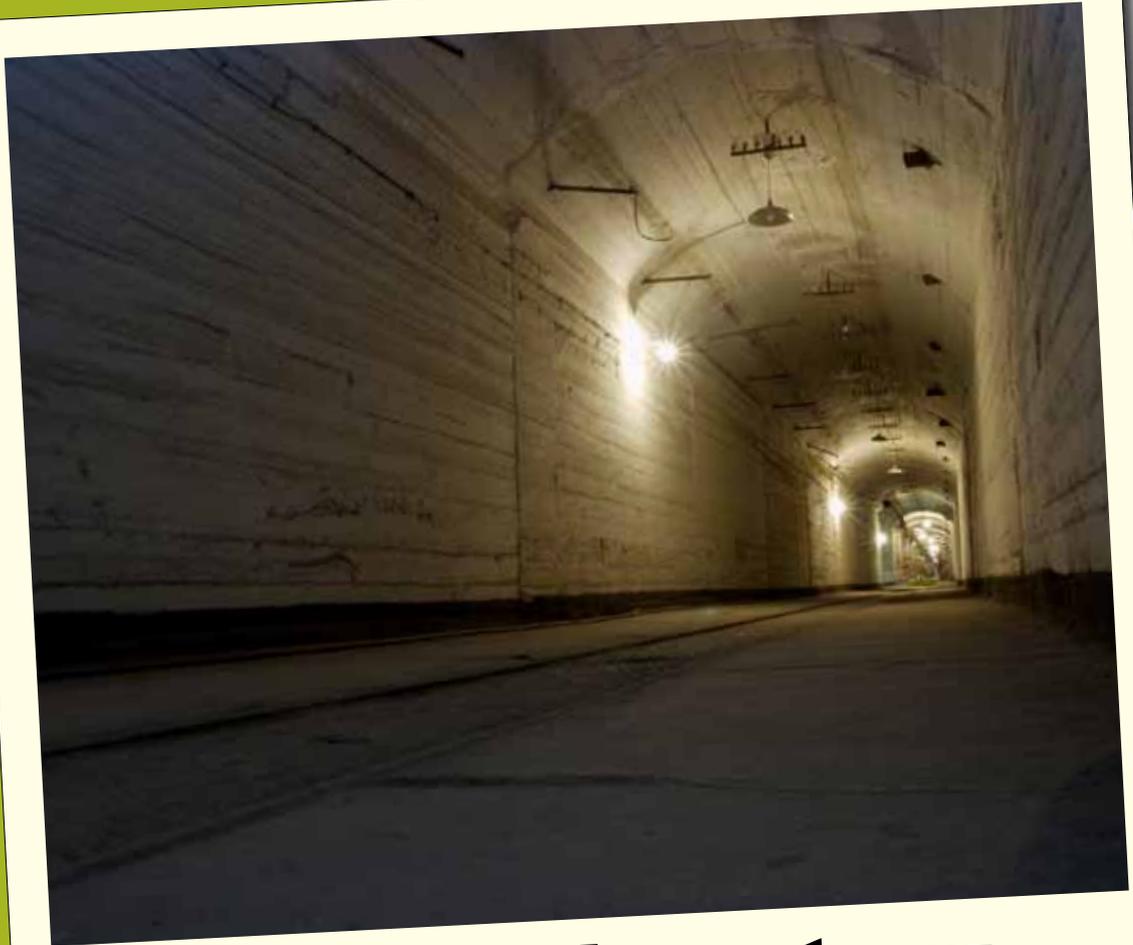


CHAPTER TWO



Generating story ideas

Learning objectives

By the time you have worked through this chapter, you will be able to:

- List a variety of ways investigative story ideas can be found
- Evaluate the usefulness of each of these
- Distinguish between investigative journalism and 'leak reporting'
- Follow a systematic process to evaluate and deal with a tip-off
- Follow a systematic process to expand and develop a story idea.

If you are confident that you already have these skills and understand these issues, go straight to:

- Chapter 3 for guidance on planning your reporting project
- Chapter 4 for a detailed look at finding, keeping and using sources
- Chapter 5 for more on interviewing
- Chapter 6 for technical assistance on computer-assisted and number-based (e.g. financial) research
- Chapter 7 for advice on analyzing your evidence, packaging it and writing the story
- Chapter 8 to consider the legal and ethical aspects of your reporting.

 Konrad Adenauer Stiftung



Where do story ideas come from?

