organisation

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How to Set Yourself Up to Succeed

BY MARK LEE HUNTER AND FLEMMING SVITH

The process so far:
We discover a subject,.
We create a hypothesis to to verify.
We seek open source data to verify the hypothesis.
We seek human sources.
As we collect the data, we organise it – so that it is easier to examine, compose into a story, and check.

Investigative research generates considerably more material than conventional news reporting, and this material must be effectively organised on an ongoing basis. This organisational work is part of a systematic writing and publishing process: You do not do research, then organise, then write.

Instead, you organise as you research, and this organisation prepares and initiates the writing process.

If you do not take the time to organise, you will need twice as much time for the project in the end (that's a minimum), and your work will be harder to compose, explain and defend. Besides, you will not have as much fun, because you will be worried all the time and… disorganised, frantic, and frustrated. So here are some easy steps that you can build into your routine work.

Organise your documents

The first time we published an investigation in a major US magazine, there was a wonderful anecdote we had to leave out. One of the principal actors had lied on the witness stand during a court hearing. But we weren't there, and we'd lost the newspaper clip attesting to the event. A colleague once had to abandon an investigation when he left a briefcase containing key files in a taxi. Another spent a year looking for proof that her targets had conducted a certain study, and then realised that she already had it in her files.

Organisation can help you avoid these problems. Investigative organisation is about making sure that:

• You know what documentation you have found and the information it contains (the "assets"),
• You know where a given asset is and can put your hand on it immediately (meaning within 30 seconds)
• You can make connections between related facts across your assets.

If you know what you have and can access it swiftly, your investigation will not collapse on its own. Just as important, you can access the same information for future projects; it's like building a capital fund. If you can't do this, your work and your career will be poorer. So please do not think this is a minor part of the job. You can't spend all your time on it, but you have to spend enough time so that you maintain mastery of your data and documentation at every step of the inquiry.

There are two parts of this process.

• The obvious part is that you are building a database – a searchable, orderly archive or library of your documentation.
• Less obviously, as you structure your database, you are structuring your story and building your confidence in it.

Making a database

Building a database or archive can be done with paper folders, electronic data, or a combination of both. There is, however, no point in building it if you don't use it, so the structure has to be robust and rapid. We suggest the following simple, efficient basic process.

A/ **Collect documents.**
A source's business card is a document. So is an official report, a news clip, interview notes or transcripts, etc.

B/ **Review the document in order to assess its contents.**
Underline or highlight any passages that appear of particular importance, and place a physical marker at the passage. If a paper document seems particularly crucial, make at least one paper or electronic copy.

C/ **Give the document a title or number, if it doesn't already have one.**
Any title will do as long as it reminds you of what the document contains. (This is especially important for web pages! Saving a web page under its original title is sometimes the same thing as hiding it in plain sight on your hard drive. Make sure you either change the title to save it while recording the original URL elsewhere, or copy the content that interested you in another document with the URL reference.) For interviews, we suggest you use the subject's name. If the subject is confidential, give him or her a code name.

D/ **File the documents.**
Put them in an order that feels natural to you. We prefer to file documents alphabetically, in a physical file or a computer folder.

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We also prefer subject filing: we will open a subject file with a single document, then expand and sub-divide the subject headings as more documents arrive. Within subject files we arrange documents chronologically, with the more recent first.

E/ **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 not just to keep your files updated, but to ensure that you know what they contain.

F/ **Exchange documents across files.**
If a particular event or series of events leaps out of the file to suggest a separate story, copy related documents from all pertinent files and begin a new file. Be sure to leave copies of all documents in their previous files. This is a technique used by the FBI: Whenever a document refers to another (for example, if both contain the name of the same person), copies of each document are placed in both files. The reason for this technique is that it increases the chances you will make connections between disparate bits of data.

G/ **Make backups.**
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. Any and all data on your computer cannot be considered secure.

Structuring the Data: Creating a master file

Your assets will do you no good unless they add up to a story. Your hypotheses will help to remind you of the core of your story, and to guide your research. But they will not suffice to compose a tight, well-structured narrative. To do that, you need another key tool: the master file.

