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From the outside, investigative reporting appears to be the glamorous side of journalism. That’s not surprising. Investigative reporters are more likely than their colleagues to become famous. Who hasn’t heard of Bob Woodward, Carl Bernstein, Seymour Hersh, Jack Anderson? “60 Minutes,” the CBS news program that features investigative reporting, has a weekly audience matched by few programs. And the stories that attract attention, that affect the course of history, are likely to be investigative. Woodward and Bernstein helped topple a president with their digging into the Watergate scandal. Hersh’s story of the My Lai massacre by American soldiers during the Vietnam War probably contributed to the public opposition that eventually ended the war.

From the inside, investigative reporting looks more like hard, frustrating, often dull, sometimes risky work. Days may be spent tracking down leads that prove fruitless. Weeks of effort may yield a story that goes unnoticed, or may yield no story at all. Pressures and even threats are common.

Still, most journalists would agree that nothing in the business is more important than the detailed, analytical examination of important issues and important people that is investigative reporting. Often, the best public service is performed with stories that attract little national attention but that expose to local readers injustices that should be rectified, corruption that should be punished or social problems that should be solved.

For example, months of work by two reporters for the Fort Wayne (Ind.) News-Sentinel showed how a growing religious cult’s
ban on medical treatment was condemning to death not only believers but sometimes children too young to make decisions for themselves or spouses unable to seek outside help. The stories also revealed weak laws and other failures by society to protect its young and helpless.

In Knoxville, Tenn., complaints of police brutality, mainly from the black community, had gone ignored for years by both the press and the power structure. Finally, the Knoxville Journal launched an investigation. Reporters were met with hostility, suspicion, closed records and frightened witnesses. Months of work finally produced a series of stories and editorials that forced an official investigation, identified the officers most often accused and led to changes at the top of the police department.

Such stories, and hundreds like them, are the payoff for the long hours, the frustrations and the expense. They make the investment in investigative reporting worthwhile for journalists and readers alike.

Investigative reporting has a rich tradition in the history of American journalism. The fiercely partisan editors of the Revolutionary era dug for facts as well as the mud they hurled at their opponents. At the turn of this century investigative reporting flowered with the

Figure 20.1 Original Muckraker. Ida Tarbell’s early-twentieth-century work in examining Standard Oil helped set the pattern for modern investigative reporters.
"muckrakers," a title bestowed with anger by Theodore Roosevelt and worn with pride by the reporters. Lincoln Steffens dissected America's cities, one by one, laying bare the corrupt combinations of businessmen and politicians that ran them. Ida Tarbell exposed the economic stranglehold of the oil monopoly. Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair and Frank Norris revealed the horrors of working life in factories and packing plants.

The complexities of big government, big business and big society will require even more widespread — and more sophisticated — investigative reporting if the press is to fulfill its role of keeping a free people fully informed.

Few editors assign beginning reporters to investigative work. It is the most demanding kind of reporting. Still, you need to know what it is and how to do it so that you will be ready when your chance comes. Many of the techniques can be used as well to produce good stories from what would otherwise be routine assignments.

In this chapter you will learn:

1. The process of investigative reporting.
2. How to find and use sources and records.
3. What kinds of obstacles you will face in doing investigative reporting.

The Process

BEGINNING AN INVESTIGATION

Most investigations start with a hunch or a tip that something or someone deserves a close look. No good reporter sets out on an investigation unless there is some basis for suspicion. That basis may be a grand jury report that leaves something untold or a tip that some public official is on the take. It may be a sudden upsurge in drug overdoses or it may be long-festering problems in the schools. Without some idea of what you're looking for, investigation is too likely to turn into wild goose chasing.

Based on the tip or suspicion together with whatever background material you have, you form a hypothesis. Reporters hardly ever use that term, but it is a useful one, because it shows the similarity between the processes of investigative reporting and scientific investigation. In both, the hypothesis is the statement of what you think is true. Your hypothesis may be, "The mayor is a crook," or, "The school system is being run incompetently." It is a good idea to state clearly your hypothesis when you start an investigation. By doing
so, you focus on the heart of the problem and cut down on the possibility of any misunderstanding with your editor or other reporters who may be working with you.