John Nyamu was a young journalist on an independent paper in an East African country. One day, he received a phone call.

The caller didn't give his name, but simply said: "Meet me at the tea stall in the old-clothes market in an hour. I have a story that will make your career." John was intrigued.

When he got to the place, no-one was there, but the stall-holder showed him an envelope and said "Are you John? A man in a white shirt said I should give you this." The envelope contained a videotape. It seemed to show the President sitting at a table in the presidential palace garden, accepting a suitcase full of banknotes from a well-known businessman, who had recently been acquitted in a big money-laundering case.

John was very excited. But when he discussed the videotape with his editors, they were divided. One said: "This story will make the paper! It's obvious this is a recent tape because of the weather and how the two

men look. We can bring down the government with cast-iron proof that crooked businessman bought his acquittal. We'll put stills from the video on the front page. Good work, John!" But the other said: "I'm not so sure. We don't know where this came from, it might be a fake, and there could be many reasons why money is changing hands. It could even be a donation to the President's charity fund."

Then the editors discussed how to proceed, and asked John what he thought, since he'd brought in the tape.

If you were John, what would you have contributed to the discussion? What should the paper do next?

(At the end of the chapter, we'll look at this question again).

When they start their careers, investigative journalists very often have an image in their minds of important people – if possible, **very** important people – approaching them in dark alleyways and slipping them packets of confidential, preferably top-secret, documents. Once the contents are revealed, the resulting Big Nasty Story makes the front page, with, if all goes well, a byline in really bold print. Praise, prizes, and perhaps the fall of regimes, all follow.

It does sometimes happen like that. Watergate, which we discussed in Chapter 1, began with an anonymous tip-off – and, in the end, a US President did fall. But we've also seen the limitations of that model of investigative reporting, particularly in the context of resource-poor newsrooms in developing countries. And Watergate is a well known example not only because of the inspired and determined work of the reporters involved, but also because it's unique: the story of a highly unusual set of circumstances and people.

In every chapter of this book, you will read case studies of real investigations done by African journalists. Many of these had a major impact on their communities. You can study the full investigations as you read on; for now, consider the accounts some of these reporters give of how their stories got started:

- "In the midst of a conversation about something else, I picked up my source's concern about this" (Joyce Mulama, Kenya)
- "We were motivated by the need to clarify ... the vast difference between electoral promises and the actual exercise of power" (Eric Mwamba, Ivory Coast)
- "I began my story because a World Bank press release did not 'feel' right" (Joe Hanlon, UK/Mozambique)
- "The story started as an item in our daily news diary" (Andrew Trench, South Africa)
- "I had covered another story about this company, and wondered why" (Finnigan wa Simbeye, Tanzania)
- "When I saw the *Sunday Times* front page about this topic, it seemed to me it begged at least one other question... And another story got started because of something that happened to me when I tried to open a bank account" (Tom Dennen, South Africa)
- "The story was inspired by a report launched at a conference in Addis Ababa, where I learned for the first time about something I hadn't known of before" (Joyce Mulama, Kenya)
- "A source leaked the story to one of us" (Sello Selebi and Phakamisa Ndzamela, South Africa)
- "We considered many other topics for transnational investigations. But then it became starkly clear to us that the concern we all urgently shared was that our own members and people they knew, were actually getting sick and dying because of this" (Evelyn Groenink, FAIR)
- "I heard more about this from a colleague whose cousin had been involved. I thought: I'd better go and have another look" (Henry Nxumalo, South Africa)
- "I had always been sceptical about the success of a certain property developer" (Charles Rukuni, Zimbabwe)

Only one of these stories came from a tip-off. The rest were developed by the reporter's pre-existing interest or a previous story, by something they read, by direct experience, a conversation or a chance remark.

In other words, most of these stories started with a question or issue, not an anonymous phone call or a packet of top-secret papers.

But generating good story ideas isn't easy – in fact, the editorial focus group on this chapter, made up of regional journalists, said it was probably one of the hardest parts of a journalist's job.

So, first we'll consider the various alternative ways of finding stories, and then spend the second part of the chapter discussing how best to handle tip-offs.

READ

Pros and cons of sources of story inspirations

respond

Look at the list of story inspirations below. For each, suggest what their advantages and disadvantages might be. Take five minutes or so to do this before you read on.

