in the fight against SLAPP lawsuits – another growing concern – who details basic legal procedures. Nils also contributed once again to our expanded section on interviewing techniques, along with new material from Oleg Khomenok, whose work in Eastern Europe was crucial to expanding the global investigative movement.

Security concerns have likewise become more intense, and we've set out some basic procedures, enough to get you started safely, with insights from Oleg Khomenok and Elodie Vialle, who are leaders in defining current best practice.

Finally, we added an entire new chapter on impact, because social media and **stakeholder-driven media**(1) have changed the game in that regard. The practitioners at Disclose.ngo and Anya Schiffrin made generous contributions to that chapter, which also cites James T. Hamilton, whose work has deeply influenced my own.

Data journalism likewise experienced explosive growth in the past two decades. We allude to data practices across this edition, but there are already **excellent manuals**(2)on the subject, so we decided to put materials for further study in a separate resource guide that accompanies this text. The same applies to AI, where developments are occurring so fast that current practice will be swiftly outmoded.

Our case studies and citations, which I solicited via social media, capture some of the history and the growing breadth of our work. They also provide more evidence for the fact that women play a major, if not preponderant role in contemporary investigative journalism. I've often said that the future of journalism will be women holding men accountable, and it's happening as I write. The late Anne-Marie Casteret, to whom this book is dedicated, was an avatar of that trend. No journalist I ever met was more skilful, inventive and brave than Anne-Marie, and she needed every bit of those resources to expose the Contaminated Blood Affair (1991) and overcome the combined resistance of high officials and their allies in the media to

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obtain justice for the victims. I once told her that she might want to drop a story that was raising the heat on her to levels even she had never seen. She replied, "If I do that, I am no longer free."

It takes more courage to be free now than when I started in the late 1970s. As Julian Assange said, "Power pushes back." Investigative reporting is pushing further than ever, and so are our adversaries. Someday, you may have to decide how far you want to push. Long before you reach that point, you can change your life and the world for the better by learning to investigate, and helping to expose problems that need fixing, and comforting the victims of injustice. By the time you undertake riskier projects, you'll know what you're doing, and you'll have the company of other skilled, brave people to help you get it done.

Investigating isn't only or merely dangerous. Discovering things that make the world better is deeply satisfying, even when what you discover is startling or shocking. We aren't doing the job for our pleasure, but we can certainly take pleasure in doing the job. I hope you'll earn that pleasure for yourself, if you haven't already.

Acknowledgements

The two most frequent compliments I've heard about Story-Based Inquiry are that beginners find it "inspiring", and investigators who teach say "you made the job easier for me". Thanks from my heart to everyone who took the time to tell me, because that's exactly what we tried to accomplish.

I am particularly grateful to Rawan Damen, who succeeded Rana Sabbagh as Director General of ARIJ in 2020. In 2024, Rawan commissioned the Arabic version of this revision and continually supported it, not least by providing me with a team at ARIJ – Naji Tamimi, Munir Al Khatib and Safa Amer – who subjected that project to insightful scrutiny and provided numerous case studies. The revised manual I wrote with them, focused on the Arab world, gave me a solid foundation for the new global edition. I am proud that together, over nearly two decades, we made the second "major contribution" (thank you, **Pacific Journalism Review**[1]) to the practice and theory of investigative journalism that originated in the Global South, following Anton Harber's discovery of the power of coalitions during the fight against apartheid.

Nadia Mandl, my wise and cool project manager at UNESCO, and I agreed to send this text out for peer review – a step we omitted in the first edition. Our reviewers met the highest standard for the job: They enriched the text with examples, cases, resources and counsel. In particular I want to thank Deb Nelson for bringing her deep and subtle editing skills to the project. Oleg Khomenok's wisdom likewise runs through this manual. Peer reviewers and contributors are cited at the top of the

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pertinent chapters.

Heartfelt thanks are also due to Guy Berger, Andrea Cairola, Antonia Eser-Ruperti, Ma'aly Hazzaz, Xianhong Hu, Nadia Mandl, Mogens Schmidt of UNESCO, who worked in different ways to bring both editions of this manual to a global audience.

Thanks, finally, to the hundreds of universities, NGOs and investigative centres around the world who adopted Story-Based Inquiry, including the 70-odd Arab universities that are teaching a curriculum that Luuk, Rana Sabbagh and I developed with ARIJ. Further teaching materials can be found in the UNESCO anthology, **The Global Investigative Journalism Casebook**[1] (2012), to which I refer frequently in this text. A full package of 10 course sessions with presentations, teaching notes and case studies for instructors that Luuk and I wrote for UNESCO is likewise free for download as **Investigating Sustainable Development**[2] (2022), and is referenced in this text. Anne Barcat's design for the first edition of this manual contributed greatly to its success. I am glad that she took on this second edition with equal brilliance.

A note on terminology: Throughout this text, we use the term "victims" in alternance with the more recent term, "survivors." The reason for this choice is both sad and undeniably true: Not all victims survive, and we must honour their memory in our hearts and our work.

The first edition of this book helped to create a global movement and its knowledge base. I hope that the next and greater success will be yours, as you undertake the work of ensuring that our lives will change for the better. If that's your ambition, this book is your open door. We hope you'll walk through it and join us to make a more just and truthful world.

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1. WHAT IS INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM?


subject
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I

Investigative journalism is not quite the same as news reporting

What is investigative journalism?
How is it done? Why should we do it?

Investigative journalism involves exposing to the public matters that are concealed – either deliberately by someone in a position of power, or accidentally, behind a chaotic mass of facts and circumstances that obscure understanding.

- The information may be concealed by wrongdoers, or it may be kept secret for private motives. In that case, the journalist seeks to hold the power accountable.
- Alternatively, its features may already be in the public domain, but remain unnoticed, and the investigation pulls them together to offer a new perspective that can support change.

The public interest, as opposed to private ambitions, is the fundamental justification – social, moral and legal – for contemporary investigative reporting. That may seem self-evident, but it hasn't always been the case. At different points in modern history, investigative reporting has served for purposes of blackmail; the ultimate audience was not the public, but a target who would pay to keep a story unpublished. In contrast, our job is to create a record that is as true as our methods and minds can make it, and share it publicly.

Ever since investigative journalism emerged, a number of people have argued that it is merely "good, old-fashioned journalism that is well done". In other words, it is assumed that any competent news reporter already operates like an investigator. We've heard people say, "When you start asking questions, you're already investigating." That's not false, but asking questions is only the beginning of the process.

Anyone who has done both news and investigative reporting will tell you that the two jobs don't quite feel like the same work. When you investigate you're certainly doing the same things as when you report the news – say, interviewing or collecting documents – but you're taking them further, longer and deeper, and the quantitative differences become qualitative. You are seeking facts, as always, but you are also taking the facts up one level of abstraction, as the scholar Yves Doz would say, where you discover and define their previously unknown meaning.

You may already be investigating without recognizing that you are, maybe because you're humble, or because you are working by reflex instead of methodically. By making your investigative instincts visible to yourself, you transform them into tools that can be honed.

There are three predictable phases in this process. It's worth noting that as investigative reporting becomes a common practice (as opposed to a specialty), their features are increasingly visible in high-quality daily news reporting. Keep this in mind: A story written on a daily deadline may not be entirely investigative, but it can certainly contain a sentence, paragraph or passage that results from investigation, as journalist Bill Dedman once said. Look for those elements in your own work and build them out.

Phase One: You become ready to investigate.

You see something happen, you report on it, and then you think: What happened that I can't see? You sense that you won't be satisfied until you find the whole story, and you believe that the story matters to others and must be told.

Phase Two: You begin to investigate.

- You seek further information, beyond seizing a momentary opportunity.
- You ask questions, and instead of simply quoting the answers, you verify them.
- You look for more than one source – documentary evidence, testimony, data – for every fact that you encounter.

- You go beyond and behind the daily news. You see separate events as part of a continuum, in which the past leads to consequences in the present and future.

Phase Three: You go all in.

- You observe facts and events that you previously ignored. Often enough, the evidence seems to find you. In truth, you are simply ready to hear it. You have become part of the world where your story takes place, and where things you never imagined become possible.
- You replace opinion, speculation and deduction – yours or someone else's – with documented facts.
- Previously unconnected facts converge toward a verified pattern.
- You gather so much material that you feel like you're drowning in it (which is not the same thing as finding enough information to produce a news story under deadline pressure). You may worry that you'll never get to the end. You will certainly worry that you missed something important. Conversely, you may not even notice when your material is finally coherent and complete. (That's what good editors are for.)
- You see how your story can change lives or institutions, by pointing out practices that need to be ended or adopted, and how. You engage allies and the public to further that result.

There's no escaping it: Investigative stories require more investment – personal, financial and temporal – than daily news stories.

But they can also be much more rewarding – for the public, for your organisation, and for you.

II

How investigative journalism adds value

For the public: Viewers and readers love stories that bring them added value – information that they can't find anywhere else, that they can trust, and that gives them power over their lives (for example, by avoiding bad investments or corrupt leaders). Please remember this: Investigative journalism is not a product, it is a service, on behalf of the public interest – not only what interests the public, but what will make their lives better.

For your organisation: Do not let anyone tell you that investigation is a luxury for news media. Most news media lose money, but media that conduct and manage investigations properly, and use them to enrich their value for their users, are frequently very profitable. The most profitable television show in the history of U.S. broadcasting was "60 Minutes", which built its public through investigative scoops. Web-based outlets like Heated.world, focused on climate change, and the Kyiv Independent have followed a similar strategy in attracting their subscriber bases. Moreover, such media gain greater influence and goodwill in their communities, which increases their access to information, and hence their competitive position.

For you: In the decades we have spent training investigators, we often hear them say: "Won't I make enemies?" Sure, a few. But if you do the job right, you will make many more friends than enemies. You will also make yourself much better known in the profession and outside it.

Most important, you will change as an individual in astonishing ways. You will become stronger, because you will know yourself to be capable of finding the truth on your own, instead of waiting for someone to hand it to you. You will learn to master your fear while listening to your doubts. You will understand the world in a new, deeper way. It's sad but true that the grinding practice of journalism makes many people cynical and lazy; investigation will help you to avoid that fate.

In short, investigation involves more work, physically and psychologically – but the rewards are so great that if you care about the public good, journalism and yourself, you will offer yourself the experience, and offer your viewers and colleagues the added value that investigation creates.

III

Choosing a story for investigation

Beginning reporters often ask: How do you know what to investigate? Not infrequently, they have a difficult time finding a subject. But as one of our students once said, "Material is everywhere." The problem is seeing it.

In our experience there are three main ways to notice a story that calls for investigation: "leftovers", word of mouth, and observation.

- **"Leftovers"** is the term for perfectly nourishing food that remains on the plate when a meal is finished. There are lots of leftovers in news and social media – a casual remark from an official source that no one verifies, an odd event that no one explains, a success that is too good to be true.

In general, it is a good idea to monitor a given sector, so that you can begin to identify patterns, and thus notice when something unusual occurs. An anomaly in the flow of events becomes significant when it leads to further anomalies, the same way that a pothole in the road starts as a bump and ends with a broken axle. If you finish a story and think, "How did that happen?", the odds are good that there is more to investigate.

- **"Word of mouth"** is exactly that: Someone says something, and you pay attention to it. Any place where people gather – village markets, Internet forums, dinner parties – you will hear of things that sound strange, shocking, or intriguing. Some of them are mere rumour or clichés ("everyone is corrupt"). But some rumours are worth investigating, and it also happens that people tell detailed stories that are rich in feeling. When that happens, make sure you capture the story on a written or recorded note.
- It also happens that **personal observation or experience** alerts you to a community of victims. Saba Al Mansour's investigation of Cochlear implants, which enable deaf children to hear, began with her own son's special need, and then extended into an entire community of parents who are impoverished by the costs of these devices. Or, when

changes in your environment become visible – for example, if a number of people are stricken by a rare disease, or the character of a village or neighborhood mutates, or public spaces deteriorate – it may be a sign that hidden causes are at work.

Do not look only for stories that involve wrongdoing. It is in some ways more difficult to do a good job of reporting on something that is going right – to understand a new talent, or a development project that met its goals, or a company that is creating wealth and jobs. Failure is usually visible; success is often a black box. Identifying the replicable elements of success, or "best practices", is a valuable service to your viewers.

Don't always look for someone to blame, either. A powerful recent investigation of a European's city's attempt to use "ethical AI" to manage its social programs, in active collaboration with the officials involved, ended up showing that despite the best of intentions, grave problems remained. Instead of merely denouncing yet another scandal involving misuse of algorithms, the reporters and officials took the debate to a higher level, where other cities could learn from the experiment.

Beginning in the 2010s, two movements – solutions journalism(1) and constructive journalism(2) – forcefully and rightly argued that reportage that only denounces problems, without pointing to a way forward, can leave the public depressed and disoriented. (In the United States, the failure of investigative reporters to take this risk into account in the years following Watergate led to widespread public rejection.) The future of investigative reporting will include developments of those ideas. In fact, a constructive approach has appeared in landmark investigations across the history of journalism. It remains legitimate, on condition that you investigate not only injustice, but also how justice can be restored.

Remember: Especially when you are starting out, there is no such thing as a small investigation. The skills needed for an inquiry in a distant village are the same skills that you will need later in the capital. That is not a theory, it is our experience. Use the stories that appear where you are now to begin building those skills. Do not wait until you are involved in a high-stakes investigation to discover that you don't really know what you are doing. The post-Watergate generation learned their tradecraft almost entirely on the job – a necessary apprenticeship, but one that leaves holes in your knowledge. Find people who know more than you do, study them, and adopt their techniques. When you meet them, you'll have the basis for a rich conversation. If you're lucky, that conversation will lead to collaboration with people who can shorten your learning curve.

Last and first, follow your passion. There are two aspects of this principle:

- In general, we do not notice even striking phenomena unless we are looking for them. A common example: many expectant parents are surprised by how many children they see in the street; the children were always there, but the parents didn't pay attention to them until they

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began thinking about having their own. So, allow your existing passions to sensitise you to stories that no one else seems to take seriously.

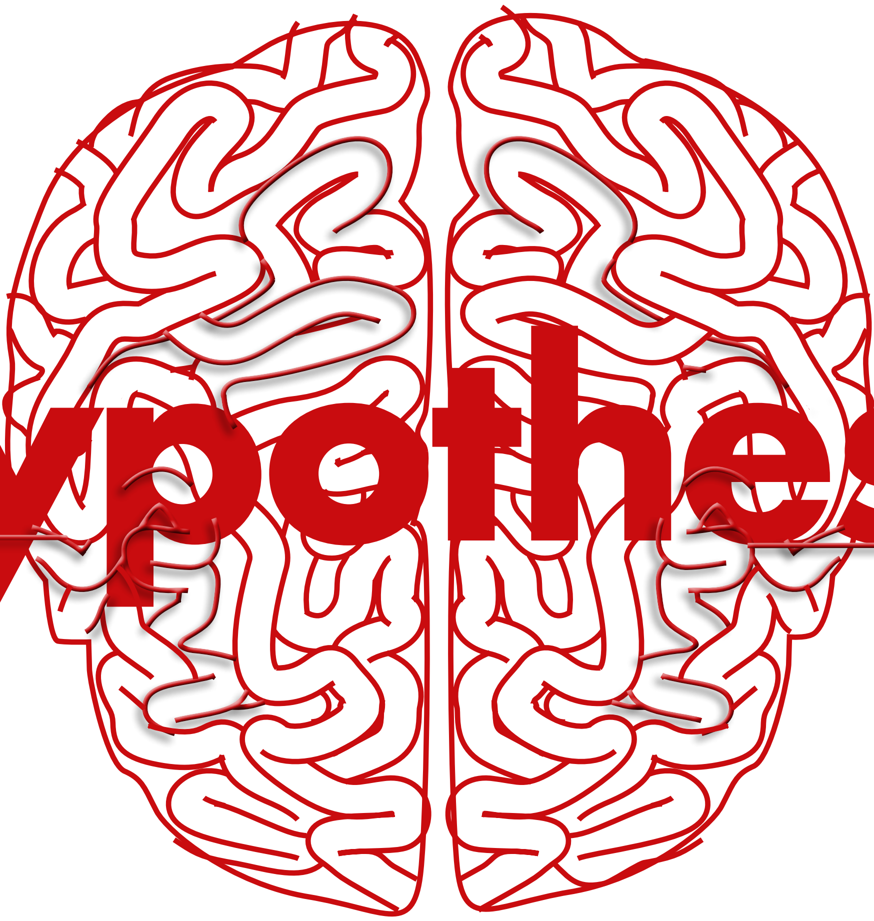
- The second aspect is that if a story does not fascinate you, or outrage you, or give you the intense desire to see something change, you should avoid taking it on. Likewise, if you are an editor, pay attention to whether your reporter is treating an investigation like a mere task. If so, take back the assignment and give it to someone else.

Why? Because good work is more work. If you don't care about a story, you will almost surely not be motivated to do the job correctly. Of course you will have to use your critical mind to get it done; of course you must remain objective toward the facts (which means verifying that they are indeed facts, and not just what you would like to be true). But if the story does not touch your passions, one way or another, you are probably going to fail with it. Every investigation becomes more, not less, difficult and complex as it progresses. So please, do not undertake an investigation simply because you can; start an investigation when you feel strongly that a particular situation must be known, and must change.

In the next chapter, we discuss how to turn a potential subject of investigation into a hypothesis – a provisional explanation for the phenomena and other evidence at your immediate disposal. Without a hypothesis, your investigation will be far more difficult to conceive, plan, and sell to the media and your public. In contrast, armed with a hypothesis, you can move faster and deeper than you ever imagined, while avoiding mistakes. Let's see how.

1.
We define an investigation.

2. USING HYPOTHESES: THE CORE OF INVESTIGATIVE METHOD



hypothesis

With
Luuk Sengers, Deborah Nelson,
Oleg Khomenok, Paul Radu, Eva Contantaras,
Emma Prest, Disclose.ngo and Coco Gubbels

A hypothesis is a method for testing a story

The moment that you frame a subject as a statement that can be verified, you are stating a hypothesis – "an assumption or idea that is **proposed** for the sake of argument so that it **can be tested to see if it might be true**" says the Merriam-Webster Dictionary. The Oxford English Dictionary offers a similar definition: "**A proposed** explanation made on the basis of **limited** evidence as a **starting** point for further **investigation**."

The hypothesis is the beginning – a proposed starting point – and not the end of an investigation. A hypothesis seeks to explain a phenomenon, and the explanation remains a mere proposition until we can test and verify it. Your hypothesis captures what you think is happening, what you already know, and what you would like to prove. Because the initial evidence is nearly always scant, further investigation is required to verify if the hypothesis can be supported or not. **If it can't be proven, it must change to fit the facts we can prove**.

If it doesn't change at all by the time you're done, either you possess a remarkable gift of prophecy, or you haven't been paying attention. The facts are nearly always richer and more complex than anything you can imagine in advance, and the verified story must reflect those discoveries. **You can't put significant facts aside just because they don't fit your hypothesis**.

You already know a great deal about using hypotheses, though you may not be aware that you do. Philip Meyer, who did much to create computer-assisted reporting[1] (currently known as data journalism) beginning in the late 1960s, said it well: "We all work with hypotheses in everyday life, but without thinking about it very much." When you say, "If I don't leave by 6:00, I'll miss my plane," you are stating a hypothesis. If you see a public official who has suddenly become rich, and you think, "He didn't earn that wealth honestly", that's a hypothesis.

Investigation is a matter of trying to prove or disprove your hypothesis. Remember: **It is not a matter of proving that any idea you may have is true**. If the evidence you uncover is trying to tell you that you're on the wrong path, listen to it and revise your hypothesis.

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In investigative journalism, a hypothesis most often takes the form of *a story that we think might be true*. That's why we call this method "Story-Based Inquiry". We begin our work from a story; we don't know yet if it is true, but we have reason and some evidence to believe that it might be. By verifying that story through further evidence, we can see if it is, in fact, true, or largely true, or simply wrong. Even if it's wrong, the evidence we uncover along the way may lead us to the real, true story. From that standpoint, this is a no-risk procedure. The risks come from inside your head – confirmation bias (which we'll discuss under "hypotheses can be dangerous" below), and "status quo" bias (in which you can't bear to admit that what you've discovered is true) are the main ones we encounter.

Why do we start from a hypothetical story? Because facts alone don't tell stories; stories tell the facts. If a fact is not embedded in a story – the movement of people and their actions through time and space, leading to a meaning, to paraphrase Itzhak Roeh[1]– it swiftly becomes impossible to remember, for you or anyone else. If you want proof, take out your telephone and open the contacts app. Before looking at the contacts, try to remember the first five names on the list. If you can do that, you are a remarkable individual, unless they are all members of your family. Now look at the first five names and try to remember how you met them. Each of those meetings is a story, and we're certain that you will find them easier to recall.

The hypothesis is the heart of your story, its first rough, stripped-down version. It should be expressible in a few short sentences. Those sentences are the first statements you will verify; they define the object of your research.

For example, if you think that a government minister is corrupt, it may be because they own a mansion on a hill that their salary couldn't possibly afford. Your hypothesis is that "the minister's mansion was purchased with the fruits of corruption." Every word in that sentence – the mansion (which may be visible from the road), the purchase (which will be recorded in the local cadaster), and the payoffs (which will be hardest to verify by far) become objects of focused research.

You may never be able to prove absolutely that corruption is involved. You will surely be able to establish that the minister owns a very large and expensive house, because that information is public. (That's what Paul Moreira did in an investigation[2] of how $US 100 million intended for the construction of schools in Afghanistan disappeared.) Then you can explore alternative hypotheses: The minister has a rich spouse; the minister made wise investments; the minister came into a rich inheritance. In the end, you may conclude that the minister is a very lucky person, or that their wealth can't be explained by legitimate causes. What's certain is that you won't advance fast, far or safely if you simply run around town asking if the minister is corrupt.

We've read thousands of story pitches, and written hundreds ourselves. We can assure you that if you can't state your hypothesis in a few short sentences, it will be hard for someone else to understand the story, and you very likely don't understand it yourself.

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A classic and frequent mistake of beginners (and even pros aren't immune to it) is to subject a listener to an endless stream of facts. If you don't take the time to consider what story the facts support you may find something, but you won't know what it means or where it fits into a story worth telling.

Can you investigate without a hypothesis? Sure – in the same way that you can cook a complicated meal for the first time without a recipe. You may create something more or less edible, but the odds are that it will take you longer, and taste much worse, than if you followed a careful, established procedure. (Unfortunately, we've tried it.)

That is one reason why, before hypotheses became a standard part of the investigator's toolkit in the 2000s, editors groaned that investigative journalism is too slow and uncertain to justify investment in a story. Prior to that the typical working procedure was to gather mountains of information, and then try to find a story in it. (Yes, we did that too, because we didn't know better.) In contrast, a hypothesis pushes you to find precise information: the information required for verification. You may not find what you wanted, but you may also find a better story than you first imagined. Once a hypothesis is defined, it is far more likely that an investigation will produce results – or, conversely, that a flawed story can be quickly abandoned, leaving time to do something more useful.

Even a faulty hypothesis is better than none, but only if it contains factual statements that can be verified. Our method began in the mid-1990s when an editor told us: "Doctors are killing prematurely-born babies to stop them from growing up with disabilities. Prove it." We didn't believe it, but two elements of that assignment were easily verifiable. We could prove from statistical tables we found at the local library that premature births had declined from 1970 through 1984, when they suddenly rose at a rapid rate. We could also prove that prematurely-born children are afflicted with a wide range of disabilities. However, we couldn't find any evidence that doctors were killing them, and we couldn't imagine how they would get away with such crimes ("Did you notice that every time Dr.X comes on the ward, a baby dies?").

And then we found a smoking gun, but for an exactly opposite story. In 1984 a law had made it a crime for physicians to deny care to prematurely-born, disabled children, and set up a national surveillance system to catch anyone who tried. The result – which researchers predicted at the time – was the creation of a new population of disabled children. We knew that at the time, legislators were cutting budgets for institutions that cared for these kids.

The hypothesis changed. It wasn't that doctors were killing severely disabled babies. It was that doctors were keeping them alive, and no one in authority cared about what happened to them next. That was abundantly provable, and it became an award-winning story. (UNESCO has published a full analysis of this case, including specific steps in the investigation and teaching aids, in Module 2 of "investigating sustainable development".[1])

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If you can't find evidence to prove your hypothesis, in the process of searching for it you will surely find evidence that points to a better, truer story. It's not always easy to find the line between persisting on the wrong path and recognizing the mistake so you can move in a new direction. However, unless your story involves closely-held secrets, the absence of unambiguous evidence that supports your hypothesis is a clear sign that you need a new one.

Not least, a hypothesis enables you to collaborate efficiently with other journalists and organizations. In the contemporary era, donors and partners demand to know the working hypothesis before committing to a project. Without it, there is no common goal and no common path forward.

II

Making hypotheses

Your hypothesis may start from an intuition, a document, an observation, or a tip that indicates something that is worth investigating. It cannot be mere speculation larded with opinion. There must be some evidence in your possession that indicates the plausibility of your idea; otherwise, you're wasting time. That's why the groundbreaking French investigative outlet, Disclose.ngo, starts by asking for two things[(1)] from their contributors:

1. *Summarize in one or two sentences the main hypothesis of the investigation you would like to conduct.*
2. *Detail the main pieces of information that allow you to support your hypothesis (a testimony, an exclusive document, access to a database, administrative documents obtained after a request for access to public documents, etc.).*

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A journalistic hypothesis typically begins from a visible effect, such as "this person has suffered injustice", or "this beautiful landscape has become polluted". We may learn about it from a tip, a rumor, a document, from our own observation, or from a bit of news that reveals a piece of the story. To make the hypothesis, ask how that effect or event may have occurred, and then answer the question: "What does the information at my disposal mean?" **Your answer is a hypothesis**.

This is one step beyond typical news practice, which is to ask a question and then get someone else to answer it. Interview quotes are considered valid material. So are the words from inside your head, as long as you can and do verify them.

Your hypothesis leads to other questions that must be answered if you want to find out whether or not the story makes sense – that is, whether it is plausible – and then, if it can be proven. Each of those questions can be answered in turn, as a further hypothesis. We can then decide which hypothesis we wish to test first.

A
Two ways to make a hypothesis

1. THINK LIKE A SCIENTIST

For this manual, journalist and project coordinator Eva Constantaras mapped out the investigative procedure for Deeper and Deeper: A Water Race to the Bottom, a collection of 22 stories published by environmental journalism fellows from the Thibi Earth Journalism Network Data Journalism Academy. It's a good example of how investigative reporting can address systemic problems, and not only cases of individual wrongdoing. In this first extract, Constantaras details how her team "workshops" their hypotheses in three steps. The process is very similar to how hypotheses are formed in social science research. Of course we're not scientists, but that's no reason not to borrow their methods.

a. First, we identify key elements:

- *What is the specific problem we want to investigate?*
- *What is the impact (or effect) we are trying to measure?*
- *What causes or drivers of the problem can be exposed?*
- *Are there any potential solutions that could potentially be used to reform the system?*
- *What initial evidence do we have to substantiate each of these?*

b. These elements are then pulled together as a series of assertions supported by evidence:

Category	Assertion (supported by evidence)	Source/evidence
Problem	Agrarian states are the largest extractor of groundwater.	National Compilation on Dynamic Ground Water Resources
Impact (effect)	States are over exhausting groundwater resources, primarily for irrigation purposes	National Compilation on Dynamic Ground Water Resources Land Use Statistics – At a Glance, Table 2.2: State wise area irrigated by crops
Cause	Mono-cropping of water-intensive crops is accelerating water use as are subsidies that make pumping groundwater free.	Area, Production & Yield - Reports Major Contributing District Land Use Statistics – At a Glance, Table 2.2: State wise area irrigated by crops Water footprint per ton of crop or derived crop product at national and sub-national level (m3/ton)
Solution	Implementing efficient irrigation practices can alleviate pressure on groundwater resources.	Net Irrigated Area and area covered under Drip Irrigation

c. Combining these elements results in a cogent, evidence-based hypothesis:

The groundwater crisis in agrarian states is driven by ground water extraction used primarily for irrigation of water-thirsty crops, thanks to free water access and despite availability of more efficient irrigation methods.

2. BORROW AND ADAPT THE HYPOTHESIS

There are two common situations in which a hypothesis can be borrowed and adapted, instead of created. Both of them provide an open door for anyone starting on the investigative path.

a. Sometimes the reporter can treat an official statement, or an anonymous tip, as a hypothesis that demands verification – a simple technique that can have amazing results.

Most investigations are about the difference between a promise (that life will be better, that things or organisations will work better) and the reality of what resulted. Thus, the official promise often serves as a hypothesis, and verification shows whether or not the promise has been kept.

This technique launched the epochal "contaminated blood" story[1] (1991) in France, which concerned the deliberate sale of blood products contaminated by the AIDS virus to unknowing hemophiliacs, resulting in hundreds of deaths. The initial source was a tip from a victim, who said that the National Center for Blood Transfusion, which made the contaminated products, knew that it was spreading the incurable disease. Reporter Anne-Marie Casteret interviewed the Center's director, who gave her a detailed explanation of the disaster. But when she verified his claims – that safe products were unavailable, that contaminated products were given only to people who already had AIDS – she found that necessary products were indeed available and there were no tests to determine who might be contaminated.

She then sought the true reasons, starting from the hypothesis that the officials had made grave mistakes in good faith. In fact, they had carried out a deliberate policy, for which she eventually obtained documentary proof. The scandal that followed her revelations led to the defeat of the ruling party in the next national elections, and to the conviction of the responsible officials.

Disclose.ngo systematically use the same technique of considering official statements as hypotheses. In an interview for this manual, they said:

> *We regularly aggregate statements in the media and in the National Assembly. A lot of our stories start with a CEO's statement, a minister's statement, the official statement – and we reveal that it's false, inaccurate or incomplete.*

It can be said that this approach resembles fact-checking, but in order to check such facts, it's also necessary to expose hidden or previously overlooked information.

b A hypothesis that proved successful in one jurisdiction can frequently be applied to another.

One explanation for that fact, says Paul Radu, co-founder of the OCCRP, is that in criminal circles, the same illicit methods are applied to new locales over and over again. Likewise, a multinational corporation or institution may deploy the same management goals across borders, with visible effects. Wherever it was done first, such a story will be new and useful for your community.

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A powerful example of this technique emerged from the "Spotlight" investigation of child sexual abuse by Catholic priests[1]. (The 2015 movie about that investigation[2] has our endorsement as the best that was ever made about our craft and tradecraft.) That story led to a wave of similar investigations across the planet. The enabling principle is that global institutions have local impacts. The Catholic Church undertook reforms. That's worth noting, because anyone who begins such an investigation will be told that it's better to remain silent. Maybe, but not for the victims.

III

How hypotheses work

A

It doesn't matter if the first hypothesis is entirely true. What matters is that you can verify it – confront it with evidence – in whole or part.

In essence, a hypothesis is based on a mental trick. You create a statement of what you *think* reality may be, based on the best information in your possession. (Opinions do not count as evidence.) Then you seek further information that can prove or disprove your statement. (You too can be wrong.) This is the process of *verification*. If the entire hypothesis can't be quickly confirmed, its separate terms can nonetheless be verified. If not, go back to step one and make a new hypothesis.

If there is no substantive evidence to support your first hypothesis, either you are

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searching for a closely-held secret, or more likely, you are looking for the wrong thing. Change your hypothesis to fit the emerging evidence; do not persist in looking for evidence that doesn't exist.

It's always wise to begin testing your hypothesis with the easiest verifications; **if you can't do the easy stuff, you will never solve the hard problems**. Consider an ARIJ medical investigation, **"Liposuction sucks life out of beauty"**. The hypothesis is clearly stated: "Many women who seek to improve their physical beauty end up hurt or even losing their life when they fall for unscrupulous clinics and plastic surgeon advertisements promising liposuction and body contour enhancement operations at cheap prices."

At the outset of such a project, the authors may know of a single such case, and hypothesize that there are others. How many? Quite a few, it seems, because physicians are actively seeking clients, and their advertisements are easy to find. We can also easily verify the operating and licensing requirements that must be met by physicians who perform these procedures. We can then undertake the more difficult task of showing that women have died or been disfigured because some physicians played by their own rules.

That requires finding the victims – a task that has been made simpler by the existence of social media and Internet user forums. It is common to find associations of victims who maintain their own social media pages or websites. Those victims will possess documents and photographs that are of fundamental importance for your work.

If those sources don't exist, you must hypothesize the reason. Are there no victims, or have the victims been pressured to stay quiet? In the former case, there is no story. In the latter case, the story is more terrible than you might have imagined.

B
Structuring the hypothesis to succeed

The hypothesis is stated as a story. This matters hugely, because it means that you end where you began – with a story. We are not just collecting facts, we are telling stories that we hope can lead to justice or a solution.

In its most basic form, the story is nearly always a variant of these three sentences:

- "We are facing a situation that is causing great suffering (or conversely, that deserves to be more widely known as a good example of how to alleviate suffering)."
- "This is how we got to this point.
- "This is what will happen if nothing changes... and here is how we could change things for the better."

Notice something about these sentences: **They have an implicit chronological**

order. It may not seem apparent, because the order is not a straight line from the past to the future. Instead, it tells us:

- The news of the problem, which is the **present.**
- The cause of the problem, in the **past**.
- What must change for the problem to end, in the **future**.

Thus, when we compose our hypothesis, we are already beginning to compose a narrative – a story that involves people who move through a particular place and time.

One of the most difficult things in investigating is to keep your focus on the narrative, and not to get buried by the facts. When you feel overwhelmed, stop digging and start looking at the story your facts are trying to tell you. If they don't fit the original hypothesis, change it. After all, it's just a hypothesis – until you prove it.

Not incidentally, it can be very difficult to show how we can put an end to a given problem. Sometimes, the best you can do is to denounce an injustice. (There is no way to undo a genocide.) Often, however, someone connected to your story has looked for a solution. Don't neglect to look for that person – and to verify their hypothetical solution. Every solution leads to new problems – a key insight of the science of system dynamics[1]. Consider that possibility carefully, not least because it may lead to more stories in the future.

C

The four keys to making hypotheses effective

Using hypotheses is not a complicated trick, but unless you are a lot more gifted than we are (we accept this possibility), it will take you several tries before the method is natural to you. There are four things you need to keep in mind to make it work (with thanks to Luuk Sengers):

1. BE IMAGINATIVE

Normally journalists react to situations. They report what they see or hear or read, or follow up on yesterday's news. An investigator is trying to reveal something that is not yet known. They are not just covering news, but also making it. They necessarily make a leap into an uncertain future. That means trying to picture the story – to imagine how something great or terrible came about – and this is creative work.

It also requires critical judgment. In working with several thousands of beginning investigators, we have frequently seen hypotheses based mainly on opinion and speculation. This is the wrong kind of creativity for an investigator. We are not inventing fictions to validate our biases. **We are verifying the facts at our disposal and seeking to complete them.**

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The hypothesis is necessarily based on:

- Facts, meaning confirmed information;
- Deductions, which fill the gaps between the known facts, while awaiting verification.

In our work, **a valid deduction must result from conscious, active analysis**. It must also appear logical in relation to confirmed facts, and it must seem plausible, based on experience or visible evidence. When Chris de Stoop undertook his epochal investigation of the traffic in women in the 1990s (a detailed analysis of that project is included here[1]), he was told by police that the victims immigrated individually and voluntarily, to earn money through prostitution. Why then, wondered de Stoop, did they arrive suddenly, together, in the same city? That simple, obvious fact strongly implied organisation. Prostitution is legal in Belgium, but exploitation of prostitutes – "pimping" – is criminal. He therefore deduced that the story involved organized crime, and he was right.

2. BE PRECISE

If you use the word "doctor" in your hypothesis, is he or she a gynecologist, a cardiologist, or a general practitioner? The more precise you can be about a presumed fact, the better your chances of finding the exact source you need (in particular, in the scholarly literature, which is easily visible in Google Scholar among other sources). When you are brainstorming the hypothesis, *ask yourself what you mean, exactly, by every word you use*. That may sound fastidious, but it's a proven way to discover new meanings in your hypothesis. Every hour you spend on that exercise will save you days down the road.

3. USE YOUR EXPERIENCE

If you have seen how the world works in certain ways, that may be applicable to the story you are trying to prove. For example, if you know that certain physicians may impose dangerous and damaging procedures on their ignorant or trusting patients, through laziness or greed, you are more apt to recognize such a scheme, and to understand how it is put into practice.

