

## **Module 2.1 - How to launch an investigation. Key steps.**

I'm Alejandra Xanic and I'm a reporter based in Mexico City. I have been a local reporter and a freelance investigative reporter for many years, and I'm currently an editor at Quinto Elemento Lab, a nonprofit investigative center that we founded in that funding and mentoring reporters with great investigative projects in Mexico.

I'm really, really happy to be here with you and I'm looking forward to this week together. In the past module Lise Olsen talk to you about several things, among others, how to find investigative story ideas. We shall now look at the steps that follow and review a series of tools that can help organize and focus our reporting.

It all starts with a rat's tail; something passes before our eyes and arises our curiosity. The rat does not appear in its entirety. It is elusive. It runs away from us. This is a figure that Daniel Santoro, an Argentinian journalist, uses to describe story ideas, hints. The trick is how do we know if there is something worth investigating on the other side? If there is in fact a big fat rat or only a small mouse or nothing at all.

Take the case of this rat's tail for example. If you were to drive with me around the industrial city of Toluca in central Mexico, you would bump into these huge abandoned buildings that are halfway in construction. Malls, hotels like corporate buildings. And if you are as evil minded as I, your first thought would probably be this must be a money laundering scheme.

So, the first step here would be to take that hunch and check everything that's been said and published about it. We had to, we would have to look at the media and social media and the academic journals and YouTube.

What will we be looking for? Our goal in the beginning, we would be trying to corroborate if this hunch is possibly correct or if we might be making a misinterpretation of facts. After all, there are so many possible explanations. This can be the story of a very lousy businessman, for example. Or the case of a construction company gone broke after of unforeseeable increase in the prices of steel, which canceled their plans.

On the other hand, we are also going to be looking if there's already something known to others, if it's been published and in what way. Or if there are key aspects of the story that remain uncovered. And also, we are looking for records and possible sources. This is one very, very important part of the investigation process that we sometimes skip. And it's really, really crucial. Why is this? Well, because we don't want to put a lot of time and effort into something that's probably only news to us or worst case no news at all. So, if the tip and hunch survive this first test, we need to do serious pre reporting before running to our editors and pitch the story.

So, step two consists in actually verifying our tip or hunch. By now, we have been marinating ourselves in the story, in the facts and the players and the records. We will go somewhere and knock on people's doors, get them to talk about the subject, even if we don't know yet if we're going to pursue this story or not.

In the Toluca case, I knocked several doors and I learned that the owners of these buildings are all one family. I also learned that they have a radio station with no advertisement. Also, a TV station with no ads and newspapers that are nowhere to be found. Last thing I learned is that one of them was recently listed by the U.S. Department

of the Treasury as part of a money laundering scheme. And best of all, nobody has written about them since.

So, the next key step is to define why this story is important. What is it about really? What structural problems does it expose? In the Toluca story, I found this family puts a lot of money to political campaigns. They have escaped investigations and sanctions. They have close ties with politicians in the state where the same party has governed for nine or more years.

So, third step, think what is the story about? What structural problems that it exposed? Why is it important? We must have a very powerful reason to investigate specific issue, not only because this will be a key when asking for editor's support, but also because you will be investing a lot of energy work and determination in pursuing it, and you will have set aside a lot of other important investigative leads.

So, the next big step is turning the tip or hunch into a hypothesis. Let me stay here a little while. It was not until recently that reporters started talking about hypothesis, although it has been with us forever. Many reporters react with mistrust to the idea. They fear that having a hypothesis is basically like getting married with a version of reality.

But really, it's not. Mark Lee Hunter, who's a reporter and trainer of other journalists, wrote a very helpful manual, which is you'll find in our readings for this week and it comes in several languages. And this is how he describes a hypothesis and what it is for. "In essence, it is based on a mental trick. You create a statement of what you think reality may be based on the best information your possession. And then you seek further information that can prove or disprove your statement." So, we can only make a sound hypothesis when we've done pre-reporting and thorough verification. A hypothesis is sort of a place to start. It helps us focus. And I'm gonna show you an example. Hoping that maybe this makes us more clear.

So, this is a hypothesis of a work in, from a Guatemalan reporter. So, this one says, "Guatemalan police officers, who were reported by witnesses of disappearing civilians in the 80s. today occupy positions in the agencies in charge of searching for the missing during the internal armed conflict."

So, what makes it good? Well, for once it makes it clear, it is concrete. It tells us what to do. And that's one of the most important things. And almost everything here is verifiable.

Writing a hypothesis is not always an easy task. This is something my father would tell me one day and the next, then it would make me so mad. He would say that, "if we don't think clearly, we cannot write clearly." And I believe now, after years after that, I believe that really writing that hypothesis is really putting to the test the clarity we have about the issue we are trying to investigate. It will hurt at the beginning, but also this pain will pass.

So, when do we know we have a great hypothesis? Well, when the hypothesis we've put together tells us what to do. Which brings me to the fourth step in the investigation process, which is to determine what evidence you need in order to prove or disprove your hypothesis. The Guatemala hypothesis basically tells us, we must find one. The names of the police officers who are pointed out by witnesses and victims of the two disappearances in the 80s and second check if they are currently part of the task forces that are in charge of searching for the missing.

Now, there are a couple of warnings I need to make. One, as Mark Lee Hunter said, this is a provisional explanation of things. We're going to search for information that corroborates, modifies or debunks our hypothesis. The hypothesis is a living creature. It can mutate and it can die. I worked with New York Times reporter David Barstow for almost two years and a story about how Wal-Mart paid its growth in Mexico through use of systematic bribery.

One of our stories focused in its store that was built in small town next to a monumental pre-Hispanic pyramid. We had the tip that Wal-Mart had bribed officers in an exchange for permits. David and I searched in every drawer for evidence that Wal-Mart had cheated. But we also search in all corners for evidence that we could prove otherwise. That Wal-Mart had, in fact, done things by the book. I spent probably 15 days in row sitting, sifting through thousands of documents just in case Wal-Mart hadn't fact followed the proceedings.

So, we must regularly and repeatedly report in favor and against our hypothesis. And another note of advice, always, always, always listen to your inner voice. You probably read Columbia University's audit on a story about rape on campus that was published by Rolling Stone. It's also included in this week's readings. Well, there is one thing that clings to me since I read it, and it's this idea that we have a natural and powerful propensity to seek only for information that corroborates our beliefs. This confirmation produces a chemical reaction in our bodies that we experience as pleasure. This means we have to go against our nature when we report against our hypothesis.

So always be thinking of what you don't know, of what information you could learn that might totally change your understanding of events and be willing to react to information that conflicts your findings. Edit Your hypothesis according to findings and medical if it falls.