

Module 1.1 - Digging

Hi, this is Lise Olsen. Welcome to Week 1. In our MOOC "Investigative Reporting in the Digital Age."

I'm an investigative reporter in Texas. I work for The Texas Observer and I previously worked for the Houston Chronicle. I'm going to be talking about my own investigations, but also about a lot of other investigations I really admire and sharing some ideas that I hope you can use in your own work.

First of all, what I always look for are the big fat liars, the people who don't tell the truth or who contradict themselves. These can be some of the easiest investigative stories or they can be the stories that really get big over time. Here is some really good rule breakers that can be great beginning investigative stories if you're just getting started. For example, you can check to see if the people running for your city council don't really live in your city. That might be illegal. And then it's a good story. You can see if the mayor of your city or the governor doesn't pay his taxes. Checking on who pays and doesn't pay taxes is a great thing to know as an investigative reporter. You can also see if a legislator accepted illegal contributions or has had any funny business with their campaign contributions. You can also look to see if anybody running for office has lied about their degree. It's pretty easy to call a college university. Those kind of contradictions can make great investigative stories.

But beyond that, there's often a reason someone is failing to disclose something or hiding something. And that's part of what our mission is an investigative reporter is trying to figure out what is being hidden and why is it being hidden. So a big clue to that might be someone who doesn't file a disclosure report that could just be an oversight or it might be somebody who really has something to hide like this Texas legislator who is hiding a conflict of interest with another lawmaker by failing to disclose.

Great example of how to investigate a corrupt official. Is in a series that Lee Zurik of Fox News in New Orleans did about a corrupt coroner in a parish called St. Tammany? And one of my favorite stories in that series is about how Dr. Peter Galvan collected a bunch of back pay for vacations. And when he looked on the Internet and checked his wife's Facebook page, he found a whole bunch of great vacation photos from all kinds of exotic locales, including Greece. And there's another vacation reporter from a photo in the slideshow you can check out for yourself. So that's a really interesting series to check out, to look at the whole issue of how to exploit and explore lies and use public records to do it.

Another great thing to try is to build chronologies. When you build a chronology out of a lot of facts that you get from different sources, a lot of thought times things will pop out that you didn't notice when you first heard about it. You'll discover that two different people have two different versions of this same event, or that, for example, there's a huge contradiction in how one person is described.

In this case that I'm talking about here. There's a DEA agent who alleges that his former informant was framed in a death penalty case by a prosecutor. The prosecutor denied it, but their versions of events were really interesting in that story. For a really great example of this, I suggest you check out Pamela Colloff's recent expose a called "He's a Liar, a Con Man and a Snitch. His Testimony Could Soon Send a Man to Death Row." Her ProPublica story that showed that even as prosecutors in Florida were using a certain con man, a convicted con man as a star witness in their death penalty case as more than one. He was simultaneously swindling people and using fake identities. The end of the story has a great

explainer on a lot of the public records she used in that investigation and is just an excellent story. So I recommend reading it.

Another thing I suggest you do is really open your mind to all kinds of sources. Sometimes when you're just starting on an investigation, you think, I need to talk to this person, the key whistleblower, the key target, but that person won't talk to you and you get blocked.

So you have to think who else can talk? Keep trying. Sometimes a person won't talk to you the first time. They'll just talk to you off the record or on background. But if you keep trying. You can over time convince them to talk to you if you just keep trying and you don't become a huge pain, or sometimes the person you want to talk to is completely barred by law or by a legal agreement from speaking to you or they're dead and you can't talk to them at all. You have to think about who else can you talk to. In this case when I was investigating a corrupt federal judge, I couldn't speak to the victim for several years, but I was able to persuade her mother and her best friend and other employees of the judge to describe how he had sexually assaulted women over a period of time.

Another great thing to do is to explore connections between people. A lot of times the story doesn't come from what you first find out, but from knitting together a sort of tapestry of different connections and figuring out who is related to whom. Here's a quick card example of a story I did where a man was murdered in Mexico the same day we found out he had a major mansion in the outskirts of Houston. And the question came up, well, was he laundering money? Was he hiding there or was it for security reasons? This is something we couldn't answer on deadline, but we could very quickly visit his property. We could also get a Google Earth view of it. And we discovered he had a huge mansion with a moat, which is quite his own story. Later on, we found that a lot of other government officials had bought, from Mexico, had bought land in the same area, and they were accused in a court filing of money laundering. So that was another investigative story we were able to do by cross referencing different documents.

Increasingly, public records from all over the world are on the Internet. You can use a lot of great tools like Corporation Wiki, Open Corporates or Investigative Dashboard to explore corporate records. There's also a lot of great court records on the internet from altar countries. These directories get updated all the time and so I recommend checking out sites like the Organized Crime and Corruption Projects, Investigative Dashboard, the Global Investigative Journalists Network list of resources and the Investigative Reporters Tool Box to name three.

You also should learn to use whatever public record laws apply in your country. Some of them work really well and you never know till you try. But remember, not all documents are on the internet. Not all are public. So you need to also just ask for records. Think of what other record might exist. Maybe it's something in the cell phone. Maybe it's an old journal. Maybe it's a photo.

Private records can be as important as public records. Many are not on the internet Alejandra Xanic an instructor and week two won a Pulitzer for figuring out how Wal-Mart broke Mexican laws and built its stores on archaeologically sensitive sites. Among other things, as proof, she found letters that a dead man widow had kept. She found videos archived in very small towns on old archaic computer equipment. She also visited officials at their homes and interviewed them privately and persuaded them to talk through a long process of conversation.

Also, great resource these days is learn to use social media and the Internet to carefully reach out to readers. Network carefully, use Twitter direct messages and Facebook messages when appropriate, be professional. Use LinkedIn to find former employees of companies that you're researching and to find common connections between people. You can also use social media specific search tools that will search Facebook archives and Twitter archives better than other tools. You also can create a form like a Google Form, a very simple form to encourage readers to send you tips or set up a more secure email. Each time you get a tip, though, you should think about what kind of tips do you want, how are you going to manage to manage and handle those tips? And remember that a reader tip is only a tip. It's easy to fake an identity, an email or social media saying you need to verify.

I recommend you read. The expose that the Miami Herald reporter Julie Brown did about Jeffrey Epstein, the billionaire who avoided prosecution in 2008 despite evidence that he'd systematically been abusing Florida teens. You can read both her investigation and a great explainer on the Miami Herald's Web site. She did get people to talk who had never spoken before. She did get emails that were not public. She used social media systematically to reach out to a lot of people. But she also did a lot of personal outreach. She had been homeless briefly as a teen, and she was able to use her own experiences to try to relate to victims and get them to speak to her. It's very impactful reporting.

Collaboration can be a really great tool to investigate deeper and faster, especially if your investigation is large or covers a large and too graphic territory. Often, if there's good ground rules, common goals and ethics, some sort of trust between the members of the team and a story of mutual high interest, collaboration can be very successful. Learn to use collaborative tools like the nonprofit document Cloud or ProPublica has new collaborative platform to organize, analyze and backup your own archives securely to share those archives with the trusted members of your team, and also to perhaps selectively publish some of the archives at some point to share with readers to encourage them to send you tips.

Lastly, I really encourage you to participate in this MOOC. Please post our MOOC discussion forums. Read the recommended readings. Send questions to our great team of instructors and above all, enjoy yourself. Happy investigating.