Please remember that even the most experienced people can be surprised by something they never saw before, and other people can dismiss their own experience. Conversely, you may think that your experience is so comprehensive that any new events are mere repetitions of what you already know. Unfortunately, that's rarely true. Things do happen in new ways that you haven't encountered before. Try to enjoy that novelty instead of considering it an insult.

4. BE OBJECTIVE

By objectivity, we mean three precise things, which do not always correspond to the

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traditional notion of objectivity as neutrality toward all the actors in a story.

- The first is that **we have to accept the reality of facts that we can prove, whether we like them or not**. In other words, we are objective *toward* the facts. If the facts say the hypothesis is wrong, we change the hypothesis. We do not try to make the facts disappear.
- The second is that we have to do this work with the understanding that **we could be wrong**. If we do not keep that in mind, we will not do an honest job, and we will not get the help we need from others, either. Would *you* help someone who already knows all the answers, and isn't listening to what you have to say?
- Even if you remain objective toward the facts – and you must – **there is a subjective basis to this work that will not go away.** Investigating is not an objective goal; it is a subjective choice. We are not recorders when we investigate, we are reformers. We use objective facts, and are objective toward the facts, to advance reform, because we believe that any attempt to change the world will fail if it is not based on reality. In other words, we use our subjectivity as an incentive to remain open to the evidence, and to incite us to take all the evidence into account.

D

What if the facts go against your wonderful hypothesis?

Easy: Accept the facts and make a new hypothesis.

The challenge here is to neither cling too hard to a mistaken hypothesis, nor leap in a new direction at the first contrary fact. The most obvious sign that your hypothesis is groundless is that you can't find any strong supporting evidence – just ambiguous hints that are open to interpretation. Or, you may find a fair amount of information, but it doesn't make sense. When that happens, either you are looking at the wrong information, or it makes sense only when you have changed your hypothesis.

E

Start with a strategy!

Take time to consider your investigative strategy – the order in which you will execute specific tasks, and how they will fit together. Believe us, in the end this will save you a lot of time. This will require an initial list of terms and assertions that must be verified.

It is a very good idea to begin research by seeking information that does not require talking to people. Generally, the first impulse of a news reporter is to start asking people questions; for an investigator, that's not always the best way to work. We are of course not saying that you should never talk to people. What we are saying is that sources are much more likely to find you worth speaking to if they perceive that you are so committed to the story that you have sought out information for yourself – and in the process, learned the working language of the people you are investigating. (A leading investigator of health issues, Katherine Eban, has made an eloquent statement of that principle(1).) You are no longer an outsider: You are an aspiring member of the world in which the story takes place.

Second, there are a lot of advantages to starting research in a way that makes no noise. Once you are further down the path, a great many people will know what you are doing, and not all of them will like it. Some of them can pose a risk to your freedom or safety. (We will discuss these risks later in this manual.)

That is why **you need to know whether or not there are open sources – public documents, news reports, and so on – that can serve to verify or elucidate parts of your hypothesis.** If so, consult them first. You will have a better understanding of the story before you speak to people, and they will appreciate it. We will say more about open sources – a field that has evolved in stunning ways since the first edition of this manual – in Chapter 4.

If you're like us and nearly all the thousands of people we and our colleagues have taught to investigate, **you need to break the habit of relying on other people for information that you can find yourself**. That habit may save some time, and unfortunately, it also leads some human sources to conclude that you require more effort than you're worth.

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IV

The advantages of using hypotheses

Does all of this sound like a lot of work? That's because it *is* a lot of work – but only if you compare it to the way many news stories are written, which is by talking to a source or two or rewriting a press release. If you compare the hypothesis method to most other ways of investigating, the labor-saving advantages are obvious:

A

A hypothesis gives you something to verify, instead of trying to uncover a secret.

People do not give up their secrets without a very good reason. They are much more likely to offer confirmation of information that is already in your possession, simply because most people hate to lie. A hypothesis enables you to ask them to confirm something, rather than to advance information. It also puts you in the position of someone who is open to discovering that there is more to the story than he or she thought at first, because you are willing to accept that there are facts beyond what you suspected at the start. Sources feel that openness, and many respond to it.

B

A hypothesis increases your focus on pertinent information.

As the investigator Edwy Plenel said, *"If you want to find something, you'd best be looking for it."* The hypothesis focuses our attention on particular information – the evidence needed to verify the story we want to tell. We would add that if you're really looking for something, you'll find more than you hoped for.

C

A hypothesis makes it easier to sell your story.

Editors want to know that in return for a specific investment of resources, there will be a terrific story to publish. A hypothesis hugely increases the likelihood of that outcome. It enables you to predict a minimum and maximum positive result for your work, as well as a worst case.

1. The worst case is that verification of the hypothesis will quickly show there is no story, and the project can be ended without wasting significant resources.
2. The minimum positive outcome is that the initial hypothesis is true, and can be quickly verified.
3. The maximum is that if this hypothesis is true, others must logically follow, and either a series of related stories or one very big story will result.

D

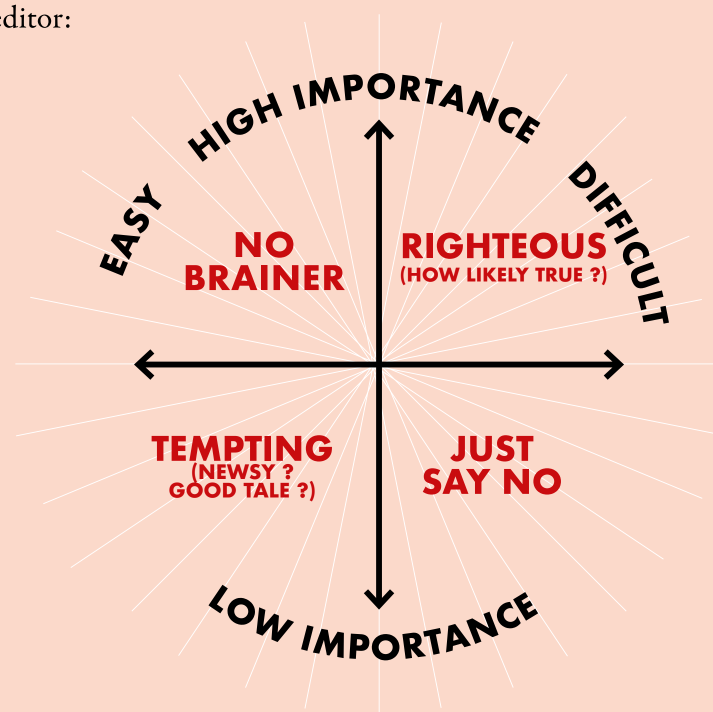
Hypotheses are a tool that you can use again and again.

When you can work in a methodical way, your career will change. More important, you will change. You will no longer need someone to tell you what to do. You will see what needs to be done to combat some of the chaos and suffering in this world, and you will be able to do it. Isn't that why you became a journalist in the first place?

V

Is the story worth the trouble?

Before you undertake any investigation, please consider whether it is worth the effort. The simplest tool we know of to make that assessment is the "Nelson Chart", which was created by Deborah J. "Deb" Nelson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter and editor:



- The first lesson from this chart is that if a story is difficult and of low importance, let someone else ruin their life doing it.
- Conversely, if it's important and easy to do, the crucial question is how quickly you can get it done before competitors swoop in and grab it.
- If the story promises to be difficult, you must balance its importance against the effort.
- If it's of low importance but looks easy, you may want to do it for fun or to sharpen a few skills.

But wait: what makes a story *easy* or *difficult, important* or *not important?*

The answers aren't as obvious as you may think. Of course, stories that involve numerous victims or large sums of money are important. But some stories that involve few victims – for example, a woman who poured gasoline over her drunken, sleeping husband and set fire to him – may be important for other reasons. The official story was that she was evil and insane. Instead, one might ask: *What could drive someone to murder somebody else in such a dreadful way?* You surely guessed the answer in this case: He beat her brutally, every day. A further hypothesis: He was not the only man in any country who ever beat his wife. The wife, then, made an extreme response to a more or less common situation. But how did she arrive at that extreme? Did she have no other options to obtain aid? Yes, we know from news stories about the case, but only one: Her son carried the gasoline up the stairs to where his stepfather slept. They sought to escape from a terrible situation, and they could find no better way than violence to do it. This was also a tragedy that could have been avoided if better solutions were available.

In sum, **the dramatic or symbolic interest of a story may add greatly to its importance.**

What about the difficulty? The fact that investigation is a lot of work doesn't necessarily make it difficult. What makes the job hard is an inability to get access to information. In the case of the woman who killed her husband, the hardest task would surely be to document her path to murder, because there may be few written or photographic records of her life, and her friends, family or neighbors might very well be reluctant to provide those records or to speak. If you're investigating an official entity, or a public figure, they can likewise refuse to provide even information to which you have a nominal right.

From a professional standpoint, this means that **you should not undertake an investigation before assessing how much information concerning the target is already in the public domain, as an "open source"**. Open sources are usually insufficient to tell the story; human sources are typically needed to explain the meaning of openly available information and to complete it. But without at least some open information, you have very limited means of verifying human testimony, and people have very little reason to speak with you. We will discuss open sources in greater detail in Chapter 4; we will consider working with human sources in Chapter 5.

By now, you are ready to commit – not just to the story, but to a project. To make it successful you will need to manage it.

Managing a project means formulating targets and making sure, through constant checks, that the targets are achieved on time. In our annexes below, Eva Constantaras, Emma Prest and Coco Gubbels will show you field-tested ways that journalists can do so. The most important point they make is that you should put as little weight as possible on your capacity to improvise. Instead, look for solutions to potential problems before you run into them. Otherwise you may muddle through, but you'll make a hard job unbearable, for you and everyone you're working with. So please, take the time to read those annexes and make their insights part of your routine.

VII
Hypotheses can be dangerous

Telling an untrue story makes the world a sadder, uglier place. So keep this in mind, please: If you merely try to prove at any cost that a hypothesis is true, regardless of the evidence, you are making a common and dreadful mistake called confirmation bias[1]: *"people's tendency to process information by looking for, or interpreting, information that is consistent with their existing beliefs."* You will thus join the ranks of the world's professional liars. Your new company will be crooked cops who condemn the innocent, politicians who sell wars as if they were soap, and propagandists. *Investigation is about more than proving you are right. It's about finding the truth.*

Specifically, to make the world worse, all you need to do is leave out the facts that disprove your hypothesis. Or you can be careless; mistakes probably add as much to the confusion and suffering of the world as outright lies. Either way, you make your job easier, and you let someone else clean up the mess, including the misinformation and disinformation[2] that results. Plenty of people do so every day, but that doesn't make it acceptable.

So be honest and careful about how you use hypotheses: Try to disprove them as well as prove them. In other words, be prepared to acknowledge that you can be wrong. The real story is always more powerful than anything you could imagine.

In our next chapter we'll see how the hypothesis expands into a timeline and a source map – the basic building blocks of narrative.

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Annex 1:

Pulling it together: The Investigative Roadmap

"The Investigative Roadmap" was created for Lighthouse Reports from a model developed by Eva Constantaras for stories based on data sets, then adapted by her and Emma Prest to make it more broadly applicable. It shows how to systematically build from a hypothesis to a project, and it closely resembles a template developed by Disclose.ngo) It's always significant when the same concepts arise simultaneously and independently in different places. We're grateful to Constantaras, Prest and Disclose for sharing their work. We've edited the Roadmap to focus on editorial and research processes; in the following annex we'll consider project management.

Top Line

In one sentence, explain your story idea. What is the main focus of the story you hope to tell?

....

Hypothesis

What are you trying to prove? This should be more developed than your top line and can evolve with the reporting. There can be more than one hypothesis.

....

Editorial Objectives

What are you trying to do? Prove the scale of a problem? Explain why/how something went wrong? Explore the impact of an event? Show who is harmed? Expose systemic failures that enable a problem to grow? Hold someone accountable? There can be more than one.

1. ....

2. ....

3. ....

Key Questions

List out the questions you will need to answer throughout your investigation. E.g. who knew what when? When did something change and why? Who is profiting or gaining some advantage as a result?

1. ....

2. ....

3. ....

Clip Search

Summary of previous coverage
Give the gist of what's been covered by you or others so far and where the gaps are.

....

Existing coverage in detail

Look for other stories covering a similar story idea. Make sure you include existing coverage in the countries and languages relevant to your topic. This list can save time for team members joining later on as they learn about the topic. It can also identify the hypotheses, questions, sources, and methodologies previously used.

Title	Link	Notes *(relevance to your topic, type of publication)*

Evidence & Methods

Methodology

How will you get the evidence you need? What are your sources of information: interviews, FOIA/ATI, OSINT, primary data collection, paid for records? Don't reinvent the wheel. Have others tried something similar before? What approaches can you copy or take inspiration from?

Evidence

What evidence do you need to prove your story? This should help you think through the way you'll find it. If certain evidence proves hard to come by, you may want to update the table and propose alternatives.

Point you need to prove	How you will prove it	Status (evidence found researching, unable to find)

Potential Data Sources

Which datasets might be relevant to the investigation? If data analysis plays a central role in your investigation, then please reach out to the data team for a scoping conversation.

Source	Dataset	Link to dataset FOI request

Key Documents

Add links to the essential documents you create here. Keep the list updated!

Document Name	Template	Link
Reporting Memo	A document that shows confirmed events in the story and their sources	
Key findings document	Summaries (with links to sources)	
Reporting timeline / To do list	The order in which you perform specific tasks and how much time you expect them to require	
List of people to be interviewed	Prospective sources, ideally with contact info	
Interview tracker	A spreadsheet or text document that reminds you who you spoke with and when.	
List of quotes from interviews	Optional; this can also be included in a timeline or "source map"	
Review of academic literature	Welcome to the candy store! Peer-reviewed literature is a feast.	
Source map (see Chapter 3)	Who's involved in the story, what they do, and who else in the story they're connected to.	

Reporting Timeline

Think through the different components of the work ahead of you. When do you hope to conduct interviews or collect data or onboard partners? When will you begin composing the story? When do you hope to publish?

Month	Activities

Go off and do the investigation. Refer back to the roadmap periodically to see if you're on track and adapt it as needed.

Annex 2:

Coco Gubbels on planning for collaboration

When you start out, you'll probably do everything yourself. As your projects grow in scope and scale, so will the number of people needed to get them done. You will need to collaborate – with other reporters, photographers, editors, at home or across borders – and just as surely, you will need to deploy project management procedures.

Project managers are considered essential in practically every industry but ours. Perhaps everyone else is fooling themselves, but we doubt it. Project management often makes the difference between a smooth route and a miserable slog. Below are the matters and key questions that Coco Gubbels, a pioneer in investigative reporting project management, says you must address, drawn from her GIJN **guide**[(1)]. You can find a template for managing your projects in our separate resource guide, and also **here**[(2)].

1. Choosing team members

Who is on the team?

- What are their roles and responsibilities?
- In particular, who is managing the project? What other responsibilities does that person have? Are they in conflict?
- What are each team member's (verified) competencies? Do they match the project's needs? Do they have the character to keep their commitments, and to work alongside others?
- Who is covering specific regions/countries? Are they competent in terms of language, contacts and local knowledge?

2. Stakeholders

Who is involved in the project outside the team?
  Funders (if any)
  Publications (if known)
  Co-publishers (if any)
  Sources, institutions (experts)
What agreements have been made with stakeholders?
Who is responsible for interacting with them?

3. Internal Communication

This is where your team can go crazy, for example by searching through endless threads for the one piece of information they need. Design such annoyances out of the project with simple rules that everyone can follow, such as starting a new thread for a new subject.

- How have you agreed to communicate with each other as a team, and how often, via which channels?
- How are you going to store and share documents, drafts and other materials?
- Who oversees communication to see whether the processes are working?

(1)

(2)

4. Tools & applications

Describe here which applications will be used for which purpose.
Also describe how you will collaborate in those applications, so that you don't all use your own way of storing, describing or collecting.
Example:
Name of tool/application
Purpose
Way of working

5. Results and publications

Define the impact you wish to have and the channels you will use. (See chapter 9).

- What is the minimum that you can commit to delivering, in terms of finished stories?
- What is the maximum?
- Who will publish it? What channels and media will promote it? (For more on this, see Chapter 9.)
- How should the story be followed up, in the event of further developments? Within the newsrooms where it's published? With other media?

Individual reporters should consider whether their engagement will be justified in terms of additional revenues, new contacts or other opportunities, and in particular, **new knowledge or skills.** When you consider committing to a story, ask what you will learn by doing it. If it's something you'd rather not learn – say, if you prefer education to crime as a subject – find another project.

6. Timeline and planning

How much time will you need for this investigation? Describe the project schedule and milestones here, including start and end dates. At least say roughly what time you think you need for each phase (exploring open sources, interviewing, archiving and analyzing, composing, planning and executing impact strategies). Be realistic! For example, if you make a FOI request (see Chapter 4), include the time that you have to wait for it.

7. Budget

Based upon the tasks, the timeline and your team members, develop a budget for the project.

- Besides your time, there may be travel, lodging, communications, subscription to specific software or data storing services, legal and other costs. What are they?
- Will participating media cover all costs, or will you need to fundraise?
- If you fundraise, where will you turn?

8. Risk Management

Describe here the top five risks for the project as a whole, including legal, physical or security risks, the risk of not obtaining specific documents or cooperation, etc. Be as detailed as you can about each risk: *Who* might sue you, troll you, etc.? What laws might you violate (clandestine recording? Trespassing?). What if you get sick far from home? (Don't be nonchalant about this matter. We'll discuss security risks in Chapter 5.)

- How will you mitigate each of those risks?
- It is crucial to know whether the project is justified from a public interest perspective –

the major line of defense if your targets sue for libel. For more on legal risks, see Chapter 8.

9. Post-publication: Evaluation and assets

- How and with whom will you evaluate the project?
- Is there data that you could publish online for others to use?
- How will the property created – datasets, project website, materials and archives – be managed within and for the team?
- Who owns it?

You know what you're doing, and with whom, and you have a good idea of how you'll do it. It's time to build a timeline of events and a map of people who were there when it happened.

1.
We define an investigation.

2.
We create a hypothesis to verify our idea.

3. TIMELINES AND SOURCE MAPS

timeline

With
Luuk Sengers, Deborah Nelson, Oleg Khomenok,
Josephine Chinèle and Paul Radu

Finding and building the hidden scenario

A hypothesis is the starting point of an investigation, the provisional answer to the question, "what are we looking for?" A timeline and a source map determine the path we'll take to verify the answer – the movement in time and space of the story's "actors and actions", in the phrase of Paul Radu of the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP). By seeking when events occurred, and where they occurred, and who was involved, we will learn how things occurred.

Mastery of the temporal and spatial elements of an investigation contributes hugely to cleaning up the otherwise messy process of managing an investigation. More or less useless details, enticing but ultimately pointless sideshows, and avalanches of data will come your way, like the rocks and dirt that conceal metal ore. You'll find more information than you can use or understand, and your best hope of dealing with that stuff is to set it in order. Time and space offer two potential orders, two ways to sequence and explore your material, two ways to view the relationships between separate facts. In the end, they offer us two different ways to tell our story.

These concepts are hardly new – they are embodied in *The Iliad and The Odyssey*, Homer's chronicle of war, one fight after another, and his recounting of a long voyage home, one place after another. Time and space can likewise be built into the structure of research from the start of a project. By continuously setting actions or events in chronological order, we see cause and effect, opportunity and consequences. By mapping relationships and resources, we see the ways in which actors enable or block each other, where they start from and where they end up.

Everyone has an inbuilt preference for one or the other of these ways of organizing material; some folks love the orderliness of time, and others like to enter the space where the story happens. That's not a problem.

It does become a problem, however, if you undertake an inquiry where the facts show a preference of their own, and it isn't yours. It's as if they ask to be set out in a particular order, and it may not be your favorite. A concrete example: in completing a book on the extreme right[1], a first attempt to write the inquiry in chronological order failed. Why? Because the subject was a heterogeneous movement in chaotic, simultaneous action on numerous fronts. The timeline was largely: Now. The material had to be

(1)

ordered as a landscape. Believe me, it was much more labor to fix that problem after writing the first draft than it would have been to listen to the material in the first place.

If you continue investigating throughout your career, you will eventually be forced to become proficient with both temporal and spatial organisation. We suggest you start with the one that seems most natural to you and complement it with the other. Take your existing talent to the limit and then bring your lesser gifts to that level.

A
The logic of chronology

The hypothesis captures the heart of your story. It describes something that happened – or more exactly, something that you saw, heard or deduced has happened. The hypothesis therefore identifies an event.

Less obviously, **the hypothesis suggests an entire sequence of events.**

The reason is simple: Nothing comes from nothing. For an event to occur, some other event must make it possible. For example, for someone to accept a bribe, it must first be solicited or offered.

You can call these enabling events "conditions" or "causes". Whatever you call them, they are a necessary part of your story, because without them, nothing could happen.

Further on in time, **these events will produce more or less visible effects**: The money gained through corruption is spent on houses or cars or smartphones; the pollution generated by a chemicals plant makes people sick.

Starting from the event at the center of our hypothesis, we can therefore construct a chronology that begins with the causes of the event and continues to the moment when the event's effects are recognised and hopefully repaired.

Along the way, we can use the power of chronology to uncover information. If we know that something happened, we can deduce the causes or conditions that led to it. We can likewise deduce the consequences. Once we frame the causes and consequences as hypotheses, we can verify them.

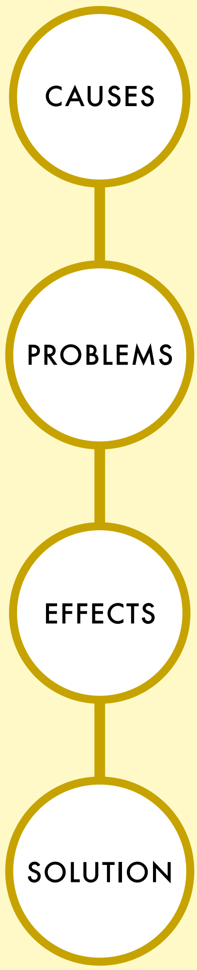
Our work isn't fiction, but there are fictions we can learn from. The creator of Sherlock Holmes, Arthur Conan Doyle, was a trained physician, and he studied under one of the great diagnosticians of his time. A proper medical diagnosis, as it happens, proceeds from a hypothesis that is verified by clinical examination and the patient's history. That's surely where Doyle's description of Sherlock's method came from: "The ideal reasoner would, when he had once been shown a single fact in all its bearings, deduce from it not only all the chain of events which led up to it but also all the results which would follow from it."

In other words, Holmes thinks: Before this event occurred, another specific event occurred. Because those events occurred, something else happened.

Consider the banal event of an official announcement. For the announcement to be published, someone had to order that it be written, someone had to compose it, someone had to approve it, and someone had to deliver it, then ensure that the message was heard. We might deduce the individuals involved, if we know the organisation they work for. We can imagine a meeting of these people, where decisions are made. If we are lucky, there will be a record of that meeting, and we may be able to obtain it.

That is exactly what happened in the Watergate investigation, which launched the contemporary era of investigative reporting. Federal investigators observed a change in the communications strategy of Richard Nixon's White House, and deduced that a meeting had preceded it. They then sought records of that meeting, and eventually found them. Those records revealed a conspiracy to obstruct justice, and Richard Nixon resigned before he could be impeached. (Please note: Journalists can't do it all. Reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein did a historic job of exposing the scandal, but they were powerless to resolve it. If you want something to change, you need allies. We'll discuss that in Chapter 9.)

The graphic below represents the sequence of events implicit in a hypothesis (with thanks to Luuk Sengers):



Unless temporal elements can be uncovered and documented, the story will be visibly incomplete. For example, if there are no causes for the *problem*, how could it arise, and how can it be resolved? If there are no *effects* from the *problem*, why does it matter? If there is no possible *solution*, what hope can we have that the situation will change?

Let's consider typical examples of each of these elements (with thanks to Luuk Sengers):

1. **CAUSES:**
   - Someone does something that can be disadvantageous or advantageous to another actor.
   - Someone provides or enables another actor with the necessary financial resources, tools, raw materials, know-how, manpower or permission to achieve their ends.
2. **PROBLEM:**
   - An actor consciously or unknowingly does something that is harmful or beneficial to others.
   - An actor fails to fulfill their duties, and someone becomes a victim through that failure.
3. **CONSEQUENCES:**
   - An actor acquires money, goods, freedom and/or influence.
   - A victim loses health, money, property, freedom and/or influence.
   - A victim seeks help, resists, adapts to the new situation or escapes.
   - A witness sees or investigates what happens.
   - A witness helps the victim.
4. **SOLUTIONS:**
   - An actor prevents or restores further damage.
   - An authority intervenes, prosecutes, or imposes sanctions or enact reforms.
   - Stakeholders take action or lobby for a solution.
   - Researchers seek a solution.
   - Experts propose a solution.

Notice that every one of the above sentences contains a verb: acquires, sees, seeks, intervenes, etc. Verbs designate action. A timeline is a record of actions, as well as a record of events. In every event, an actor does something that moves the story forward.

We can thus use the timeline to indicate the presence of specific actors in the story: **Every time something happens, someone had to make it happen.** We can deduce who that "someone" might be – a functionary? A lawyer? A scientist? – and then verify that hypothesis.

Typically, the first actors to appear in a story are its victims. They tell us when the effects of a crime or an error erupt – much of what is wrong in the world results from a mistake, which becomes a problem only when its author refuses to recognize or fix it – and they can help to identify the probable agents driving that change. Victims may also be aware of previous events that signaled the coming storm. From that starting point, we can deduce and document or disprove other events (including rumors, which sometimes contain a trace of truth).

In sum, **we work backwards from the present to its roots in the past and forward to its consequences.**

B

How to make and maintain a timeline

Composing a timeline is a simple procedure, and it works equally well for research in print, long-form features, and documentary or investigative filmmaking. However, for it to be effective, you need to work systematically and add material regularly. If you do that, you will gradually internalise the story, which means that your mind will keep working on it even when you are not consciously thinking about it. Meanwhile, you compile a precious asset that will be useful for future stories as well as the one you are working on. You will also acquire a vital skill – organizing your material as you collect it. You will be glad for that skill when it's time to compose your story.

Of course you'll use a word processor, spreadsheet or both to make the timeline. (You'll also need audio and image editing software, and access to a transcription service for your interviews. Much of this stuff is freeware.)

At this writing, spreadsheets are the preferred timeline tool of leading investigators. (You can use an AI app to generate a text timeline, but be careful to verify the events on it separately, because at this writing AI makes and even invents mistakes.) Deborah Nelson comments:

> *I like spreadsheets better than word processors, because you can ask them questions and they answer back. You can enter events/developments fast and furiously as you discover them and sort by date to put new events in the right place. You can filter to separate out events involving one deal or theme or place or person from others and you can unfilter to see where they fit into the bigger time/place scheme of things. If you are counting things, like dollars, you can quickly add up a column with the sum function.*

In nearly every story, you will need a spreadsheet at some point. They enable insight into trends and help to reveal clusters of events with particular characteristics. In collaborations, Nelson notes, "A shared timeline in Google Sheets is especially useful for organizing information collected by multiple reporters from far-flung places."

You are not bound to start with a spreadsheet. Paul Radu says: "I'm always putting everything on paper first, pointers and ideas and a little bit of timeline. Then I transfer into a spreadsheet." At that point, he said, "I'm just trying to organize the documents, put structure in the investigation." Note the implicit point: **You use different tools to stimulate your mind**. This is not a uniform, mechanical process, it's a personal journey.

I prefer using a word processor for the timeline, and adding in text, images, audio extracts, video clips, tables or spreadsheet extracts as needed. I find the relatively small fields in a spreadsheet (even after enlargement) less stimulating than seeing images or words spread across a page. Finally, if the timeline is in a text format, I find it easier to redact before composing the story.

Regardless of the format, the key elements are always the same: *What happened? When did it happen? Where? Who was involved? What did they say? Did it have an effect?* Any software that enables you to capture them is fine, so long as you (and your collaborators) are comfortable using it.

Here's the step-by-step procedure:

1. Capture the events that left visible evidence (like a tip, a document, a comment, an observation). Begin with the time at which each event occurred – not the time when you learned of it, another common mistake. Include the year, month and day if known. (If you're analyzing a crime or disaster, hours and minutes may matter too.) If you don't know the specific month or day, use the first month of the year and/or the first day of the month so they are roughly in the right vicinity in your timeline. You can color code if needed to flag the imprecision.
2. Then add where the event occurred, who appears to have been involved, and what happened. The entry may be more or less detailed. You may include a summary, or quotes from an interview or document, an image, or a link to an original recording. If you're working with film, keep track of the time codes for those quotes to reduce the time you'll spend searching for them later. If you're working with documents, color-code the key passages. These little tricks take a moment and save minutes or hours later on.
3. Now, insert the source of your information. Did someone tell you? Put in their name (unless the source is confidential, in which case you must not record it on a computer or smartphone). Is the information (or data) contained in a news clip or document? Is the information proven by other sources? (In case you need to protect a person, the fact might be confirmed by a document, ideally from an open source.) Give the information necessary to find the information again, for example a URL.

And please, copy the original web page into your files before someone takes it down, as they often do when their acts are exposed. Print the page as a pdf, take a screenshot, use a free web browser extension like GoFullPage[1] or store a permanent snapshot of the website with a tool like Simple Web Archiver[2]. Don't take the chance that your evidence will disappear. It's also a good idea to keep two copies of all your data in secure locations – an external drive that you can remove from the computer, for example, or a double-protected online drive.

Wherever the information came from, it is infinitely more efficient and secure to **keep your data and sources together** as the timeline is being created, than to search through your material for documentation later. We once saw a great reporter who was forced to get his documentation together in a hurry after he was sued for libel. Don't make that mistake.

4. This is what a typical timeline entry looks like, from an investigation published as "The Vanishing Diaspora". The story documents the flight of tens of thousands of physicians, driven by terror and poverty, and their disappearance from the medical profession as they fail to obtain re-accreditation abroad. This entry captures one such story. The entry includes a date (which can be more or less precise depending on what you need to know), a summary, identifying details for the source, an interview excerpt and archival information:

01/01/2015: [Dr. X] emigrates to Canada from the Middle East with family after militia attempts to kidnap his son. [Current title, company, location]

Interview: "They tried to kidnap my son. They targeted sons of doctors, engineers, kind of known people in the city, who they suppose have money.... And in many cases, we know they kidnap the kids and took the money and killed them and sent dead bodies to their families. Personally, I know two families."

Source: Interview, 24/08/2022 (recorded: filename)

5. In general, it is a good idea to include tangential events in your timeline if they provide you with a deeper understanding of the actors in the story. You are not obligated to keep them in your final draft. In the timeline above, a summary of the Second Chechen War (1999) was added, because an expert author had written an article placing the two events in parallel. It was not clear that both events would figure in the final story, but it was very clear that understanding how the war was conducted could be relevant to the case.

6. Not every event needs to be documented in the same detail. However, key events, such as reconstructions of meetings, official or criminal

(1)

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procedures, or dramatic scenes, require in-depth documentation that must be gathered (often from interviews) as the story is developed, and recorded as more or less extended quotes in the timeline.

7. *Now, deduce the events that you believe must have preceded or accompanied the event you have confirmed.* Who must have done what, at which moment, for the event to occur? Use a specific keyword term (like “deduction”) to describe these possible events, so you don’t mistake what you imagine for what you have proven.

8. Also try to imagine: where would this event have left a trace? An official document, a news item, visible damage or conflict that a witness might recall? Put those ideas in the timeline, and seek to verify them.

9. If several interviews or documents refer to the same events, place separate quotes in the timeline, as if you were compiling a conversation about the event. This material can be used later to create dramatic effects in your story, as you juxtapose different points of view.

10. As you compile the material, you may wish to insert a hyperlink or use keywords to connect to later or earlier events in the timeline. This makes it easier to navigate among related events.

11. Descriptions or illustrations of places where events occurred will be valuable when composing the story. They can likewise be put in the timeline as an image or hyperlink at the moment a given location enters the story.

12. Again, look at the sequence of confirmed events, and ask: *What happened in between these dates?* Deduce those events in turn, labelled as deductions, and verify. Remove the ones that aren’t supported by facts. It’s a good idea to save progressive versions of the timeline with a date stamp in the filename, because sometimes you’ll remove something that turns out to be true. (Digital storage space is cheap. Rewriting a passage you cut by mistake takes time.)

13. Imagine the consequences of the events for different actors in the story. Might these events appear in any open source? Were there witnesses, reports, evaluations, judicial decisions? Enter these deductions, labelled as such, in the timeline and verify.

14. As your timeline becomes more detailed, you will have moments when the data seems to be speaking to you, and your attention becomes creative. You will have ideas in these moments – the meaning of an action, or its connection to another, for example. Capture those thoughts and put them in the timeline; we tag them “note:”, with a colon, to avoid false hits when we search for them, and to avoid mistaking them for

verified data. If your timeline is in a spreadsheet, create a "note field" by adding a new column. (You can make text-heavy "fields", also called cells, easier to read by widening the cell and wrapping the text.)

15. Finally, imagine how you would like the story to end. Is a reform necessary? What might it encompass? What would you like to hear the protagonists say, in line with the facts? Of course you can't speak in their place. But you can verify the idea with them, or from a document. If your idea isn't right, you'll find what is.

We have made stories without timelines, usually because we were in too much of a hurry, and we always regretted it in the end. A well-executed timeline saves far more time than is required to make and maintain it – about half an hour a day, once you get the habit – because it imposes order and clarity on what would otherwise be a chaotic stew of facts. It also provides other powerful benefits:

- *Like the hypothesis, the timeline helps to define and imagine the story before committing to the investigation. Its most important initial function is to tell you if a story is plausible. For example: Did anomalies occur in an official procedure? Did they affect the outcome?*
- *The timeline also helps you to foresee which steps will be easiest or hardest to uncover and document. Confidential meetings are far harder to document than public meetings. Generally, sources will only discuss such events when they realize that you have already documented a pattern that points to a conclusion.* **Instead of asking "what happened?" you can ask, "Isn't this what happened?"**
- *The timeline plays a key role in keeping track of discoveries during the investigation. As each new fact emerges, it will be placed in the appropriate place in the timeline and documented. This greatly facilitates fact-checking and composition, because you won't struggle to remember where you found the facts.*
- *Finally, a timeline enables you to structure the investigation as a narrative sequence, progressively, as research continues. You may decide to change that sequence later, for dramatic effect (we'll discuss this in Chapter 7). One way or the other, by making a timeline, you are already beginning to compose the story.*

II

Mapping the actors

Every investigation defines a world – a specific place, in a specific time, where things occur in a specific way. The inhabitants of that world may vary tremendously in terms of their social status and power, and in the ways they are affected by the actions of others.

But they all share important things in common. For a start, **they care about the event we are investigating**. It changed their lives: Maybe it made them rich, or maybe it made them sick. Maybe their job is to study such events, or to influence them.

Whether they were hurt or helped by the event, they know something about it. They may also know of each other – that there is a ministry or an official who is supposed to be watching the situation, or that someone is suffering because nothing is done.

Their actions are recorded in our timeline. We can complement and extend that timeline with a source map, focused on individuals and organisations involved in the story. In the event that the timeline fails to capture the meaning and drama of the story, the source map will provide an alternative structure for the narrative, as we lead our viewers around the landscape. It can also be a first choice, as it often is in documentary or investigative film (for example, in the work of Michael Moore[1]).

A

Entering the Village: Places, people and resources

We can usefully think of the mapping process as moving into a village. In a village, everyone knows or has heard about everyone else. In a village, people watch each other closely, and discuss their neighbors and local officials. The houses of the villagers contain secrets, and they also contain knowledge and resources of different kinds – documents, photographs, legal papers, and so on.

We can access those treasures only when we become part of the village. We must be accepted by its inhabitants, or at least some of them. We must show that we belong there, because we care about the same story that the village cares about.

At the outset of an investigation, we begin to map that village. By doing so we gain a rapid overview of who will be involved in the story, and just as important, we see the path we will take to our sources.