Once the hypothesis is stated, the reporter — like the scientist — sets out to prove or disprove it. You should be open to the possibility of disproof. Reporters — like scientists — are not advocates. They are seekers of truth. No good reporter ignores or downplays evidence just because it contradicts his or her assumptions. In journalism as in science, the truth about a situation is often sharply different from what is expected. An open mind is an essential quality of a good investigative reporter. Remember, too, that you may have a good story even if your hypothesis is disproved.

CARRYING OUT THE INVESTIGATION

The actual investigative work usually proceeds in two stages. The first is what Robert W. Greene, Pulitzer Prize–winning reporter and editor for Newsday of Long Island, N.Y., calls the *sniff*. You sniff around in search of a trail worth following. If you find one, the second stage, the serious investigation, begins.

The preliminary checking should take no more than a day or two. Its purpose is not to prove the hypothesis but to find out the chances of proving it. You make that effort by talking with the most promising source or sources, skimming the most available records, consulting knowledgeable people in your newsroom. The two questions
you are trying to answer at this stage are, "Is there a story here?" and, "Am I going to be able to get it?" If the answer to either questions is no, there is little point in pursuing the investigation.

When the answer to both questions is yes, the real work begins. It begins with organization. Your hypothesis tells you where you want to go. Now you must figure out how to get there. Careful organization will keep you on the right track and will prevent you from overlooking anything important as you go. Many reporters take a kind of perverse pride in their illegible notebooks and cluttered desks. As an investigative reporter you may have a messy desk, but you should arrange your files of information clearly and coherently. Begin organizing by asking yourself these questions:

1. Who are my most promising sources? Who am I going to have trouble with? Who should I go to first? Second? Last?
2. What records do I need? Where are they? Which are public? How can I get to the ones that are not readily accessible?
3. What is the most I can hope to prove? What is the least that will still yield a story? How long should the investigation take?

Now draw up a plan of action. Experienced reporters often do this mentally. But when you are a beginner, it's a good idea to write out a plan and then to go over it with your editor. The editor may spot some holes in your planning or have something to add. And an editor is more likely to give you enough time if he or she has a clear idea of what has to be done.

Carry out your plan, allowing flexibility for the unexpected twists most investigations take. During your first round of interviews, keep asking who else you should talk to. While you are checking records, look for references to other files or other persons.

Be methodical. Many investigative reporters spend an hour or so at the end of every day adding up the score, going through their notes and searching their memories to analyze what they have learned and what they need next. Some develop elaborate, cross-indexed files of names, organizations, incidents. Others are less formal. Virtually all, however, use a code to disguise names of confidential sources so that those sources will remain secret even if the files are subpoenaed. The method you use isn't important, as long as you understand it. What is vitally important is that you have a method and use it. If you fail to keep careful track of where you're going, you may go in the wrong direction, or in circles.

An Example

Steve Woodward was less than a year out of journalism school when, as a reporter in a suburban bureau of the Kansas City (Mo.)
Star, he first heard the name of Frank Morgan. Over the next few months, the name kept popping up. Morgan, it appeared, owned a great deal of land. He was rumored to have an interest in several banks and to be the behind-the-scenes financier of important business developments. He won concessions from the zoning board and the tax assessor. He associated with important politicians. But despite all the activity, little was known about the man himself. He refused to be interviewed and forbade his associates to talk to reporters.

Woodward, intrigued, decided to investigate. In months of part-time work, while he kept up with his regular assignments, Woodward was able to put together from public records and interviews a word portrait of one of the city’s most important but least-known businessmen. He traced Morgan's holdings in shopping centers, banks and apartment buildings into five states and showed them to be worth nearly half a billion dollars. He also produced a biographical sketch of Morgan, an account of his political connections and a look at Morgan’s use of a "straw party" — a person apparently unconnected to him — to conceal ownership of real estate.

In a modest summary of his work, Woodward said, "No laws were broken by the persons named in the stories, and no one went to jail because of them. The stories were meant only to demonstrate how power really works."

Here's how he did it:

He began with the clippings in the newspaper morgue. He double-checked every name he could come up with that had a possible Morgan connection. Some seemingly unrelated individuals and corporations were linked by material from other records.

Then he went to the courthouse. There, depositions taken in the divorce case of a Morgan associate revealed numerous land transactions and yielded other names to check. The indexes showed a great number of lawsuits filed against Morgan and associates. These contained still more names of corporations and business properties.