At the most basic level, a master file is a "data department store" – a place where you throw all the assets you've collected. But it is not a chaotic dump, because you are going to give it order. The point is to have all of the information that you may use in a single location and form.

1. **Basics of the master file**

A / Create a new word processing file or data base file on your computer. Either one will do; use the one with which you are most comfortable.

B / Move your data into this file.
• By "data" we mean all the facts you need to do the story: your sources, interview transcripts, document extracts, notes, etc. We suggest putting sources first, so that you can find them easily.
• If the data is in electronic form (extracts from online documents or web pages, scanned illustrations, etc.), copy it directly into the file.

• If the data is not in electronic form – for example, paper documents – and the original form is important, scan the document, save it to an easily accessible location on your hard drive, and insert a hyperlink to the document's location in your master file. Of course, you may include hyperlinks to web pages or other online sources.
• Please do not be lazy about transcribing key passages from interviews. Every hour you spend on this part of the investigation will save several hours later on.
• Make sure that every piece of data that you put in the file includes information concerning its source. For published sources, give the full bibliographical information.
• Make sure as well that you document your contacts with sources. The master file should include such information as when you made the first contact with the target, what he or she said, when you made a promise to a source, and so on. This information can be of critical importance if your investigation is challenged, because it demonstrates that you made a serious effort of research.
• Repeat: do not put information in the master file that may compromise the security of a source. Assume that anything on your computer may be accessed by someone else.

C / As you enter data in the master file, if it has a physical location (like a file folder), note where it can be found. This will be of tremendous help later on. If you have questions about a given document you can find it easily. Just as important, if your lawyers want to know what proof you have before it is published, you will be able to hand them a document within seconds. (This is a heart-warming experience that no lawyer should be denied, especially the one who may have to defend you in case legal action is taken against you.)

D / When you move the data, give it a preliminary order. The simplest order and the most powerful from an organisational standpoint is chronological. Stack your events in the order they occurred. Insert portraits or biographical data about actors in the story at the moment they first appear in it. M

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E / As you create the master file, connections between different data points, as well as events or facts that seem to make no clear sense, will become evident to you. So will entire sentences or paragraphs of exegesis on your material. Note those insights in the master file. Identify them by a keyword (for example, you may use the word NOTE, in capital letters, or TN, meaning "to note").

F / Be sure that you always enter dates using the same format (mm/dd/yyyy, for example). Also, make sure that you enter names the same way every time. Otherwise you will not be able to search the master file properly.

2. Segmenting the Master File

A more detailed approach to this above system has been developed by Flemming Svith, formerly the co-founder of the Danish Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting (DICAR). Rather than use a word processing file to collect and track data, Flemming uses Excel or open-source spreadsheet software to create an index and master file of different aspects of his investigation. The method is simple: He creates a spreadsheet for the investigation. Then, he creates separate pages under the following headings:

A / Document list.
Flemming prefers to use a chronological sequence for his documents. In any case, he insists: "Give all documents a number and keep the paper documents in numeric order." If there are electronic documents on his list, he includes a hyperlink to the online or hard disk location. He sets up columns of data concerning the documents as follows:

No	Date	From	To	Subject, content, keyword	Form
1	01/02/05	Last name, First name	Last name, First name	keyword, keyword, keyword	email
2					letter
3					telephone

B / Source list.
This is where Flemming keeps track of his contacts. The data sheet looks like this (all coordinates but his name have been changed!):

No	Title	Person	Organisation	Adress	Zip	Country	Tel Org.	Tel
1	Editor	Flemming Svith	Dicar	Olof Palmes Alle 11	8200	Denmark	+45 89440493	+45 89440480
2								
3								

C / The chronology spreadsheet gives the sequence of events that appears in the investigation, including all contacts with sources. It looks like this:

Date	Source	Organisation	Event (act)	Content, keyword	Source
1/02/03	Last name, first name	Name	Interview with...	Corruption, etc.	
			Meeting between…		
			Release of a document….		