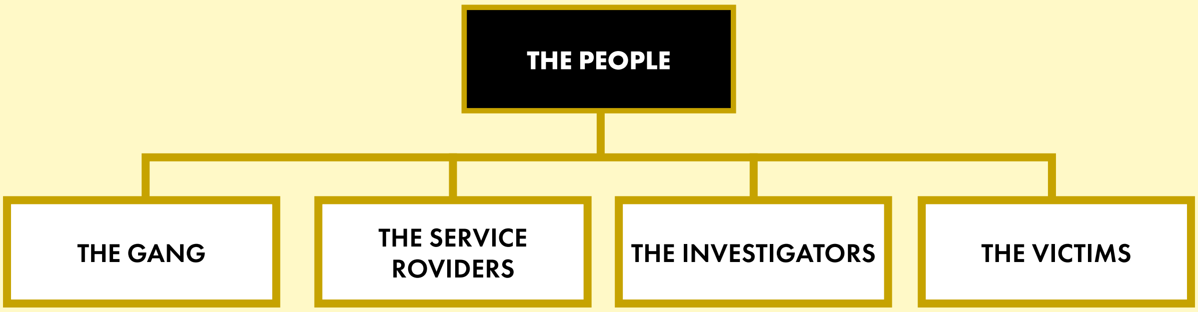
(1)

Here are some typical houses in the village:

- Initiators and Perpetrators: The person or entity responsible (individual, organization, legislation, or lack thereof, enforcement systems, their weakness or absence).
- Victims who are affected by the results.
- Allies of the victims (lawyers, good cops)
- Allies of the perpetrators
- Witnesses to events or to other actors
- Experts and advocates on technical, legal and scientific issues
- Resource houses (libraries, archives)
- Institutions (NGOs, government bodies, international organisations)

A survey like this is most effective before you reach for the phone or messaging app. In working with news reporters, we often see their anxiety at having no one to call and quote under deadline pressure. Even a basic map will suggest more sources, and more types of sources, than you will think of spontaneously. In particular, the map can suggest alternate sources when, not if, you are blocked by an indifferent or hostile gatekeeper. Instead of thinking, "Who can I call?" we can think, "Which of these sources shall I call first?"

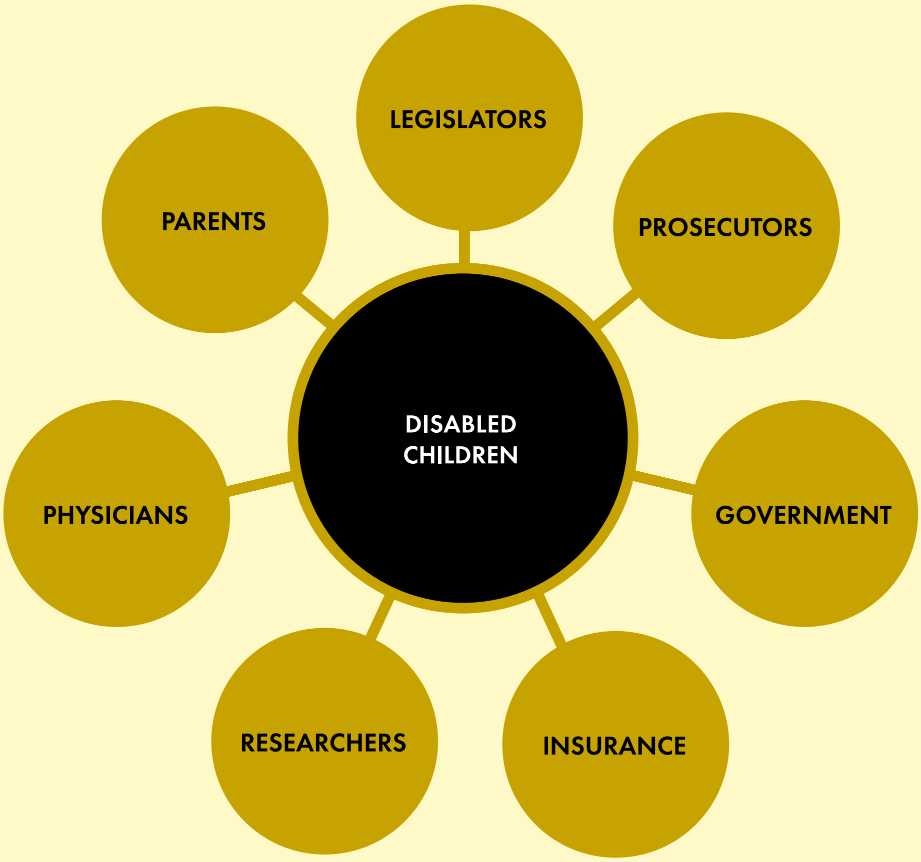
Paul Radu begins his investigations with simple maps, like the one excerpted below, transcribed from the original hand-drawn version. The illustration shows the top line of his story's actors – wrongdoers, "service providers" (enablers like crooked lawyers), victims and their allies. The map is extended by adding new actors below each box in the line.



We used a similar technique on the same story that led to our first conscious use of a hypothesis (see Chapter 2). The point isn't that we're clever, it's that you can't investigate properly unless you do certain things, and one of them is getting an overview of who's in the story. Like Radu, at the outset we drew by hand a map that represented the different engaged parties – the "stakeholders" – in the story of disabled, prematurely-born children. Each circle is a "house" (though you can call them whatever you prefer).

The names on the houses would soon change, becoming more detailed as we advanced in our research. For example, "government" became specific agencies. Later, we added "schools", because they played a key role in the lives of the children.

The first version looked like this:



Note that the "houses" comprise two large clusters. On the left we have those who are in direct contact with the victims. On the right we have different components of the system that parents and victims must accept, confront or navigate. We can draw lines between the houses, to visualize the relationships among the actors. This technique, which you can also practice by inserting keywords into a spreadsheet, reveals affinities among actors.

In most maps, the victims are at the center. Alternatively, you can place the target at the center. The center should be occupied by someone who is of direct interest to everyone else on the map.

We're interested in who will open their doors to us, and even rudimentary maps offer some ideas. In the above case, the victims are highly protected by their physicians and their families. Will the physicians speak to us? Maybe, but they can't discuss specific cases, at least by name. Parents of disabled children are another matter. Many become activists when they see the pain and injustice that awaits their children. They opened their doors to us.

The map helps you to **think about why someone would speak with you before you approach them**. What matters to them first and most is not why you need their help; it's how you can help them.

There is another house here whose doors are already open: scientific researchers. **In any story that has a scientific component, including social sciences, peer-reviewed research is an obvious first stop.** Google Scholar proposes online citations and abstracts, and sometimes access to original papers. (It is worth adding a well-equipped library to your source map. If there is no suitable public library, ask a private library for access.) Peer-reviewed articles are published with the coordinates of the authors, making them easy to contact. The authors have very few readers, and are typically surprised and happy to learn that a journalist took the time to study their work. It's not enough to collect this stuff in a list. You also need to read it before you discuss it with the author. Otherwise you're wasting *their* time, and they'll know it immediately.

The next step: **work your way around the village**. Once it's known that someone has been welcomed into a house, neighbors become curious. Some will want to meet you. Others will agree to meet when they understand that you have entered their world and you know who they are.

In the great majority of cases, **go first where you are wanted**. You'll have time later to meet the people who wish you'd go away. Some of them will change their minds when they see how well you already know at least part of the story.

Alternatively, you can choose to make contact with the targets of your investigation early, and to ask for their ongoing comment on your discoveries. This is another technique that was first articulated by Deborah Nelson (in her article "Confronting Showdown Interviews", IRE Journal July-August 1995. It's not advised when dealing with criminal networks.) That became policy at the Swedish STV network after an investigation blew up. The reporters had invited their target for an "ambush" interview. To their astonishment, the target gave a better explanation for key documents than they had found in six months.

B

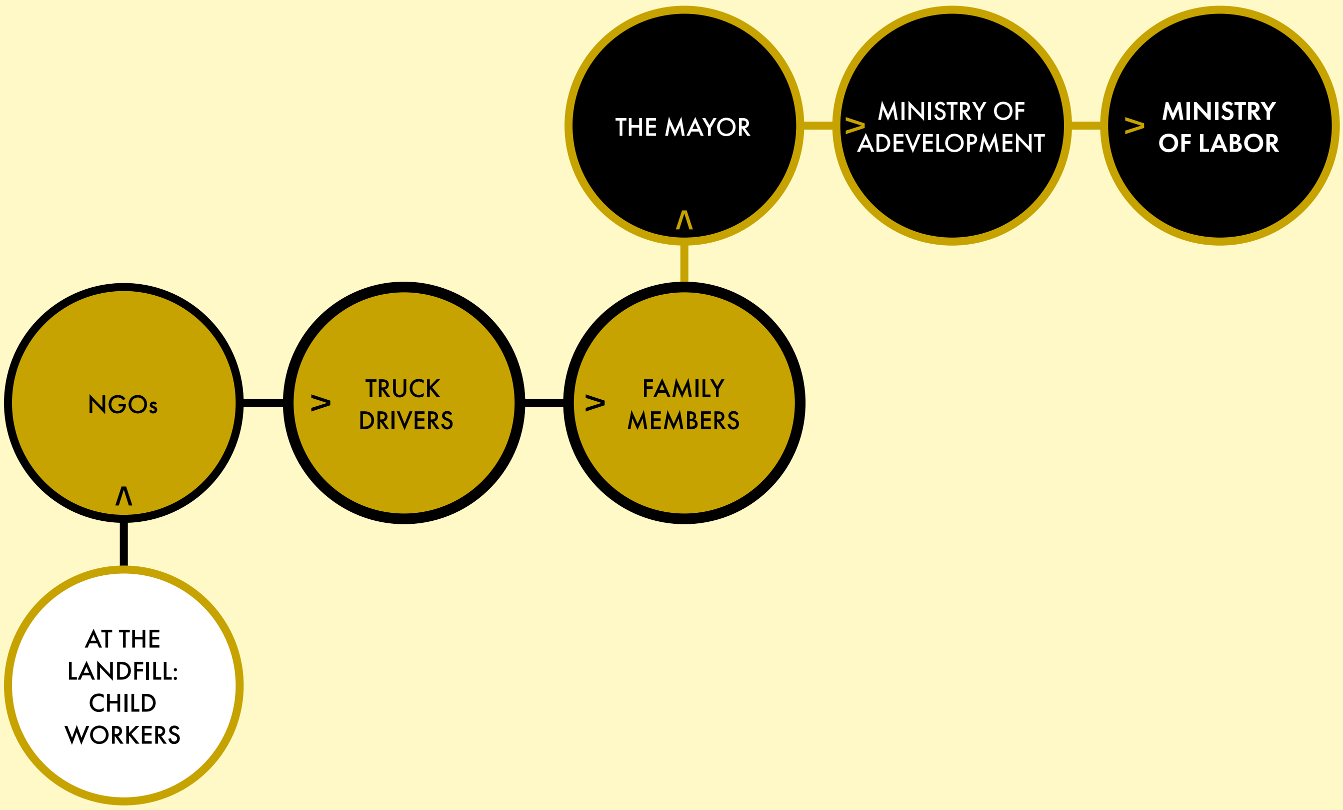
Sources whose doors are open lead us through closed doors

You can see how a map develops in the ARIJ film "Children of the Landfill", which reveals illegal child labor at a dump site. The story began with a tip from a local Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), an open door, who had identified current and former workers at the landfill. The NGO had sought to enter the site, but were turned back, and so were the reporters. (Undercover work was not an option; the reporters are women and there were no adult women on the site.) Instead, they followed garbage trucks to the dump with a contact from the NGO, who introduced them to one of the drivers. On-camera, the driver tells what he's seen, in a strained voice heavy with shame: His son works at the site. Later, the child tells us how the system works, and other children speak. *"I am 13 years old,"* says one. *"I used to go to school."* Another tells us he lasted two years, and saw many children *"hurt and exhausted."* By then, one of the hardest parts of an investigation – establishing that there are victims, and interviewing them – is done.

The reporters show the pertinent laws – another open door, available at a library or online – that ban child labor, especially in dangerous places like landfills. A human rights NGO (another open door) warns that the childrens' employment can be considered forced, and in some cases amounts to human trafficking.

The story arrives at the closed doors: In a surreal interview,the Mayor responsible for the site claims that the childrens' labor is *"informal"* and *"unofficial"*, and blames them for threatening legitimate workers at the site. In a second interview, he outright denies that children work there. The focus shifts to the Ministry of Social Development, who says that the situation is the responsibility of the Ministry of Labor. That ministry's spokesman blames citizens for not reporting violations. The ministry's inspectors, he says, perform their jobs *"perfectly"*, though their numbers are *"insufficient".* The story closes with the revelation that there are 100,000 working children, hoping for *"a chance to live their childhood."*

The path taken to the sources through this "village" is shown below:



The discovery of a truck driver who was willing to speak was crucial to the investigation, and it was dependent on the NGO, whose involvement was more predictable. All the other actors on the map are there because their situation puts them into the action, whether they like it or not. Most of the map could be deduced in advance.

Once you are inside the village, you will intuit or observe the presence of actors you hadn't imagined. The process is similar to deducing "missing" events on a timeline: we work from what and whom we can see, to whoever is out of sight.

Let's consider how to develop our first source map in useful ways.

c
Detailing the map

A simple map can be useful, but eventually it doesn't have room for more details, and details matter. Within larger organisations, smaller offices may handle the precise information you seek. Within the category of victims, there may be heads of associations, special cases, or miserable, overwhelmed individuals and families. It is possible to draw a series of maps, showing particular sectors in growing detail. You can also use a spreadsheet to note, and annotate, the growing number of actors and offices. A map will stimulate your sense of the landscape; the spreadsheet will capture the keys to its doors (coordinates, responsibilities, resources, etc.).

We recommend using a spreadsheet to keep track of contacts with individuals and offices. Otherwise you will waste time and gather anxiety by trying to remember whom you spoke with when, and what you learned from them. (Remember to put those discoveries in the timeline, too.)

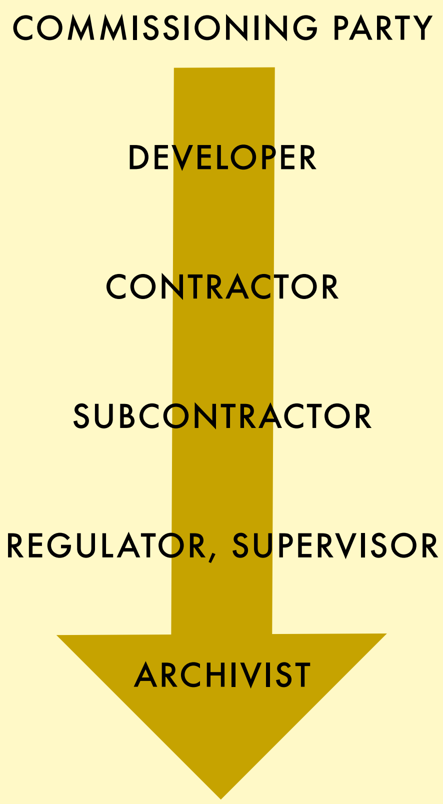
The spreadsheet format below, developed by Luuk Sengers, begins from the timeline, where the description of events includes specific actors. (If someone on your source map plays no role in the timeline, either you missed certain events, their involvement is secret, or they are irrelevant to the story.) The spreadsheet then designates an interview candidate (make sure it contains a column for interview extracts and also put them in the timeline). Public documents pertinent to that actor are noted, as well as private documents we might hope to obtain, like personal notes or emails. Places where the source or its environment can be observed are also specified. A sample entry, from a story about chemicals that leak from plastic pipes into drinking water, looks like this (without all the details):

Timeline	Interviews: title, coordinates	Public / open documents	Private/ confidential documents	Observed	To do
A scientific article reports dangerous chemicals from plastic pipes in drinking water	Authors of the scientific article	Scientific article; profiles of the authors	Personal and professional emails	Visit an author's laboratory	Ask the regulator if they are aware of this research; links to other events, actors

From a storytelling perspective, your goal is to "enter the room" where key events in the story take place, and to recount those events as though you were there. It is easier to accomplish that by first getting an overview of the actors in the story, and then focusing on the ones who will take you into the room through their memories and experience. You can see an expert example of this approach in Asian Dispatch's 2025 story, "In the Shadows: The Shahtoosh Trade", which documents not only the illicit global traffic in wool extracted from endangered animals, but also the actors and their environments at every level and station of the trade, from weavers in mountain villages to luxury boutiques.

All along our path, we will see which houses contain documentary resources. Very often, as James Steele and Donald Barlett discovered[1], the question is not whether or not a document exists; the question is where we might find it. Many documents in investigations are provided by human sources, and a growing number of official documents are digitalized and can be obtained even without engaging people (we'll discuss that more fully in the next chapter). By forcing ourselves to think about who knows what, and where their knowledge is kept, we increase our chances of getting access.

We can sharpen this approach by looking at it from the standpoint of when and how documents come to be. Example: A building falls down, and we suspect that its construction violated building regulations. Before it was built, a permit was required. What agency approves and registers those permits? Which regulator inspects the building before it is inhabited? In the case of a major public development, the chain of possession of a document grows longer. Every individual along this paper trail, prototyped here by Luuk Sengers, may have seen, handled or kept a copy of what we seek:



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To resume:

- Observe or deduce who is involved in the story, and how.
- Create a visualization of the landscape where they operate.
- Use the visualisation to deduce and verify relationships among the actors.
- Deduce or discover the resources in their workspaces or living spaces and obtain them.

D

Archiving and analysing the source map

It's not just a good idea to keep your investigation well-ordered – it's the core of the job. In the event that your investigative narrative will be a voyage through particular places and particular encounters – the typical structure of documentary film – this decision should be reflected in how you archive your discoveries.

One simple and sturdy method is to open a folder for each of the "houses" in your village. When you compose the story, you will move from one house to the next. Within each folder, use sub-folders to separate particular individuals or offices within an organisation, institution or family. For example, you may have a folder for scientific articles, and within that folder, you may open sub-folders for different scientific specialties. Typically, I open a sub-folder when more than three documents on a specific subject must be archived; I save each document with a date stamp that tells when it was created. The goal is to reduce the time required to locate each document and to see at a glance when it first appeared in the story.

Once we have read, annotated and excerpted a document for the timeline, we add our initials to the filename, in order to avoid endless review of documents we have already read. You can use any format you like, and please do it.

There is a simple test of whether your archiving is efficient: How much time does it take you to locate a specific document in your files? If the answer is "longer than 30 seconds", revise your file tree or filenames. The demands on your system will grow as you acquire more and diverse sources. At that point you may want to use an AI tool that searches (by keyword, such as a name), compares and summarizes your documents.

In Chapter 6 we'll show you how to construct a database of sources, documents and insights for your investigation – a "masterfile" – starting with the timeline and source map. That chapter includes an annex on advanced tracking methods developed by Eva Constantaras.

In the beginning, the process is not complicated. You don't need to start with a detailed framework; you can create it as you advance, and adjust your methods when they begin to seem cumbersome. You do need to recognize that **the success or failure of your project will depend not only on how much material you can find, but even more on how well you keep track of your discoveries.**

E

Case study: Using the timeline and source map in parallel

Josephine Chinèle, a reporter from the outlet "Platform for Investigative Journalism", answered our call for case studies with a story of judicial chaos:"Stolen Justice: A Missing Court Document and Heartbreak at the Supreme Court." The heartbreak belonged to former employees of the country's leading commercial banks, who sued for "illegal dismissal." Recounted Chinèle's story: *"While [the victims] were fighting for justice, a crucial court document suddenly – mysteriously – vanished from a case file at the Supreme Court of Appeal."* The effect was to ruin the victims' case. Starting from that event, Chinèle uncovered systemic corruption at the court.

She told us: *"I first got a tip that there is corruption in the judiciary and that documents [go] missing to help other parties to win cases. Then months later, one of the victims approached me with his predicament over court issues."* That validated the earlier tip, which became her hypothesis. The hypothesis indicated a first mechanism of corruption, which could be verified by court records of cases in which documents vanished.

Her source map included *"the fired employees, court sources, court documents and [expert] law commentators. Then the Judiciary itself, to hear its side of the story."* Lawyers for the defendant – the bank – provided materials that supported their case. Another key source of documents was the court registry, where she obtained filings and judgments concerning the victims' case, and located other, similar cases. She then proceeded to *"in-depth interviews... where I established issues of judge shopping"* – a second form of corruption – and obtained more documents that supported her hypothesis.

The timeline in the story stretches over nine years, beginning with an earlier case involving the target of the investigation, and that also led to court battles. Documents from those cases showed the names of lawyers, some of whom became sources. Along the way, Chinèle discovered that the current case was part of a larger pattern, exposed in published sources that she cited in her story:

> *Allegations of judge shopping, and theft of documents in case files are hardly new for the judiciary. In January 2018, the then judge president at the High Court registry reported to the Law Society incidents of some lawyers paying court staff to "misplace or destroy court files to frustrate case proceedings".*
>
> *Another judge, , now retired, also publicly cited the theft of documents as one of the impediments to the delivery of justice. To date, no official crimi-*

nal investigation has been conducted to probe the allegations.

She used that information to encourage lawyers who might have remained silent to speak with her (though not for attribution; in such cases multiple sources must provide the same information): *"while reporting on this matter, [she] interviewed several lawyers who confirmed the criminal practices continue."*

Obviously, this work would have been far more time-consuming if Chinèle were not already familiar with the judicial system and its actors from her previous work. If you're starting out, consider the time necessary to gain such knowledge as an investment, whose return will be a competitive advantage over other reporters. Comments Chinèle: *"The judiciary remains one of the country's untouchable institutions that most people avoid holding to account."* Because she tells such stories, she will get priority from future victims and sources. So will you.

While you're learning, **keep your timelines and source maps from every inquiry you undertake.** The information they contain will gradually become a searchable, well-sourced database that you can mine at every step in your career, and the people you encounter will remain loyal sources.

F – Sourcing for impact

A source map defines more than your possibilities of finding information. It also tells you who the story matters to, and how. By compiling a source map, you discover your core audience, the people who know and care most about what you're investigating. They will be the ones who review your work first and most closely. Many have invested their lives in the small world that you are about to shake.

To use this circumstance to your benefit, when you make your source map, **take note of the media that are published by your sources** – official acts, parliamentary debates, NGO websites, and so on. Of course, you will mine these media for information. Equally important, some of these media will later refer to or promote your work; others will oppose it. Either way, they will contribute to the prominence of the story. We will say more about increasing your impact in Chapter 9.

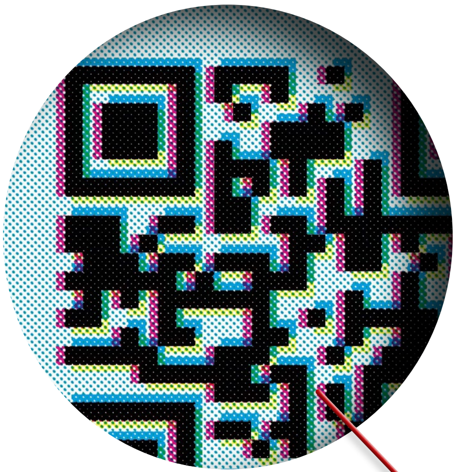
Our next step is to look for open sources – information that is already somewhere in the public sphere, waiting for us to discover it.

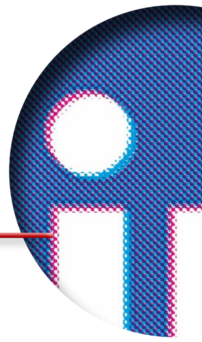
1.
We define an investigation.

2.
We create a hypothesis to verify our idea.

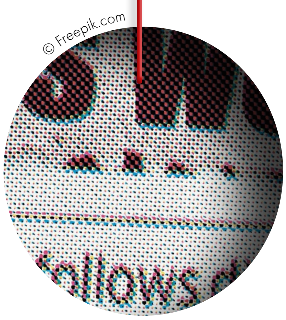
3.
We begin to build a timeline of events and a map of the actors.

4. THE POWER OF OPEN SOURCES





open sources



With
Luuk Sengers, Oleg Khomenok,
Deborah Nelson, Henk Van Ess, Paul Myers
Manisha Ganguly, Giancarlo Fiorella,
Crina Boros, Shyamlal Yadac and Eva Constantaras

The royal road to inquiry

The path to secrets or a hidden meaning now runs through "open sources" – **information that is freely available or accessible for a reasonable fee to anyone who looks for it**. To name just a few, they include news outlets, public archives, government datasets and social media posts. All of these categories existed in 2009, but on a much smaller scale, and there are more categories and sources every day. Such materials are making a revolution in our work.

In previous generations, up to and including Watergate, the confidences of "inside" sources played a leading role in investigative work. (Whistleblowers are the contemporary version of that path.) The main problem posed by the strategy was that it could be very slow and difficult to corroborate inside information. Now, we can work backwards from a tip or an off-the-record interview to the visible traces that an event leaves.

Thus in 2021, ARIJ could report *"the appointment of 71 [members from the same families of officials] in important administrative and diplomatic positions during the past decade."* From beginning to end, this revelation of family secrets was driven by obscure government disclosures.

The initial tip came through social media, where a bitter post appeared at the end of 2020 and quickly went viral: *"Congratulations to all high school graduates! Especially the 'backbones', the chosen ones with guaranteed employment, while all other graduates sit and wait!"* To find if there were indeed such "chosen ones", the reporters drew connections among three open sources.

- The first was the official Authority Gazette, Al-Waqa'e, where appointments are posted, from 2010 through 2020.
- The second consisted of the archives of local media for the same period.
- The third open source was job advertisements from the Public Personnel Council.

Under the law (another open source), all the positions should have been advertised. Instead, the reporters found: *"Appointments for unadvertised governmental jobs were made for first-degree relatives of serving or former senior governmental Authority officials."* The investigation includes startling details, like this: *"Family members [of an Ambassador] make up 7% of the appointments documented in this report. His wife, brother, and son-in-law were all appointed in senior diplomatic positions."*

In this chapter we'll begin with the simplest kinds of open sources – the ones that you can use right now, without further training. We'll then consider the ways that working with open sources has become a high-tech enterprise in which mastery nearly always requires working with a team, a community, or a friendly expert. Our annexes will dive into specialized matters – joining an open-source intelligence community and using freedom of information laws.

This much is true whatever your skill level: **open-source investigation demands that we rethink our reflexive tendency to prioritize human sources over documentary sources. Instead, we consider how these two sources complement or contradict each other to decipher the truth of a situation.**

Of course, there are major stories that begin from a leak, a tip, or from watching people, but sooner rather than later, we need more information. At that point, instead of seeking sources who promise us direct access to secrets, we look for publicly available evidence that can indicate *what the secret might be*. With that information, we can hypothesize what is hidden, and verify it, either by persuading someone to show us the missing piece, or by finding it in open sources.

Learning how to exploit open sources takes time, but it's more reliable than begging someone to tell you a secret, which also takes time. In the end, hearing a secret brings you back to your starting point, because once you've heard it, you must still verify it.

We systematically use open sources to confirm the plausibility of our hypotheses and document specific events. Then, we begin questioning people who know what is not in the open sources – the experience of initiating, enduring or resisting the events we are describing. Human sources remain the richest, and if we already know key facts of the story, it is easier and wiser for them to give us the rest. However, human sources can also be fallible, because memory transforms what it records. That's where concrete data from open sources comes in. We'll consider human sources in the next chapter. For now, let's move from what can be seen toward what cannot be seen.

II

The first 90 percent

We can learn at least two things from intelligence professionals:

- Many "secrets" are simply facts that we haven't paid attention to.
- Many of these facts – about 90% – are in an open source.

We have often heard that in this or that country, open-source information is limited and of poor quality. That may be more or less true. (The same applies to "right to know" laws, which we'll discuss in Annex 2 below.) But we have also noticed that there is always more open source information available, wherever you may be working, than journalists are making use of. I think it's fair to say that 90% of journalists use only 10% of the open sources that are pertinent to their work. The problem isn't that the information is hidden; the problem, to paraphrase James Steele, is imagining where it might be kept.

A stunning example of investigative imagination at work comes from Newstapa.org. A Newstapa reporter visited a lobbyist's office and saw that it had been shut down; only a photocopier remained. Newstapa's founder, Yongjin Kim, recalled "a broadcast report about hospitals returning leased copiers without erasing the hard drives, leading to patient data leaks. I suggested that perhaps the company copier might also contain valuable data. With the cooperation of the leasing company, we recovered the drive and obtained about 700 pages of key documents."

You can find powerful open information close to home. In 2021, a man entered a hospital room where his wife, stricken with a terrible disease, was resting after surgery. He shot her and then killed himself. News accounts gave no names. On her own initiative my former student (and later collaborator) Angèle Delbecq went to the city's "vital statistics" bureau – which records data like births, deaths and marriages – and asked for death certificates for everyone who died at the hospital that night and found them. We could then look for their families.

If you haven't used open sources before, you'll be amazed how many there are, and how much they can tell you. They're like a candy store where all the goodies are free.

A

Common types of open sources

Open sources can be found on the Internet, in libraries, in databases and in archives. Many of the institutions on your source map will maintain such resources. (Journalists are quick to access Google, but in our experience seldom visit a building filled with documents and data and administered by trained archivists. Please do. You will meet some of the greatest civil servants alive, who know more about finding documents in their reserves than you ever will.)

Classic open sources include information that has been published in any of the following media, and please note that this is a partial list; a full one would fill this manual, and would be obsolete before we could publish it, as satellite, GFS, CCTV and other technologies are deployed and exploited by reporters and NGOs. We'll address those high-tech open sources in our resource guide, where we'll also point to stories that are pushing the limits of "open source intelligence" (OSINT). Meanwhile, take comfort from the fact that there are so many places where information is waiting for you to put your hand on it.

- **News** (newspapers, magazines, TV, radio, Internet). Be careful with these, because journalists often get facts wrong.
- **Special interest publications** (unions, trade associations, etc.)
- **Scholarly publications**. An increasing number of these documents are available free online; others must be paid for. Nearly all of them can be identified using Google Scholar.
- **Corporate** filings, disclosures, advertisements and PR announcements. (Yes, PR announcements! When enterprises or institutions have something to boast about, they must say why it's worth the trouble.)
- **Websites** of stakeholder groups (such as Internet user forums, financial analysts, protest groups, etc.)
- **Public libraries**. Governments at national and municipal levels, as well as parliaments generally have their own libraries and archives. So do many ministries. Teaching hospitals have databases of scientific publications, and librarians who will guide you to the ones you need.
- **Courts**. At a minimum, courts keep records of judgments, and judgments state the facts of cases. At a maximum, they keep evidentiary documents and transcripts of trial testimony. One of the first great modern investigators, Ida Tarbell, based her epochal 1904 study, The History of the Standard Oil Company[1], on sworn testimony from the many trials where the company was sued or prosecuted. Seven years later, the government broke up this monopoly.

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- **Public databases** (such as health or employment statistics, or parliamentary debates). These are typically free to access. If they're missing in your country, you may find what you need by looking in another country.
- **Private, pay-for-use databases,** such as Dun and Bradstreet, that offer information on companies or industries.
- **Property ownership records**, such as Cadaster bureaus.
- **Laws and regulations** are usually available online. From an investigative standpoint, they set out a baseline of what people are supposed to do in a given situation, which makes it easier to identify abuses or mistakes.
- **Company ownership** registers, such as OpenCorporates(1) and national registries.
- **International institutions** that provide aid or information concerning situations in particular countries, like the European Union, United Nations agencies, OECD, etc. (Don't hesitate to contact their press officers to ask what they have available, if you can't find it yourself.)
- **Public procurement registries,** which typically include tender offers and who wins them.
- **Election donations and party expense reports.** These don't exist in every country, but where they do, they tell you who supports political movements. The office that collects this data is usually an open door.
- **Financial reports of public officials.** Discrepancies between what's reported and what an official takes home are powerful stories.
- **Social media postings.** Facebook is an obvious open source, but other networks may be equally useful. For example, private investigator Jim Mintz(2), uses LinkedIn searches to identify current and former corporate employees who can provide him with inside information.
- **Databases of whistleblower leaks,** such as Wikileaks, Offshore Leaks(3) (which offers material from the Panama and Paradise Papers), and Open Sanctions directories(4).
- **Web archives,** such as the Internet Archive Wayback Machine(5), which stores past versions of websites, including content the website owner subsequently removed.

Becoming expert with these sources may require negotiating access to libraries, fami-

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liarity with archiving terms and processes or profession-specific language, or framing queries for archivists. (This is a skill you can improve by using an AI application, which requires you to pose and develop your queries. Make sure that your queries don't contain sensitive information.[1] We'll say more about AI below.) The first time, say, that you go to a courthouse to obtain a judgment, you won't know the procedures or the terminology. Once you find these keys, they will open doors throughout your career.

That is why, when you assess the potential return on your personal investment in an investigation, it's a good idea to consider which open sources you will master for the first time. You'll learn by using them to solve a particular problem – say, how many companies are owned by the same individual.

B

Open sources change our relations with human sources

Open sources place us in a position of relative power, compared to the usual situation of asking someone to tell us a story. It is quite another thing to ask someone to confirm a story. **It's the difference between saying, "What happened?" and saying, "Is this what happened?"** Of course, you can ask "what happened?" – it's called an open question – and then use open sources to cross-examine. But if you need to ask what happened because you don't know enough to guess, you can be easily lied to.

Open-source documents are one way to correct source declarations – in particular, to verify official hypotheses, which is all that many official statements amount to. Such material thereby alters the dynamic of source relationships. If a reporter can specify details that have not been offered by the source, lying to the reporter means accepting the possibility that the lie will be exposed, and most people hate to be caught lying.

From a happier perspective, it is often much more exciting and interesting for a source to converse with a journalist who understands at least part of a story before the conversation begins. Such a reporter can appreciate the value of information and respond to it more deeply than someone who has no independent knowledge. The reporter can also trade knowledge, though be careful: it's one thing to make a source aware of a public document, and another to share confidential information (to be generally avoided). **Don't brag about what you know.**

Key actors in any story, and especially the victims, desire to be understood, and to have their experience recounted by a worthy witness – someone who cares about getting the story right and telling it truthfully. (The film *Erin Brockovitch* perfectly captures this dynamic.) **If you demonstrate to sources from the outset that you are making independent efforts to understand their case, and can access relevant information on your own, they will be more inclined to trust**

(1)

you, and to reserve their best information for you. (Alternatively, notes Manisha Ganguly, you can ask whistleblowers and tipsters if they know of open sources that corroborate what they are telling you. They are already motivated to help you.)

In sum, by making use of open sources, you show your human sources that:

- You care enough about the subject to explore it independently.
- You do not expect them to do your work.
- You are not dependent on them for information.
- You have information to share.
- You cannot be prevented from doing the story simply because someone does not want to talk to you.
- You are the person they always knew, or hoped, would someday come to their door.

III

Finding open sources

A

Map the subject

Your first task is to get an overview of the field under investigation. This process is also called "backgrounding", which refers to finding what lies behind and around the subject in the foreground. **Stay focused on the questions of what happened, how it happened and who made it happen.** This will occur naturally as you build your timeline and source map, which will help you do three things:

- Identify key actors (individuals and institutions);
- Identify key issues that concern the actors;
- Compile key dates and events in their records, including historical events that serve as landmarks for the actors.

As you progress, you will absorb the language, events and personalities who define a community. Before long, you will become part of it, too. When you go there, you will have things to discuss with its members – the matters that marked their lives. You cannot do this efficiently, or with confidence, or in depth, unless you invest the time necessary to grasp the record they have left and the world they have built. Even intelligence agencies or criminal gangs leave such a record, in court cases and scholarly studies. It's not merely unprofessional to ignore this material – it's also discourteous to the people you hope to meet.

The eruption of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into common use is already changing the backgrounding process. The world-famous "digital digger" Henk Van Ess is among the first to identify how AI can streamline the task. He writes that it *"isn't about letting AI do the research for you - it's about making AI help you find where to start your actual investigation."*[1] In other words, AI will not *think* for you – it will save time by giving you things to think *about*. By creating and refining structured prompts, in which you specify what you're seeking – Van Ess created a free tool[2] for this, which we tested and recommend until he or someone else develops something better – AI chatbots can select elements *for verification* that would take you far longer to compile by other means. Try, says Van Ess, asking a chatbot to deliver the following:

- Current developments (or developments from a particular year)
- Historical context (that stuff you always forget to ask about)
- Key players and stakeholders (following the power)
- Primary data and peer-reviewed research (when available)
- Different perspectives (because nuance exists)
- Expert opinions (when they're not just making them up)
- Future implications (educated guesses)
- **Sources worth checking (when the chatbot bothers to provide them)**

That last point is crucial. The summaries provided by AI chatbots in response to queries are sometimes valuable, sometimes worthless, and sometimes disinformation. AI responses can be manipulated through disinformation or bias. Moreover, AI bots are also known to "hallucinate" – making up false information to answer your

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query. Instead of relying on their summaries (probably because you are in a hurry, and hopefully not because you are lazy), ask for citations you can verify. Some AI apps (like Perplexity) provide links to the records supporting their responses to queries, so you can and should read the source documents yourself.