Corporation records kept by the secretaries of state of Kansas and Missouri showed names and addresses of officers and directors and when the corporations were formed. For business partnerships that were not incorporated, much the same information came from the fictitious name files, also called "d.b.a." (for "doing business as") files, also in the secretary of state's office. A pattern of connections was beginning to emerge.

Most banking records are secret, but Woodward put to good use a federal form (FFIEC 003) that has been required since 1979 and that details the principal owners of the bank and any loans the bank has made to its owners. Depending on whether the bank has a national or state charter, the form can be obtained from the U.S. Comptroller of the Currency, the Federal Reserve Bank or the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation.
City planning commission records included minutes of meetings, staff reports and other details of developments such as shopping centers. County collectors' records showed who paid the property taxes on various parcels. County recorders' offices produced details of land ownership and of the financing of purchases.

City directories, birth certificates, school and military records, all public, helped Woodward trace his subject's life from the beginning. Marriage records in the county courthouse showed not only his wife's maiden name but even which synagogue he attended.

Campaign finance reports — local, state and federal — revealed support for some politicians whose later actions benefited Morgan.

Even some of Morgan's federal income-tax records, closed by law, were opened to inspection when they were entered as evidence in a suit in the U.S. Tax Court. Woodward got them with a request under the Freedom of Information Act.

Finally, Woodward said, "I talked with dozens of real estate developers, city planners, politicians, bankers, appraisers — you name it. Many of their names I got from the clips. Others I got from lawsuits. Records gave me a start in tracking down the people who could fill in the gaps in my stories and demonstrated how documents and human sources can complement each other."

The result was a series of stories rich in detail that told Kansas Citizens a great deal about a man who had been secretly shaping their city.

The importance of accuracy cannot be overstated. It is the most essential element in good journalism of any kind. In investigative reporting especially, inaccuracy leads to embarrassment, to ruined reputations and, sometimes, to lawsuits. The reputations ruined often are those of the careless reporter and newspaper. Most investigative stories have the effect of accusing somebody of wrongdoing or incompetence. Even if the target is a public official whose chances of suing successfully for libel are slim, fairness and decency require that you be sure of your facts before you put them in print.

The Washington Post, during its famous Watergate investigation, followed the policy of requiring verification from two independent sources before an allegation could be published. That is a good rule to follow. People make mistakes. They lie. Their memories fail. Documents can be misleading or confusing. Check and double-check. There is no good excuse for an error.

WRITING THE STORY

Most investigative stories require consultation with the newspaper's lawyer before publication. As a reporter you will have little or nothing to say about the choice of your paper's lawyer. That lawyer, though, will be an important part of your investigative career. The lawyer advises on what you can print safely and what you cannot.
Most editors heed their lawyers' advice. If you are lucky, your paper's lawyer will understand and sympathize with good, aggressive journalism. If he or she does not, you may find yourself forced to argue for your story. You will be better equipped for such an argument — and few reporters go through a career without several — if you understand at least the basics of the laws of libel and privacy. Chapter 22 outlines them. Several good books on law for journalists are available, too.

The last step before your investigation goes public is the writing and rewriting. After days or weeks of intense reporting effort, the writing strikes some investigative reporters as a chore — necessary but unimportant. That attitude is disastrous. The best reporting in the world is wasted unless it is read. Your hard-won exposé or painstaking analysis will disappear without a trace unless the writing attracts readers and maintains their interest. Most reporters and newspapers that are serious about investigative reporting recognize this. They stress good writing almost as much as solid reporting. The Chicago Tribune, for example, assigns an especially skilled writer to its Pulitzer Prize–winning investigative task force as it nears the completion of each project. The writer's sole job is to present months of reporting work as clearly and dramatically as possible. Other newspapers prefer to let their reporters do their own writing.

How do you write the results of a complicated investigation? The general answer is, as simply as you can. One approach is to use a hard lead, displaying your key findings in the first few paragraphs. Another approach, often used, is to adopt one of the alternative story structures discussed in Chapter 15.

For three months six Miami Herald reporters examined every aspect of two counties' failing school systems. Their findings ran in an eight-part series, which began by focusing on a single student:

At 17, Frank Smith seems more harried than a high school student ought to be.  
Up at 6 a.m., due in class by 7, he endures five hours of lessons with less than 18 minutes for lunch. Building a romance, holding down a full-time job, he rushes from one responsibility to another in a car that is both his burden and his pride.