Your own experience

The experience of friends, colleagues and neighbours

Following up news stories that have already been published

Reading, and surfing the web

Routine checks of public information on your beat

'Roadside radio/Radio trottoir': what people in your community are discussing

Generating story ideas: **your own experience**

Very often, reporters complain “I don’t have enough evidence!” when they have been to the site of a story, spoken to role players and recorded detailed descriptions of what they saw. Yet all this is real, concrete evidence. In the same way, something that happens to you is no less valid as the starting-point for a story than something that happens to someone else. The advantage is, you know it is happening: you experienced it. You are your own best and first witness, and it is always preferable to have first-hand experience and observation to help you shape your own view of the story – backed up, of course, by detailed notes taken at the time; never rely on your memory. If you have a cellphone with a camera, photograph that leaking sewer as soon as you see it.

That is why we say that a journalist is never off-duty. Keep your eyes open, and notice the blocked drains on the road as you travel to work; the long queues you stand in at the passport office; the rudeness of the nurse at your clinic. There may be investigations there, waiting to be done. Keep an ‘ideas book’ as a section of your notebook, and jot these observations and questions down when you come across them.

But there are two potential problems. The first is that your own feelings may get in the way of conducting a balanced investigation. You may be so angry at the conduct of public officials who delayed you that you seek to blame them, rather than uncovering the reasons for what happened. You may not want to confront certain aspects of how **you** behaved, or what **you** are feeling, and so bias your investigation towards alternative explanations.

The second potential problem is that your experience may not be representative. You are only one person – how many people is this happening to? Did you experience certain treatment because you are a journalist, or a man, or a woman, or an educated person? Is other people’s experience the same? Does it happen every day, or was today different for some reason?

The way to overcome these potential pitfalls is to broaden your reporting out from what happened to you. If you wish to write only about your personal experience, that’s an opinion column, not an investigative report. To make it a report, seek reasons, find out about context, and talk to a range of different kinds of people to make sure your final story represents something more than your personal grievance.

Generating story ideas: **experience of friends and family**

All the same advantages and disadvantages apply to the people you know and work with. Their experiences are real, but may not be representative, and may be biased by personal feelings. So, again, they can be the starting points for good investigations – but only starting points.

The Centre for Investigative Journalism (CIJ) notes: “Some people you know may do jobs where a commitment not to disclose information goes with the job... a policeman, for example. So think first about how you use the people you know. And don’t imagine that because someone is a friend or neighbour, they don’t mind helping you out – it might make life difficult for them. Always get permission before you use someone’s personal story.”

Steer clear, however, of things told to you by friends that are not direct experience, as in: “I have a cousin who knows a woman who was asked for a bribe at the airport.” Unless the woman has a name, an address, and can be interviewed, this is just rumour or urban legend.

Generating story ideas: **roadside radio/radio trottoir**

No medium is better at generating urban legends than ‘roadside radio’: the fast-traveling gossip and anecdotes of street traders, taxi drivers and passengers, and people in bars and cafés. Periodically, rumours of ghost hitch-hikers, or miracle cures, or magical tricksters who make penises disappear, infect whole cities or villages.

Of course, the legend itself can become the subject of an investigation: is it really true? Why do people believe it? What does it tell us about our times and our country?

But far more useful is the way roadside radio can alert us to real trends and changes. The media is often accused of ‘agenda-setting’ and telling readers what they ought to be interested in, but popular rumour also sets its own agendas. Just as you keep your eyes open for physical clues to stories, so your ears need to be alert to what people around you are discussing. Are girls disappearing, suspected victims of trafficking, in a certain suburb? Have people begun abusing a new type of homebrew? Has a well-known businessman suddenly stopped spending money, or a top policeman begun socialising with the criminal elite? Roadside radio will tell you about all these developments, and many of the tales will be true.

Your first step, however, has to be confirming the validity of the rumour. Cross-check with sources who are in a position to know. Check with the suburb’s police station on reports of missing girls, and with doctors on cases of alcohol abuse. Check with employees of the businessman about how his enterprise is doing, and with financial analysts about market trends; look at whether he has sold assets such as houses or cars recently. Observe the policeman at play.

Once you have confirmed that the rumour has some substance, you can begin planning your story.

Generating story ideas: **local newspapers**

Former IRE executive director Brant Houston reminds us in his and IRE's *Investigative Reporter's Handbook* that local newspapers carry many seeds for investigative stories. A story lurks, for example, behind practically every paid legal notice: whether it deals with wills, name changes, foreclosures, auctions, tenders, seized properties or unclaimed property. Local newspapers also carry valuable reports on new construction or government projects and on local court cases. You may find the name of your school bus driver in a drunken driving case, or the name of a financial officer in a shoplifting case.