Whether you use AI or not, when you find yourself blocked, take note of the obstacle and seek information about something directly related to it instead. (For example, move to the next house in the source village.) Never place yourself in a position where you need specific information from a single source to advance. If that happens, **collect data about actors, institutions or events that are one step removed from the target of your inquiry**. This tactic, known as the concentric circle strategy[1], can open a path to sources who can provide at least part of the missing data.

B

Use general or secondary sources to direct you to experts and primary sources

A news article about a scientific discovery is a general or secondary source. The original scientific research, published in a peer-reviewed journal, is an expert or primary source, containing a richer level of detail and insight. In an investigation, that detail can be critical to success, not only because the facts overlooked by a reporter may be of great interest, but because knowledge of the details enables you to dialogue with sources more powerfully. They will recognise you as someone who is making an effort to understand and advance a story they care about, as opposed to rewriting someone else's work.

Sources like news articles can provide important insights, of course. Eva Constantaras observes that "local media coverage of your topic can show you what conversation people are having and what information they need and want." But **once you collect a lead from a secondary source, try to find the primary source at its root**. Wikipedia articles – which are often denigrated by people who never take the time to read them – often include references and links to primary sources, as do scientific articles. It's important to follow pertinent citations in scientific articles too. Sometimes they lead to powerful information, and sometimes they misstate it. Deborah Nelson recalls that she traced one "fact" back through several studies to unattributed information in a news article. Don't rely on someone else's interpretation of that material.

Luuk Sengers observes that the best way to discover expert open sources is to **ask the professionals in a given sector which sources they use.** Estate agents, for example, will know which offices keep track of property records. Professional investors can tell you where to find company information and how to interpret it. In some cases, professional forums contain expert and relevant posts (and an open path to the author). **Don't just collect facts: Collect the methods and sources by which the facts are found.** Always ask: "How do you know this? Where did you find it?"

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C

Harvest documents in the field

You need to cultivate the habit of collecting information in depth wherever you happen to be. The information most pertinent to a given activity is often found where the activity takes place.

So **grab all documents in sight whenever you visit a place as a reporter**. (Of course, you should ask for them first; the immediate risk of being caught stealing is loss of all access.) When you go to an interview, if you see documents on display, pick them up, look them over, and ask to keep them. At a minimum, those documents tell you what the organisation is thinking about. At a maximum, they will provide usable intelligence. For example, the office of an extreme right party displayed journals published by obscure groups or individuals within the larger movement. These were invaluable sources of information on the movement's activity at local and regional levels, which the news media never discussed, and practically unavailable elsewhere. We asked if we could keep them and were allowed to take any we wanted. Every week we brought home a tote bag full of them.

At a general level, critical background information about a region can usually be gathered at a municipal office or chamber of commerce (or its website, but you'll see more on the scene). At the least, the information will enable conversations with the locals. At the most, it may provide material of direct relevance to your investigation. It did for us, more than once.

Bring an empty bag, go home with a full one, and see what you harvested. Sometimes it's trash, sometimes it's a seed, and often enough it's a feast.

D

Start out easy

We strongly suggest that you begin an inquiry with the easiest information you can obtain from the most wide-open sources. If none of the elements in your hypothesis are supported or corroborated by those sources, either the hypothesis is at least partly mistaken, or more rarely, someone is working very hard to conceal the story. (The explanation of *every* obstacle is not: "A hidden conspiracy is at work.")

Conversely, if the first verifications are successful, it's a sign that you can accelerate and widen the inquiry. When this momentum begins, exploit it. Take the open-source data as far as it will go. Deduce its meaning, and add it to your hypothesis. This is what you will test in the next step, when you enter the space where the truth is held by living people.

IV

From open sources to the OSINT revolution

None of the techniques described above require special technical skills. You can do fine work if you stay at that level. But you can't communicate effectively with others in the investigative journalism community, let alone collaborate with the best among them, unless you understand that there are indeed special skills that are either established or taking hold in this field. Those methods mark the frontier between open sources and "open source intelligence", or OSINT.

You may already have crossed that border. Manisha Ganguly, author of the first doctoral thesis on AI and OSINT in investigative journalism[1], says that *"When we analyse our sources for credibility or verification, that means we are producing intelligence."* The kinds of intelligence we can produce are rapidly expanding:

- "Data journalism" – which only a few years ago was known as "computer-assisted reporting" – has become an essential toolbox for working with open source information. It has a long history, by the standards of our profession. In the 1970s, reporters like Donald Barlett and James Steele compiled their own databases, by hand, from sources like paper court records. As governments acquired computer technology, increasing amounts of data were compiled, and much of it ended up on the Internet. That was a step change, because in many jurisdictions (and more of them every day), it became possible for journalists to obtain documents or entire datasets from their office computers instead of trudging to a library or official bureau. The digitalization of government archives made those documents more easily searchable; so did the development of "scraping" techniques[2], which enable extraction of relevant data from websites or documents. (Those methods were crucial to leaks-based stories like The Panama Papers[3] and the

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Iraq War Diaries[1].) Another step change came with the aggregation by journalists of online sources, notably for financial data, into stand-alone databases like Aleph[2].

Because data journalism now amounts to a distinct field on its own and is constantly advancing, rather than try to detail how it works in this manual, we'll direct you to other manuals and references in our resource guide.

- Facebook was founded only in 2005, and its rapid expansion enabled investigation of individuals, as well as organisations, to an unprecedented extent. In one striking early case, the OCCRP and ARIJ found links to the bankers who serviced a former President's affiliates in 2011. The cronies had bragged about their banker pals to their online friends, which made them visible.

Early innovators like Paul Myers of the BBC and Henk Van Ess swiftly developed techniques for finding information and people through Facebook (Myers discusses some of his techniques here[3]). Myers advises: "The most powerful, but hidden tool in Facebook is the Search Tool [sic]. It looks like a magnifying glass and can often be found by clicking on the three dots on someone's profile page. The search tool will find words in Facebook posts that are connected to the profile." He adds, "I often just search for their surname. This gives me posts they are tagged in."

As of this writing, LinkedIn, Facebook, Reddit and X (formerly Twitter) appear as the most important social networks for investigative reporters in many countries, while VK and Telegram play major roles in Eastern Europe . What you need to know now is that to effectively exploit a social network, you must understand how it functions – its tools, protocols and embedded communities. That means you must join it and use it regularly. That will remain true whatever happens to particular social networks, whose emergence, rise and collapse can be rapid.

- The eruption of Bellingcat, "an intelligence agency for the people" in the phrase of its founder, Elliot Higgins, opened striking new possibilities for journalists (many of which are detailed in their "open source toolkit"[4]). What's most pertinent for us is that Higgins was self-taught, and his early methods were hardly high-tech. Anyone with the same patient determination and intelligence, including you, can do what he did.

Higgins built transparency into his work from the start, documenting not only his discoveries, but how he found them. To this day,

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Bellingcat's reporters specify each step in every story, showing how they used various tools. It's a scientific approach, which allows other researchers to verify methods as well as results, and it's also a great learning tool for anyone interested in the latest OSINT techniques.

Higgins documented the attacks of a government on its people, and verified the weapons used and the locations of attacks from sources as diverse as military museum websites and smartphone photos uploaded to social media. His influence can be seen in a 2019 investigation from ARIJ. In one social media image after another, posted by militants to promote their causes, we see arsenals of trafficked firearms and rocket launchers, supplemented by public documents. Note the use of diverse open sources in this quote, marked in bold, and also note that a simple way to increase your repertoire of open sources is to identify them as you read an investigation by someone else.

For example:

"In discussing AQAP [Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Pensinsula] in a a certain city, the first person who must be introduced is a specific individual. In October 2017, he was listed on ***the terror watch list*** *... for "acting for or on behalf of AQAP" as well as for providing financial and material support for AQAP and ISIS-Y.*

And in this one:

Through tracing weapons, we found clues strongly linking Abu al-Abbas' group with AQAP. In March 2016, ***AQAP published a video*** *showing an anti-tank grenade launcher. The* ***company****... makes this weapon, equipped with a laser range finder, with [another* country] *partner.* **The company has announced** *one customer [in the region].* **Footage** *[on social media] shows the Abu al-Abbas Brigades repeatedly and exclusively using this weapon.*

A third revolution is occurring as we write: the emergence of digital technologies that enable us to analyze sounds, time, built and natural landscapes, and the movement of anything from vehicles to pollutants with unprecedented accuracy. Satellite imagery – a high-tech open source – is playing a growing role in our work, by enabling us to "geo-locate" and verify events, and to identify changes in the landscape (such as illegal mines in the tropical forest basin[1]) in otherwise inaccessible settings. The most powerful use of this technology for investigative reporters right now appears to be in conflict, environmental and climate coverage. This excerpt from "Burning Skies"[2], a cross-border project led by the Environmental Investigative Forum, shows how satellite imagery enables unprecedented scope as

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(2)

well as detail in an investigation of an entire production system. Open sources are marked in **bold**.

Flaring, which consists of oil and gas companies burning off excess natural gas from their hydrocarbons fields, terminals and refineries, comes at catastrophic costs for exposed populations and biospheres, as well as climate. ***This infamous practice remains one of the main drivers of greenhouse-gas emissions within the fossil fuel sector.***

According to the **latest annual report from the World Bank***, flaring emitted 381 millions tons of CO2 equivalent worldwide in 2023, representing 1% of global carbon dioxide emissions. This is more than* **the annual emissions of a country such as France for the previous year***.*

But the true toll behind these burning flames remains largely uncovered, mainly due to a lack of corporate transparency on the matter. **Available data only provides total emissions by country, but no detailed information by operator…**

Using **satellite and geo-data** *provided by the Earth Observation Group of the Payne Institute for Public Policy and the environmental NGO Skytruth, completed with open source research [***notably scholarly studies***], we linked thousands of these flaring signals to over 650 oil and gas infrastructures, in 18 countries of Africa and the Middle East.*

Environmentalist NGOs played a key role in this story, because they were the first to collect and archive the necessary initial data. If you do not know the NGOs working in your field, you are not only depriving yourself of key informants and resources; very likely, you are duplicating work that they have already done.

Annex 1:

Bellingcat on entering the OSINT ("open-source intelligence") community

With Giancarlo Fiorella/Bellingcat

The renewal of OSINT in the 2010s occurred in parallel with the rapid development of online communities who collectively pushed existing techniques to their limits and developed new ones. With Bellingcat's permission, we include an edited version of **their article**[1] on how to dive into OSINT. Notice that their key point isn't about this or that technique – it's about how you can draw close to other people who care about open source research. The principles described here can work for any investigative community, or any community of experts, that you want to learn from: ***Explore your preferences, join and exchange.***

Your interest and appreciation for others is a gift to them, as well as an investment in yourself. Stay eager, stay humble, and be sure to thank anyone who takes the time to help you.

1. Take Stock of your Skills and Interests

Are you interested in a particular conflict? Or do you love solving puzzles, which could translate to geolocating images? Do you have a programming background, or knowledge of several languages? Or are you fascinated by military machinery and equipment?

Having an idea of what topics interest you and what you're good at will help you find other researchers on social media whose work you might want to follow, and may eventually inform your own.

If you're not sure how your skills and interests might translate to this field, don't worry: that just means that you'll have more to discover.

2. Get on Bluesky or X

X (formerly Twitter) is a less important medium for identifying, debating, and disseminating open source research than it used to be. However, having an X account will allow you to follow some researchers so that you can learn from their work, as well as to follow objects of your research. Remember that you don't have to post anything —ever. Recently many researchers abandoned X for Bluesky, so it is important to join the relevant communities there. You will find practitioners who are eager to engage in discussions with others about best methods and practices, and to share their work and the work of others.

If you're security conscious or have any reason to want to be anonymous, you can easily set up an account that doesn't contain your real name or other personal information. The open source research community welcomes anonymous accounts.

3. Find Your People (and Put Them on a List)

Once you're on a platform, you'll want to **follow lots of open source researchers***. This will allow you to see what topics the field is interested in, which organisations focus on which issues, and which methods they employ in their research. More importantly, you'll be able to learn directly from the experts about methods, tools, and best practices.*

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If you've just learned about the world of open source research, it might be a good idea to cast a wide net and follow researchers at established institutions like the New York Times Visual Investigations, Bellingcat or the Washington Post Visual Forensics team.

One easy way to find open source researchers is to **follow lists**. Any user can create a list of accounts, and some — like Malachy Browne of the New YorkTimes' Visual Investigations[1] Team — have made those lists available. His "OOSIList"[2] contains more than 200 open source researchers whose work you can keep up with by following the list.

4. Find Community Branches

Open source researchers and enthusiasts tend to spend lots of time online, which means that they're likely to be hanging out in digital spaces besides X. Discord is a popular messaging app on which several open source communities have chosen to set up base. These communities resemble the chatrooms of the early internet, and are called "servers" in Discord lingo. Besides Bellingcat, The OSINT Curious Project, dedicated to sharing news and educational information about open source research; Project OWL, a sprawling server dedicated to every imaginable facet of open source research; and the Spanish-language Bridaga Osint are on Discord. In the Bellingcat Discord server, there's a channel dedicated to sharing research tools and resources.

Reddit also hosts open source research communities, including r/Bellingcat and r/OSINT[3] (which has tens of thousands of members, and opens with a guide for beginners).

[Manisha Ganguly adds: Much of the matter investigated by OSINT communities relates to conflict and details graphic violence. That entails a risk of vicarious trauma. Anyone undertaking this kind of research should take the time to study trauma informed workflows[4], and be prepared to ask other members of their community for support. We will say more about trauma in Chapter 5.]

Now that you've got a sense for what the community looks like, where researchers hang out and who's working on what, you can start to develop and practise new skills.

If you're interested in learning about every single detail of putting an open source research project together, bookmark the Berkeley Protocol on Digital Open Source Investigations[5]. This document is a one-stop resource for all questions related to workflow, from ethical and legal considerations to security awareness and data collection and analysis.

5. Be Patient — and Have Fun

Chances are that you're going to find out pretty quickly that geolocation, chronolocation, determining what objects are in images, or any of the other skills that you've chosen to develop are difficult to master. You might find that you're not able to solve @Quiztime challenges (an otherwise fun way to check your skills), or that conversations in your Discord server involve topics and techniques that you've never heard about.

Be patient. None of us who do this for a living had any of these skills on the first day, the first week, or even the first month (importantly, many or even most seasoned researchers don't do this for a living at all). In fact, ask any open source researcher and they'll tell you that they're still learning new things every single day, and that there are some areas of the field in which they're novices, too.

Do not be discouraged if you feel like the pace at which you're learning is slow. **As long as you're having fun learning, then you're sure to make progress**. If you stick with it, you'll look back in a month or a year on your first day and realise how far you've come.

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Annex 2:

How to use your right to know
(Adapted from "Investigating Sustainable Development", UNESCO 2022)
With Crina Boros and Shyamlal Yadav

TThe idea behind freedom of, or right to, information is that all official documents are in principle public, and should be available for the asking, including to journalists. Fifteen years ago 70 countries had laws granting such access (with certain more or less wide limits, like matters of national security); now there are about 120.

We have frequently been told by reporters: "You are American and European. You have easy access to government documents, and we do not. Everything we might ask for will be denied, or it will take forever. If documents are finally given to us, they will be filled with lies, useless." We tell them: **In any jurisdiction we know of, less information is available than reporters would like, and more is available than they might imagine before they ask for it.** The question is not, "Why can't I get everything?" The right question is: "What can I get?"

Part of the answer is: any public document in jurisdictions which don't require that requests for public documents must be filed by citizens. If those governments have documents that concern your country, you can obtain them, whatever your national government is required to give you.

Concerning the time required, it is a fact that even when administrations comply with a request for information, it can take weeks, months or even years. But this is hardly wasted time. The difficulty of obtaining the information means that competitors will probably give up, and when the story is published, it will be a powerful scoop. Meanwhile, the reporter signals to potential sources that they are in the game to stay, and becomes the recipient of choice for exclusive information.

In the USA journalists greeted the first FOIA law's passage in 1967 with cynicism, because procedures for obtaining information were perceived to be slow and riddled with exemptions. In the next seven years, approximately 40 of the 200,000 requests for documents filed with the government came from journalists. Reform of the FOIA in 1974, following the Watergate scandal, and the subsequent rise of Investigative Reporters and Editors Inc., which actively promoted the FOIA, decisively changed the situation. **The point is that a right offers no benefit whatsoever if no one fights for and makes use of it.**

You don't need special training to start using this right. The independent reporter Crina Boros, who became an expert in using the FOI laws of the UK and European Union, told us that she began in her late twenties in order to obtain a competitive advantage: *"I'd never sent a FOI request in my life... I had a formal education as a journalist, but never filed a FOI. Most students, including at British universities, are not taught how to file a FOI."*

Says Shyamlal Yadav, a global leader in the field, who to date has filed about 11,000 applications under India's 2005 RTI law, "Many reporters ask me, 'How do you file so many?' Whenever you have an idea, you must file an application."

Boros and Yadav agree on six key principles:

1. First and foremost, read the relevant laws carefully, in order to see what your rights are, and how to frame your request.

Crina Boros: "Never underestimate the value of reading the legislation. It will give you the keys to use. It will make the functionary happy not to go back and forth with you because you didn't know the law.

"In reading the law [U.K. Freedom of Information Act 2000, c. 36](1), I saw that I could claim entitlement over anything that concerns use of public spending. My request concerned taxpayer money being spent in a foreign country. I thought, 'They should give it to me.' I never used lawyerly language. I [wrote a letter to say], 'Hi, I'm filing a FOI request.' I specified clearly what information I wanted, itemized, the time frame it covered. At the end I specified that according to the law I did not need to know the exact name of the database or document that contained the info, and I specified the amount of time the law gave the government to reply. I got a hit right away. It was quite interesting because a few years later I made the same request for an update, and they refused it. So I produced the first request, and I said, 'You gave it to me once, you have to give it to me again.'

Shyamlal Yadav: "In 2006, I was working at India Today. I started filing several RTI requests. I can say the big first story was about foreign travel by the government ministers. For that story I had to file 60 applications to almost every federal ministry. It was published as a cover story. That was the first story where we realized that RTI could be an investigative tool.

"The beauty of the RTI law is that there is not necessarily a format to file. You can write on a simple paper your questions, and what information you require, and send it to that department. I have no law background. Of course I have a number of friends who are lawyers, but using the act is so simple that I never felt I needed their help. I just read the act and wrote the letters."

2. Before you file, explore the open sources.

Shyamlal Yadav: "Before anyone files a RTI, he or she must see what information is [already] in the public domain... and also within [a particular] bureaucracy. If you file for information in the public domain you are wasting your time and theirs. Asking for the process of getting a passport is a useless question."

3. Identify the right target agency and if possible the individual responsible for FOI requests before you ask for the information.

Crina Boros: "You have to learn: Is this the right organization? Will they have the information? ... You have to learn how organizations work, and how information circulates inside an organization. Who holds it, who publishes it, who is the gatekeeper, has it been released before, who else has it, what are their obligations?

"You want to get, for example, to the database manager, or the archive manager, who knows the source material, and can talk you through what's there or not there. If you get to that person it's like going to the library. If you can't get to that person the second best is the FOI officer, because the law says it's their responsibility to tell you what you can find and not find."

4. Keep track of applications and outcomes

Shyamlal Yadav: "I maintain my own database of RTI letters and acknowledgement to keep track of what is going on. I file numerous applications, tracking them, calling the department officials."

Crina Boros: "We have deadlines, and officials know it. If they don't release on deadline and you work for an organization that moves quickly, your organization moves on. In the long run that deters news outlets from investigating, because they won't get the documents on time. ***You have to know the official deadline [for replying to requests in compliance with the law] and you have to let them know you do."***

5. Treat FOI officials like sources with whom you have a relationship.

Crina Boros: "You need to know the stages of processing an application. The first is the request. Then there's a negotiation between you and the organization. In the UK, if you're unhappy, you can ask the FOI manager to review how your request was handled and whether you received all the info you were entitled to. In my experience this produces a lot more results than anything else. ***Be transparent****. You don't say 'I'm an innocent bystander' if you're a journalist."*

Shyamlal Yadav: "Before RTI, I was doing stories on bureaucracy and government. So I have links across the government. I call them, I meet them. All those relations are helpful. Sometimes when I file, my friends get the application, they provide the information."

6. Show them that you, too, are doing your best to serve the public.

Shyamlal Yadav: "Your reputation as an honest reporter is very important. It's not a personal agenda. It's public interest. ***Once the officials realize that I as a reporter don't have an agenda against an individual, and that the story is important to ordinary people, it always helps."***

1.
We define an investigation.

2.
We create a hypothesis to verify our idea.

3.
We begin to build a timeline of events and a map of the actors.

4.
We seek open sources to validate and extend our research.

5. WORKING WITH HUMAN SOURCES: INTERVIEWS, SECURITY AND UNDERCOVER WORK

human sources

With
Nils Hanson, Oleg Khomenok, Deborah Nelson,
Elodie Vialle, Drew Sullivan and Luuk Sengers

The most exciting information is usually not in open sources – it's in people's minds. How do we get them to tell us what they know? Do not underestimate the value of such skills. Not everyone has them, and your work as an investigator will develop them to a high degree. (As a side benefit, your conversational skills, and with them your popularity, will also grow.)

Do not abuse these powers, either. **Never forget that as a journalist, you can hurt people – their feelings, their livelihoods, and even their personal safety**. Make sure that you do not hurt them just because they were foolish enough to talk with you. Plenty of journalists do – alas, it's happened to me – and it's one of the main reasons that a great many people distrust or hate us.

Conversely, always remember: **sources are looking for someone like you, who can understand what they have to say, just as much as you are looking for them**. These encounters are among the great moments in a career. Thirty years ago, a source who brushed me off at first took my second call and said: "I decided that I have to help you, because you're doing God's work." Whether you are religious or not, such statements – one day soon you will hear them – are moving and humbling. They affirm the importance of our work and remind us that we must be worthy of such trust. (On a practical note, they also remind us to stay in touch even with people who reject us.)

In this chapter, we are first going to consider the art of becoming a worthy witness – someone that a source may usefully speak to. Then we will turn to security – yours, and theirs. We conclude with the particular risks and requirements of undercover work.

I

Helping people to speak

A

Why sources speak with us

There are two general reasons that someone will open their experience and insights to you, and they are called pride and pain. You will necessarily, if not explicitly, offer your sources the chance to satisfy one or the other.

- People will talk because something excites their pride -- a talent or thing of beauty they have discovered, a success they have had or will soon have, a plan they have created to save the world, the knowledge they have accumulated. Discussing these subjects makes them feel happy, important or both.
- Or, as doctors know, they speak because they are in pain and they badly wish that someone would help them.

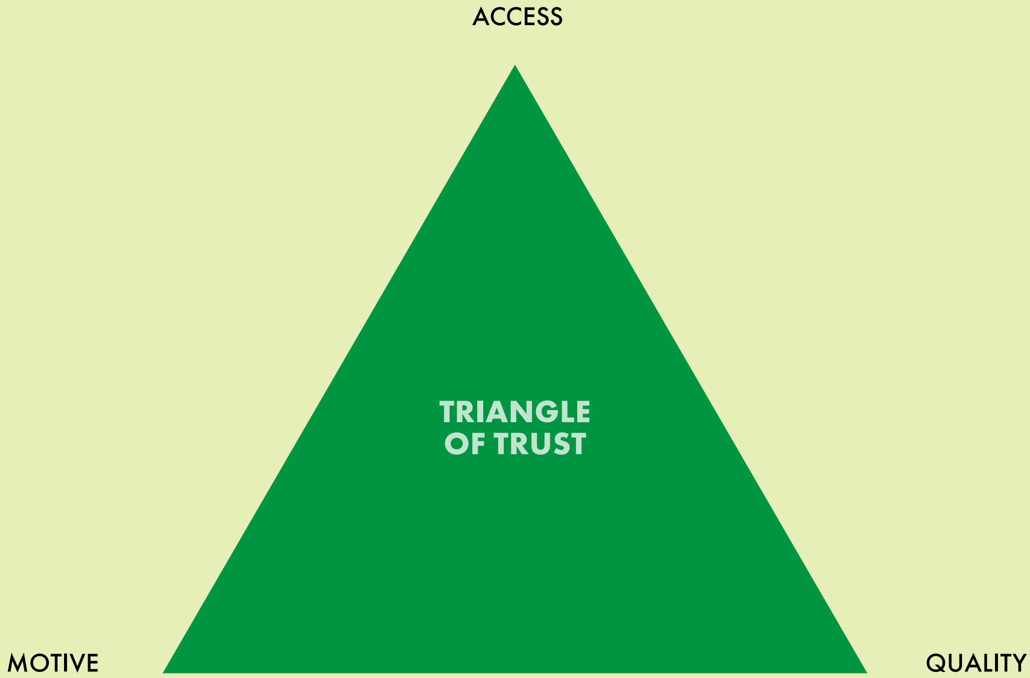
Generally, **pain is stronger than pride**, and that is why the first people to speak in most investigations are victims – those who have been wronged in some way, or whose values are deeply offended by what they have witnessed.

Oleg Khomenok, who has worked in numerous regions on investigations as well as training, tells us:

> When talking to people, always ask yourself:
>
> - *What is their interest in communicating with me?*
>   *If they contacted me first, why?*
> - *What threats are they facing?*
> - *What do they want to talk about?*
>   *What don't they want to talk about?*

Motivation is likewise among three key criteria that some intelligence services use to assess sources:

- *What is their* **motivation** *for sharing the information with us?*
- *What is their* **access to** *information? Is it direct, or second-hand?*
- *What is the* **quality** *of their information? Can it be corroborated?*



Understanding sources' open and hidden intentions is vital. Says Khomenok:

> *People might expect justice or revenge after speaking to journalists. In the first case there can be some victims of crime or misconduct who desire a positive change for all who suffered like them, as well as punishment for the perpetrators. In the second case there might be political rivals or business competitors who lost at dirty games (elections, public procurement, government contracts etc.) and want to get vengeance by using reporters.*

A source's motivation may not serve your interests. Perhaps they intend to deliver a threat. One of our sources took care to say, three times, that our taxes would be audited and our car would be burned. Take such threats seriously. (We'll say more about precautions below). Maybe the source wants to know what you already know, or what you are trying to find out. Their intention might be to mislead you or compel you to waste your time verifying disinformation.

There are two very positive reasons that someone will speak with you, notes Khomenok: **he or she believes that doing so is safe and may lead to a change.** Unfortunately, you cannot guarantee that the desired change will occur; journalists do not have that power. The most you can promise is that you will do your best to tell the story truthfully and fully and make sure it is heard. You can offer vindication and recognition: "Yes, it really happened." You can also do your best to keep them safe from exposure or reprisal, but you can't always guarantee that you will succeed, especially if they don't take precautions on their own.

Whatever comes next, you and the source must create a relationship. In that relationship, each of you will count on the other to do certain things, more or less reliably. Both you and the source may furnish each other information and make certain engagements. **Whether or not the source keeps their promises, you must keep yours**. It is not merely a professional obligation. It is also a matter of character. You must be visibly trustworthy, or people will sense that they cannot trust you. Don't leave a trail of disappointed, deceived and burned sources behind you. We've seen people do it, and it's a sure way to end your career.

B
First contacts: Preparation and invitation

1. BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

a. Profile the source

The purpose here is to demonstrate your interest in the source, and knowledge of his or her career or the situation in which they are involved.

The absolute minimum is to search online for him or her. Any news articles or other writings in which the source is mentioned should be consulted; if there are too many to read all, choose a few that are directly related to your inquiry. Never go to an interview and ask a source with a public history to recount the basics of his or her career (it's much more impressive to ask what the source learned in a specific situation that you evoke). You should know about it before you arrive. For private individuals, start by consulting their profiles, posts and contacts on social media.

If the source has written articles for news media or specialised publications, obtain them and read them. Even secretive or shy individuals reveal their personalities, values and concerns when they write. These materials can furnish hypotheses that can later be tested in an interview.

For example, from his published articles and speeches I hypothesised that a certain high public official hated to lie, but was an expert in avoiding subjects he considered sensitive or dangerous. Thus by observing how and when he changed subjects, I could identify the precise points he wished to obscure and then investigate them further. When directly asked to confirm my conclusions, in keeping with my hypothesis about his character, he told the truth.

b. Making contact

Nils Hanson, one of the co-authors of the first edition of this manual, tells us: *"The safest way to communicate with a source, in particular where the source is concerned, is in a face-to-face meeting. The purpose of your first contact is to make that meeting happen"* (if the contact leads immediately to a fruitful exchange, that's a bonus). You must be very careful how you make that contact, because it is the moment of greatest vulnerability for your source.

Of course, you do not always need an appointment to make contact with a source. You may show up at their home or office unannounced (the aggressive form of such encounters, in which you confront the source, is called "doorstepping". It is generally considered that Andrew Jennings, who harrowed the corrupt leaders of international sports organizations, was among the greatest masters of this technique[(1)]). You may watch for them at a reception, conference or press conference where you know they'll be in attendance. Or you may approach or be introduced to them through a friend or another source.

As with any relationship, maintain communication after the initial contact. Basic courtesy, like a follow-up message or note, is essential. It's not enough to meet a potential source; they need to remember who you are, and how agreeable (or at least professional) it is to deal with you, at least at the outset.

If no opportunities appear, contact can be made by phone or letter – but only to the person's home. Never call him or her at work, unless you are absolutely sure it is safe to do so. The same applies to email, even if the content is harmless. It is easy for an employer to find out who received an email or other electronic message at work from a journalist. All phone records are traceable, and all Internet activity is traceable. Sending it through the office makes it easy for the boss.

We are not speaking theoretically here. We once saw an investigative team that targeted a public official who was said to be tyrannical and paranoid, as well as corrupt. They wrote to his secretary, at their office, asking her to help them. She refused. But when the boss learned of their letter, as targets always do, how do you think he treated that woman?

Think about how to present yourself before making contact. **You must tell the source who you are, and what you are doing, and how you got their name**. You do not need to tell a source everything about your goals and ideas, but you certainly must not lie to them, unless you're undercover, because when a lie is exposed your reputation with that source and everyone they know is dead. You don't need to say so, but you do need to feel – your confidence, or your embarrassment, will be palpable to sources – that you are going to get this story and tell it, and the world will be a better place when you do. If sources ask why you're asking so many questions, as they often do, you can tell them that they have something to say about a matter of great importance. If that isn't true, you have no business bothering them.

Consider these examples of the right and wrong way:

Wrong: "I want to ask you something, if it's not too much trouble..."

What's wrong: *You don't* **want** *to ask,* **you ask**. *You don't suggest to the source that speaking with you means trouble, and that you're embarrassed to be asking.*

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> **Right**: "Hello, my name is... I am a journalist, working for a media called .... and I am working on the story of .... I believe it's an important story, and I want to tell it fully and accurately. When may we meet to discuss it?"

What's right: *You identify yourself and your purpose fully, and you give the source a good reason to speak with you. You do not ask if you may meet, you ask* **when**. *You do not use the word "interview," which invites the source to connect his or her own name with headlines and a future full of trouble. If you are not working for a specific media, you may say which media you have worked for. If you have not yet worked for any, say which media you will submit the story to.*

Here's how Deborah Nelson handles first contacts on sensitive stories:

> *I look for an opening line that piques their interest – so they stay on the phone or at the door, because they want to know more. I figure I have 10 seconds or less before they shut me down.*
>
> *This has been successful in getting army veterans to stay on the line for an investigation into civilian killings: "I'm Deb Nelson of the Los Angeles Times; I found your name in a declassified file" – as well as some police officers: "I'm Deb Nelson of the Chicago Sun-Times; I have records showing the city has paid out more than $1 million to settle cases against you and wondered what you thought about that." That approach gave the officers a chance to vent about how the city lawyers sold them out before I moved the conversation to the shooting or beating at issue.*

Note the term "conversation". The richest interviews, and the most enjoyable, tend to be conversations between two people who share a mutual interest in the subject and each other. Once that conversation starts, your job is to keep it going. Let's see how.

C

When the interview begins

1. EXTRACTION VERSUS COOPERATION

In every interview, there are two different dynamics at play. The first is what you want to learn from the source. The second is what the source wants you to learn.

You do not set the terms of the encounter; the source has the right to specify the conditions of your conversation. (Whatever you do, don't record in secret.) If the source doesn't want to speak with you, that cannot be taken as evidence that the source has something to hide; they may have been a victim of an unscrupulous reporter before you ever met them. If the source says "we're done," you can go on asking questions, and maybe or not the source will answer them, and maybe that will be the last time you speak.

In short, most often **the source doesn't adapt to us; we adapt to the source**.

The strategy most commonly taught in journalism schools is extractive: Make a list of what you want to know, and then run through the list. That can be highly effective in situations where your time with the source is limited, or you are seeking a particular piece of information. It may be less effective if you're trying to build a relationship. In that case, you allow the source to decide what's important and respond to their concerns as the conversation proceeds. The extractive approach is not effective at all if the source perceives that you are mechanically questioning them without making the effort to listen to the answers.

In investigative work, unlike much news reporting (with the notable exception of beat reporting), our goal is to build a relationship with our sources. The key to that relationship is paying attention to the source. Do you listen closely to what they are trying to tell you? Can you suggest words that help them express themselves without offending them? Do you cut them off when what they're saying makes you uncomfortable or bored? Do you physically recoil when they recount things that scare you? You may be the first person who listened to their story. If they suffered when they lived it, polite disinterest or unconscious hostility on your part will only make them suffer again.

The best way we've found to build active listening skills is through a game we call "Follow That Word", which you can play several times a day without waiting for a formal interview. In fact, I use it at least once in every conversation, every day. When a conversation begins, listen closely, then ask a question that includes a word or phrase from the other party. (Skilled police interrogators do this, too, because it works.) This is particularly effective when a source uses terms that carry an emotional charge. Luuk Sengers gives an example: If you hear a reference to "my sweet sister", you can ask: "What makes her sweet?" (Whether you're playing the game or not, pay attention to such terms. They are open doors to what the source cares about.)

This exercise will also develop your patience, a trait that is often in short supply among news reporters, who are under deadline pressure to get to the point rapidly. That may deliver a sound bite, but we want more than that. We want the source to go deeply into what they've seen, heard and done. If the source opens the door to those assets through their words, you have the right to step inside.

Your first goal in an investigative interview is to help the other person to reveal their knowledge, thoughts and memories. Beyond showing sincere interest, you can also do that by bringing something for the interviewee to react to – a news clip, a photograph, greetings from another source you encountered, a scholarly article on a subject they care about. Any of these gestures will demonstrate your eagerness to understand what the source cares about.

If they want to offer you a gift – a keepsake, a bottle of wine, free lunch – politely refuse it. If they think your sympathy can be purchased, they'll lose respect for you. Maybe they're simply acting out of gratitude or courtesy. Tell them that if they want to stay in touch after they're no longer your source, you'll be glad. Until then, you can't be their friend, because you may find something that they don't like, and using it will seem like a betrayal of your friendship.

When the conversation moves toward an end, be sure to ask, "Is there anything we didn't discuss that you think is important?" A variation is to ask: "Whom should I speak with next?" Without exception, every experienced investigator we have ever met asks those questions. At the very least they signal your desire to fully understand the source. They may also lead to unexpected revelations.

The fictional detective Columbo famously used another device, which salespeople also know about: At the moment the interview ends, say thanks, get up to go, then stop and say: "Oh, one more thing." The mechanism involved is to let the source think you're done and come back when their guard is down. I used it in a felony courtroom, where a key witness had just survived three hours of cross-examination. I followed him to the door and complimented him on his performance, which was indeed admirable. (Never lie to a source, even to flatter them.) He relaxed. Then I asked why he had withheld a certain fact. He literally threw up his arms and cried out, "You mustn't say that!" It was confirmation that the fact was crucial.

But such tricks can betray you. If he had been among the millions of Columbo fans and recognized the gambit, our relationship would have ended there, because I was manipulating him.

In general, avoid manipulating your sources, unless you're ready to lose them. **Be as transparent as you can and see if the source responds to your good faith.** If not, be careful what you reveal, and look for a source of better character.

2. CONFRONT OR EMPATHISE?

Is the person you plan to meet a victim, an expert, an initiator of the problem, a government official? Do you challenge them all in the same way? After all, what could be more fair than to treat everyone the same?

In fact, it's not fair to add confrontation to the list of injustices that victims must face, not least because it may revive their traumas. Active listening (in which you adopt the source's rhythm and follow their words, facial expressions and body language) and a more gentle tone usually leads to the same results. The ARIJ reporter who uncovered child labor at dump sites (see Chapter 3) took that path when she met the children:

> *I realized they always feel better talking while they are walking or doing something, or being around someone who either shared the same experience (groups of two for instance), or with whom they are comfortable. Don't let it feel like an interview because that's when you actually lose them.*

Of course, you must remain sceptical toward even a victim's claims. Reporters who neglect to consider the motives or mistakes of victims run a very large risk. **Even victims/survivors must be asked for corroboration, and even perpetrators have a right to comment on accusations and evidence**. If the victims/survivors can't point to corroborating evidence without reliving their trauma, don't neglect to verify the details of their accounts independently.

