

Module 1.2 - Digging Deeper: Tools and techniques in four investigations

Hi, welcome to week one of The Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas MOOC on Investigative Reporting in the Digital Age.

Today, we're going to look at some examples from my own work where I used some of the techniques that I've described in this class to work on investigations. And I want to tell you about several of stories that I did when I was working at the Houston Chronicle and also a documentary that I did for A&E.

The first technique that we've talked about is exploring lies and omissions. A really interesting case that I covered when I was working for the Chronicle involved a congressman who filed the disclosure that recorded that he had a salary from a company that we discovered did not exist. This was illegal. But by itself that was a small story. Well, we wanted to try to figure out what else might he be hiding. The company that he indicated as the source of his salary was not registered anywhere in the world, had no presence on the Internet. So, we began to look what else what other companies he might have. We started to look at and build a list of all the companies associated with him using corporation tools like Corporation Wiki and Open Corporates. We also recorded all the addresses he used and the other people who were listed in his businesses. And we found some very curious patterns that we were able to diagram and map.

One of the patterns we found was that a lot of his businesses and his campaign contributions and some charities that he and his associates had registered were all based at the same P.O. boxes, which meant the seemingly all this money was being commingled in some way. Eventually, he and his two campaign workers were indicted, but by then we'd already published an entire series of stories that outlined many of their illegal activities.

You can do this yourself by creating a simple spreadsheet that answers key questions about the people you're investigating. Figure out what their businesses are, what are their business names, what are their corporate names? Who are their employees? Who are their family members? What names do they use? What property do they own? What of addresses are associated with these properties and who else is associated with these addresses? And most importantly, is any of the activity you're finding violating any rules or laws? That's what makes it an investigative story.

The key tools for our investigation included Corporation Wiki, Open Corporates, Investigative Dashboard, Federal election commission filings, campaign finance reports. The congressman's own Twitter account. Wayback machine to look at old records about these entities that he supposedly had created. In some cases, he had web sites for these companies that really didn't otherwise exist. We also organized our information in a Google doc. You can also use Excel and we used the nonprofit Document Cloud to create a huge archive of all of our records because I was working on this in Houston with another reporter who is working in DC and we could share information that way.

Another tool we've been talking about here is building chronologies, the power of chronologies to find patterns in investigations. Case study number two has to do with the prisoner who told me in 2011 that he killed eleven girls in the 1970s. I knew he was a murderer. He was in prison for murder, but he had never been charged with any of the other crimes. How could I possibly prove he might have been the killer? The answer was trying to build a chronology.

Where did he live? Where did he work? Where was he arrested and when? Who else knew him at different times? And then finally, a separate chronology of the victims he had named. Where did they disappear? Where were they last seen? Where were their bodies found? Could we find any connection between the two lists, the places Bell was, the places the girls were? We did find many, many connections, both between the places where they disappeared and where they were found.

Key sources for this investigation included old police records, medical examiner reports, crime scene photos and diagrams. Often images are as important as documents. Interviews with victims' families. Interviews with Bell's friends and business associates. He lived in a trailer for many years, so it wasn't a matter of just finding public records to figure out where his trailer was parked.

We had to talk to people. We also found living victims who had escaped to Bell and who were identified as his victims and records and found that some of those attacks occurred very near the sites where some of the girls he claimed to have killed were abducted. We used extensively mapping tools and we also drove between the sites ourselves to try to see how long it would have taken Bell from to go from one place to another.

Another technique that I've been exploring in this class with you is finding connections between people. Often finding connections between people will lead you to more stories. Case study number three has to do with how a cantina-based sex trafficker remained in business in Houston after the feds raided the bars and forced him to flee to Mexico. The initial document on this was, of course, the press releases about the case, the cantinas he was using, the number of victims he had. I had the business names and I could with those names, start to build a list of the people and places associated with this guy whose nickname was El Gallo, Gerardo Salazar.

One of the curious things that happened was after the bust, there were a lot still a lot of calls for help from victims who claimed to be being sold in bars in Houston. One of the most curious calls for help came from a house where there was a 9 1 1 call. We explored who owned this house and found that the woman who owned this house also ran a bar that was one of the bars named in the federal case.

Again, exploring tries, we were able to connect the woman who owned the house and was keeping a girl captive with the ring run by El Gallo. There were a lot of other connections. This woman had also been arrested for prostitution, along with another woman who ran another series of bars that were associated with the rings. A lot of the documents we used to find information about these rings were on the Internet. They included property ownership records, entered federal court files, Google Earth documents and liquor license records, which were increasingly important. We found both evidence that there had been prostitution within the bars. We also found very unusual archives when we filed public records requests, including unusual escape routes that had been photographed by police in these bars. Unusual secret passageways, different hidden bedrooms and elaborate security systems that allowed us to make our stories more interesting in addition to connecting the members of the ring and the characteristics of the bars.

When you're when you're looking at licenses for people or for businesses, remember that almost any occupation can be regulated, whether it's a bar owner or whether it's a lawyer. Often there's someone who licenses that person. There can be complete records, inspection records, all kinds of data that can really pay off for an investigative reporter. And

some of these human traffickers were also on YouTube. This one owner of a bar also sang a song about trafficking, women selling women who danced in his cantinas. And so, we found that just by looking at social media.

Finding ties between people in places you investigate are really important. Property records. Google Earth calls for service at a bar business. Federal and state and local court records. The licenses of the businesses.

Finally, in a fourth example, I'm going to talk about how you also can bring in readers to try to help you investigate and work with a team of people to do a collaboration. This case began when a younger reporter in our newsroom at the Houston Chronicle heard that a local longtime Southern Baptist church leader had been sued for sexually abusing a young man. We wanted to find out how common that was. And first of all, he set up a Google search to look for other cases. He ended up finding hundreds of possible hits of other reports of abuse. But it wasn't good enough just to establish a long list of Google Docs that we shared internally between the members of our team. We had to prove that this abuse really had occurred and find the victims. So, we developed an elaborate system to organize our findings. We built internal lists and we verified the arrests by collecting court data and collecting lists of sex offenders and collecting police reports not just from Texas, but from other states all across the United States.

Ultimately, we built an internal archive that had thousands and thousands of records and we shared a good number of those records on two hundred and twenty or so of the perpetrators with the public. There's a tool called Document Cloud that allows you to post all your records internally, share them privately, but then also make some of them available and searchable to the public. We used that extensively in this investigation. You can explore the database, the public part of the database on the Houston Chronicle Web site under the Abuse of Faith series.

We also used a simple Google forum to ask readers for tips about whether they knew of perpetrators in Southern Baptist churches, it was very simple. It just asked for people's name, number, how to reach them and the information about what they knew. We also asked later if they could give us information about the church or the year so that we could further try to verify the information. The reader tips were especially valuable for finding documents about abuse that occurred abroad involving missionaries. And many of these people who contacted us later provided their own documents, their own e-mails, their own photos that allowed us to do a complicated investigation.

So that's a quick summary of four investigations I did in some of the techniques I used to build chronologies, find connections, explore emissions and lies, and of course, reach out to readers to investigate. I hope that you will participate further by participating in the student forums in this week's lessons, posting questions for both our fellow investigators and four instructors.

Thank you so much for participating in the Knight Center MOOC.