D / Next is a **contact log**, which looks like this:

Date	Time	Researcher	Person (Source)	Org.	Contact	Answer	Content
01/02/03	13:22	Name	First name, last name	Name	yes	Interview	done corruption
					Call again 15.00		
					email set 13.05	Email answered	

As you can see, Flemming separates different kinds of information that other reporters (like me) would put into a single file. One advantage of his method is that it builds redundancy into the system: The same information will turn up in more than one place. (A disadvantage is that there are more opportunities to create errors, too.) A second, huge advantage is that spreadsheet applications allow you to sort through files quickly to find and group all references to a particular actor or element in the investigation. You can't do this with a word processor.

We suggest that you use whatever software you're comfortable with, until it becomes obvious that it is insufficient or inadequate for your needs. In the meanwhile, if word processors are your favorite tool, use them. If you're handy with spreadsheets, use them. But use something that allows you to put the power of a personal computer behind your work.

3. **Why bother? When?**

You do not need to go to these lengths on every story. But if you do not create a master file in some form for an investigation that involves, say, more than a dozen documents or sources, you will regret it later. A key distinction between investigation and daily reporting is that investigation involves more information and contacts, and different kinds and qualities of information, than ordinary news reporting. The systems offered here will help you deal with that situation. You can improve them or alter them, or find a better one of your own.

But don't think that if you skip this task, you'll go faster. You'll either slow down, or you'll crash. The most obvious advantages of using your computer to create one of the systems described above are:

• When it's time to write, having your data ready to hand and in order will help you avoid forgetting everything but the last thing you found.
• When it's time to fact-check, having your data and your sources in one place will save huge amounts of time and anguish.
• In short, you will write faster and better.

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Making connections across files

By making your documents easier to collect, track and review, you make it easier for your mind to make connections among the data. You will surely notice that the data generates questions that have not been answered. Thus your archive is telling you what data it needs to be completed. You will also become more sensitive to new data that relates to your hypothesis, and thus you will make unexpected discoveries.

An example of the process of making new connections:

Step One (initiation):
In working on the Front National we observed that they were frequently on trial for various acts, and we hypothesised that judicial activism was central to their strategy. We collected documents related to their - judicial problems, including news clips and court papers.

Step Two (diversification):
As the number of assets increased, we divided them by type. There were new files for cases involving accusations of electoral fraud, violent crime involving suspected Front members, and so on.

Step Three (focus):
Because some of the accused in the assault cases were skinheads -- that is, neo-Nazis with shaven skulls -- we hypothesised that despite official denials, the FN maintained some sort of connection to the skinhead movement. We opened a file on skinheads, too. Eventually we noticed a report concerning the trial of two skinheads and a FN municipal council candidate who had attacked a long-haired man with a baseball bat, leaving their victim permanently handicapped. We contacted the victim's lawyer.

Step Four (seeing connections):
The lawyer offered access to information suggesting that another group of assailants was involved, but they had never been identified. These assailants appeared to be pagans (in this specific case, worshippers of Norse Gods). We had been keeping another file on the FN's pagan underground. We now added documents from the skinhead file. Our working hypothesis, based on contacts within the FN, was that the pagans were the FN's link to the skinheads.

Step Five (reviewing and regrouping):
We assembled the material from various files, looking for connections between the pagan underground, skinheads, and violent acts involving the FN. The material on hand included interviews with FN officials about skinheads, clips from FN publications, interviews with pagans from the FN, and other assets. This file became the basis for a chapter in the book detailing the assault described above, and using it to expose the connections between the pagan underground, skinheads and the FN.

Review:
Key principles and tools of the organising process

1
Organise documents, clips, etc. in a way that allows immediate access to specific points.

2
Name, review and file data as it comes in.

3
Create a master file that groups assets and references into a single sequence.

4
Use the organisation process to identify holes in the research and objects of further study.

5
Cross the data in specific files with data from other files through review and regrouping.

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