Frank Smith, an 11th grader at Miami Killian High, is typical of thousands of youngsters in today's public schools. Shaken by his parents' divorce when he was 9, forced to fend for himself when his mother and stepfather were busy at work, Frank turned out like so many other kids: sometimes mischievous, usually affable, rarely diligent, but always on the move.

Described by his teachers as an "average" student, Frank fits neatly into an educational system plagued by problems.

A big, complicated story is introduced in simple, human terms. Readers who might have been put off by the mass of evidence the
Reporters had assembled were lured in by the plight of one real person.

Instead of a single blockbuster story, the material was presented in a series of shorter, less-complex pieces. There were stories on incompetent teachers and principals, a story on the money shortage, another on the politics of school finance, stories on curriculum, one on bureaucracy and several sidebars on schools and individuals doing something right.

The Philadelphia Inquirer spent six months investigating the scandalous nursing home business in New Jersey. Here is the beginning of one of the resulting series of stories:

For most of her 98 years, Alberta Senior was an inconspicuous domestic worker who earned little money, never married and had only a few friends.

Her death on March 22 was equally anonymous. Her funeral and burial in a pauper's grave were paid for by the Monmouth County Welfare Department.

Only in the last few weeks of her life, when she was finally taken to a hospital from a boarding home, did Miss Senior attract the attention of some of the influential persons who had overlooked her, and others like her, for so long. By then, the plodding bureaucracy had proved itself incapable of acting swiftly enough to help this woman who had spent nearly a century in society's shadows.

The writing here is of a quality not matched in many stories. The combination of good writing with careful, extensive reporting produced a story that was read widely.

Writing an investigative story so that it will be read takes the same attention to organization and to detail that any good writing does. Here are a few tips that apply even more to investigative than to other stories:

1. Get people into the story. Any investigation worth doing involves people in some way. Make them come alive with descriptive detail, the kind we learned of in Frank Smith's and Alberta Senior's cases.

2. Keep it simple. Look for ways to clarify and explain complicated situations. When you have a mass of information, consider spreading it over more than one story — in a series or in a main story with a sidebar. Think about how charts, graphs or lists can be used to present key facts clearly. Don't try to print everything you know. Enough to support your conclusions is sufficient; more than that is too much.

3. Tell the reader what your research means. A great temptation in investigative reporting is to "lay out the facts and let the reader draw the conclusions." That is unfair to you and your reader. Lay out the facts, of course, but tell the reader what they add up to. A re-
porter who had spent weeks investigating the deplorable conditions in his state’s juvenile corrections facilities wrote this lead:

Florida treats her delinquent children as if she hated them.

If the facts are there, drawing the obvious conclusions is not editorializing. It is good and helpful writing.

4. Organize. Careful organization is as important in writing the investigative story as in reporting it. The job will be easier if you have been organized all along. When you are ready to write, examine your notes again. Make an outline. Pick out your best quotes and anecdotes. Some reporters, if they are writing more than one story, separate their material into individual folders, one for each story. However you do it, know what you are going to say before you start to write.

Think of writing as the climax of a process that begins with a hypothesis, tests that hypothesis through careful investigation, checks and double-checks every fact, and satisfies the concerns of editors and the lawyer. Every step in that process is vital to success.

The Sources

Investigative reporters — like any other reporters — get their information from people or documents. The perfect source would be a person who had the pertinent documents and was eager to tell you what they meant. Don’t count on finding the perfect source. Instead, count on having to piece together the information you need from a variety of people and records — some of the people not at all eager to talk to you and some of the records difficult to understand. Let’s consider human sources first.

HUMAN SOURCES

Suppose you get a tip that the mayor received campaign contributions under the table from the engineering firm that just got a big city contract. Who might talk?

Enemies. A person’s enemies usually are the best sources when you are trying to find out anything bad about him or her. More often than not, the enemies of a prominent person will have made it their business to find out as much as possible about that person’s misdeeds and shortcomings. Frequently, they will share what they know with a friendly reporter.
Friends. Surprisingly, friends are sometimes nearly as revealing as enemies. In trying to explain and defend a friend's actions, they may tell you more than you knew before. Occasionally you may find that someone your target regards as a friend is not much of a friend after all.

Losers. Like enemies, losers often carry a grudge. Seek out the loser in the last election, the losing contender for the contract, the loser in a power struggle. Bad losers make good sources.