Generating story ideas: **following unpublished stories**

We do this far too infrequently. Reader surveys and focus groups invariably tell us that readers love follow-ups. They want to know what happens next, or why it happened, or what the story is behind the terse daily news. Look especially for news stories that neglect to ask 'why'; or that seem to focus narrowly on only one aspect of an issue. Look, too, for alternative ways of covering obvious, or regular stories such as world or national commemorative days.

Case study (from Brant Houston's and IRE's *Investigative Reporter's Handbook*)

Old newspaper reports came in handy when US journalist Mike Berens (then at the *Columbus Dispatch*) reported on the murder of a prostitute in Ohio. Berens had read other stories about murdered prostitutes and remembered a comment, made years earlier by the FBI, that some serial killers prey on prostitutes because they are easy targets, who move around a lot and are therefore often not immediately missed. Berens checked online databases of his country's daily newspapers, starting with Ohio. His first keyword search "prostitute" and "body" turned up 60 stories. There were three stories about prostitutes who had been found murdered and who had last been seen alive at a Youngstown truck stop.

These victims' bodies had all been found along the Interstate 71 Highway, so Berens started – on the advice of the *Columbus Dispatch* librarian – to include the words "Interstate" and "highway" in his internet search. That led him to three more similar cases.

The pattern that appeared was of the women's bodies having been dumped directly from a truck cab. For that reason, Berens started to exclude cases where the bodies had been moved or hidden. He then conducted similar searches of newspapers of other US states over the past six years and found cases in Alabama, Illinois, Indiana and New York.

He then started calling sources, visiting truck stops and interviewing police officials. In the end he produced an investigation that pointed clearly in the direction of a serial killer at work, and that helped police eventually to make an arrest.

Remember, though, that a follow-up rests on information that is already out in the public domain. Other journalists or publications may seize on exactly the same line of investigative follow-up as you, especially if the original story has obvious gaps in it. So you will need to ensure that you have an original angle, and may need to plan speedy work and publication to beat any rivals.

One form of follow-up that we often neglect is asking 'stupid' questions – in other words, questions that are so basic and almost naive that they are neglected. When every newspaper is speculating whether a politician took a bribe to vote a certain way, why not instead investigate whether he needed to be bribed, or why his price was so low/high? You may uncover some surprises.

Another is to interrogate the information that 'everybody knows'. Journalist and trainer Edem Djokotoe checked figures on the land area of Zambia – something where a standard figure appears in every school geography book – and discovered an environmental story in what turned out to be 'shrinking' borders.

Ugandan journalist Frank Nyakairu recommends revisiting your own notebooks for follow-ups too. Remember that interesting question an interviewee posed, that wasn't relevant to the story you were then working on? That could become a new story in its own right.

A particularly rich source of ideas is searching for a local angle on a foreign story: we call this 'localising' an issue (see page 2-6 for examples).

Is it happening here?

Journalist and media trainer Edem Djokotoe describes the following examples of 'localising' overseas news:

"In recent times many high-profile sports personalities have been caught for doping or implicated in using performance-enhancing drugs. Notable among them are US sprinter, Marion Jones, and Swiss tennis player Martina Hingis. Reporters could investigate the extent of drug use in their own countries. Agreed in most of Africa, the extent of poverty and lack of resources means that often sportsmen and women cannot access top-of-the-line drugs. But there are unconfirmed reports that the use of easily accessible drugs like dagga is very common among soccer players in Africa. One Zambian player, Rotson Kilambe, who played in the PSL at some point, was banned for a number of years for using dagga, following a random drug test. How prevalent is it? To what extent is it sanctioned by coaches?

"Another example is based on an experience of a story I tried to investigate: the use of growth hormones and steroids and other unethical practices in the poultry industry in Zambia. I found out that table birds (broilers) were finding their way to the market after three weeks instead of the six to seven weeks chickens need to be ready for consumption. Unfortunately, there are no resources to test chickens for growth hormones and steroids. I was told that samples would need to be sent to South Africa at great cost."

Generating story ideas:

reading and surfing the web

Reading widely is your most important source of story ideas and the best way to upgrade your professionalism and writing skills. If you're serious about your beat, accessing everything that is published about it is a professional duty. If you are not prepared to do this, investigative journalism is not the career for you.