Most of us have been influenced by interviews we saw on television. The confrontational approach to interviewing, especially in politics, is a mainstay of television news shows. *60 Minutes* perfected the "ambush" interview, in which the interviewee is shown a document or other evidence that makes him or her look very bad, and the camera records the source's anguish or rage. It's exciting television, and sometimes those interviews generate game-changing scandals[(1)].

But we can't always work that way, for at least two reasons. The first is that any investigation may require us to maintain contact with sources, to confirm, deny or explain new information in our possession. The ambush announces hostile intent, and when we attack a source, we nearly always lose access.

The second reason, and the most important, is that **people who are ambushed may talk nonsense out of shock**. I was ambushed in a filmed interview early in my career, when the interviewer asked how I justified writing for a pornographic magazine. I stammered out a justification but forgot to say the truth: I had never done what he accused me of. If you use ambush material in your story without verifying the target's reply, you may be committing libel. The same applies if you quote one source to attack another, without confirming that the accuser knows what they're talking about.

3. CHOOSE YOUR ROLE

An interview is also a performance, and every interviewer has a favourite role – house visitor, chronicler, curious individual, informant (yes, you inform them, too, every time you ask a question). **Whatever role you assume, do so consciously.** Imagine the part you will play before an interview starts, *based on your profile of the source.*

The two simplest roles, in our experience, are the expert and the naive listener.

- **The expert can dialogue with sources** by exchanging information, offering informed comments, or posing precise questions aimed at capturing more or less subtle facts. This role is particularly effective with sources who are themselves trying to comprehend complex matters, like a criminal case; a reporter who has closely studied the case can help them think it through.
- **The naive listener** – another role played to perfection by Peter Falk as Columbo – **asks simple questions**, accepts the answers, says thanks, and then goes away to verify what they've been told. Don't dismiss this stuff as mere fiction; we've known honest, smart cops who watched that series to improve their techniques.

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It is usually wise to begin with a source from a more or less naive standpoint. Sources nearly always care less about your expertise, and more about whether you're working hard to understand what you've been told. Limited expertise can help make that demonstration, as long as you don't boast about what you know to someone whose knowledge is deeper than yours. Instead, take the position that you know a little, and want to know more. That allows the source to feel proud to help you, and rightly so.

Whether you wish to appear naive or expert, be sure to repeat what your source told you in your own words from time to time, and ask if you have correctly understood its meaning. Be careful: Sometimes sources will say "yes" just to be polite. Let them know that you don't mind being wrong; you care about making sure that you heard them right.

The role you must avoid, unless your ambition is to be an opinion star on a propaganda outlet, is to judge the person you are listening to. Some sources will buckle when faced with a judgment, but others will respond with anger. Be careful about this: You can communicate a judgment with an aggressive response, a raised eyebrow, a backward step. **Save the judgment for the story, by stating the meaning of the facts**. We will discuss your right as a reporter to make judgments or valid inferences based on the evidence when we discuss writing in Chapter 7.

II

The matter of safety – yours and theirs

Investigative journalism has never been more inflential, and the pushback from politicians, business interests and criminal organisations has never been greater.

Before the past decade, the chief risks faced by investigative reporters were psychological, legal or reputational; assassinations, like the killing of the great journalist and publisher Norbert Zongo[1], were rare. UNESCO has recorded[2] the killing of more than 1800 journalists worldwide since 1993. In the first quarter of this century, the most important factor driving the killing of journalists has been the number of journa-

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lists reporting on or in armed conflict and crises. Attacks against journalists have nonetheless grown in scale, intensity and complexity. New risks have arisen through the nefarious use of digital technologies, particularly to target women and other vulnerable groups, as well as to surveil journalists. Strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs)(1) and other misuses of criminal, tax and financial legislation have been used to threaten, harass, bankrupt and silence critical reporting.

The great majority of investigations do not entail such risks. You would be wise to undertake less dangerous subjects while building your skills.

Meanwhile, practice working securely, not only for yourself, but for your sources. Ignoring potential threats will not make them disappear. Below we consider some necessary precautions.

A
Protecting yourself

1. EMOTIONAL SAFETY IS NOT A LUXURY

A new element is appearing in our work – consciously and explicitly managing the emotional aftershocks of investigative work, which requires immersion in more or less hostile situations and extended contact with victims. Until very recently, reporters managed those effects on their own, usually by instinct. (After Anne-Marie Casteret exposed the Contaminated Blood Affair, her next project was a book about people who lived happily for more than a century.) Women, who now account for the majority of reporters in fields like climate coverage, have played a leading role in recognizing the necessity to codify the threats and counter-measures.

Elodie Vialle, a safety trainer for numerous journalism institutions, advises that "caring for your safety also means caring for your emotional well-being." She proposes that reporters adopt specific practices before and during the work, and after it's done.

- *"Situational awareness is your best ally in the field. Monitor your environment continuously. Listen to your instinct: If something feels off, trust it."*
- *"The pressure to 'go further' can be intense – especially when adrenaline kicks in, or you're with competitive teams. Resist it."* [This hits home to me; a dear friend of mine got killed by ignoring that advice. The point of the work is not to prove how brave you are; doing the job is already brave enough.] Watch out for team members, she says: *"Check in with others. Ask how they're doing."*
- *"Many investigative journalists carry the burden of the stories they expose. Sources might reach out to you for months, sometimes years. The weight can be heavy - even more so if you're the only woman or the only racialized person in a team."*

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- *" Once the assignment ends, the work is not over. Debrief formally. What worked? What didn't? What will you do differently next time? What practices will you repeat?"*
- *"Check in with yourself. Disconnect. Talk to a friend. Rest. If you have access to psychological support or identity- and trauma-informed therapy, use it. Encourage your newsroom to offer it if it doesn't already. Healing is part of the process. So is solidarity."*

It's an unfortunate fact that you can't always expect solidarity from reporters who have no experience of investigative work. Journalists who show their own pain – something that is best left out of our stories, as we'll see in Chapter 7– can be told to "get real" or regarded as crazy. Choose your confidants carefully.

We've met journalists in the process of burning out at conferences and elsewhere. They came back, and so will you if you don't hide it, especially from yourself. We'll point to further resources on this matter in our resource guide.

2. INTERVIEWING DANGEROUS SOURCES

Drew Sullivan of the OCCRP has compiled a list of procedures to follow when speaking with gangsters. They make equally good sense for contacts with hostile sources in any investigation:

- *Talk on the phone or meet in a public location.*
- *Do not give them personal information (like the name or profession of your friend, your home town, etc.).*
- *Be professional. Do not get personal, friendly, cute, flirty, funny. Do not show fear.*
- *Make sure you give them a means to contact you for comments after you publish (but never, ever, your personal address!).*
- *Have a backup. Get a second reporter to observe the meeting, and have numbers you can call with a signal if there's trouble.*

Fear is natural when you are in the presence of dangerous creatures. One way to deal with it is to consider the sensation as a phenomenon that you may notate for further analysis, following the interview. **(Never notate your feelings during an interview**. Sources might grab your notebook or read it over your shoulder. Yes, it happened to us.) This literally objectifies your emotion and enables you to take a certain distance from it.

It may also suggest new avenues of investigation. For example, if you reflexively avoid the people on one side of the room, it might be due to your intuition that they are more dangerous than the others. You can verify that intuition: What might make them so dangerous? On one occasion, asking that question led me to the discovery of an extreme right sect, by backgrounding the people I avoided.

3. TAKE THREATS SERIOUSLY

We have been threatened when working on certain projects, and you may be too. Threats may range from blacklisting, which makes it more difficult to earn a living, to legal action, which can bankrupt you, or to physical assaults. The chances of a threat being carried out rise according to the character and resources of the person making it; they also rise if you have something to hide yourself. (As the magistrate Eva Joly advised the newly-founded GIJN in 2003, "Make sure you're clean.")

The places to start mitigating threats are your computer and your phone: Upgrade your antivirus, virtual private networks, passwords and two-step verification, and make sure you have backup copies of any data in your cloud archives. If you must pay for the upgrades, consider it a necessary investment. It's also a good idea to remove information about bank accounts and identity papers from your computer and make at least two copies on removable drives.

If the actors have a criminal or corrupt history and an organisation at their disposal, and reason to believe that they can escape consequences for retaliating against you and your work, they may well be capable of acting on their threats. Do not dismiss this possibility. The global rate of impunity for killings against journalists still remains exceptionally high at 85% according to UNESCO[1]. Several investigative reporters, like Daphne Caruana Galizia[2] and Jan Kuciak[3], have been murdered for their work in the past decade. Environmental journalists, who are often our allies and contributors in the field, are also being killed in their line of duty. UNESCO's research[4] found that a total of 44 journalists reporting on environmental issues have been killed in 15 different countries between 2009 and 2023, with only five cases resulting in convictions. At least 24 journalists survived murder attempts.

To assess your risks, says Khomenok, ask yourself these questions, and share the answers with your editor or collaborators:

- *Who knows you're working on the story?*
- *Is the story a threat to their interests? How big a threat?*
- *Do they have a history of dealing with such threats? That history is vital, but it may not reflect how far they will go in the present. Has the actor changed?*
- *Have they given you a warning? What, specifically, are they trying to prevent you from doing, and what do they suggest or state they will do in response?*
- *Is there any evidence of hidden danger (like surveillance, phone calls to the newsroom from unknown people requesting contact information and personal data or questioning colleagues and friends about the reporter)? These signs are more dangerous than warnings, because they indicate that a reporter's life and habits are being analysed for some malicious purpose.*

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- *Who can and will help you to mitigate the threats – for example, by giving you a place to say, or holding evidence concerning your targets in a safe place, or being available if you call for help? Does your newsroom offer insurance in case you are injured because of your work? If not, do you have your own?*
- *Can you put distance between yourself and the threat? In some countries, reporters tell us that leaving town for a few days is sometimes wise. Others have chosen exile. In rare cases reporters work anonymously, signing their stories with pseudonyms or not at all.*

B

Protecting your sources

1. IDENTIFYING THE SOURCE

Ideally, we always want our sources to speak on the record and take responsibility for their words. In reality, we must consider how they might be endangered by their honesty, because they may not be fully conscious of the risks they assume by speaking. On the one hand, **we are compiling a public record, and it will be more credible if sources can be identified. On the other hand, people we identify may become targets**. The Emmy-award-winning film "Retrograde", which focuses on the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, showed the faces[1] of several men who had worked with foreign troops. They were found and arrested, and in some cases killed. Don't make such irreversible mistakes.

Oleg Khomenok offers several ways in which you may identify sources, balancing the source's own desires and the needs of the story:

- **Complete identification** (name, title, direct or indirect quotation): This can apply to government officials, who are responsible for their words and acts, and to experts who comment on situations in which they're not directly involved, as well as victims who assume the possible consequences of speaking out.
- **Partial identification** means that you indicate status or qualifications (such as "an expert observer"), and omit the name or other identifying characteristics of the source. You can negotiate the terms with the source.
- An **anonymous source** remains unnamed or is identified by a pseudonym, and their information can be cited. In general, you need at least four anonymous sources to be confident of the information. (And make sure that the confirming sources aren't all getting their information from the first source.) Even that will not protect you if you are prosecuted for libel and cannot produce a witness to your information.

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- Finally, **the journalist can be the source of the information and take responsibility for its accuracy.**

The question of identification is closely linked to the question of whether source statements are on or off the record. Very few sources have an accurate understanding of what these terms mean, so you may want to tell them: *"Off the record"* means that you can't use the information unless *you can attribute it to another human or documentary source*. In other words, one source can't stop you from looking for another, but without that other source, you can't use the material. "Not for attribution" means that you can use the information, but you can't attribute it to them; the source may be partially identified or remain anonymous. "On the record" means that you can use what the source told you, with full identification.

In general, says Khomenok, *"The more identified sources the journalist uses, the higher is the audience's trust in the information. In contrast, the less a journalist refers to an identified source, the more they are protected."* He advises: *"If you cannot name the source, look for a document that you can link to that makes the same points."* As always, when you know what you're looking for, the chances of finding it go up.

2. USING DOCUMENTS SAFELY

It's always exciting when we are given a powerful document. However, the fact that we obtained it does not end our responsibility to the source. If someone who wishes to remain unidentified offers you a document, ask: "How many other people have seen this?" The higher the number, the less the chance that your source will be exposed. Sources, by the way, greatly appreciate being asked.

We repeat: Don't keep sensitive documents on your computer. Copies should be kept somewhere besides your home or office; if you put them online, use the available security procedures to the max. The non-profit Forbidden Stories has created a "Safebox"[(1)] where reporters working in sensitive or dangerous environments can store their archives. There will surely be more such initiatives. Don't let studying them make you nervous to the point where you avoid thinking about whether or not you need to use them.

Numerous documents can't be shown or published in their original state without endangering the source. Microprinting on a document may encode the time, date, device and computer from which the document was printed. On some occasions, the supposedly confidential location of sources has been revealed by metadata encoded in photographs. That data is useful if you're looking for someone. It's dangerous if you're trying to protect the source. Ask your sources if any document they provide you can be traced back to them, and how you can remove or obscure the traces. Better yet, investigate how to do so[(2)] and tell the source how you're doing it.

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3. PROTECTING WHISTLEBLOWERS

A whistleblower is someone who offers you confidential information or documents from within an institution. In most jurisdictions, they run a high risk of losing their jobs, lawsuits or criminal prosecution by telling their employer's secrets. You can lower their risks by following certain procedures.

First, know the law in your jurisdiction. The mere possession of certain documents may be illegal, for the source as for you. The argument that revealing them is in the public interest may not be a sufficient defence. Don't wait until you are arrested or sued to find out. You also want to know whether there is a statute of limitations that applies to any use you might make of the documents.

A good example is the General Data Protection Regulation law (GDPR)[(1)]. It governs how organizations collect, store, and manage personal data relating to individuals located within the European Union, even when the organizations processing that data are outside the EU. It is widely regarded as one of the strongest privacy and security laws in the world. While the GDPR provides certain exemptions for processing carried out solely for journalistic purposes and in the public interest, these protections are not automatic. Some of the materials you obtain may fall outside those exemptions and therefore must be handled in accordance with the GDPR's general requirements. Such data must be processed lawfully, securely, and only for a legitimate purpose, and in some cases organizations may be required to cease processing or delete the information in line with the law.

Second, protect the source's anonymity so far as possible, starting with respecting the source's wishes in the matter. In the Panama Papers case, the reporters who received the data leaks never learned the identity of their source.[(2)] There may be exceptions to this rule. The journalist and scholar Elena Egawhary[(3)] has argued that whistleblowers don't need anonymity; instead, they need support, which is impossible to provide if you can't contact them. Nonetheless, the current best practice is to create secure, anonymous online channels for whistleblowers, as the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists offers to its sources on its Leak to us - ICIJ[(4)] page.

If you do know the whistleblower's identity, leave any and all identifying information, in particular names, contact and employment data, out of your digital and paper records.

The least secure tool at your disposal is a computer. If you put information about the source on a computer, disconnect it at all times from the Internet. (That's why Seymour Hersh works with a typewriter, and it hasn't kept him from being productive.) If you send an email to them, use an encrypted service or PGP ("pretty good privacy")[(5)] codes. Make sure that your passwords change often, and that your antivirus software is up to date.

These are the minimum steps. The maximum is constantly evolving, as intelligence agencies and private firms develop new tools for surveillance and penetration of our

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assets. They are a cost of doing business, and if your business is a high-stakes game, you'll have to pay it. Investigative journalism conferences have regularly offered sessions on security over the past decade. That's a good reason to attend.

III

The smart ways to go undercover

Undercover work was among the first techniques used by investigative journalists, with a history that goes back at least to 19th-century London[1]. Reporters like Nellie Bly[2], who pretended to be insane in order to expose the inhumane conditions in an American "asylum", achieved real victories for the public interest. That tradition is still alive – for example, in the work of reporters Măriuța Nistor and Natalia Zaharescu[3], who won the European Press Prize in 2024 for their account of going undercover in a troll factory.

Unfortunately, undercover investigation is easily misused by lazy reporters or neophytes. In their work, the adventure of penetrating an exotic or merely private environment distracts the audience from the holes in the story. The adventure becomes its own justification, an exercise in cheap thrills. The reporter becomes the story, and their obsessions become "facts." There are better ways to do the job, and they all involve additional work.

A

First, understand the risks

Whenever we ask students to propose projects, someone in the room says, "I want to go undercover." To beginners, undercover work looks like a shortcut to exposing how the world really works. Why bother to slog through piles of documents and hours of tense interviews when you can penetrate the rooms where secrets are exchanged by pretending to be someone else?

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One answer is: because documents and transparent interviews won't kill you, and someone who discovers that you're spying on them – which is arguably what you're doing when you go undercover, even if it's in the public interest – very well might. If you approach someone and say, "I'm a journalist," the worst thing that will probably happen is that they'll say, "I don't like journalists, so get out of here." If you're caught operating under false pretences, you have no rights anymore, and your targets may feel that you have violated theirs.

A second answer is that according to a BBC producer cited by GIJN[(1)], contemporary undercover work is *"80%... traditional, thorough, source work, some intelligence work, and paperwork, and then the final 20% is what brings you the result. But if it's not underpinned by this very solid base of traditional work, it's just not going to work."*

Journalists are the only people on the planet who have the right – not by law, but by custom – to ask anyone any question, anytime, anyplace, once they say who they are and what they're doing. Everyone else has the right to refuse to speak with us, for any or no reason. By going undercover, we take that right away from them (and lose our own right to freely question others, because we have to be very careful what we discuss in hostile environments). We may have strong cause to think that they're conducting business that harms other people; if we don't, we shouldn't be there in the first place. Even if we have that justification, we are putting the public interest over theirs, and they can't be expected to like or even respect what we're doing. We are moving in their world, where a different set of values applies. If it's a criminal world, violence will be considered legitimate and necessary.

In recent years several organizations have sent undercover reporters into educational institutions[(2)] and day care centers where mistreatment of children was suspected. This genre of story often leads to reform or prosecution of wrongdoers, and we think it's justified, because the juvenile victims can't tell what they've experienced, and they may be facing immediate threats to their physical or mental integrity. We worked with a young reporter who went undercover in an Islamist school in her country, at great personal risk, and she won a prestigious award for it. However, on the night she lost another prize, she burst into tears and said: "I could've been killed."

Journalists can indeed get killed while undercover. Tim Lopes[(3)], a photographer and producer who worked undercover in gang-controlled favelas, was one of them. On the night of June 2, 2002, he was confronted, abducted, tortured and executed. Tobore Ovuorie[(4)], a reporter for Premium Times in West Africa, came close to the same fate when she infiltrated a human trafficking network. During a meeting with gang members, two women were beheaded in front of her by traffickers who claimed they had a right to the women's body parts.

Undercover work should never be initiated without full knowledge and discussion of the risks, and without a strategy to mitigate them

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and come back with a great story. Let's consider what the most experienced journalists in the field have learned about doing that job in recent years. Their best practices amount to a step change in undercover methods.

B
Making the decision to go undercover

Leaders in investigative journalism around the world are unanimous: **Undercover investigation must always be the last resort, when it is clear that an important story for the public interest cannot be obtained by any other means**. Their accord results from multiple causes besides the danger of the work.

- When properly done, undercover reporting involves more – not less – preparation, documentation, expense and sheer work than other forms of investigation.
- It demands a higher level of professionalism from everyone involved – reporters, editors, publishers.
- It entails heightened legal risks, in addition to the physical risks.

The crucial first step in an undercover investigation is to ask: **Is this the only way we can get the story?** Often enough, it isn't. But sometimes, yes, it is.

- Is it necessary to go undercover to penetrate a political movement? Probably not, is my opinion after working openly among the extreme right for several years in the 1990s. At the time, undercover reporters, mainly freelancers, got themselves invited to extremist events or took jobs under false identities, then put the worst of what they heard and saw into articles. You'd hear that stuff anyway if you stayed around long enough under your own identity to build relationships with party members. Meanwhile, you could freely ask questions and collect documents from your sources, without fear of exposure.
- To penetrate a criminal organisation? Maybe, at high risk. In certain cases, criminals may be willing to speak with reporters. To investigate extra-judicial assassinations by police, reporters from the Al Jazeera English 101 East[1] investigative programme found criminal sources without going undercover.

  Probably the least dangerous way to engage with a criminal organisation or its enablers is to pose as a customer for its services – for example, by listening to a corrupt lawyer's pitch for evading taxes, as OCCRP did in its investigation "Lazslo Kiss, the Offshore Master" (included in The Global Investigative Journalism Casebook). Do not however profit

(1)

from criminal activity. Likewise, if you're pretending to be interested in drugs, don't buy or sell them. Also, try not to find yourself in a situation where you can't leave when you want – for example, by getting into someone's car and letting them take you to a destination of their choice.

- Gunter Wallraff[1] famously went undercover to expose a culture of racism by posing as an immigrant. By undertaking a metamorphosis of his identity, Wallraff sought to augment his story's dramatic impact, in order to shock his society toward change. It's an important justification for undercover work, and it does not remove the obligation to first consider whether other approaches might work. In Walraff's case, it's difficult to imagine what other approach might have had the same impact. It's also noteworthy that he didn't merely dip in and out; he played the role for two years before writing about it.

Every case is different. Al-Jazeera has a wise rule[2] for assessing them: **There must be a documented path to the decision to go undercover or not, and the impossibility of other paths must be documented too**. Any other approach may be reckless, from both legal and personal safety standpoints.

C

Managing the risks

1. GETTING OUT MAY BE HARDER THAN GETTING IN

We've heard plenty of reporters talk about going to a dangerous place. We've heard fewer thinking out loud about how they'll get back. Nate Thayer[3], the last journalist to interview the Cambodian dictator Pol Pot, said that he wasn't the first to achieve that exploit, but he was the first to come home..

When you go undercover, you are no longer on your own ground. If you are exposed, your last and best option is usually to escape. We've heard assurances from neophytes that they can handle themselves when that occurs. "I'll jump out of the car! I'll figure something out!" A freelance journalist who sought to infiltrate a hard right party tells[4] how such improvised tactics may end in humiliation, if you're lucky:

> *They asked for my name – I gave a fake one – and then, unexpectedly, my passport. I claimed not to have it. They found it after searching my bag.... I saw the chapter head Googling frantically in a closed back office. A few members marched back and joined him. Something was loudly discussed.... Then I saw the chapter head pick up the phone. I grabbed my bag, dashed past the soldiers, out the stairwell and ran down the street. I took three different cabs home. I haven't been back.*

In sharp contrast, Tobore Ovuorie[4] advises that you need "an escape plan, a rescue team,

(1) (2) (3) (4)

enough money for emergencies, an effective means of communication with your editor, and tracking devices for extreme undercover scenarios, such as embedding yourself in human trafficking rings." If you go in without such backup, you increase the chances that you won't get out. Even with those resources, Ovuorie survived her encounter with a sex trafficking ring by luck, when someone persuaded the men who were about to behead her to choose another victim. It happened the night before she was scheduled to escape the traffickers' camp and return home with her colleagues; an overworked editor had missed her warning[1] that the gang dealt in "human sacrifice". **If you make an extraction plan, take care to have a backup plan, too, and someone behind you to carry it out.**

2. THE LAW MAY NOT BE ON YOUR SIDE

a. Your methods may be illegal and unethical

Do you plan to use a fake ID? That may be illegal in your jurisdiction. Will you record video or audio on a concealed device? That might be against the law, too, and the public interest may not be a viable defence. The anti-abortion activist David Daleiden[2], who went undercover to seek proof that the abortion services provider Planned Parenthood is a "criminal organisation", was charged[3] with 16 felonies in two states. Some of the charges were later dropped. He also lost a defamation lawsuit[4] filed by Planned Parenthood, who won an award of two million USD that was upheld[5] on appeal. Going undercover is not a substitute for doing the job legally.

b. You have the same rights as any other citizen, and no more

In general, you don't have rights beyond what other citizens can claim when you go undercover. In the landmark Food Lion case[6], ABC News sent two undercover operatives, equipped with hidden cameras, to document the alleged sale of rotten meat by a supermarket chain. The company sued for fraud, trespass and disloyalty -- ABC's reporters got themselves hired by Food Lion -- and won 5.5 million USD at trial. (Note that these are civil torts, not crimes.) An appeals court threw out the fraud count and reduced the judgment to just 2 USD on the trespass and disloyalty counts. Still, that decision and others have affirmed that reporters who enter a place of business under false pretences could be liable for trespass and other offenses.

Legal jeopardy varies wildly by jurisdiction. Hidden camera reporting on farms is a crime in several U.S. states. Nearly a dozen states prohibit secret recording of private conversations -- as Linda Tripp[7] discovered after she secretly taped phone chats with a White House intern who was having an affair with the President. If the phone conversation had taken place in a district where it was legal, there wouldn't have been a problem. But she was in a jurisdiction where it's a criminal offense that can carry up to a 10-year sentence. She was spared when a judge ruled key evidence inadmissible, forcing the prosecutor to drop the charges.

(1) (2) (3) (4) (5) (6) (7)

The moral of these stories: **Know the pertinent national and local laws at the location of your reporting before you go in.**

3. HOW EASY ARE YOU TO EXPOSE?

Have you posted your photos or achievements on social media? If so, "delete everything you can from the internet, including all social media. Profiles need to be deleted and, if necessary, replaced with new ones," advises journalist Patryk Szczepaniak(1). Moreover, you'll need to create a new identity, using "memories and experiences from your own past to make your story authentic." That may also involve disguising yourself, he notes, changing your appearance and wardrobe, "including socks and underwear." If you're going to pretend to be someone else, you must think of all the details of your new identity.

Are you using a concealed camera or microphone? Such devices are now cheap and easy to purchase, and they are also possible to detect through a body search or electronic surveillance. GIJN advises: *"Make sure you research what kind of security measures might be taken by your target before you go in with your hidden camera."*

4. YOU MUST STILL ACT FAIRLY

While undercover work necessarily involves ethical transgressions in the service of the public interest, your story remains bound by the same standards of fairness that apply to any other form of journalistic work. In the Food Lion case, a Federal court(2) found that the reporters had more than once betrayed their unknowing employer: *"As one snippet from their videotape shows, instead of cleaning a meat grinder that a loyal employee would have undertaken to clean, even if the task were not specifically assigned to the employee, the ABC employee photographed the dirty meat grinder and offered it as an example of poor food-handling practices."*

David Daleiden admitted(3) in an interview on CNN that he had deceptively edited his undercover footage, and had used video and photographs in his report that were unrelated to Planned Parenthood. He told an evangelical conference(4): "In normal every[day] life, we don't always communicate the truth by a simple, one equals one, mathematical way of speaking. We often use poetry and metaphor and even pretext in order to communicate really important truth in a more clear way." Whatever that may be, it's neither investigative journalism nor easily defensible in a libel trial.

You can't darken your findings, or accuse people of things they didn't do, or ignore what they've tried to fix, just because you hate the targets or want to make the story more compelling.... unless you are prepared to pay for it when you become a target in your turn.

In Chapter 8, we will detail the "quality control" procedures that ensure you can back up what you say, on the right side of the law.

(1) (2) (3) (4)

1.
We define an investigation.

2.
We create a hypothesis to verify our idea.

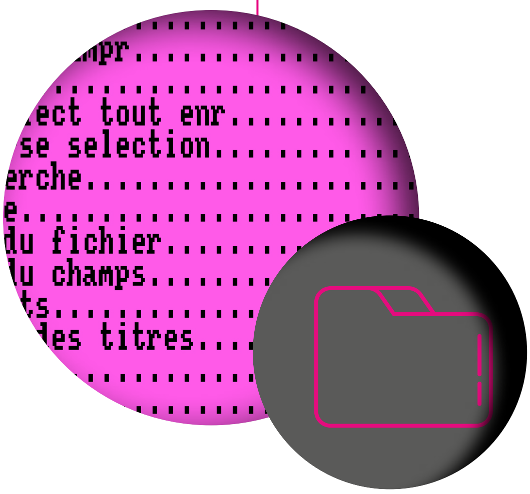
3.
We begin to build a timeline of events and a map of the actors.

4.
We seek open sources to validate and extend our research.

5.
We identify and encounter human sources.

6.
THE USES AND MAKING OF A MASTERFILE

masterfile



With
Luuk Sengers, Oleg Khomenok, Deborah Nelson,
and Eva Constantaras

Beginners believe that the crucial work of investigation resides in discovering and penetrating secrets. Professionals understand that the organization of the material generated by the investigation is even more important, because unless they manage it, they are going to drown in it. They do not gather an ocean of material and then seek its meaning; they continuously collect, organize, and analyze.

Organizing your investigation is about making sure that:

- You know what documentation you have found and the information it contains (the "assets");
- You know what evidence is missing from your inquiry;
- You know where a given asset is and can put your hand on it immediately (meaning within 30 seconds, the approximate time it takes for your lawyer to become anxious);
- You can make connections between related facts across your assets.

This is not optional: **You have to spend enough time to maintain control of your data and documentation at every step of an inquiry.** Every hour you spend on organization will save you time as you drive toward the finish. It will also enable you to undertake further projects in the same sector from a solid foundation of data.

For all those reasons, we recommend that you create a **masterfile** – a kind of database that compiles in a single document, or a sequenced collection of documents, all of the information and insights that you expect to use in writing your story.

The masterfile is a structured archive of your discoveries and insights. **As you build the masterfile, you are building and documenting your story**. Eventually it serves to select and refine your material. You will edit the masterfile down to create a structure for the final story. In the process, you will create an asset that will serve throughout your career. If you think this is merely a fastidious task that you can bypass, you're tossing all those benefits in the trash.

There are many ways to make a masterfile. If you're working solo or in small teams, you can use the simple procedures outlined below. Working in a large-scale collaboration is a different challenge, which Eva Constantaras addresses in an annex.

I

Organising your documentation

A

Handling documents

Our goal is to create a database of our material that is directly pertinent to the emerging story, giving us essential evidence as well as rich context and detail. **The necessary first step after collecting the evidence involves archiving it**. This archive can be constructed with physical objects (paper documents or photos), or electronic data (including transcripts, audio or video files, or anything else in digital form). It is far more efficient to create it step by step, as the material comes in, than it is to later sift through a pile of notes, documents and photos.

These are the necessary steps:

1. **Collect documents.** A source's business card is a document. So is an official report, a news clip, photograph, dataset, interview notes or transcripts, etc. If the documents are not searchable – meaning you can't find specific terms, like names, without opening them – run them through an OCR converter program when you save them. (We will name some in our resource guide.)
2. **Review the document in order to assess its contents.** Underline or highlight any passages that appear of particular importance. If you discover important information on a web page, immediately copy the page to your hard drive or the Cloud. It is very easy to take down web pages if you own them (which you don't), and your evidence might disappear if you can only access it by its original URL. Yes, there are workarounds, like the Wayback Machine (http://web.archive.org/[1]), which collects web pages that would otherwise disappear. But workarounds take time that you will never get back.

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3. **Give the document a working title.** Any title will do so long as it describes what the documents contain. This is especially important for web pages. Saving a web page under its original filename is often the same thing as hiding it in plain sight in your archive. For interviews, we suggest you use the subject's name and the date of the conversation. If the subject is confidential, do not leave it on your computer.
4. **File the documents in a way that enables you to relocate them quickly.** You can file documents alphabetically, by subject, by the date of their creation, by keywords or names or all of the above. If a number of documents concern the same subject, such as interviews or datasets, or chapters and actors of your narrative, you may create a separate folder, then expand and sub-divide the folder as more documents arrive.
5. **Review the documents periodically.** Once a month is sufficient. Make sure that the different documents are filed correctly. If a document looks unfamiliar to you, take a moment to read it. The point of this exercise is to keep your files updated while ensuring that you know what they contain.
6. **Exchange documents across folders.** If a particular event or series of events leaps out of the file to suggest a separate story or block of material in your story, copy related documents from all pertinent files and begin a new folder. Be sure to leave copies of all documents in their previous files. This is a technique used by the FBI (Woodward and Bernstein borrowed it for their Watergate work): Whenever an interview refers to another document (for example, if both contain the name of the same person), copies of each document are placed in folders concerning these individuals. The reason for this technique is that it increases the chances you will make connections between disparate bits of data.
7. **Make backups.** Digital documents can be stored in a secure online site like Document Cloud or Dropbox; wherever you store it, make sure you use every security feature allowed by the site, and make an offline backup copy. If documents are sensitive, prepare copies and store them in a place that is not your home or office, and to which you or a colleague can have access. Do not put sensitive data, such as the names of confidential sources, on your computer.

II

Principles and content of the master file

A

Function dominates format

The procedures that go into making a masterfile may vary from one project or practitioner to another, but whatever their form, they have in common that **they facilitate specific procedures and functions**:

- Review the status of the research: What do we already know? What do we still need to find out?
- Make an initial selection of material pertinent to the story: Keeping the key extracts from documents and interviews in one file reduces search time to a minimum.
- Analyze the material: Add notes and insights that may be used in the final story.
- Share the material and collaborate with colleagues and editors; continually update progress reports.
- Begin the task of structuring the narrative.

The steps outlined below will make it easier for you to exploit the resources collected by investigating. You can read them as a procedure, or as indications of what your procedure must achieve.

B

The elements of the masterfile

1. STATE THE HYPOTHESIS

We prefer to place the hypothesis at the top of the master file, in order to recall the focus and scope of the investigation each time the file is opened. The hypothesis will most likely be updated and revised in successive versions of the master file, to reflect discoveries and insights from the investigation. To avoid confusion between successive versions, make sure that either your drive app automatically saves successive versions, or insert a date stamp into the name of the file and change the date every time you work on it. The key is to ensure traceability in your work and backup in case you lose something by mistake or a file is corrupted.

2. IMPORT THE TIMELINE AND SOURCE MAP INTO THE MASTER FILE

We recommend creating both a timeline and a source map for every story. Every story contains both chronological (events in sequence) and spatial (events and actors in different places) elements. It's generally an advantage to consider the story from both perspectives.

3. CHOOSE THE MAIN AXIS OF THE STORY: CHRONOLOGY OR MOVEMENT ACROSS THE LANDSCAPE

If key events occur more or less simultaneously but in different locations, this is an indication that a spatial structure will predominate. If the story unfolds over time, in a sequence of cause and effect, a chronological structure will probably be most adequate, with spatial elements playing a secondary role.

It is usually simpler to arrange the material in the master file according to the chronological sequence of events in the story. Alternatively, separate headings for each actor or institution on a source map may be noted under the hypothesis. Events pertinent to these actors can then be inserted under the headings. We recommend that these events follow chronological order.

Space and time are not mutually exclusive. Every event occurs somewhere, and every place or character has a history. In the end, either time or space will predominate in the structure of the finished story, but elements of both will be present.

Check to make sure that each entry includes basic information (in case you didn't add it in when you made your timeline).

- The *date* and *location* of the event. The date can be a season, a month, or a precise day and hour. In general, be as precise as you can.
- Key actors in the event and how they reacted to it.
- A brief (summary) or detailed (scene) *account* of the event, with citations from documents or interviews.
- If an event or actor brings to mind similar events or other actions, add a note that makes the link explicit, either by referring to them in a comment or hyperlinking to them.

4. ADD SENSORY DETAILS

Make sure that you gathered sensory details as you reported the story. Without them your audience will find it very difficult to enter the scenes you are describing, or to care about the people who lived them. Details such as how someone dresses, or died, how their homes or offices are furnished, what the landscape around them looks like, how they speak to someone else (are they angry? kind?) transform places and characters from "talking heads" and depthless backdrops into complete human beings and environments. **Our actors are not merely sources, they are characters; the places we describe are places where unimaginable things become real.** If you didn't collect such observations in the field, you'll need to go back and get them, or you'll have to forgo their use.

5. SPECIFY THE SOURCES FOR EACH ENTRY

We said it in Chapter 3, but we'll repeat it here, because it's essential: Investigative reporters must always try to keep their information and the source of the information in immediate proximity (unless the source is confidential). The chief reason is that reporters forget how they know a given fact when the facts begin to multiply. Therefore, **for each fact added to the masterfile, we also immediately provide the source**.

- If the source is an interview, note the time and place.
- If it is a quotation from a document, provide the full bibliographical references.

If you already did this when you compiled your timeline, congratulations: You have saved time. If not, do it now. You cannot publish an investigation before it has been fact-checked, unless you want to run the risk of being sued and losing, and you can't fact-check a given point unless you know where it came from.