Victims. If you are investigating a failing school system, talk with its students and their parents. If your story is about nursing home abuses, talk with some patients and their relatives. The honest and hard-working employees caught in a corrupt or incompetent system are victims, too. They can give you specific examples and anecdotes. Their case histories can help you write the story.

Experts. Early in many investigations, there will be a great deal you may not understand. You may need someone to explain how the campaign finance laws could be circumvented, someone to interpret a contract, or someone to decipher a set of bid specifications. Lawyers, accountants, engineers or professors can help you figure out technical jargon or complicated transactions. If they refuse to comment on your specific case, fit the facts you have into a hypothetical situation.

Police. Investigative reporters and law enforcement agents often work the same territory. If you are wise, you will make friends with carefully selected agents. They can — and frequently will — be of great help. Their files may not be gold mines, but they have investigative tools and contacts you lack. When they get to know and trust you, they will share. Most police like seeing their and their organization's names in the paper. They know, too, that you can do some things they cannot. It takes less proof for you to be able to print that the mayor is a crook than it may take to convince a jury. Most police investigators want to corner wrongdoers any way they can. You can use that attitude to your advantage.

People in Trouble. Police use this source and so can you, although you cannot promise immunity or a lesser charge, as the police can. A classic case was the Watergate affair. Once the Nixon administration started to come unraveled, officials trying to save their careers and images began falling all over each other to give their self-serving versions of events. People will react similarly in lesser cases.

Managing Human Sources

As an investigative reporter, you cultivate sources in the same ways a reporter on a beat does. You just do it more quickly. One ex-
A excellent tactic is to play on their self-interest. Losers and enemies want to get the so-and-so, and thus you have a common aim. (But don't go overboard. Your words could come back to haunt you.) Friends want their buddy's side of the story to be explained. So do you. If you keep in mind that, no matter how corrupt your target may be, he or she is still a human being, it may be easier to deal sympathetically with that person's friends. That attitude may help ensure that you treat the target fairly, as well.

Experts just want to explain the problem as you present it. And you just want to understand. People in trouble want sympathy and some assurance that they still merit respect. No reporter should have trouble conveying either attitude.

Another way to win and keep sources is to protect them. Occasionally, a reporter faces jail unless he or she reveals a source. Even jail is not too great a price to pay in order to keep a promise of confidentiality. More often, the threats to confidentiality are less dramatic. Other sources, or the target of the investigation, may casually ask, "Where'd you hear that?" Other reporters, over coffee or a beer, may ask the same question. Hold your tongue. The only person to whom a confidential source should ever be revealed is your editor.

Human sources pose problems as well as solving them. They may lie to you. To get at an enemy or protect a friend, to make themselves look better or someone else look worse — and sometimes just for fun — people lie to reporters. No reporter is safe and no source is above suspicion. They may use you, too, just as you are using them. The only reason most people involved on any side of a suspicious situation will talk about it is to enhance their own position. That is neither illegal nor immoral, but it can trip up a reporter who fails to take every self-serving statement with the appropriate grain of salt.

Sources may change their stories as well. People forget. Recollections and situations change. Pressures can be applied. Fear or love or ambition or greed can intrude. A source may deny tomorrow — or in court — what he or she told you today.

Finally, sources will seldom want to be identified. Even the enemies of a powerful person often are reluctant to see their names attached to their criticisms in print. So are friends. Experts, while willing to provide background information, often cite their codes of ethics when you ask them to go on the record. Police usually will cooperate fully only if you promise them anonymity — since they are not supposed to prosecute people in the newspapers. Stories without identifiable sources have less credibility with readers, with editors, even with colleagues.

WRITTEN SOURCES

Fortunately, not all sources are human. Records and documents neither lie nor change their stories, they have no axes to grind at
your expense and they can be identified in print. Many useful documents are public records, available to you or any other citizen upon request. Others are non-public but still may be available through your human sources.

Public Records

As Steve Woodward's work shows, a great deal can be learned about individuals and organizations through records that are available for the asking, if you know where to ask. Let's take a look at some of the most valuable public records and where they can be found.

