

# **INVESTIGATIVE TECHNIQUES**

*Adapted from Raising Hell: How the Center for Investigative Reporting Gets the Story*

**F**inding a good investigative story can be as simple as receiving a phone call or as complex as spending months searching through libraries, public records and computerized databases. In all good investigative stories, the reporter must recognize the potential of the information and be tenacious in tracking down the story. This awareness comes with experience, education and alertness. Tenacity, on the other hand, is mostly in the blood.

## **THE FIRST LEAD**

Stories begin in different ways that usually fit into several broad categories. They might start with whistle blowers and leaked documents, brainstorming among reporters, or personal observations. Others begin with tips and rumors, phone calls, pursuing a lead from an earlier story, or simply reading the morning paper. No method seems to ensure a better story than any other. But reporters can always help to "make their own breaks" by being alert to new reports and developments, seeking and maintaining sources, interviewing experts, and producing stories that attract attention. Whistle blowers, for instance, often contact reporters who they feel will give the proper treatment. Once the lead is in hand, there are certain techniques and methods that investigative reporters commonly use.

## **THE INVESTIGATIVE SNIFF**

First, reporters must find out if the lead seems solid. Talk to knowledgeable sources to see if controversial rumors have validity. Sometimes the "sniff" will end the story before the reporter becomes too deeply committed.

## **THE INVESTIGATIVE HYPOTHESIS**

This useful tool gives shape and direction to a budding investigation. The theory should be grounded in fact and experience and take the story beyond what is presently known to what seems a likelihood. Forming a hypothesis allows the reporter to think like a prosecutor and to narrow the focus of the investigation away from irrelevancy. The reporter uses his or her analysis of how the world works to say, "Okay, I think this is probably happening. How do I go about proving it?"

## **DON'T RE-INVENT THE WHEEL**

At the very start, the reporter needs to find out what's been written or said about the subject under investigation. This means checking for previous stories, government hearings and reports, and scholarly articles. Make good use of the library and, if possible, electronic databases; remember that a good reference librarian is an investigative reporter's best friend.

If someone has already reported on aspects of the story, the focus of the investigation can change or even come to a halt. On the other hand, when there is only a collection of "puff" stories and press handout rewrites, contrary information usually ensures that the subject will be worthy of further investigation. The important thing is to evaluate carefully all existing information and to avoid duplicating work that someone else has done.

## **FIND THE EXPERTS**

Many stories involve people or institutions that various experts have studied at length. These experts, whether scientists, analysts, or hobbyists, can provide a valuable shortcut for the reporter, saving research time and often uncovering new leads. Look for experts at universities, specialized libraries, government offices, public interest groups and so forth. In each conversation, remember to ask who else you should talk to. Also, although competitive pressures sometimes rule out cooperation, many reporters are happy to help colleagues once their own work has been completed.

## **DEVELOP A TEAM**

Investigative stories are often team stories in which several reporters and researchers work together and divide the responsibilities. Team investigations offer flexibility, allowing different reporters to use different techniques, strategies and sources. At the same time, team members can provide one another much-needed psychological support.

One danger of the team approach is that some members may feel that their work is too fragmented from the larger story and thus become isolated. This situation can be avoided if team members compare notes regularly. Taking on powerful people and institutions, or cults and violence-prone groups, is a difficult proposition for the lonely freelancer. It is usually more suitable for a team of reporters.

## **DOCUMENT THE STORY**

Following the paper trail of documents is an integral part of most investigations. Numerous public records exist in government offices at the local, state and federal levels. These pieces of paper help a reporter build the documentation needed to strengthen the story. Documents can become vital when questions of libel arise and proof must be provided to support allegations. A major source of documents from the U.S. government is the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), which says that the federal government must either justify the withholding of information requested by citizens or release it. The U.S. FOIA puts the burden not on citizens, but on the government to prove it should withhold the material. FOIAs exist in a growing number of other nations as well.

When seeking public records, a reporter should study government manuals to locate which offices might have had contact with the individual or organization of interest. This might include financial regulatory bodies, tax authorities, environmental agencies, and so forth.

Finally, court records are extremely useful in following the paper trail that important people and organizations create. Publicly available court files can be a gold mine for information on finances, corporate holdings, criminal activities and more.

## **DEVELOP SOURCES**

A good source can spark the beginning of an investigative story or strengthen one that is already under way. Finding a good source is a matter of luck, energy and perception. Personal acquaintances, published reports, professional associations and unions are among the more common places to track them down. Be prepared to spend lots of time on the telephone.

Dealing with sources is a tricky matter; it depends on individual style. Some sources will be interviewed for direct attribution, others off-the-record (not for quotation or attribution), and still others for quotation but they cannot be identified by name. The reporter must figure out how to get the most information and keep as much of it attributed as possible. Sometimes one

source can go on- and off-the-record for different questions. Other times a reporter may convince a source to go back on-the-record after initially agreeing to anonymity.

Perhaps the most difficult source relationships for a reporters are those with law enforcement officials and with sources who leak documents. Just as newspapers and reporters vary in credibility, so do law enforcement agencies. Reporters should use their experience, knowledge, and caution when they evaluate source and reasons for sharing information. If possible, they should check with other credible sources to verify a new source's trustworthiness.