By linking each fact directly to its source, the masterfile becomes a useful reference document and asset. This will also be of tremendous value if and when you undertake a future project on the same subject.

6. WRITE SUMMARIES

The reporter can develop the habit of summarizing information in the masterfile — preferably in one sentence. We have found that regularly writing short summaries helps to analyze the material, because it is difficult to summarize something if one does not understand it. Moreover, while summarizing one often realizes the relevance of the material.

Summaries should not be placed within quotation marks, to avoid confusion with source material. They may include *descriptions* of people, places or situations observed by the reporter.

7. ADD NOTES AND INSIGHTS: EVERY TIME YOU REVIEW THE MASTERFILE – AT LEAST ONCE EVERY WEEK – ANALYZE THE MATERIAL, AND REFINE IT THROUGH YOUR INSIGHTS

Quotes and summaries relate to the knowledge and experience of *others*. But sometimes we want to add our *own* thoughts, experiences and observations. We can also capture our feelings, which often alert us to important information before we can articulate it. With one exception: Personal insults should be removed from, or better, never added to the master file. Character traits may be noted and verified in neutral terms. (If you can't prove someone is a thief, you can express your suspicions as hypotheses, but don't call them that until you have proof.) In some jurisdictions plaintiffs in libel cases can obtain access to your working materials, and such insults can be used to establish bad faith on your part.

In effect, you are commenting on your material as you are collecting it, which means you are beginning to write the story. James Steele and Don Barlett, who are excellent writers as well as innovative investigators, famously summed it up: **"Write early and often."**

This brief note, from the masterfile for "The Vanishing Diaspora" , captures the destruction of human infrastructure beyond physicians:

> *"NOTE: The issue is not only a shortage of doctors. It's a shortage of administrators who understand health care."*

We recommend that notes or insights be marked with a term that sets them apart from documented, verified material, and that can be easily located within the master file through a search. Any characters that do not appear together in the dictionary will do. In the example above, the common term "note" is modified with a colon: "Note:".

8. KEEP TRACK OF UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Questions that come to mind during the investigation can also be noted in the master file. Most questions will relate to unresolved details about statements or documents. We can also make a note of *who* might answer the question.

This masterfile extract from the diaspora story shows a quote from an official document, a question about the statement (in capital letters to signal its importance), and the answer from a top official of the Standing Committee of European Doctors (CPME):

"National medical associations can... facilitate the identification of refugee doctors."

Source: 10 November 2018: the CPME Board adopted the 'CPME Statement concerning the integration of refugee doctors into the European workforce' (CPME 2018/022 FINAL).

NOTE: DID ANY OF THIS HAPPEN?

NO ACCORDING TO the Secretary General of CPME: "Members discovered that *finding doctors in the refugee policy is difficult...*

Questions that have been answered become ordinary entries in the masterfile.

9. USING A LOGBOOK

A logbook allows the reporter to see at any time how her or his questions are being answered by various sources, and in particular human sources. This is highly useful in stories that involve multiple actors occupying diverse functions and locations; without some way to track them, the actors will evaporate from your mind, and you won't be able to remember when you spoke or exactly what you discussed. Commercial organizations spend large sums of money on "customer relationship management" software, but Excel sheets can do most of the job. You enter necessary details about sources at the moment you decide to contact them, then add information as the contacts deepen. The information required for each logbook entry can vary according to the source and the reporter's needs. At a minimum, it must enable you to swiftly locate and reach your sources. The content can be brief on condition that it is precise.

Below is an example of the initial log entry for "The Vanishing Diaspora". At that early stage the entry awaits completion; it nonetheless reminds us what we're hoping to discuss, and what steps we've taken to find someone to discuss it. Please note: any format that you find easier or better to use than this one is perfectly fine.

You can begin the log from any point of information – a webpage, a reference, a name. Once the source has attracted your attention, focus on **contact details**, adding columns as necessary:

Country	Organlgrame	Person	Data	Coordinates	https	contacts	articles/report
USA	Syrian American Medical Society	Awaiting name		info@sams-usa.net The Syrian ...american Medical Society Foundation 1012 14th St. NW Suite 1500 Washington DC 20005 P: (202) XXXXXXXXX	https:// www. sams -usa.net	wrote 210722; replied sorry if there's a delay. Wrote back 290722	See "A Heavy Price to pay"https:// www.sams-usa.net/ wpcontent/ ploads/2022/05/ 2022Ouploads/ 2022/05/20220

- Organisation (where do they work?)
- First name, last name, title, function
- Phone number(s)
- E-mail address(es)
- Website(s) (with pages of interest specified)

You may add other columns to capture ideas or material that enable you to deepen your understanding of the source and his or her environment:

- Questions to ask the source
- Reputation (What do others say about this source, in documents or interviews?)
- Authority (What authority or influence does the source have?)
- Network (Which other actors is this source in contact with?)

Furthermore, for each contact, we keep track of:

- **Documents:** Relevant documents that the contact or organization has created or published.
- **Conversations:** Excerpts or summaries of exchanges with this contact. These are dated and sorted so that the most recent notes are at the top. The reporter can link to transcripts on a hard drive or online archive.

If the log becomes very long – say, because the reporter consults many sources, or if a particular source yields rich information – consider creating a separate sheet for each important actor. Give each sheet the same name as the actor and keep documents concerning the actor together in one folder.

9. HOW TO KNOW WHEN YOU'VE DONE IT RIGHT

Beginning reporters tend towards overkill: They gather more and more information, without understanding why they've collected it, or how they might use it. In reviewing the masterfile, you will see the necessity or superfluity of your information. When all of your questions have been answered, all of your hypotheses are verified or disproved beyond reasonable doubt, and all the elements needed to tell a powerful story are present, your research is effectively done.

If you pass those tests, it's time to turn the masterfile into a finished story.

Annex:

Eva Constantaras on making a collaborative masterfile of data sources

You don't have to be a Marxist to agree with Karl Marx that changes in quantity eventually become changes in quality. The massive increase in collaborative projects is one of those changes. Eva Constantaras has developed tools to manage information resources in large-scale collaborative projects, which she demonstrates below in an excerpt from the masterfile she and a team of dozens of reporters created for the Indian water story cited in Chapter 2.

Eva's procedures enable large teams to see immediately the key features of the research foundation on which her team builds the story. Notice how she divides the data by type – news clips, scholarly studies, and datasets. (Please note: Data consists of more than numbers. For example, facts derived from interviews are also data points. Eva's examples below don't include human sources, but you can easily add a category for interviews using her model.) We show an example or two of how she works in each category, which makes the elegant simplicity of the overall framework more evident.

Her approach can also be used by solo reporters, of course, to make research and archivage efficient. In collaborations it enables an efficient division of labor, because different members of the team can focus on one part of the research for everyone's benefit.

Eva's teams don't just collect this stuff: Everyone does an analysis and summation of the material and its value as they collect it. A solo reporter can do this in a timeline. Eva's approach has the added benefit of creating a shared enterprise asset. If your solo project is aimed at building a long-term career project, you may want to adopt her approach.

Whatever you decide, **this work is about trading an investment in advance work for a big payoff at the end of the project.**

A. Clip (news report) Search

1. Global Data or Investigative Journalism Examples
The procedure:
Look for other journalists who have covered a similar story idea using data or other sources. Identify the hypothesis and questions, data sources and methodology.

Title	Link	Notes (relevance to your topic)
A Quarter of Humanity Faces Looming Water Crises		*New York Times' story on water security. Maps out global population that is at risk from water running out, countries that are relying on groundwater, water-stress levels in cities, globally, and areas of groundwater decline.*

2. National and Local Media Coverage

The procedure:

Look for local media coverage of your topic so you know what conversation people are having and what information they need and want.

Title	Link	Notes (relevance to your topic)
600 Million Face Acute Water Crisis		*This article contains data coverage on various themes related to the water crisis, such as droughts, rainfall, water supply management, agricultural water usage, regional disparity in water resources, and micro-irrigation potential.*

B. Research Reports

Part of what journalists do is to translate academic papers and text-heavy reports into accessible and useful information for the public. A well-written article cites findings that have already been peer-reviewed by scientists or are backed by credible organizations. This step also enables us to identify important sources of information and experts who can help us ensure our investigation covers new ground.

The procedure: *Identify published research related to the issue you are interested in. Use the research reports to map out what is known and unknown about your topic and where to find data sources.*

Title	Link	Notes (relevance to your topic)
A Quarter of Humanity Faces Looming Water Crises		*The report provides evidence on the status of groundwater levels, management practices, challenges to groundwater resources; and discusses fund allocations of policy initiatives around water conservation in the country.*
Groundwater: A valuable but diminishing resource		*It examines groundwater depletion, including the decline in cities, and the impact of land use changes on recharge. It contains evidence on groundwater use for agriculture and irrigation, where it discusses micro-irrigation, water-intensive crops, subsidised electricity, and related policies. It also contains data on industrial groundwater use and issues of pollution and contamination*

C. Numerical Data Sources

The procedure: *Identify datasets relevant* to the investigation.

Source	Dataset	Link to dataset or RTI request
Water footprint per ton of crop or derived crop product at national and sub-national level (m3/ton) (1996-2005) (1996-2005)	*State-wise, crop-wise data on water use of crops in the world.*	*https://data.4tu.nl/datasets/a8d1b398-853e-46e2-b0d1-83dfc424153c (1)*

(1)

1.
We define an investigation.

2.
We create a hypothesis to verify our idea.

3.
We begin to build a timeline of events and a map of the actors.

4.
We seek open sources to validate and extend our research.

5.
We identify and encounter human sources.

6.
We compose the story.

7. WRITING INVESTIGATIONS

writing

With
Luuk Sengers, Oleg Khomenok, Deborah Nelson,
and Eva Constantaras

We never met an aspiring journalist who was incapable of finding fresh and exciting information. We can't count how many failed to turn that information into an equally exciting story.

Why? Some are overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of material they discovered. Some are afraid of the implications – a variety of "status quo" bias, in which recognition of how cruel the world can be triggers denial. (It happens even to the best. When Anne-Marie Casteret discovered incontrovertible proof that high officials were selling AIDS-contaminated blood products to haemophiliacs, in order to hide their failings and stay on budget, she went into shock.) Some are so well-schooled in the conventions of news writing that they can't handle a complex narrative that requires more than an "inverted pyramid" of facts.

Whatever the reasons, it's heartbreaking to let these reflexes sabotage good work. Don't let them. You're already well along on the path to a great story. What comes next involves putting that material together. Telling stories well is a demanding task, but you've got the tools to do it, and using them always becomes more powerful with practice.

Some of those tools can be borrowed from fiction – imagery, exposition, dialogue, and so on – so long as they do not subvert the reality of a story. This discovery was the great contribution of the so-called "New Journalists"[1] to our work in the 1960s and 1970s, and their work informed the narrative strategies of most of the best investigative writers I have met. Beyond their discoveries, we have two advantages

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over makers of fiction: First, we do not need to invent the characters and events that compose our narrative (in fact, we're forbidden to do so). The second advantage is that we are not limited to a single point of view; we can allow multiple voices and perspectives to drive our narratives. That happens every time we explore a given actor's actions and thoughts.

Conversely, we are constrained by the facts in ways that artists are not. A novelist can eliminate someone from a story simply because they don't like the character. We can't take someone out of events in which they played a significant role simply for dramatic effect or convenience; we must account for what happened and how it happened, and if an individual or organization bears responsibility, we must show it. Likewise, we cannot invent a happy ending when the real-world outcome is misery; the best we can do is show how we can avoid further suffering. We must do the best we can with what the facts tell us.

To do our best, we need to rely less on our creativity and more on our methods. The procedures outlined below start from the masterfile, where we have collected our material. Now we will redact the masterfile to eliminate unnecessary details and set the important ones in order. When that's done, we can write through the material, turning facts into finished prose or coherent scenes. It's easier than sifting through our raw files for the next thing we'll show or say, and it offers a better chance of composing a coherent, fast-moving narrative. Once again, we invest some time in preparation and gain even more time as we move toward the close.

AI tools are beginning to have a profound impact on the way that we write. Of course you'll use them; please do so with caution and critically. For example, tools like Google NotebookLM allow one to upload a set of documents, and the app will then summarize their contents and identify recurrent themes. The procedure adds most value by pointing to elements that you might otherwise overlook. The results can be impressive (I'm speaking from personal experience).

However, if I were you I would keep in mind that whatever the app tells you, you still need to verify it manually. That's particularly true if you rely on an AI app to compose all or part of your story, as a lawyer discovered in September 2025. He was fined $10,000 USD for submitting a court filing that was written by generative AI[1], in which 21 of 23 citations were fictitious; the app had simply invented (or "hallucinated") them. Your adversaries will be on the lookout for such mistakes. Beyond accuracy, there's the matter of time. AI can certainly accelerate certain processes, but a recent study[2] identifies a verification-value paradox concerning AI that is not to your advantage. In short, you can't yet safely consider generative AI a substitute for learning how to tell a story well and accurately, which remains a unique and highly valuable skill.

There are other ways to make your writing more efficient, and we'll detail the main ones in this chapter.

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I

Start from the structure

We need surprising and fascinating details – of setting, character, and action – to bring a story alive. But without a coherent structure, the facts, however exciting, will not maintain the viewer's interest for long; they may even stop the viewer cold, like a slap in the face. Likewise, various other potent narrative devices, such as suspense, are robbed of power when they conflict with the structure of a piece.

At its simplest level, structure refers to the order and weight of the materials within a story. When will the separate elements be presented? How will they be developed, or contrasted with other material?

The result of these decisions is immediately visible in the momentum of a story. If the structure is flawed, the narrative continually slows or breaks down entirely. Eventually, the viewer gives up trying to follow the author.

A long-form narrative can succeed without planning its structure on extremely rare occasions – in my entire career of nearly 50 years, exactly twice – but more often, neglecting that task leads to endless rewriting, as the author desperately attempts to hold a jumbled mass of facts and ideas together.

There are infinite ways to structure a story, and we will focus on the simplest, because they are enough to get you started. As you progress you will find others. To accelerate that process, make a habit of studying not only your peers, but also the masters of prose and cinema whose works powerfully affect you, with particular attention to the way they fit their material into a sequence.

Whether their methods work for you or not, you will need to be as methodical about composing your story as you were when you reported it. Keep track of your own methods and the methods you see others using, and hone them.

A

Review and redact the masterfile

In the SBI method, **we use the masterfile to capture the material necessary for the story, and then edit the masterfile to create a structure**

in which each successive revelation leads to another, and finally to a conclusion. We then "write through" the edited masterfile, turning its components into a smooth narrative.

First, save the last version of the masterfile, including the date of the last time you added to it, in at least two places. That eliminates the risk of losing your data.

Now, save it again, under a new name, so that any modifications will not corrupt your masterfile. We typically use the format: draft_story_date. The first term separates the draft from the masterfile, the second names the story, and the third tells us which is the latest version of our work. A date stamp enables us to backtrack to previous versions if we wish. You can use any terms you like, so long as they enable you to find and track your work.

If you are writing in a Google Document, a common tool in collaborations, all versions and changes to them are automatically saved. You can retrieve them by opening the document, clicking on "File" and selecting "Version history" from the drop down menu. We still recommend saving copies of all versions in another location, to have backup. If you share the document electronically with someone outside your team, paste the text into a new document, clearly mark it as a copy and share that.

We recommend that the first change you make in the draft is to rewrite your hypothesis, replacing any assumptions with the verified facts you have gathered. That will place the story you are about to tell firmly in the front of your mind.

Now, read through the draft file and remove extraneous data. (Remember, you have the original masterfile for backup if you miss that data later.) If you don't, your draft will become a thick sludge of details whose meaning is obscure. This is a subtractive process. You can complement it with an additive process later, if and when you add context, color and quotes from the masterfile to the text once you see where they're needed more clearly.

We suggest that **at the end of the redacting process, the draft file should be twice as long as the final story.** This is not an absolute target. It's a feasible goal, and it will allow you a small surplus of material that can be refined and further reduced in the first draft.

Several things will happen while you are cutting:

- The first is that you will see the best order in which the material can be presented. It's quite like preparing a garden: You can't see where plants should be until you clear the ground. You can then cut and paste material into the order in which you will use it. **You are thus making the structure while selecting your best material.**
- The second occurs when the material generates insights and ideas, as you see the relationships between events and actors. This phenomenon often appears as you make the masterfile, and it will return as you

initiate the writing process. Add your new insights to the draft file. By doing so, **you write the story as you structure it.**

- A third effect is that by redacting the material – an iterative process that can take several days, more or less – you will internalize it. The effect is that **when you write a finished draft, the story will come from inside you, as part of your experience**. That does not mean that you can substitute yourself for the actors in the story. It means that your story will contain a powerful emotional charge. Viewers will feel that charge, whether or not you explicitly refer to your own feelings in the narrative.

1. FIND THE DETAILS THAT MATTER (AND CUT THE REST)

Frequently, the work of collecting details makes each of them seem important to the reporter, and cutting them becomes painful. (Memo to our readers: There is a difference between your facts and your flesh.) Sometimes, by packing the story with details, the reporter is trying to prove that they did serious work. It's not important to show one's virtue over and over; what's important is that a given detail offers increased comprehension and dramatic effect for the viewer. (We will return to this point below in our discussion of style.)

Our task is to find the coherence and meaning in the chaos of obscure data that fills the world. It is not to create a catalogue of every detail that we may discover.

Details are like close-ups in a film: They demand heightened attention from the viewer, and in doing so they slow down the story. That may be a desirable effect from time to time, but a constant barrage of details exhausts the viewer. Who would watch a film composed only of close-ups? Who reads inventories for pleasure?

By giving every detail you have collected the same attention in your story, you reduce all your evidence to the same level of importance. The same applies to every possible nuance of every fact and its implications. Your audience will interpret such devices as proof that you don't know what's important in your material.

In our experience, half of what we put into a first draft – yes, half – can be cut: clever turns of phrase, clichés, distracting nuances, and more. Editors don't have the time to do that work for you. Do it yourself. If you realize that you've removed something valuable, you can always go back to the masterfile or a previous draft and re-insert the material.

2. ELIMINATE REPETITIONS

In our work the most common form of repetition is that the writer constantly restates the same arguments and facts.

Justifiably or not, the audience will often interpret such repetition as a lack of confidence. They may even resent it, because it seems you think that people are too stupid to get the point. ("Well then, I'll say it again more slowly.")

If you are writing in a second language (as I often do), you will have a tendency to restate the same points, because you are uncertain if you said it right the first time. Pick the best statement and cut the other one.

B

Choose the overall structure: Chronology or voyage?

If you didn't make this choice as you were compiling the masterfile, do it now, because your choice will determine the order in which you reveal events.

The decision should be based, first of all, on the nature of the story. Are the events we're describing primarily the result of actions taken (or not taken) in the past? In that case, a chronological structure will convey a powerful sense of fate, as events converge toward an outcome. That works very well for stories involving criminal schemes or failed policies, or to understand how the characters in our story changed in ways that affect all of us.

However, if the events we're investigating are occurring simultaneously in multiple locations, there may be no single cause or driver; in order to understand the events, we must go to where they took place and bring the audience along with us. (This is the typical structure of documentary film.)

The choice between chronology and voyage is neither absolute nor exclusive. Every event takes place in a particular location, and every location (and its inhabitants) has a history. You can see this in Ana P. Santos's "Women of the Eastern Caliphate: Hiding in Plain Sight" (2019). This complex story is structured as a series of portraits of ISIL (Da'esh) fighters, in which the startling clandestine actions and public identities of the women are woven together. The places they occupy are not so much territories as communities; one of the portraits shows a women who supports herself as a schoolteacher while collecting marriage dowries to fund terrorist acts. In parallel, we see the wide community of intelligence agencies and police who chronicle these suspects. The timeline drives the story, as the women move deeper into both their militant networks and their cover-story lives, and their pursuers chronicle their movements.

The guiding question is, **which element predominates in your material**? Is the story about where events are taking us over time, or is it about something that could only happen in particular scenes and places? If you have made the wrong choice, redacting the masterfile will make it apparent, because you will find it very difficult to create an order for the material. If that happens, start over by using chronology instead of spatial movement, or the reverse.

It is much easier and more efficient to do this before you are deep in the writing process. If you miss that opportunity, you will discover your mistake when you attempt to write transitions between the events in your story. **Failed transitions – awkward phrases, tortured connections, a break in momentum – are the unmistakable sign that your material is poorly structured.**

When you see those signs, first try moving the material – as little as a sentence, as much as a block – and then try rewriting it. If neither tactic works, cut the material and see if the story still works. You'll be amazed how often material you thought was essential is superfluous. If that doesn't work either, try revising the structure.

You can borrow the structure from classic works

It is neither laziness nor plagiarism to collect and use structures that have been effective for millennia. It is simply smart. It's the difference between trying to reinvent the bicycle and riding one.

1. LEARNING FROM ARISTOTLE

In The Poetics – the first known study of narrative structure – the philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC) proposed that stories have a beginning, a middle and an end. It's still a useful notion. In journalism, we can speak of the past, present and future. Does that mean that our stories must begin in the past? No. The three elements identified by Aristotle can be reordered for dramatic effect. Consider this chart, to be read top to bottom, and left to right, in three columns:

past	present	future
present	past	past
future	future	present

On the left, we see a straight chronological sequence starting in the past. We do not need to return to the creation of the world to understand how the present was shaped. Nonetheless, we can use a chunk of the past to add tragic depth to our work. Consider this investigation of arms trafficking, which begins by plunging us into a civil war and swiftly arrives at a turning point in the conflict:

> *By the beginning of 2011, the fallout from [a] disputed presidential election was turning ugly.*
>
> *Violence had flared across the West African country since [the President] rejected the result of a second-round presidential poll that was won by his rival... in late November 2010.*
>
> *The international community was piling pressure on [the President]. He ignored calls[1] from the United Nations' then-Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon to step down. In January 2011, the European Union froze[2] his family's assets and sanctioned dozens of people and companies that supported his regime.*
>
> *As the country spiraled into its second civil war in less than a decade — a conflict which would claim 3,000 civilian lives — [the President]'s military chief of staff warned the army "didn't have enough munitions to fight for three days."*

This is the key: **If you start from the past, begin when something important is about to occur**.

In the middle column, **we begin by showing the present, then return to the past, and finally describe the probable future that will result from events.** This is the most common sequence for investigative reports. It raises the question: How did this happen? Its effect is to confront the viewer with a surprising situation that threatens our sense of safety and comfort, before showing how it came to be and how we will escape it. In this investigation of the "gold rush" to build data centers in Latin America, two worlds are juxtaposed in a single moment:

> *An old shipping container converted into a mobile classroom sits closed next to the taco stand Hortensia runs with her sisters.... On the front of the classroom is a compagny logo. Hortensia explains that she hardly ever sees anyone go in, and that, in any case, the classes they give there would be of little use to her.*
>
> *Just over a mile uphill from Hortensia's stand, the tech company is building a massive data center complex. One building full of servers running day and night has been operating since 2024. The other is already in the final phase of construction.*

On the right **we begin from a hypothetical future**. We then show how this future took shape in the past. We conclude by showing how we can alter the outcome by actions in the present. This structure was practically absent from journalism before climate change, whose most powerful effects will emerge in the future, became a vital story.

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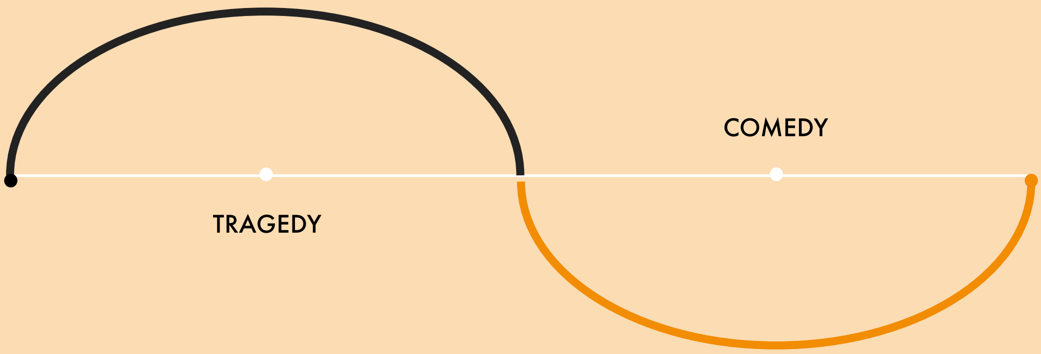
All three of these structures reply to fundamental questions that the viewer will ask as the story progresses. **What changes is the order in which those questions are asked and answered.**

- Where are we now?
- How did we get here?
- How do we get to a better world?

2. RIDING THE CURVES OF TRAGEDY AND COMEDY

There are two simpler structures that can substitute for the ones detailed above. In a tragedy, an individual or a community achieves success, and then is destroyed by their own flaws. In a comedy, the actors fall from a state of happiness into failure or despair, and then find their way to a resolution. (The term "comedy" does not mean that the resolution may be funny; it may offer nothing more than the sad acknowledgement that a mistake has been made, and the hope we can avoid it in the future.) These trajectories can be represented as the two halves of a sine wave, with tragedy on the left and comedy on the right:



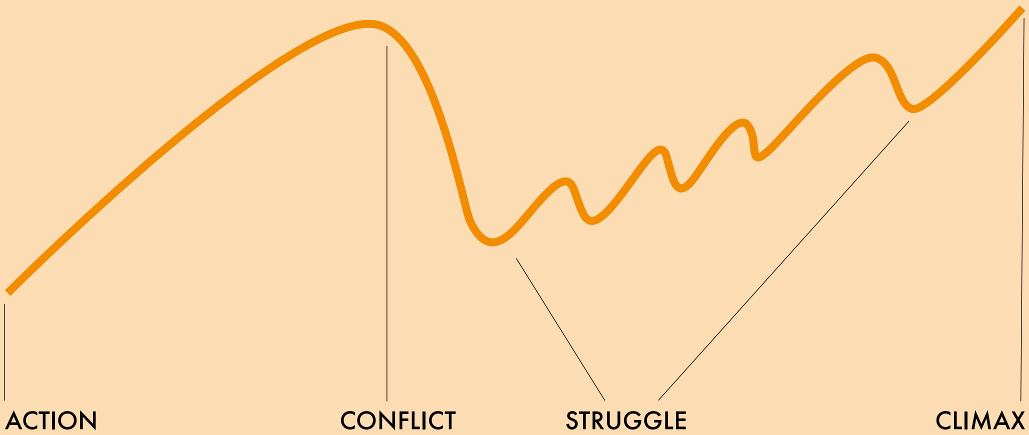
It is relatively easy to compose a story based on either of these trajectories, on condition that you previously made a timeline: **You build stacks of events that lead to and from the turning point of the wave**, when the rise of an actor turns into a fall, or the descent into darkness finally becomes a climb toward the light.

You can see this procedure at work across classical and modern literature, including journalism. It's particularly evident in profiles of celebrities who become obscure, or politicians whose idealism becomes corrupt cynicism. (As the Roman historian Suetonius said in *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*: "I have shown you a prince, and now I will show you a monster.") Conversely, if your story ends on a hopeful note – a flawed policy is repaired, justice is finally done, the celebrity discovers happiness in private life – the underlying structure is comedic.

C. STRUCTURING SCENES

While you are reporting the story, and as you review the masterfile, you will become aware of dramatic scenes nestled in the material. For example: Someone realizes that he or she is a victim of injustice, and confronts the wrongdoer; someone makes a decision that will have good or catastrophic consequences.

The underlying structure of such moments is nearly always the same: A character undertakes an action, is faced with an obstacle, struggles with it, and finally submits to or overcomes it. The obstacle may be a happy event – "I won the lottery!" – or a life-threatening challenge, or the threat of impending loss. One way or the other, it represents a critical change in the actor's situation. The graphic below, devised by screenwriter Robert McKee[(1)] describes this sequence (with thanks to Luuk Sengers):



To write these scenes, you must document the thoughts and actions of the characters involved, and the role they played in the outcome. Frequently, that documentation will take the form of interviews. Coverage of the "#MeToo" movement, to take one prominent recent example, relied heavily on this method. Unless a predator recorded his attacks, the survivor's's recollection of an incident may be the only available evidence that it occurred. However, the survivor or victim may have spoken or messaged with trusted friends, who can corroborate their distress. In composing the story, these bits of evidence can be woven into a dialogue, as one witness after another contributes to the scene.

That technique enables you to transform a problem into a solution. The problem is that witnesses to the same events nearly always recall them differently, because not everyone notices the same things at a given moment, or because one or more of the witnesses want to hide what happened, or because traumatic experiences are often suppressed. **The solution is to gather those different versions and recount them like a conversation**. In doing so, you move beyond quotation to dialogue,

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a dramatic device that plunges viewers into the centre of a scene. I used it in this non-fiction account of a confrontation between a lawyer and an investigating magistrate, based on interviews with both:

> *There were two men in the room, and there are two versions of what happened next.*
> *[The lawyer's] resides in one word: nothing.*
> *[The judge] recalled the lawyer saying: "Very soon, I'm going to be asked to fulfill high judicial functions."*
> *So the rumors are true, thought [the judge]. He's going to be the Minister of Justice.*

II

Problems and solutions for the start, the middle and the finish

Nothing drives journalists more crazy than deciding how to begin and end the narrative, unless it's how to keep the story going. That is not a joke, it's a fact.

Beginnings can be confounding because we have so much to say, and we can't say it all at once. (This is why many journalists write or rewrite their leads, also called "ledes", after they've composed the rest of the story.)

Endings pose a structural problem: **We can't say how most stories will end, only how they began and continued to the present day**. Journalists can reveal a scandal, but they can't punish wrongdoers beyond exposing them. The ultimate impact must come from someone else. (We will say more about this in Chapter 9.)

The middle of the story can be wearisome to compose and to watch, because it's where themes must be developed and detailed. The principal difficulty is to maintain momentum – to balance revelation of what the viewer didn't know, and explanation of what it means, without slowing down under the freight.

We suggest a few proven techniques below to solve these difficulties, on the understanding that there are many more ways to pull the audience into the story and keep them there than we cover in this manual. Make this part of your practice: **When you read or watch or listen, observe how the masters do it, and borrow their techniques**. Experiment and retain the variants that work for you. In other words, study telling your stories while you investigate them. In my own practice, I read and watch films as I write, with a focus on authors who dealt with similar themes.

A

Use the hypothesis

Your verified hypothesis is a cogent statement of what the viewer will discover in your story. It is not obligatory to place it at the very top, though in some journalistic traditions, notably the French, that's exactly what's expected; they call it "the hat" of the story. **It is almost always a good idea to place it somewhere within the first few paragraphs.** It tells the viewer what they are about to read or watch, and why it matters. Of course every story, no matter how good it may be, will not matter to each individual. Nonetheless, you are about to take your viewers on a hard ride, and they will appreciate knowing where you are going together.

B

The anecdotal lead

This device is used so often that it can be considered a cliché, and yet it still works, probably because meeting someone who endured astonishing events is rare and exciting. **The technique consists of personifying the story in an individual actor**, usually but not necessarily a victim or survivor. (Wrongdoers can be interesting, too, especially when the dark sides of their characters is concealed.) After presenting the actor and their situation, the writer informs the viewer that their case illustrates injustice or danger. The initial presentation can be more or less long; in Barry Yeoman's investigation of fraudulent for-profit adult schools, the opening anecdote stretches over two full pages, and concludes with a statement of the verified hypothesis. The effect is to enter a survivor's life and share her shock and outrage. Africa Uncensored's film, "Fertile Deception"[1], develops a variant of this technique: We are first shown

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a mine where fake fertilizers are extracted and bagged, and moments later a woman whose food plants were destroyed by the products tells her story.

If you use an anecdotal opening, **beware of a common mistake**. In order to catch the viewer, writers may use an anecdote for its shock value instead of the information that it conveys. At worst, the anecdote tells us little or nothing about the heart of the story. The result is to confuse and anger the viewer.

Make sure the anecdote illuminates your subject and not another. If you can't find such an anecdote in your material, either you forgot to look for it, or you are ignoring evidence which might indicate that your hypothesis is off-center. It's sad to realize such a thing late in the game, but that's better than publishing a story that runs on broken legs.

C

Pull the viewer into the place

Places are also characters in your story. Just as certain people can do things that others wouldn't dare, in certain places things are possible that would not happen elsewhere. You can thus open a story by placing us in one of those places, where something strange and exciting is about to occur. This technique was used by Robert Louis Stephenson – of whom Nobel Prize winner Jorge Luis Borges said, "All writing is mechanics, and Stephenson was the greatest mechanic who ever lived" – in his story "A Lodging for the Night." He begins with a terrifying snowstorm in Paris, then focuses on an apartment where a band of thieves and murderers are hiding from the hungry cold. Here's how the same device worked in this recent ARIJ investigation, "Learning Disabilities Room"(1), whose opening conveys the heartbreaking isolation of disabled children and the shrinking space accorded them:

> *At a government school on the outskirts of the capital we were met by a teacher, Bassim Mohammad, who escorted us to a small room at the end of a narrow hallway, separated from the corridor by a wooden partition. Bassim explained that the partition was donated by the parent of a student with learning difficulties. A sign inside designated the "Learning Disabilities Room." The teacher put it [on the inside] so that the students would not feel embarrassed to enter.*
>
> *Bassim Mohammed had prepared the little room himself, but he was surprised when the administration issued an order to turn it into a classroom, to deal with overcrowding at the school. He said it replaced a bigger space, "a six by seven metres room, dedicated to students with learning difficulties."*

You can't do this if you haven't noted descriptions of the places in your story while reporting. If you notice they're absent from your masterfile, there's still time to collect them, or to find a photograph, or to interview someone who was there.

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In the middle: Define the story's sections

In the Global Investigative Journalism Casebook[1], we asked two dozen expert reporters to describe their procedures for structuring the body of a story. (The book was published in 2012, and their methods remain current.)
Let's consider two.

- Barry Yeoman ("The School of Hard Knocks") breaks his stories into "blocks" (or sections) of material and places the relevant discoveries, interview extracts and document excerpts within the pertinent section. In the process, he moves through the worlds of the survivors, the industry and its regulators, before returning to the survivors to give them the last word.
- Stephen Grey ("Hearts, Minds and the Same Old Warlords") writes memos to himself summarizing his findings, sometimes on a daily basis. In addition to the memos, he will ask colleagues to "talk the story through" with him, explaining what he has found and what it may mean, and then writes down the conversation. In that way he establishes the flow of the story and sees what has the most impact on the viewer. He then adds in the details that keep the story moving. The result is a uniquely conversational style.

In both these examples, the **process is iterative**, meaning that the material is shaped and reshaped as it is collected and composed. Likewise, in both examples the goal is to build momentum as the story is drafted, as successive discoveries build toward a conclusion. Most journalists we've encountered work more like Yeoman. The masterfile makes it easier, because as you set the material in order, you will see themes or focus points that can be separated into sections.

The most important principle here is that the text should constantly move forward, from one theme or actor to the next. You can insert a flashback that illuminates the action, or shift the focus to a another actor, and then resume the forward motion. What you can't do is skip forward and back constantly, because the effect on the viewer will be like riding in a car that starts, stops, moves in circles and reverses direction. They can't see where they're going with you, and in the end they won't know how they got there. Keep the sequence of events clean.

E

Build to a solution

In the past decade, two new genres, "solutions journalism"[2] and "constructive

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journalism"[1], became forces in our industry. Both movements propose that without a viable path to a better world, audiences for our work are left hopeless, and that our job should include looking for that path. We are glad to see these developments; the first edition of this manual urged reporters to seek solutions to the problems they expose. That advice was based on the experience of investigative journalists in the United States following Watergate, where investigative journalism became synonymous with denouncing problems while not providing solutions. It took less than a decade for the public to reject reporters who painted such a dark image of the world, and another long decade for our work to regain a wide audience.

This is still a current issue in the news industry: Recent studies[2] show that up to 40% of the population in various countries avoid the news, because they find it too depressing. We are well advised to take notice. We do not need to soften our discoveries in order to recognize that there may be solutions to injustice and suffering that our sources have worked hard to imagine and design.

Journalists lack the power to force governments to do their work properly; nor can we reverse past injustice. (We can't undo a genocide, and that does not mean we should cease to study such events. Part of our job is to enrich history and understand its meaning in the present.) **We can nonetheless identify those who maintain destructive practices, those who have power to end them, and those who know how it may be accomplished**. At the least, that approach offers comfort to survivors, and makes it more difficult for wrongdoers to pretend that there is no alternative to their actions.

In every investigation, there comes a moment when the viewer wonders: *"What might get us out of this mess?"* Look for the answer and show it.