Property Records. Many investigations center on land — who owns it, who buys it, how it is zoned, how it is taxed. You can find out all those things from public records. Your county recorder's office (or its equivalent) has on file the ownership of every piece of land in the county and the history of past owners as well. Most such offices have their files cross-indexed so that you can find out the owner of the land if you know its location or the location and size of the property if you know the owner. Those files also will tell you who holds a mortgage on the land. The city or county tax assessor's office has on file the assessed valuation of the land, the basis for property taxes. Either the assessor or the local zoning agency can tell you for what use the property is zoned. All requests for rezoning are public information, too.

Corporation Records. Every corporation must file with the secretary of state a document showing the officers and principal agent of the company. The document must be filed with every state in which the company does business. The officers listed may be only "dummies," stand-ins for the real owners. Even if that is the case, you can find out at least who the stand-ins are. But that is only the beginning. Publicly held corporations must file annual reports with the Securities and Exchange Commission in Washington. The reports list officers, major stockholders, financial statements and any business dealing with other companies owned by the corporation. Non-profit corporations — such as foundations and charities — must file with the Internal Revenue Service an even more revealing statement, Form 990, showing how much money came in and where it went. Similar statements must be filed with the attorneys general of many states. Corporations often are regulated by state or federal agencies as well. They file regular reports with the regulating agency. Insurance companies, for instance, are regulated by state insurance commissioners. Nursing homes are regulated by various state agencies. Broadcasters are overseen by the Federal Communications Commission, truckers by the Interstate Commerce Commission. Labor unions must file detailed statements showing assets, of-
ficers’ salaries, loans and other financial information with the U.S. Department of Labor. Those statements are called “5500 Forms.”

**Figure 20.3** Copy of an IRS Form 990.
Once you have such corporation records, you must interpret them. Your public library has books that tell you how. Or your newspaper's own business experts may be willing to help.

Court Records. Few people active in politics or business go through life without some involvement in court actions. Check the offices of the state and federal court clerk for records of lawsuits. The written arguments, sworn statements and answers to questions (interrogatories) may contain valuable details or provide leads to follow. Has your target been divorced? Legal struggles over assets can be revealing. Probate court files of your target's deceased associates may tell you something you need to know.

Campaign and Conflict-of-Interest Reports. Federal — and most state — campaign laws now require political candidates to disclose, during and after each campaign, lists of who gave what to whom. Those filings can yield stories on who is supporting the candidates. They also can be used later for comparing who gets what from which officeholder. Many states require officeholders to file statements of their business and stock holdings. These can be checked for possible conflicts of interest or used as background for profile stories.

Loan Records. Commercial lenders usually file statements showing property that has been used as security for loans. Known as Uniform Commercial Code filings, these can be found in the offices of state secretaries of state and, sometimes, in local recorders' offices.

Minutes and Transcripts. Most elected and appointed governing bodies, ranging from local planning and zoning commissions to the U.S. Congress, are required by law to keep minutes or transcripts of their meetings.

Using and Securing Public Records

The states and the federal government have laws designed to assure access to public records. Many of those laws — including the federal Freedom of Information Act, which was passed to improve access to government records — have gaping loopholes and time-consuming review procedures. Still, they have been and can be useful tools when all else fails. Learn the details of the law in your state. You can get information on access laws and their interpretations by contacting the Freedom of Information Center at the University of Missouri, Box 838, Columbia, Mo. 65205.

Non-Public Records

Non-public records are more difficult, but often not impossible, to obtain. To get them, you must know that they exist, where they
are and how to gain access. Finding out about those things requires good human sources. You should know about a few of the most valuable non-public records.

Investigative Files. The investigative files of law enforcement agencies can be rich in information. You are likely to see them only if you have a good source in that, or an affiliated, agency. If you do obtain such files, treat them cautiously. They will be full of unsubstantiated allegations, rumor and misinformation. Be wary of accepting as fact anything you have not confirmed yourself.

Past Arrests and Convictions. Records of past arrests and convictions increasingly are being removed from public scrutiny. Usually these are easier to obtain from a friendly police or prosecuting official. And usually they are more trustworthy than raw investigative files.

Bank Records. Bank records would be helpful in many investigations, but they are among the most difficult to get. Bankers are trained to keep secrets. The government agencies that regulate banks are secretive as well. A friend in a bank is an investigative reporter's friend indeed.

Tax Records. Except for those made public by officeholders, tax records are guarded carefully by their custodians, and properly so. Leaks are rare.

Credit Checks. Sometimes, you can get otherwise unavailable information on a target's financial arrangements by arranging through your newspaper's business office for a credit check. Credit reports may reveal outstanding debts, a big bank account, major assets and business affiliations. Use that information with care. It is unofficial, and the companies that provide it intend it to be confidential.