## **OBSERVE**

First-hand observation can also start or strengthen an investigation. Visit the places you're investigating. Go to conferences, political events and other public gatherings that involve your subjects.

Sometimes the reporter decides that undercover observations are called for. Others simply hang around the bars and cafes of a company office or community. A reporter must exercise great care when deciding whether to mislead people while pursuing a story. Undercover work may ultimately be used to discredit a story. Some critics accuse undercover reporters of encouraging unsavory behavior and influencing events, and thereby creating situations that otherwise would not have occurred. In recent years, U.S. reporters using undercover or misleading tactics have come under pressure from editors and publishers.

## **ORGANIZE YOUR FILES**

File systems can vary greatly among reporters. Good organization requires time and resources that may be beyond the means of many journalists. Still, knowing how to organize files is a useful skill, even if it isn't employed often. If a copying machine is handy, duplicate pages can be made and separate files begun on many topics, people, organizations and events. A chronology can be helpful where a series of complicated events occur over time. Sometimes it's useful to compile a file summary that lists the highlights of each file as it develops. A summary allows you to glance at and evaluate a file quickly. Computer database programs are available that allow one to index and cross-index various facts; these can produce useful surprising patterns. Another technique is to keep large "generic" files and then start index cards on all major names, listing the file name and page number or document where the name is mentioned. One basic principle underlies all effective filing systems: an unrelenting attention to detail.

## **INTERVIEW**

Some reporters have a gift for interviewing; others learn as they go. A great deal of nerve often helps, by refusing to back down and being willing to push oneself into sometimes uncomfortable circumstances. Whatever your situation, try to put your subjects at ease by talking about yourself and showing concern for your source's life and work. Meeting them in person is almost always a good idea. This personal contact makes it easier for the sources to "open up" later. Remember to dress appropriately and professionally when doing interviews.

Interviewing public relations officials for corporations and other organizations is generally of limited value. These highly trained professionals know how to avoid or deflect many questions. While there are exceptions to the rule, reporters should always strive for primary sources talking to those directly involved or affected by a particular issue.

The final interviews with key figures are a critical step in an investigation. Sometimes they can make or break a story, particularly on television, where producers want good "visuals." Reporters often know 80 percent of the answers to the questions they will ask. Of course the subject of the interview does not know this, or at least is unsure which 20 percent the reporter doesn't know. The reporter tries to maneuver the subject into telling more than he or she intends. Sometimes a reporter feigns ignorance to seem nonthreatening. Other times the reporter pretends to know more than is the case, bluffing the subject into saying something previously unconfirmed or unknown. During key interviews, reporters should be careful not to mislead their subjects or misrepresent themselves; American courts, among others, have been harsh in libel suits on reporters who have done so.

Key subjects frequently refuse to be interviewed. Of course the reporter can always try to surprise a reluctant subject; sometimes the "ambush interview" is all that's available to a tenacious reporter.

## **ANALYZE AND ORGANIZE**

Reporters should try to re-evaluate or broaden their perspective once in a while. Sometimes documents, interviews, or files will produce hidden patterns of information or new leads when the reporter returns to them for a second look. Those who wait until the end of the investigation to give their files a thorough review may not discover valuable new leads until it's too late to pursue them.

## **WRITING**

Writing involves a process of selecting and emphasizing information and therefore is perhaps the most individualistic part of investigative reporting. Each person must find the method that works best. Some reporters try to write the story first and go back to check on the details later. Others need to document their facts as they go along. One basic approach is to become immersed in the files, then organize an outline of the material and finally sit down and write the story or script, referring to the files as little as possible until factchecking time. In this method, the style and organization are paramount. Some reporters try to review books on good writing, such as *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White or *On Writing Well* by Zinsser before starting. The challenge in an investigative article or program is to weave a well-written story out of material that is heavily laden with factual detail and yet keep within the strict boundaries of what has been proved.

When writing about environmental pollution, for instance, it is important to minimize the use of technical or bureaucratic terms. Long, confusing quotes from sources often have to be edited slightly, not to change the words or meaning but to cut out the excess. Remember the golden rule: when in doubt, opt for simplicity, using language that is direct and easy to understand. Other rules of thumb: Try to work closely with a good editor; be prepared to rewrite and reorganize; solicit criticism from friends; and carefully check every fact. In the end, publish only what can be proved.

Most important, reporters have to think about the way the information they are presenting will affect their readers, listeners or viewers. They need to explain in a direct fashion why their audience should care about the story. If a story can somehow touch the everyday lives of individuals, it can motivate the public to take corrective action. Such a story may, in fact, make people feel a little bit more in control of their lives.

## **FACT-CHECKING AND LIBEL**

It is a sobering experience for investigative reporters to sit through a libel trial and see how mundane matters can come under judicial scrutiny. The widespread use of libel suits makes investigative reporting resemble a sea full of underwater mines. Something can blow up at any moment. But precautions can be taken; learning about the law is an important first step. It is equally important to check facts at the end of the writing to make sure that every fact in the article stands up. Major magazines in the United States, for example, often have research departments that systematically check dates, names, key allegations, and supporting facts prior to publication.

Before publishing or broadcasting an investigative story, the completed work should be examined by a libel attorney. American publishers and broadcasters do this routinely. Simple changes can sometimes keep one out of court while still preserving the integrity and scope of the story. Finally, remember the old adage: truth is the best defense against libel.