F

Ask how you're making the viewer's life better

James T. Hamilton's *All the News That's Fit to Sell* (2003) and *Democracy's Detectives: The economics of Investigative Journalism* (2015) draw on scholar Anthony Downs (1957) to consider why people will read a given story. Hamilton focuses on "four distinct information demands": "consumers" want guidance for better purchasing choices, "producers" want to know how to do more rewarding work, "entertainment seekers" want stories that are "inherently interesting to know", and "voters" want to know if the right people are making and carrying out policies. The current debate over how independent media can build their sustainability (you can follow it here[3]) makes a similar argument: **Our mission includes making our viewers' lives visibly better in some way that matters to them – knowledge, prosperity, safety, satisfaction, wisdom**. Solutions are part of that. So is the drama of an astonishing tale. So is actionable information that enables people to make better

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decisions.

If such material somehow slips through the cracks of your hard-won facts, the chances that your work will be viewed, remembered and acted upon shrink. As you research and write, keep asking yourself: **How does this story make life better for the people I want to help?** Don't be shy about this: Make sure the answers are in the story.

G

Give the last word to a survivor

We often say that our work gives a voice to the voiceless. That's fine so far as it goes, but it can go wrong when we substitute our own voices for people who already have a voice that no one is listening to. There are moments when we are interviewing someone who says something that perfectly captures the overall meaning of the story. Instead of stealing their idea and presenting it as our own, we can more honestly and respectfully quote them. Such an opportunity appears at the end of Barry Yeoman's investigation into fraudulent schools, where a survivor explains why she took the risk of fighting back: "Somebody needed to be a voice – for the people who are too afraid to stand up for themselves, and for the people who don't know how. Thousands of people are being taken advantage of. And it needs to stop." Do you think you can improve on that? Yeoman was wise enough not to try.

Not incidentally, this is a classic technique in great fiction. When the hero of Joseph Conrad's novel *Victory* (1915) walks into the burning house where a woman has just died to save him from a criminal gang, he says, "Woe to the [one] whose heart has not learned while young to hope, to love - and to put its trust in life!" The diction isn't modern, but the testimony of the doomed protagonist is still wrenching.

A variant of this technique can be effective when using the voice of a perpetrator to close a story. **Instead of simply quoting a self-serving statement, the journalist can follow the quote with further evidence and a commentary.** When I asked a man who was on trial for selling blood products contaminated with the AIDS virus why he didn't quit his job to denounce the scandal he saw coming, he said: "I have four children to feed." I knew instantly that his words would end the story. In the final draft they were followed by two observations and a judgment: "Behind him in the courtroom were people who used to have children of their own [observation]. Their sons are dead [observation] because these men – and others whose names we may never know – betrayed them [judgment]."

We'll say more about judgments and how to make them below.

III

A few considerations on style

Style is personal, and yours will evolve over the course of your career. We strongly advise that you focus on the mechanics – the gathering and documenting of rich material, the structure, the momentum – before you worry about your style. If you experiment with stylistic effects, document the experiment – where you got the idea, what you were trying to do, and whether it worked or not. That way you build a toolkit, as opposed to a repertoire of devices that eventually goes stale.

A

Put clarity over complexity

A common flaw of beginners' work, and not only in journalism, is that in **seeking to embellish their work with literary or artistic devices, they sacrifice clarity and momentum**. Instead of a limpid, swift-running stream, they create a river strewn with waste and garbage. Their sentences are as long as paragraphs, filled with subsidiary phrases that are meant to add nuance; their scenes distract more than they inform. The audience is obliged to review such passages again and again, in hopes that their meaning will finally be clear. Eventually, they will give up and find better uses for their time.

In writing, whether a print story or a script, **the best rule is to break any sentence that contains more than three phrases into two (or more) separate sentences**. Of course there are exceptions to this rule, as to any rule; some cultures appreciate longer sentences and paragraphs. In general, however, integrating this principle into your writing will have an immediate effect on the clarity of your product, because it will force you to be concise and direct in every sentence.

We are hardly the first practitioners to confront this challenge. The Nobel-prize winning work of Ernest Hemingway, who in his early career was a war correspondent, was based on systematically reducing his texts to the minimum required to keep the story moving. (Hemingway is not our favorite writer, but he is certainly a great technician of prose.) Hemingway understood that **certain stylistic effects – grand phrases, pontification, complex words or phrases – position the writer between the story and its viewer**. The effect is to distract the viewer's attention from the action and the actors to the narrator. For critical readers, this flaw can ruin an otherwise great story.

In our work, the story is more important than the author, or it is not worth telling.

The simplest way to identify unnecessary verbiage is to read your text aloud. Your voice will reveal when the text becomes too cluttered, long or turgid to follow. If you run out of breath or try to force your way to the end of a passage or start pontificating, your voice will change. It's a good idea to recruit a listener for this exercise. When your partner becomes distracted or visibly bored, ask them why. Most often, it's because they can't follow what you're trying to say.

B

Use the power of precision

Suppose we're working on a story about corruption. There is a difference between saying, "The minister is corrupt," and telling us that "on a modest salary the minister has acquired three luxury cars, a large apartment in a wealthy neighbourhood and a vacation home on a hilltop." The first statement is a direct accusation, and it is certainly concise, but it lacks the power of the catalogue of wealth. The second approach offers precise, powerful details that bring the story to life; the viewer imagines the cars and the homes. That adds power to a question that the investigation will answer: Where did the money come from?

Yes, we advised that you cut unnecessary details. But details that add drama to the story are anything but unnecessary. Precise, accurate details also demonstrate confidence on your part. Conversely, if you can't say make a point with precision, it's usually because you couldn't find the evidence; in the worst case you are reduced to making sinister allusions. **Be as precise as the evidence and the momentum of the story will allow**.

C

Using narrative effects : Suspense, reactions and humor

1. Suspense (often called "foreshadowing") is an element you will frequently employ in investigative stories. It arises from the convergence of forces to a crisis or tragedy, like the events leading to the fatal failure of a skyscraper window as a mother walked below in a Pulitzer-finalist

story by Louise Kiernan for the Chicago Tribune[1]. **At different points in the narrative, we show the viewer actions or signals that will have serious consequences at a later moment.**

It is easy to build this effect from a timeline in which we have captured those elements. You can also build it from a voyage – for example, Alexenia Dimitrova's descent into the Cold War archives of a secret police in Eastern Europe (in the Casebook), on the trail of a unit that specialized in murder and other crimes. Through incidents spread around the globe, Dimitrova shows us how the unit planned and organised its assaults against its victims. The effect is to create a growing dread in the viewer.

2. An obvious example of effects that can be borrowed from film is the "reaction shot" (which Stephenson used to hilarious and frightening effect in "The Bottle Imp" before cinema existed). **Instead of telling the viewer how someone felt at a particular moment, we show them how the actor responded to the event.** It is much more powerful to see someone dealing with consequences than to tell us, "This was a shocking discovery."
3. Investigative work (unlike the New Journalists' feature writing or Michael Moore's sardonic documentaries) rarely employs humour. Often enough we can allow ourselves more of it. In your research, **you will repeatedly come across moments when something ridiculous occurs or is said**. Don't hesitate to use it in your narrative, as long as you're not doing it only to make this or that actor look stupid. The story "State Aided Suspect in Huge Swindle", also in the Casebook, captures such a gobsmacking moment as the authors struggle to understand how a regulator green-lighted a criminal scheme. He says: "Upon reflection, would I have liked to have done it differently? Would I have liked to stop them from doing what they currently did? Yes, of course." It's an absurd remark, and it's also a devastating admission.

D
Sensationalism and sensuality

Most journalists have been taught to avoid "sensationalism", in which words and details are chosen to excite the viewer. Regardless of the media, your story can integrate sound, smell, touch, imagery and other sensual material. These details describe the world where the events take place, and the actors who made them happen. They may reveal character – a taste for luxury or simplicity, cruelty or generosity. They bring us

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inside a room and tell us what its features mean.
It's one thing to tell viewers that a scene of environmental contamination smells bad. It's another to show them an olive oil factory that dumps its waste down a hillside into a village, turning it into a fly-infested hell where windows must be closed in summer heat. The viewer feels the suffocation, hears the noise of the insects, and understands why there's a problem that needs to be fixed.

E

Reporting emotions

Emotions are both facts and tools of our work. **If we want something to change, we must engage the viewer's emotions as well as their rational judgment.**

When we speak with people who have endured terrible things, we will inevitably absorb their emotions (in some cases, to the point of experiencing vicarious trauma). But when we tell the story, our reaction to the material is far less important than what the survivors felt in the first place. **Let your sources express their emotions**. They lived these events; you did not. You can attribute the actors' feelings – "She said she felt" – or capture them in a quote.

You can de-personalize your own feelings. When Albert Londres shows us a prison hospital that is nothing more than a slaughterhouse, he doesn't say "it tears me up." He says, "It tears you up," and the horror comes home to you.

The investigative team at the public broadcaster RTÉ showed a powerful way to capture emotions – an extended reaction shot – in their 2013 investigation of child abuse in day care centers, "A Breach of Trust". (The film led to significant reforms but is no longer available for viewing.) In one scene from hidden camera footage, a worker throws children around a room as if they were rag dolls. The next face we see belongs to a horrified expert in child development, who can barely control herself as she comments. The bond with the viewer, who shares her outrage, is instantaneous.

The takeaway here is that shock isn't gratuitous when it's followed by wisdom. If possible, let the source deliver it.

In the recent genre of "creative non-fiction", the writer's sensibility is a common feature, as it is in fiction. It works more or less well in those genres.

In investigative work, it's more often both an aesthetic and an ethical mistake. By putting your feelings as a reporter up front, you automatically consign the story's survivors and victims to the back of the frame. Their suffering or nobility matters less, so far as the viewer can tell, than your reaction to it. There's a deep psychological driver behind this mistake. **By occupying the front of the stage, you distance yourself from the horror behind your back**. Unfortunately, you also distance the viewer.

Heroes, victims and survivors do not exist so that we can engage in emotional tourism.

They are paying a price much greater than your own. **Their story matters more than what you feel about it.**

F

When do you show yourself?

Whether you use the word "I" in your story or not, you are present – always as an observer, and often enough as an actor. Without you, the story may never be told. Nonetheless, deciding how much of yourself should be shown to the viewer can be a tough call. There are valid and varied approaches:

- Alessia Cerantola's award-winning podcast "Baby[1] No. 12", which recounts a woman's struggle to discover her origins, brings the viewer not only into the story, but also into Cerantola's struggle to uncover and understand it. She evokes hypotheses that must eventually be discarded, sharing her mistakes as well as her insights. That's a gamble for the sake of authenticity, and she says she took it in order to share the experience and method of discovering the story with the viewer. **Transparency matters at least as much as objectivity to contemporary viewers**, and we are still learning how to make it work. If you try Cerantola's approach, don't do it just to look cute. Make it clear how you're experimenting, and where the benefits or risks appear.
- Andrew Jennings made scenes of "doorstepping", in which he was filmed confronting his targets in the street, a central feature of his investigation into the international football association, FIFA. To underline the drama, he consciously adopted the persona of the fictitious TV detective, Columbo[2]. The scenes make for powerful viewing, and they rely not only on Jennings' boldness, but also on his restraint. He never stops asking the questions that matter for the story in a calm voice[3].
- Gerry Flynn's documentary of illegal logging in South East Asia repeatedly shows the author and his guides in a jungle forest as they hack through brush and hide from rangers and bootleggers. Eventually they are arrested. The meaning of this sequence goes beyond a "Big Adventure", communicating the extreme difficulty of documenting an environmental crime, the high stakes for everyone involved, the complicity of authorities in the traffic, and the backup necessary for the reporter and his guides to get out of jail. The reporter's presence isn't just a narrative device. Without that presence, the context of the story is lost. The jungle scenes also lend great authority to the sit-down interview with a perpetrator that follows.

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- Jessica Mitford edited her interview with a celebrity in “Let Us Now Appraise Famous Writers”[1] (1970) to expose not only the information the source provided, but the cynical hypocrisy and greed that oozed from him while they spoke. Her example was adopted by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward in *All the President’s Men*, to communicate the character of the people they encountered for the story. It is now a standard technique.

If you stand at the centre of the action, make sure that it’s done to illuminate the story and the actors, and not yourself. It’s a good idea to ask: Can I recount this passage without showing myself? The less you occupy the stage, the more room you leave for the actors and the viewer. But if the scene makes no sense without you, stay there until it’s done.

G

When and how to make your own judgment

We have all been told to be “objective” by confining ourselves to recounting the facts. If we interpret objectivity as openness to people and facts that we don’t like, instead of what we might prefer reality to be, that’s fine**. If we interpret objectivity as refusing to express the meaning in the facts, we miss an opportunity to deliver the insight and wisdom we have gained on behalf of the viewer.** It is no coincidence that adversaries of press freedom seek to deny us that opportunity.

In the Watergate investigation, not once did Carl Bernstein and Robert Woodward tell their audience, “Richard Nixon should go to jail.” Their job was to inform, not to dispose. Practice has evolved in the ensuing half-century. It is increasingly accepted that based on a solid investigation, , a reporter can say what is right or wrong, and what solutions should be promoted or proscribed.**We cannot substitute our preferences or opinions for the facts, a major flaw that turns our investigations into propaganda. We can certainly state an unavoidable meaning to which the facts lead.**

Writing such an ending is a revelatory exercise for the writer. If the meaning can’t be stated concisely and precisely, either we don’t have the evidence, or we haven’t figured out what it’s trying to tell us.

If the evidence has already been presented throughout the investigation, such an ending can be brutally short. After surveying and detailing decades of investments for defense in an East Asian country, the investigators conclude that the contractors “have for many years made policy requests that prioritize their profits to an astonishing degree.”

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Or the conclusion can occupy an entire chapter, as in Albert Londres' colonial era masterpiece, *Au Bagne* ("in the penal colony", 1923), a landmark in a centuries-long line of investigative work focused on prisons around the world After documenting the physical and moral horrors inflicted on convicts, Londres writes *"An open letter to the Minister of Colonies"*, which begins: "I've finished. The government must start." He then sets out four vital and doable reforms. The effect is inspiring, because he is speaking not only for himself; after hearing the victims and survivors, he is standing beside and for them. . (By the way, all his ideas eventually became reforms.)

Beware of a counter-intuitive risk if and when you move toward a judgment. Even experienced reporters may resist their own findings at the end of a story, when they discover that the world can be more terrible than they ever imagined. It's happened to us, and it will happen to you: We simply don't want to believe that what we found is true. When that happens, ask yourself: Is there another explanation that's supported by our data? If not, and the facts and documentation are clear, it's your duty to accept them.

There's a variation of this phenomenon that you can often see in the work of beginners: They will give the last quote to someone who tells them, in effect, "Oh, your idealism is admirable, but you got the story wrong." Maybe you did, but if not, you mustn't be swayed by that argument.

These phenomena take root in the reporter's fear – of being wrong or unkind, of making an enemy – or self-doubt: Who are they to denounce their betters? At such times it's good to remember that you are the equal of anyone who knows the same facts, including those who are responsible for them.

Beginners are prone to another mistake: systematically denouncing their targets, without considering that the actors may not be entirely or deliberately evil. Their concluding paragraphs will express regret or doubt: "Maybe they're not all bad, after all." That, too, is an expression of fear. If they're not all bad, show it in the story, and then tell us the consequences of their acts. Even better, **put compassion in your reporting toolkit.** You may well meet some truly evil people in your career, but most of what goes wrong results from a mistake, and you can make mistakes too.

One way or the other, **when you have the material, reveal its meaning to the extent allowed by the law, or find other work.** You can be a good journalist without being an investigator. You can't be a good investigator if you allow your more or less unconscious fears to overwhelm your evidence.

Annex:

Eva Constantaras on writing collaborative, data-rich stories with storyboards and visualization

There are numerous ways to structure and compose a story, and Eva Constantaras has developed one that's particularly useful in collaborative projects. (I think it's a good idea to designate one person to write the final draft, to ensure coherence and a uniform style; that's what we did in this book.) The techniques that Constantaras defines below are applicable to any investigative story, and they have particular weight in data journalism, where the information may be exceptionally rich. The core of her approach: *"We simplify our findings and create a storyboard to find the best way to craft a narrative around our discoveries."* They may use digital tools like **Mural**[1] or **Miro**[2] (currently freeware) to make the storyboarding process engaging and enable collaboration.

1. Lede and Storyboarding

Once the analysis and interview are complete, take a step back and reflect on whether your findings prove the hypothesis true, partially true, or false. Storyboard on your preferred platform (Mural, Jam Board, Miro, sticky notes).

Was the hypothesis true or false?	Was the hypothesis true or false?
Write down the most compelling findings	Nine out of ten litres of water pumped out is used for irrigating crops in the top groundwater extracting states. - In nearly 80% of states, just five crops have dominated farmlands over the last decade. - Together, the top five crops take up a large share of the country's cultivable land – often at the cost of long-term water sustainability. - These staples are among the thirstiest: growing one kilogram of wheat, on average, requires over 1,100 litres of groundwater, while paddy needs 452 litres per kilo. - If you take the water used to grow one kilogram of wheat and instead use it to grow other crops, it could produce enough rice to feed 25 people or millets to feed more than 150 – compared to just 10 people with wheat, assuming a 100-gram serving per person. - Electricity subsidies enable virtually unlimited groundwater withdrawals. Cheap, unlimited power encourages indiscriminate pumping and flooding of fields, even in districts already flagged as water-stressed.
Draft a lede for the story	The states dependent on flooding thirsty crops with groundwater contribute to India's status as the biggest global groundwater consumer and one of the most at risk of running dry.
Main subheads	- **The groundwater crisis state by state** - **Monocropping of water-thirsty cash crops** - **Lack of regulation for pumping groundwater** - **Failure to encourage water saving strategies and crop diversification**

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2. Data visualization

Data visualization helps support and explain a data-driven story. We figure out a headline that explains our findings, match it to a chart type, design the chart and ensure we have properly labeled our chart and data. Data visualizations support the main narrative by clarifying and emphasizing key points from the data.

Once you have a story outline, decide how visual elements will support the main findings of your story. Write a headline for the visualisation and identify the dataset and chart type before creating it.

Headline	Datasets used	Chart type	Link
Sikkim, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra have the highest adoption rates for micro-irrigation, covering more than half of their net irrigated area	Share of net irrigated area in each state or union territory using micro-irrigation (2020-21), Department of Agriculture, Cooperation and Farmers Welfare, Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare	Bar chart	*Flourish chart* (1)

At this stage we will have a lede, story outline and data visualizations in our Masterfile. We copy the elements into a Google Doc and write around (or through) the outline we developed to create a piece of explanatory, data-driven journalism.

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1.
We define an investigation.

2.
We create a hypothesis to verify our idea.

3.
We begin to build a timeline of events
and a map of the actors.

4.
We seek open sources to validate
and extend our research.

5.
We identify and encounter human sources.

6.
We archive and sequence our findings
in a masterfile.

7.
We compose the story.

8. GETTING IT RIGHT: THE PROCESS OF QUALITY CONTROL

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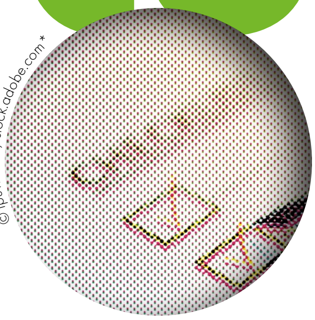
quality control



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With
Nils Hanson, Clothilde Redfern, Deborah Nelson,
Oleg Khomenok and Paul Radu

You've researched the story, organised and written it. Bravo, and now let's make sure we did it right before it gets into the public domain. This involves quality control, or in technical terms, "fact-checking." Our guide to the process comes from Nils Hanson, ARIJ ex-board member and former leader of the program "Mission Investigate" at Sweden's SVT network. We follow with annexes by Clothilde Redfern, Executive Director of Reporters Shield[1], on the matter of defending against libel charges, and Paul Radu on a counter-strategy.

I

What is fact-checking?

Long before fact-checking became a separate genre of investigative reporting in the last decade, it was part of the editorial process at high-level publications. To this day around the world, top investigative teams include a fact-checker. Their job is to make sure an investigation is perfectly executed and composed. Three main processes are involved:

- The first is making sure that you know the source or sources for every factual assertion in the story.
- In the process of verifying your sources, you identify and correct mistakes in the facts as stated. You also confirm that the "frame" – the context in which the facts are presented – is free of bias.
- At the same time, you remove emotional noise from your story – for example, bits of aggression or hostility that made its way into your narrative when you were tired, frustrated or scared, and signals of disdain, contempt or insult. They may not be defamatory in and of themselves, but they can be read as gratuitous by both your targets and libel judges. You don't need them if you've got the facts.

Repeat: You have to get the facts and the frame right, you have to cut or revise statements that aren't right, and you must make sure the tone of your story is justified.
You didn't make any mistakes? Wow, that's amazing! Our friend Ariel Hart, a great

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fact-checker at the Columbia Journalism Review, wouldn't believe you. She wrote (in "Delusions of Accuracy", Columbia Journalism Review July/August 2003): "I have never checked a story that had no mistakes, whether five pages long or two paragraphs." She adds:

> *In fairness, some of the 'mistakes' I find are matters of interpretation, and authors usually agree to change them. Virtually all articles, though, contain errors on objective matters of fact: a year slightly off; old data; misspellings; widely reported information taken from secondary sources, but wrong. And of course, "facts" pulled from the writer's mental archives. Errors often turn up when the author says, "You don't need to check that, I know that's right."*

You *will* make mistakes. Everyone does. Sometimes it's the way you say something, and sometimes it's the substance of what you're saying. Sometimes it's something small, and sometimes it's major, like calling something "hidden" when it's been publicly disclosed. Tiny or gigantic, it's a problem. Smart people correct these problems, and idiots hope that no one will notice them. If you're not willing to acknowledge and correct your mistakes, sooner or later you will pay a price for it.

It's highly possible that no one ever fact-checked one of your stories. Here's how it works at Sweden's SVT television network, where Nils Hanson developed "line by line editing" into a thorough quality control method. By the time it's over, the tone, facts and frame of the story have been reviewed, as well as the processes behind them.

This process is not complicated, though it is certainly fastidious. You can learn to enjoy it, because as it progresses, the story becomes more and more real, and its impact becomes palpable. It's also a lot more pleasant than trying to defend yourself, in a courtroom or any other space, against a charge where you got the story wrong.

You need at least two people – the author, and whoever is checking the story. The reporter should prepare by reading the story and trying to identify any errors before the meeting. Nils Hanson advises that the reporter should footnote the story with sources, and we agree. (Not least because it makes the job easier for everyone concerned, and that will augment your reputation as someone it's great to work with.)

In Chapter 5, we saw how setting up a masterfile, or a suite of files covering different aspects of the investigation, can help you organize your data and keep track of it. That work is also about to make you very popular with lawyers and fact-checkers.

If you have assembled the masterfile properly, you should have at least one unattackable source in it for every fact in your story. You can thus easily prepare a footnoted text of the story or transcript of the film.

Footnoting can be a waste of time if you do it mechanically. Do not just copy and paste source descriptions from your masterfile to the footnotes of your story. It's much smarter and safer to take a moment, each time you cite a source, to review it and then check what you've said (in a podcast, for example) or written from that source. Make sure you didn't paraphrase, summarise or quote incorrectly. It happens all the time, and if someone complains about the story, these little mistakes will make you look careless at best.

As you compile the footnotes, make a physical copy for every document you use in the story, then put the copied documents/hyperlinks in a stack in the order of use in your story. This is helpful for the fact-checker, but also for yourself, because you can now put your hand immediately on the relevant evidence, without further searching.

Here's what should happen when you sit down together:

A
First, consider the overall tone and frame

Reporters have a tendency to exaggerate, overstate, or approximate what should be precise. Usually, it happens because they don't have the facts necessary to be direct and clear. If you pass that test, keep going. If not, fix it now. Scale back your accusations. If they are substantive, you won't miss the sloppy insinuations and speculative charges.

The same goes for the frame. For example, if your story proposes that the target is serving occult interests, you may get some or most of the details right, but if you can't produce a smoking gun, your only proof that a hidden conspiracy is at work is that you can't see it.

This is where confirmation bias tends to show up. The encyclopedia Britannica defines it:

> *"People's tendency to process information that is consistent with their existing beliefs... These beliefs can include a person's expectations in a given situation and their predictions about a particular outcome. People are especially likely to process informationt to support their own believs when an issue is highlly important or self-relevant."*

If your frame leaves out important evidence or context, your work is at best mistaken and at worst dishonest. One sign that the frame is off-center comes when sources repeatedly offer information that contradicts a hypothesis, and their warnings aren't taken into account.

Don't just think about collecting multiple sources who say you're right. Pay particular attention to the ones who say, "That's not exactly right." That may be a polite way of telling you that you're exactly wrong. When you hear something like that, your next question should be: "What is not right?"

Be extra critical of information that confirms your hypothesis:

- Are the sources trustworthy?

- Am I asking the relevant critical questions?
- Have I done the necessary background checks? For example, is the expert I rely on up-to-date and trusted?

If you don't verify alternative hypotheses as energetically as you try to find facts to support your frame, you're probably engaged in confirmation bias. At that point, the best hope for you and your target is that a fact checker will call you out. You can help by asking three more questions.

- Would other facts change the general picture?
- Would the public be disappointed if they knew what we have left out?
- Can we justify the selection without losing credibility?

Even professionals who've done great work can make mistakes at some point in their careers. They may escape prosecution for libel, but their reputations can be durably affected. Future collaborators may question whether it's wise to work with them, and they are right to do so, because the next reputation to take a hit may be theirs.

The facts must be right, and the frame must be right. If the facts are wrong, the frame is like a house standing on rotten beams. If the frame is wrong, a pile of facts won't set it straight.

B
Make sure that you respect the rights of your sources and targets

Wise news organizations have adopted a "no-surprises" policy, which Deborah Nelson paraphrases:

> *No one should be surprised at what they read about themselves when a story is published. Every person or entity referenced in the story must be contacted as part of the pre-publication fact-checking process. This is not only an opportunity to get fair comment and catch errors; it also provides one last chance to elicit information and even admissions. (I've gotten damning admissions often enough to have come up with a name for this phenomenon: deadline confessions.)*

Hanson details the no-surprises procedure:

- **Mark any and all criticism** of a person, organisation or company. Has the criticised party been informed of your charges? If not, do it.
- **Has the criticised party responded to all the criticism?** If not, request a response again, preferably through a registered letter, which will prove your good faith efforts. One way or another,

document your efforts to obtain an answer.

- **Has the criticised party been given a reasonable amount of time to respond?** The more complicated your questions, the more time the other party may be entitled to.
- **Is it the right person who responds to the criticism**? You would be amazed how often a reporter settles for talking to a secretary or janitor who happens to answer the phone, but has no idea what the reporter is asking about.
- **Has the criticised party been given the chance to put forward his or her best case?** If not, you are treading on his or her rights, and just as important, you may be missing an important part of the story.
- Have we met any reasonable demands to be informed in advance of how their statements will be reproduced or edited? **It is reasonable for a source to ask that he or she be informed of any quotes that will be used in the story, and be allowed to correct them for accuracy (but not to remove an admission or corroborated information). It is not reasonable for a source to ask to see your whole story.** Never give a source this right, except in the very rare case where the story is centered on that source, and the subject is so technically complex that the source is legitimately worried you will get it wrong without his or her direct involvement. (This applies, for example, to certain scientific subjects.)

You can embed these concerns in your ongoing contacts with sources. At every stage in her investigations, Nelson asked sources for comment on every discovery about them. In one case she investigated a policeman who left a trail of destruction across his career. Because she contacted him constantly for comment, when she read him the final report before publication he said, "That's a great story. That's just how I feel."

If you have reason to fear your targets' response – for example, if they have a history of pre-publication vengeance – contact their lawyers instead. Yes, sometimes lawyers may ask for an injunction to stop publication. But that's better than getting sued for not respecting their clients' rights.

C

Confirm every detail

If you said that a person's eyes are blue, and in fact they're brown, your targets can use it as evidence of your sloppiness. Minor details such as this look major to critics. Did you document them or are you working from your memory, the richest and also least reliable archive at our disposal?

Corroboration of details is particularly important when reporting on criminal activities. Criminals tend to be paranoid (for good reason), and "if inaccurate information is published, a dangerous person may assume that their adversaries have paid us to do the story," notes Hanson.

Pay extra attention to the conclusions you draw in your story. They should be scrutinised in every detail. Is the hypothesis proven, or is an adjustment needed? Can the findings be questioned or disproved in any way? Can all other explanations be excluded?

D

Did we say it right?

Consider these two phrases, courtesy of Hanson:

- "He remembers nothing."
- "He says he remembers nothing."

The first statement is unverifiable, because you are not inside the source's head. The second reports what the source told you, and that can be documented. That's the one you want to publish.

Our tendency to accept what survivors say, with or without proof, shows in how we describe them and their accusations. Hanson gives another example from a story that was being fact-checked: "The victim is a small, thin lady weighing just under 43kg. She is severely visually impaired. At the time of the assault she was 71 years old." The description of the lady is objective enough. Her status as "victim" is not, because when the story was written, her case had not yet gone to trial. Likewise, the "assault" is an allegation, and not yet a proven fact.

Don't go beyond what you can document. It's a simple discipline, and you have to work at it.

II

Fact-checking and the law

The line-by-line process can also serve as the basis for a legal review – that is, a critical examination of whether your story is in violation of libel or defamation statutes. In nearly every legal system, there are a few principal criteria for judging whether libel or defamation has been committed. The most important is that the reporter did not tell the more or less exact truth. Jurisprudence worldwide generally recognizes three tests of this failure (though we note that not every jurisdiction applies them honestly):

1. The reporter did not compile sufficient proof of his or her assertions.
2. The reporter did not adhere to professional standards of objectivity toward the facts, and either neglected or concealed information that contradicted his or her argument.
3. The reporter acted out of personal motives, and had no larger, public interest in making their accusations.

If anything in your story fails to pass those tests, it must be removed or rewritten. Thinking about them should be part of your writing process. If not, the fact-check is your last chance to get it right.

Make sure you **read recent trial or appeals judgments in your country to see how the laws on defamation or libel are being applied**. In any jurisdiction we know of where competence outweighs cronyism, truth and good faith toward the actors of a story – most obviously, avoiding gratuitous aggression and insults you can't document – are taken into account by trial judges. That may not be to your advantage, if you break the rules.

In our annex below, Clothilde Redfern of Reporters Shield will go into legal considerations in detail.

III

Predictable psychological effects of fact-checking

The fact-checking process is going to affect everyone involved, and the only question is how. (The OCCRP has said that "the first time is torture for everyone involved."[1])

- First, going through your data to verify your assertions may revive the emotions you felt when you collected the data. If you were angry or frightened or depressed at the time, you will get an echo of that feeling.

  It is wise to note these feelings. As during the reporting process, transcribing emotions will make them into material that you can manipulate and control. Sometimes what you write at moments like these can be used in the story.

- You will almost certainly feel or be made to feel, at some point in the process, that you have misunderstood something. This instinctive anxiety can be due to several causes, not all of them valid.

  It is indeed possible that you have made a mistake of substance; the best solution here is to verify your work on this point again.

  However, it is also possible that you have indeed discovered the truth, but you find it so distasteful, or its implications are so frightening, that you would prefer not to believe it. Again, the best solution is to take another close look at your data. If the data shows that the world is a sadder, uglier place than you ever thought was possible, you can take comfort from the fact that your story may change it.

  If you made a mistake, admit it as soon as possible – ideally, when you have understood why the mistake occurred. That knowledge can help you to find other errors.

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Please note: **Many mistakes occur because the mind will naturally seek to fill holes in a story with speculation.** (A lawyer told us once that many people are in jail because they failed to master that impulse while being interrogated.) It is quite possible that your mind played this trick when you composed your investigation. It happens when you say to yourself, often without pronouncing the words, "I don't know exactly what happened, but it must have been like this." Bring that reflex to the surface and question it. Either tell the viewer that you are speculating, or acknowledge what you do not know. If you don't know something, you cannot be mistaken in saying so, and you will reinforce the authority of what you do know.

- Finally, the author and fact-checker are going to get annoyed with each other. They are doing high-pressure work with high stakes, and usually, that does not make people nicer. This has serious implications, and its causes and cures must be taken seriously too.

  The author may feel that every challenge to his or her facts and interpretations is a betrayal. On another level, the author may more or less consciously sense that their first audience, the fact-checker, either cannot or refuses to believe the story. Or, the author may be so invested in the story that every fact is carved into his or her flesh.

  The fact-checker may be worried that the reporter has done a sloppy job, or is too driven by his or her emotions, and is unwilling to improve the work.

  This conflict is inevitable, but it will be far worse if both parties are not committed to making the story the best it can possibly be. If either or both of them, for reasons of ego, fear or personal animosity, cannot trust each other to pursue that goal, they should not be working together.

If you do not work for an organization that invests in fact-checking, recruit a fact checker to your project, as part of the team. Do not rely on the reporters involved to do the whole job.

When the story is ready to publish, your job isn't done. Now you must help to ensure its impact, the subject of our next and concluding chapter.

Annex 1:

Clothilde Redfern on preventing and defending against libel charges

Since our first edition was published, the growing influence of investigative reporting led to increased use of "strategic lawsuits against public participation", or SLAPPs, as well as to legislation to restrict them. At this writing the legislation is having less effect than the SLAPPs, which are aimed at preventing or punishing investigative work. Clothilde Redfern is executive director of Reporters Shield, which she calls the first international organization that provides timely legal advice and defence to journalists facing SLAPPs. Below, she offers advice to journalists whose work may lead to legal intimidation or prosecution.

1. Know the law, or work with someone who does.

"The law is increasingly being manipulated and weaponized against journalists. Rich people are using and abusing legal loopholes to attack journalists. That is what all this is about. It's like anything else in the law: Until someone uses a loophole, it's almost not visible. There are many people working very hard to change and reform the laws, and this process just takes a long time. In the meantime you need to protect your newsroom, so you can still be running and investigating in the next decade.

"So you need to know the law or pay someone who does to review your work. The law is a rules-based system, and you have to understand the rules and play by the rules to win.

"The legal grounds most likely to be used against journalists are the laws on defamation, the protest laws, copyright and trademark whistle blowing, the Commercial and Official Secrets Act and data protection. So that's a lot of law to get your head around, particularly if you're doing any kind of cross border investigations where you might have to take into account the laws from several different jurisdictions.

"If you are publishing anything investigative and anything that is legally sensitive, you definitely need to either have that expertise in house, or make sure you have access to it, to ***review your investigations and your reporting before you publish.***

[Note: Do not simply rely on lawyers to tell you or your editor what can work. Show the lawyers that you are an eager and equal partner in a complex game. Give them solid reasons to love working with you. You may never need their help in court, but if you do, you want them to feel like they are going to win.]

2. Prevention (cleaning up the story) is stronger and cheaper than cure (defending it in court)

"You're looking for any legal grounds that the person or the company you have criticized or accused in your reporting may have to sue you in court.

"You absolutely can't publish anything without being sure you have the evidence to back it up. In particular, be careful of jumping to conclusions that seem perfectly logical to you, but have no factual basis or real evidence that would stand up.

"You have to be very careful about the language that you use. The hotter you feel, the cooler you write. Be aware of how anger, insult, and disrespect can weaken your story.

"I think sometimes they're a completely understandable expression of frustration at abuse of the system, or riches, or power, and I think those feelings are justified. But they do not make your reporting any stronger. Any gratuitous insults or accusations could come back to bite you.

"Think about what you can leave out for later use. I once spoke to an editor at a newspaper in Southeast Europe who was regularly targeted for lawsuits because he was publishing a lot of investigations against corruption there. He had had a previous career as a lawyer, so he knew the legal system very well. His personal rule was to always have more evidence of wrongdoing than you publish. That acted as a deterrent for anyone who wanted to take him to court. If they did, it would force his hand to reveal more evidence of wrongdoing.

"Prevention is by far better than cure. It's much, much cheaper as well, and it will help you improve your journalism."

[Note: Be very careful what you say about your work after it is published. Interviewers may push you to go beyond what you put in your fact-checked story. Make sure you don't.]

3. If you did it right, don't be intimidated

"This is really, really important: ***The chilling effect of SLAPPs often happens at the moment of the threat.*** *Many SLAPPs are not actually designed to win in court. Often they are simply used as a deterrent and an intimidation tactic, and therefore they expect the accused to capitulate on receipt of a formal threat.*

"The most important thing is to respond formally and professionally, to indicate that you have the resources and the legal expertise to defend your story in court. That is often where legal harassment ends, because they realize at that point that they aren't going to be able to intimidate you. They may also know that they don't want your story to gain more readership by going to court.