Problems with Written Sources

Even when you can obtain them, records present problems. They are usually dull. Records give you names and numbers, not anecdotes or sparkling quotes. They are bare bones, not flesh and blood. They can be misleading and confusing. Many highly skilled lawyers and accountants spend careers interpreting the kinds of records you may find yourself attacking without their training. Misinterpreting a document is no less serious an error than misquoting a person. And it's easier to do.

Documents usually describe without explaining. You need to know the “why” of a land transaction or a loan. Records tell you only the “what.”
Most investigative reporters use both human and documentary sources. People can explain what records cannot. Documents prove what good quotes cannot. You need people to lead you to documents and people to interpret what the documents mean. And you need records to substantiate what people tell you. The best investigative stories have both.

The Obstacles

You have seen now why investigative reporting is important and how it can be done. The picture would not be complete, though, without a brief look at the reasons why not every newspaper does investigative reporting. As a reporter you will face certain obstacles. You and your editors will have to overcome them if you are to do real investigative reporting. Good newspapers do overcome such obstacles.

The first obstacle is money. Investigative reporting is the most expensive kind of reporting. It takes time, and time is money. Steve Woodward spent months on his Frank Morgan story. Newsday’s investigative team spent nine months on a series about heroin traffic. Two Miami Herald reporters spent most of their time for more than two years on an investigation of corruption in a federal housing program. Usually, the reporters doing investigations are the paper’s best and highest-paid. Frequently, fees for experts are involved. Lawyers charge for looking over a story and much, much more if a suit is filed. Space to publish the results costs money, too.

The second obstacle is staffing. Most newspapers, large or small, are understaffed. When a reporter is devoting time to an investigation, somebody else must be found to fill the gap. Many editors are unable or unwilling to adjust for prolonged absences by a key reporter. You may be able to get around that obstacle by doing your investigating in bits and pieces, keeping up with routine assignments all the while. That kind of part-time probing requires a high level of dedication on your part and your editor’s. Such commitment is hard to sustain over long stretches of time.

The third obstacle is a lack of courage. This is the greatest inhibitor. Investigative reporting means disturbing the status quo. It means poking into dark corners, asking hard questions about controversial, sensitive affairs. Investigative reporting upsets people. If you are looking into the right things, the people who get upset are likely to be important.

Violence or the threat of violence directed toward reporters and newspapers is rare. The 1975 murder of investigative reporter Don
Bolles in Phoenix was shocking partly because such things hardly ever happen. But pressure, usually applied to your editor or publisher, is common enough. It takes courage to stand up to such pressure.

The Nixon administration threatened the lucrative television licenses of the Washington Post Co. during the Watergate investigation. The federal government sued the New York Times, Boston Globe and St. Louis Post-Dispatch to prevent publication of the Pentagon Papers. FBI and CIA agents investigated newspapers and harassed reporters during the era of Vietnam and Watergate. Those were dramatic cases. The papers involved were big and rich, and they resisted.

Other pressures are directly economic. A newspaper's survival can be threatened. The financially weak Miami News ran a series of stories on grocery pricing, and grocery chains — whose ads are the life’s blood of any paper — pulled out their advertising. The Philadelphia Inquirer, then also unprofitable, published exposes of police corruption. The wives of police officers picketed the paper, and sympathetic unions of mailers and deliverymen refused to distribute the paper. The cost was in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

More common and less visible are the social pressures and social influence of editors' and publishers' peers. It is very common for the top executive of a newspaper to associate socially with the political and business leaders who may be the targets of investigative reporting. It is also common for the reporters who work for those executives to be pulled off such stories.

If you find yourself on a paper lacking money or staff, you can still find ways to do investigative reporting, at least part-time, if you want to badly enough. But if you find yourself on a paper lacking courage, you have only two choices — give up or leave.

Fortunately, investigative reporting is so important and its rewards are so substantial that more reporters than ever are finding the support to do it. You can, too.

Suggested Readings


The IRE Journal. Publication of Investigative Reporters and Editors Inc. Walter Williams Hall, University of Missouri, Columbia, Mo. 65205. Every issue has articles on investigations, guides to
sources and documents, and a roundup of legal developments. Edited transcripts of IRE conferences also are available at the same address.