"If they follow through and they lose, their reputation will be impacted. Their finances will be impacted. They'll often have to pay their own costs and the defendant's costs. Probably what's worse is that they may need to uncover more evidence or open up their finances or their business books during the discovery process. Things like that might have a bearing on the charges that are made.

"They're not thinking about that when they intimidate journalists with the threat of a lawsuit. It's the equivalent of a scared dog barking really loudly, who will then run away if you stand up for yourself and fight back.

"You can look up individuals or companies that are known for suing anyone that investigates them. This is a good check against how legally sensitive your investigation is likely to be.

"If you're on the receiving end of a lawsuit because of an investigation, it probably means you're looking in the dark corners people don't want you to look into, and something there is wrong, and that's a good reason for you to continue and not capitulate. But it can be very nerve-wracking. If you're not used to these kinds of intimidating legal letters and formal threats, it can feel very scary. They will often threaten you with huge potential bills. Some people may not have the financial savings to cover such bills, and they may even threaten the livelihood of the newsroom. That's why it's so effective.

"You may be able to spread that risk by co-publishing with other outlets, especially in other jurisdictions."

4. Document the public interest

"It's very important to take notes on how your investigation or the story you are writing is in the public interest. This can often become an important part of your defence.

"It sounds strange to a journalist to take notes on why the story matters, because that often feels like being asked to explain your writing rather than just share your writing. But this is

one of the legal justifications for publishing possibly sensitive reports. If you can show that your accusations lead to an issue in the public interest, you will have a stronger defense than if your story reads like a personal attack on an individual.

"You need to show that there is a wider interest than just highlighting that someone is doing something bad because they're a bad person. You need to show how their actions affect the public interest, and that becomes your defense.

"And so, if you have notes on any kind of thinking processes around that, or editorial decisions about how to tell the story and why you are you telling that story, that will support you in court."

5. Give the adversary reasonable time to respond before you publish

"Always offer an invitation for the person or organisation you're accusing to comment.

"Anyone who is the subject of criticism in your story should receive a right to reply, where you set out clearly what the criticism will be in your story. If they do reply, you must include that response in your story. This will protect you from them saying that you did not follow best practice by offering them an opportunity to comment.

"They rarely refuse. What happens is, either they ignore you – that's why a right to reply should be sent with very clear publication dates and deadlines for the response – or what we often see is that at this stage, a legal threat will come through. They won't reply to your accusations. They won't offer a comment on your actual story. They just send you a formal threat of legal action, saying, if you publish this story we will sue you.

"You need to engage with that formal threat and preferably have a professional lawyer respond on your behalf, so that you have documentation should they actually go ahead and sue you."

Annex 2:

"Keep investigating": OCCRP on a counter-strategy

OCCRP co-founder Paul Radu faced a high-stakes defamation case. *"If I'd lost,"* **wrote**[(1)] Radu, *"I would have had my personal property confiscated and be left with a lifetime of debt."* That prosecution ended with a settlement favourable to Radu, because OCCRP continued to "doggedly" investigate the target, said Radu. He reflected:

> *I recommend that if you are sued, you consider the case to be another investigative project. You will need to bring partners together and start a significant investigation... You need to find everything they were involved in. You may find more evidence than you ever imagined.*

In the end, said Radu, despite the personal strain of the case, "it was all worth it. This lawsuit leaves OCCRP much stronger in the face of future legal threats, as we now know a great deal about how to mount a vigorous defence and tilt the balance in our favour."

A variation on Radu's strategy is to identify material that could go into a second or third article and keep it in reserve for a followup story. When Anne-Marie Casteret published her first article on the "Contaminated Blood Scandal" in 1991, she had nine future stories ready for release. The stories were planned as rebuttals to untruths that she expected her adversaries to proclaim, based on her knowledge of their tactics and the evidence. She used them all, and she prevailed over adversaries who were far more powerful than herself. So can you.

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1.
We define an investigation.

2.
We create a hypothesis to verify our idea.

3.
We begin to build a timeline of events and a map of the actors.

4.
We seek open sources to validate and extend our research.

5.
We identify and encounter human sources.

6.
We archive and sequence our findings in a masterfile.

7.
We compose the story.

8.
We make sure that we got it right.

9. BUILDING YOUR IMPACT THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

impact through partnership

With
Deborah Nelson, Oleg Khomenok,
Matthieu Lietaert, Disclose.ngo and Anya Schiffrin

In this chapter we have two goals. The first is to see how to help your work have an impact. The second is to help you plan a career with investigation at its center.

Let's start with a basic question: What is "journalistic impact"? In news reporting, it consists of informing people of a situation, so that they can decide what to do (or not do) about it. In our work, the investigation goes beyond drawing attention to the facts, to encourage and in some cases push for change in the public interest, and hopefully to achieve it.

Researcher Anya Schiffrin and her colleagues found[1] a near-consensus among journalists on how impact is currently defined in practice: **A report changes the attitudes, beliefs and actions of individuals, communities or institutions**. Increasingly, Schiffrin et al. note, investigative journalists seek to quantify the impact of their work. Thus the non-profit outlets Pro Publica[2] and Disclose.ngo track "the engagement of readers, the intensity of their reaction, and how much the work resonated with them… in addition to the more standard measures of government investigations, firings of government officials, [and] policy change."

Scholar James T. Hamilton's book, *Democracy's Detectives*: *The economics of investigative journalism*, quantifies the public benefits of 314 investigations by reporter Pat Stith in the U.S. state of North Carolina from 1966 to 2008; his work led to 31 laws, affected the careers of *"over 100 individuals"*, and generated $US 4.7 million in *"repayments or reimbursements…fines, shifts in contract or property values, or other changes in monetary transactions."* The OCCRP claims that its work has led to $US 11 billion in recovery of misappropriated or stolen funds. Not everyone applauds. One critic disdainfully said that OCCRP's impact statement reads like a corporate financial accounting. It can also be read as a service to the taxpayers whose wealth was stolen.

Schiffrin's team divided impact into external (the world) and internal (individual, network and institutional) effects, as shown below. Note in particular that many of them involve transforming the journalists and those with whom they're in direct contact. In effect, internal impacts aim at building a like-minded community of skills and values. You would be wise to consider them before undertaking a project, because they will directly influence your life and work. The second, external set of impacts aim at social value – the benefits to society.

A recurrent theme in studies of investigative journalism argues that it is far easier to create social value than to capture part of that value for journalists and their enterprises. The monetization of investigative work is beyond the scope of this manual, and is the object of intense research and development efforts as I write. We will refer to the actors in that enterprise in our resource guide.

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Taxonomy of Media Impact

Schiffrin et al. 2023

	INDIVIDUAL	NETWORK	INSTITUTION
INTERNAL	**1.** Awareness of problem **2.** journalists' professional opportunities **3.** Journalists' skills **4.** Journalists' competencies **5.** Respect from peers	**11.** Team collaboration (within news agency) **12.** consortium collaboration (between news agencies) **13.** Amplification of preers' work **14.** Interpeer learning **15.** Training programs **16.** Tools, services, and content	**21.** Diversity of perspectives **22.** Organizational values **23.** Revenues/income/ financial benefits **24.** Audience/reach of work? **25.** business operations
EXTERNAL	**6.** Awareness of news content **7.** Audience perception of brand/trust **8.** Increased knowledge **9.** Beliefs perceptions **10.** Behavior/individuals' intent to act	**17.** Social capital/strengthened networks **18.** Advocacy and narative change **19.** Public attention, agenda setting, and issue framing **20.** Norms	**26.** Political repercussions **27.** Law or policy change **28.** Institutions/trust in institutions **29.** Service delivery

Surprisingly, measuring impact became a general concern for investigative journalists and scholars only in the past two decades, in part because funders increasingly insisted that it be quantified. Before, the tradition of objectivity taught us that we should be neutral toward the outcomes of our work. From this perspective, our job is to inform, and it's up to other stakeholders to decide if and how they will act on our information. (Some great investigative journalists, like the late Charles Lewis, upheld this stance by emphasizing the role of an "informed citizenry" in democracy[1].) If we follow that path, we don't take sides in controversies or conflicts, we deliver the facts, and hopefully the facts speak for themselves.

In many countries, neutrality toward the outcome of our work is a defence against the accusation that we are partial or partisan. In that situation, if the ruling party or the opposition finds the facts agreeable or infuriating, we can claim that it is neither our goal nor our problem to advance one side or another. That was the stance taken by the Washington Post in its Watergate coverage, and it remains current.

There is another possible stance[2], however, which runs through the history of our work. It holds that **if the purpose of investigative reporting is to effect change, then the process does not end when the story is published.**

What the neutral position means in practice, often enough, is that a journalist will publish a story, then wait to see if anyone reacts. In practice, as in American journalistic slang, this can be called "throwing it over the wall." Our friend Kenneth J. Davis, former CEO of the Investigative News Network, sums it up: "I have never seen people do so much to make sure a story is powerful, and so little to make sure it's a hit."

Oddly enough, awards for investigative work depend, in part, on whether there are "results". Given the short time window between publishing a story and filing an application for a prize – at best a year, at worst a few months – the results must be immediate. Unfortunately, life doesn't always respect that calendar. On one occasion, I waited 11 years to see a result from a story that identified a mechanism of legalized corruption. My colleagues and I won a prestigious prize for it, but that wasn't the point. We had found something that needed to stop, and waiting for its wheels to fall off was frustrating. We had thrown it over the wall, but we couldn't see who picked it up and ran with it.

This chapter is about how you might drive change through your stories, beyond throwing them over the wall. It assumes that **publication of a story is not enough**. We must ensure, at a minimum, that it reaches the people who need to know what we have to say, and who are prepared to do something about it. The starting point for this argument is Protess et al.'s[3] discovery that investigative stories which achieve results, most often, take off from a "coalition model" in which civil society and honest authorities are more or less active partners.

In their landmark "agenda-setting" studies and their book, *The Journalism of Outrage: Investigative Reporting and Agenda Building in America (1991)*, Protess et al. showed

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that investigative journalism obtains results not only or mainly by alerting the public to scandal, but instead by acting in collaboration with other social forces. They contrast this "coalition" strategy with the "mobilisation" strategy, in which public outrage over our revelations forces leaders to respond. They note that the mobilisation model drew not only on theories of social protest, but also on a narrow reading of the Watergate case, in which allies of the Washington Post's reporters were largely overlooked.

An historic *a posteriori* test case of the coalition model, an unplanned "natural experiment", occurred through the campaign to end apartheid in South Africa. In that long struggle, a key success factor was the emergence of an alliance, recalled[1] Anton Harber, founder and editor of the anti-apartheid newspaper the Weekly Mail (now the Mail & Guardian), between "civil society, lawyers and journalists."

A warning is in order: These coalitions can take you into uncharted territory, where mistakes can be made. That happened to Protess[2] when he shared student memos concerning a case under investigation by the Medill Journalism School's "Innocence Project", which sought evidence of wrongful convictions, with a convict's defence attorneys. There were legal implications for the students and Protess. There were also ethical issues. Could journalists be allies in a common cause with one side of an open conflict, without creating a grave conflict of interest?

Our position is that **the risks are real, and coalitions are nonetheless worth exploring further than is now the case**. If we are to continue challenging powerful adversaries, and we surely will, we need allies. Among other things, that means accepting the certainty that our credibility will be challenged. It already is: The growth of the investigative journalism movement would have been impossible without the financial support of pro-democracy governments and foundations, and that has repeatedly led to accusations that we are engaged in covert activities on their behalf.. The accusations will not go away, and neither will we, if we find allies who respect our mission and independence.

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The case for coalition

Let's begin from an observation: The idea that we must be neutral toward the impact of our work is eroding because of three convergent factors.

- The first is that we have become better at our jobs. The differences between the "lone wolf" investigative work of the 1970s (or even the early 2000s) and our current collaborative work, in the scope and scale of our ambitions and skills, can fairly be called immense. That means we are finding secrets and unwinding obscure patterns more often, and some powerful people don't like it.
- The second is that as we get better at uncovering potent facts, objectivity toward the facts — accepting facts that even our friends don't like, exposing facts that were supposed to remain obscure — no longer makes us look neutral. We can be, and are, accused of serving occult interests.
- The third is that new players have entered the game. NGOs collectively publish more investigations than all the journalists on the planet, and they are hardly neutral toward the results they may obtain. They value transparency over objectivity: "This is what we want, and this is how we will get it." The best of them have deep respect for the facts, and high standards of documentation. That enables them to collaborate with us. They nonetheless use their work and ours to activist ends.

The implication of these trends is that we are increasingly pushed toward partnership with other actors in or around the stories we reveal, not only for impact, but for our own security. **Loners are losers:** An isolated reporter, the model for the legend of Watergate, is an easy target, and if no one carries the story forward alongside the reporter, nothing will happen.

Do powerful stories suffice to effect change? Yes, but rarely. A starting example was the resignation of a prime minister following the revelation by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) in its historic Panama Papers story that he owned undisclosed offshore accounts. A massive citizen demonstration demanded his exit. However, that demonstration was supported by numerous citizen groups, acting in concert.

It's an exception that proves the rule: Our stories alone will not change the world. They may have other worthwhile impacts, which we'll consider below. But if we hope to make the world less cruel and more just tomorrow than it is today, we need help.

A
Define the impact you hope to have

1. PERSONAL IMPACTS

The first and most reliable impact of your work is to offer survivors the comfort of knowing that they're not alone – that someone not only cares about them, but is also fighting for their rights. This is the minimum impact you can expect, and if you don't create it, you haven't done the job.

In some cases, your story will provide the survivors with evidence that they can use to obtain justice. Make sure that they are aware of it. If the victims are organized into associations and undertake legal action themselves, their voices may be decisive. Not least, survivors provide a moral justification for investigating a given case, which mitigates the charge that the reporters seek only glory or vengeance.

You will change, too. You will feel renewed pride and satisfaction in your work, and confidence that you can accomplish things that few people can do. (This effect was documented among members of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists by Schiffrin et al.) Others will seek you out to tell you about events that deserve a closer look. If you never undertake another investigation in your life, the knowledge that you were brave, determined and smart enough to do the job will never leave you. Whatever work you undertake, the rare skills you acquire will make you a valuable collaborator; few people are capable of truly understanding complex situations and expressing their knowledge clearly. Your confidence will draw others toward you, and they will typically be of higher character than your detractors.

2. ACHIEVING SYSTEMIC IMPACTS

Beyond the personal benefits, ask: Is your goal a legislative reform? Is it criminal prosecution of wrongdoers, as in anti-corruption investigations? How about changing a corporate policy (a major impact goal of climate journalism)? Take the time to imagine how you want your story to end, then plan for that impact.

The French investigative NGO Disclose, who graciously acknowledge the influence of Schiffrin's research on their practice – please note: not citing your intellectual sources is a great way to turn potential friends and allies into detractors – divide their impacts[(1)] into four large categories. Please note that each requires allies.

- **Judicial:** official investigations are launched, indictments and trials follow. This requires *the involvement of the justice system.*
- **Institutional:** Laws, regulations or rules are proposed or enacted. *For that, legislators and regulators are needed*. They may react to our reports because they become aware for the first time of the consequences of a policy, or because they can no longer pretend that a problem doesn't exist.
- **Public:** Demonstrations, petitions or other protests emerge. *That entails the support of civil society groups.*
- **Media:** The story receives wide attention from other publishers. At best, they launch investigations of their own. (You can help them by sharing data.) At worst, they attack you in turn, which has the counter-intuitive effect of widening the reach of your revelations.

We tend to be biased toward media impacts, because they're often the first and easiest to obtain. We count the number of times a story is reposted or mentioned, and how many people visit it online. Those data are significant, but they don't always translate into real-world effects. We want most to be of interest to people who can directly influence the outcomes, who are nearly always a smaller group. **The first step is investigating who our story matters to.**

B
Define your core audience and how to reach them

For most journalists I've met, marketing is synonymous with "getting people to buy what they don't need." One of my INSEAD colleagues, Markus Christen, described marketing in more useful terms: "the art of making the truth attractive." We try to do that when we compose our stories. Then we have to ask and answer the question: **attractive to whom?**

The obvious answer is: **not everyone, and not to the same degree**. James T. Hamilton showed in *All the News That's Fit to Sell: How the Market Transforms Information into News* (2003) – and his findings were confirmed by a 2023 study from the Reuters Institute[(1)] – that the audiences for stories about politics, sports and business are primarily masculine, and the people who care the most about stories focused on education, family and health tend to be women. These tendencies reflect socially-imposed gender roles and economic realities that have resisted over a century of feminist activism. They nonetheless have implications for our impact strategies – especially for freelancers trying to find homes for their stories. **If you want your**

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work to have an impact, you might consider starting with the people and media to whom your subject already matters, then build out from that base. That works better in the short term than trying to convince indifferent editors that your work matters to their audiences. It isn't only a matter of gender, by the way. A major reason that an entire sector of independent environmentalist media exists today is that mainstream media were slow to understand the importance of the subject.

Take another look at your source map. It is more than a guide to where you'll find information: **It shows you who is directly involved in your story, and therefore has reason to care about it**. Some of them are individuals, and some of them are organized into associations, online forums or NGOs. Whoever they are, you will not have to persuade them that your work matters. They already know that it matters. They may also know, better than you, *what to do about it.*

Now ask: **Which of these people publish their own media or are served by specialized publications?** Your analysis should include social media groups, newsletters, NGO websites, and anywhere else where people discuss your subject. Some of them will not share your conclusions, and that is a secondary concern, because as agenda-setting research has shown, **even hostile coverage of your work helps make it known.** At a minimum, these media should be contacted and given a link to your work. The best outcome is that they will collaborate on the story, which will bring it directly to the audience most concerned by your findings. Propublica applied this strategy in "Brain Wars", its project with the National Public Radio (NPR) network on brain damage suffered by U.S. troops. Parts of the series were co-published in Stars and Stripes[(1)], the leading news outlet for American military personnel.

My colleagues and I applied this strategy from the start of an investigation in 2022-23 into the opposition to medical assistance in dying[(2)], by publishing pieces of the larger story as it developed on the websites of citizen groups concerned with the issue, as well as a blog space offered by a leading online journal to subscribers. In the near-absence of coverage by mainstream media of the conflict around a proposed reform, our articles compelled opponents to respond.

Impact is possible even if mainstream media don't publish your story in their news pages. Don't let them decide if your work deserves an audience in your place.

Citizen media, and in particular NGOs, have exploded since the development of broadband internet. They are trying to build their audiences, and if your work can help, they will use it. They can also help you organize events and initiatives to mobilize allies. Don't dismiss this as "preaching to the converted", because even the converted need to know that their cause is just and shared.

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Finding impact partners

A major development in our business since the 2000s is the insight that when a story reaches across borders, we need partners in those places. In parallel, scholars have created a copious literature on corporate collaborations[1] and alliances, from which we have much to learn.

The starting point of both these research streams is that **partnerships aim to secure resources beyond our own.** The resources may be *complementary* – for example, we recruit other publications to extend our reach, or specialists to deepen our knowledge base – or *similar*, as when we seek journalists to do the same job in different places, widening our reporting capacity.

The current state of journalistic collaborations is that nearly all of them focus first on sharing reporters and magnifying impact through simultaneous publication in different jurisdictions – a compilation of similar resources. What's missing from the picture are formal alliances that aim at extended and sustained impact over the time needed to obtain reform. The components for such alliances are in place, but the only one that we know of at this writing is the Global Anti-Corruption Consortium[2], based on the partnership of the NGO Transparency International and the OCCRP.

The best time to engage allies is before your investigation is published, or even when it is designed. You begin by investigating their interest in your subject. If they're not journalists, perhaps you will engage them first as expert sources, or voices of the opposition to current practices or policies. At a minimum, you can tell them that your story is coming soon. At a maximum, you can create a network that will exhibit, share, and market your work. You do not need a large organisation to do this, but you do have to work hard at it. The independent filmmaker Matthieu Lietaert, whose recent work focuses on how communities and activists in Latin America combat climate change and corporate overreach[3], is a master of this process, which he describes below. Note that it runs through every step of his production:

> **Firstly, with regard to the story design**: *We definitely tried not to fall in the "vicitimization" trap while depicting these communities. We tried to show a turning point in the stories: These communities are slowly getting unstoppable and they will fight for their rights, no matter how big is the obstacle in front of them. This is the real news at the end of the day. It's not about rational thinking, it's about human values, it's about courage. Many from the audience told us how much these three stories motivate them.*
>
> **Secondly, there is also the distribution of the stories to be included.** *Instead of producing one film after another one on an assembly line, we decided to spend less time on production (in a world of*

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> *"infobesity") and more time on both the distribution and the relationship with the end users (citizens, NGOs, policy-makers). When possible, the protagonists of the story are invited to participate.*

Look for people like Lietaert and learn from their innovations. When you can show that your work is reaching a wide audience, you will have a better chance of publishing it in major media as well as the base you've constructed.

D
Partnering with activists

The minimum way to collaborate with activists is to use them as sources, subject to verification (as opposed to breathless admiration), and as possible amplifiers of your work through their own media. The maximum is to partner with them from the outset[1]. This goes beyond asking them to reprint or publicize your work. They become active participants, providing resources that you lack and in some cases writing their own reports. Major NGOs have their own lobbying departments. They also possess their own media, which in some cases (like Greenpeace, with its three million paying members) have audiences larger than most news outlets. Not least, they may have close relationships with lawyers, who can be useful in assuring your defence as well as arguing for reforms.

My experience suggests guardrails that must be erected before you undertake such work:

- **Make sure that your contract or memorandum of agreement specifies that you have control over the content of your investigation, and a right of approval over the use they will make of it.** Otherwise, you are leaving the door open to future conflict, as opposed to designing out the possibility. You can start with a handshake, but then write down and sign together the working hypothesis, and that you will deliver a story that is supported by the data whether it fits that hypothesis or not.
- **The minimal condition for partnering with a NGO is that you accept their policy goals as well as the means they employ to achieve them**. In particular, if they value ideology or campaign goals more than the facts, look for another partner.
- **Be careful to document the "village" inside the NGO.** Who makes decisions? Who supports or opposes your project? So far as you can see, what are the values of their organizational culture? Who will be your interface to that culture?
- **What are their impact plans?** Do you approve of them? Be aware that working with activists may hurt your chances of publishing in a media that embraces neutrality.

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- **Who brings what to the table?** Will you contribute anything beyond investigating, starting with writing the story or stories? Will they commit to administrative, quality control or legal support? Will they promote the story to their members and allied NGOs (and how many do they have)? Spell it out before you start work.
- Not least, **who will manage the project?** What are their project protocols – communication channels, deadlines, and so on? How often will you communicate with them? Will you give them a seat in the room when you discuss the work with your journalist colleagues?
- Remember this: **Journalistic time and activist time are not in the same zone**. We publish when we're ready. Activists cannot change the date at which they launch a campaign. You may have to change the scope of your project to suit their schedules, whether you like it or not.

James T. Hamilton observes that collaborating with NGOs, whose credibility or methods may be questioned, "increases the pressure and need to make the methods and data used even more transparent. In this way *objectivity becomes seen as a procedure rather than an ideal relating to how a reporter views their relation to the impact of their reporting."* The implications extend to your workflow, because you will need to document your processes, and to the published story, where you will recount how you gathered and interpreted your data. It's worth noting that Bellingcat systematically incorporates this material into their investigations, making every story like a masterclass in how it was done.

Sometimes, honest police and prosecutors have collaborated with investigative reporters whom they respect. Reporters can act before a complaint or lawsuit is filed, collecting evidence that may later serve for a prosecution. We must remember, however, that if the justice system is merely an arm of political repression, anyone inside the system who helps us is taking a career-ending risk, and their interest may be a prelude to prosecution. Don't assume that this will be the case before you investigate the matter. The memoirs[(1)] of Clark R. Mollenhoff, a pre-Watergate investigative journalist, tell how he allied with a cop and a prosecutor to end the corruption of a provincial American city, by publicizing their moves and finding new leads. More recently, the colleagues[(2)] of Ján Kuciak discovered to their surprise that the police investigating his murder, whom the reporters feared would try to bury the case, were sincerely determined to arrest his assassins.

E

Choose your moments in the short and long term

The news is a hungry beast, but it may not find the story you're about to serve appe-

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tizing. In some cases, you can predict whether someone else's story will consign yours to indifference, and conversely, whether events will widen your impact. The obvious examples are political. If a Presidential election is underway, the odds that any major media will publish or notice your story on a European parliamentary election are close to zero. In contrast, if a parliamentary election is impending, an investigation into the corruption of parliamentarians will have more impact before citizens cast their votes.

The timing of publication, especially in trans-national investigations, became a major factor of success within the past decade. ICIJ's publications were released simultaneously in numerous countries, a discipline that did not come easy, but that paid off in massive attention and reaction. If you fail to keep such an agreement, you will probably never collaborate with that partner again.

Less obviously, major stories require ongoing attention. ICIJ stayed with the story of clandestine money flows across the past decade, relentlessly building the case for reform. Over that period different media joined their coalition, and some journalists who participated discovered the subject for the first time. When you choose the sectors where you want to investigate, think about whether you want to keep using the expertise you'll gain there in the future.

That is especially true for freelancers. Andrew Jennings focused on corruption in sport partly because *"freelancers need stories with long legs"*, where their growing expertise enables continuous scoops on a matter of still-current importance. In his case, professional football tournaments provided regularly scheduled reasons for the public to watch his work.

F
Consider the possibility of unwanted impacts

People who share your values are not your only potential audience. Our work can lead to chaos and collateral damage, as with the News of the World's "Name and Shame" campaign in 2000(1), which preceded attacks against men wrongly accused of paedophilia.

Two current factors make this consideration particularly complex.

- The first is that your work can be captured by political forces who use it to attack competing movements with whom you may sympathize. For example, reporters may be pressured not to investigate corruption on the grounds that it would only further the advance of opposing forces. Such cases make our responsibility clear. If we don't hold even nominally "progressive" institutions or movements to account, we may hasten their ethical and political collapse.
- Conversely, the damage occasioned by our work may extend far beyond

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> any impact we imagined or desired. In the age of disinformation, our enemies can and will seize on our revelations to destroy what we have built, and to create an overwhelming record that drowns reasoned debate. (One of the emerging misuses of AI chatbots is to create such a biased record.) As we write, this is occurring in the debate over whether democracies should subsidize our work. A recent investigation of the OCCR, was immediately seized upon by governments to threaten or prosecute and imprison the organization's collaborators, and to justify in some instances the elimination of agencies that supported investigative reporting worldwide.

On the one hand, we can't refuse to investigate our allies; they and we are likewise accountable to the public. On the other hand, if we undertake that work we must take extra care to ensure it is accurate in both frame and facts. We are bound to take into account that our enemies – in this case, enemies of democracy among others – can and will seize on our revelations to their own ends. We can't control that; it's a feature, not a bug, of disinformation.

The Seattle Times took that into account in a Pulitzer-winning series, "Tribal Housing: From deregulation to disgrace"[1] (1996). The reporters took care to document the urgent need for housing on reservations, to ensure that a powerful senator didn't use their story to kill the program. In the end, said Nelson, who co-wrote the story, "The program didn't lose a cent, but received a needed regulatory overhaul."

We can consider how we can mitigate the misuse of our work before we publish and build that reflection into our product.

G
Monetize your work and skills

It's hardly a secret that the news industry pays reporters less than other sectors that require similar skill levels, and that it has continuously downsized in the past two decades[2]. The situation is most dire for freelancers. Until the end of the 20th century it was feasible to earn a comfortable living from freelance work in major markets. That's no longer the case. If telling the truth of your time does not seem to be the most important work you can do, those are good reasons not to do it.

If you are climbing the investigative path, you will need a plan that goes beyond your next story. At a minimum, you must ask yourself what you want to accomplish in the long term – put another way, what you hope to change – and make a plan that involves regular publication in media that share the same concern. Don't worry at the start about whether or not they're the most prestigious or best-paying in your market. Look instead for people who are doing great work, whatever the size of their business, and contribute to it.

At this writing, it's unclear who, if anyone, will replace recent funding cuts for

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investigative journalism. The most viable longer-term alternative, which is building your own media that addresses a specific community's needs and is *supported by that community*, will be more hard work, and will generally not be remunerative in the short term. The exceptions, like the Kyiv Independent[2], whose staff broke away from an oligarch publisher and launched in 2022, took extraordinary circumstances as an opportunity. (Not incidentally, they have also been inventive at designing and delivering diverse revenue streams. The trade journal, *The Fix Media*, is a great open source for current best practices.) Any path to success, will reside on your willingness to join or build a community that needs your contribution to help it grow, prosper and prevail in hard times. Create that value for your audience, then see how you can capture some of it.

If there are no media who focus on what you think is important, start one (as Rachel Salvidge and Leana Hosea did at Watershed Investigations[3], which functions as a supplier of stories about water to major media and also as an independent production house). At the outset even a blog or social media posts will serve to demonstrate and market your work. The key success factor, as influencers can tell you, is to focus on producing a steady stream of smaller or larger stories, as opposed to occasional bombshells; **frequency is reach.** Meanwhile, treat every project as an experiment in building your personal brand and audience. Define your success factors, then measure the impact of every story and analyse why it succeeded or didn't. Include qualitative factors – did the work open valuable relationships? – as well as counting views and likes.

You can also look outside the news industry. The ability to find things out and tell the discoveries in a story might be valuable somewhere besides the news industry.

Nearly all the investigative reporters I've met over the past five decades built a portfolio of activities outside or alongside the news industry. Many teach. Others publish newsletters. One of them, a Pulitzer Prize winner, opened a small hotel. Whatever you do to support yourself, it must not exhaust or distract you from the work you love to do. I know investigative reporters who work full or part-time as legal researchers, as fellows in think tanks, as investigators for NGOs, as private investigators, as investigators for the International Court of Justice, and so on. These are alternative ways of making the world a better place that continually refresh and extend your abilities, and that often offer access to high-level data resources, in the company of people who have much to teach you. Continuing to write investigations for news media will require you to work double shifts, but the same applies to beat reporters.

I always advise serious reporters to write books, and also to obtain a doctorate in their field of predilection. Both these paths will add depth to your knowledge and skills. Various countries offer programs that provide reporters with a substantial history of publication the opportunity to obtain a doctorate on an accelerated schedule. Writing a thesis means adding to knowledge beyond a headline, and it's the freest and possibly deepest intellectual exercise you will ever undertake. If you go that path, make sure that your dissertation lays the ground for your future work. If someday you decide

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to teach – the two prerequisites are patience with sometimes clueless students (who may agreeably surprise you in the end), and generosity in sharing your passion for and knowledge of the work you love – a doctorate will entitle you to a higher wage and benefits than a master's degree. In some cases, advanced studies will enable landmark stories. Anne-Marie Casteret obtained her medical degree before becoming a journalist, and she said that explained why she was the only reporter who dared to follow the tip from a survivor that became the Contaminated Blood Affair.

H

Build your network

Networking includes personal and professional marketing – making the truth of your skill and work attractive – and you must not allow yourself to be so cynical, naïve or shy that you ignore the task. It is also one way that you will build a core audience of peers for your work.

As a journalist, you must go where your sources meet – conferences, seminars, webinars. As an investigative reporter, you must also show up where your future colleagues meet, starting with investigative journalism conferences. Look closely at what other people are doing and make them aware of what you do. Exchange ideas and assess their characters. Are they open? Generous? Courageous? Realistic and transparent about their own skills? Do they keep their commitments, large and small? It may take years after an initial contact before the opportunity to work together appears. Meanwhile, maintain the contact and keep building your skills, so that when the chance comes you're ready to seize it.

At this writing the minimal best practice is to join LinkedIn (or a similar community) and develop your professional contacts there. Adopt a daily discipline: When you discover someone who provides valuable content, follow them and pay attention. Support their work through "likes" or comments, and send connection requests when people support your own contributions (don't forget to thank them if they accept). Similar procedures will work on Bluesky or other social media. The underlying principle is **to help the people you respect and admire to succeed,** and to make them part of your own success.

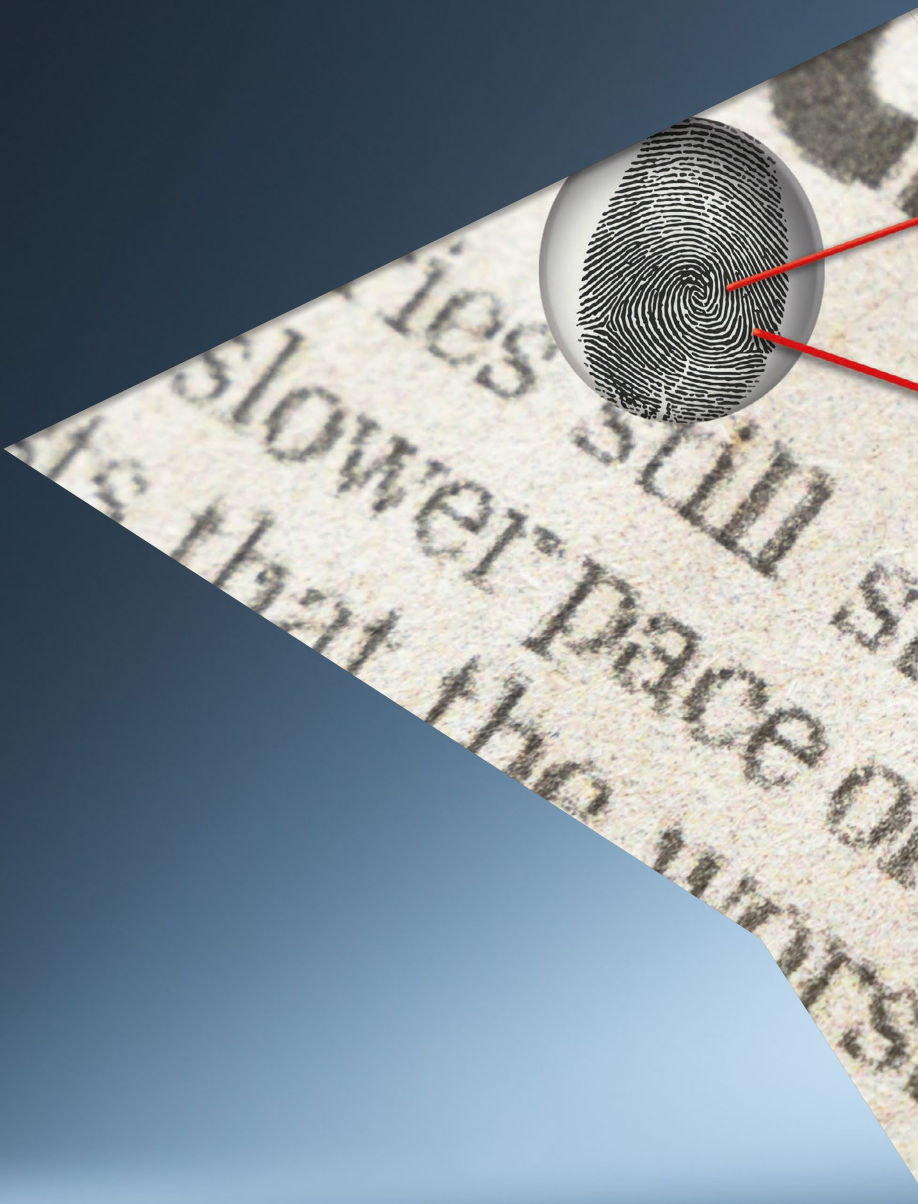
There will be another impact from these strategies, which we discovered for ourselves over the past four decades. You probably won't get rich, but you will make a rich life. Wherever you go, you will be in the company of people you find admirable as professionals and individuals. Every journalist, and every public actor, spends a large part of their career among people who are cruel or worthless, and often enough that makes us cynical, including toward ourselves. Do not underestimate the privilege of moving with the best of your kind, who care enough about the world to work for its present and future. It is a special kind of wealth, and it has to be earned. By doing the work outlined in this manual, you will earn it.

Story-Based Inquiry has transformed investigative journalism since its debut in 2009. Recognized worldwide as a pioneering method for conceiving, structuring and publishing investigations, it has shaped how journalists are trained and how stories are told across cultures.

This fully updated second edition brings new research, innovative practices and insights from landmark global investigations. Drawing on centuries of collective newsroom experience, it provides clear, practical tools to craft compelling stories, protect sources, and navigate today's evolving information landscape.

An essential guide for journalists, educators and media organizations committed to freedom of expression and accountability worldwide.

This publication is part of UNESCO's Series on Journalism Education, which provides resources on a range of critical and emerging topics relevant to journalism educators worldwide. It has been produced with the support of UNESCO's International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) and the Multi-Donor Programme on Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists (MDP).



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