What's more, without the detailed, concrete knowledge that reading will give you of how systems and processes are supposed to work, how will you detect when something is going wrong? Don't spend your time simply processing the information that happens to come your way – from press releases, statements and public events. Seek out new information to broaden your own knowledge base.

Although scarce resources, or geography, may limit your access to overseas publications or the Internet, you should use whatever channels you can to keep up to date. The various information services of embassies and non-governmental organisations often have free reading rooms or libraries, often with Internet access. If you have no alternatives, get into the habit of visiting these whenever you can.

Official and NGO reports often look dull and daunting, and many journalists see reading these as a routine task, rather than a source of exciting stories. But if you read them carefully, rather than simply using the front page or a press release summary, you can often uncover new and challenging information that can kick off investigations.

If you are able to access the Internet regularly, look for news sites and specialist listserves linked to your area of interest. Many (such as the BBC World Service) offer a free RSS feeds service that will post headlines to your email address every day, so that you can stay updated. Do this. It saves you surfing time and ensures that you get all the news about the issues you are interested in on a daily basis.

This is especially important in an area such as health or science, where the state of accepted wisdom can change quickly. Some journalists in Africa were still writing stories about the lack of effective treatments for Aids years after antiretroviral drugs had been tested and put into successful use in Europe and America – they simply did not have the information. It took them a longer time, therefore, to move public knowledge towards the really vital issue: the right of access to these drugs and the various ways it is being blocked.

Two important questions must be asked of any information you discover from reading or web-based research. The first is: who has written this, what are their credentials and what is their motivation? Anyone can post almost anything on the web, from genuine experts to wishful thinkers or lobbyists paid by commercial or political interests. Anyone who can raise the money can self-publish a book. We give hints in Chapter 6 on evaluating the reliability of researched information.

But secondly, particularly in areas like science and health, when was the information published? What was cutting-edge knowledge ten years ago may have been completely outdated by research since then. And the new developments can form the basis of a genuinely informative investigative story – as you will see in Joyce Muluma's case study at the end of this chapter.

Generating story ideas:

checking public information

This is another basic professional obligation. When someone is appointed to a new post, check the public information about them: their life story, education, the directorships they hold, etc. When a new enterprise is founded, check the main players. Cross-check too: look for links between them and their colleagues, or rivals, or relevant figures in government. If the new Agriculture Minister

also sits on the board of a major grain supply company, is this legal? Even if it is permitted, surely there's the possibility of conflict of interest? Discovering these types of links is a potent source of stories.

Any reports of scarce supplies – whether of petrol or land or scholarships – make the likelihood of corruption in the allocation of those resources greater. Asking questions such as who the gatekeepers are on these supplies, and what the allocation mechanisms are supposed to be, can help you to track down the points at which scarcity is being turned into somebody's personal gain.

Another form of routine checking is having regular conversations with your contacts in various fields. We talk at length about handling sources in Chapter 4, but it is worth pointing out here that if you only contact sources when you need them, they will begin to feel used, whereas if you meet with them regularly without a set agenda, you'll establish a good relationship and your conversations will produce news of new developments before any other reporter is alerted. We call this 'working' your contacts.

But stories from these sources will not automatically jump out and wave at you. You will have to use reasoning to work out the story. Says Edem Djokotoe:

"For instance, in a country of 12 million people where almost 80 percent of the population earn under one US dollar a day, from which sources do political parties get the financial and logistical resources they need to operate on a national scale, with a presence in 72 districts? Sheer common sense will suggest that money for running parties will not come from the sale of party cards or from fund-raising dinners. So where is the money coming from? It is easy for ruling parties to divert public funds to run party activities, but the question is: how exactly does the skimming occur and which functionaries make it happen? The fact that in Zambia political parties are not obliged to publish their financial statements and make the source of their funding known makes this a story worth pursuing."

"Know what you're looking for!"

Journalists Mark Hunter and Luuk Sengers gave a presentation to the University of the Witwatersrand Investigative Journalism Workshop in 2007. Among the advice they provided was the following:

You're looking first and foremost for a good story, not a phone book. We gather information to get a story out of it; we don't work on stories simply to gather information.

You want to stir emotions. You want your readers to get angry, to weep, to become determined to change things. Otherwise, what is the point of spending so much time collecting evidence, risking your life and your relationships? People are real characters in your investigations, not just quotes.

READ Which of these do you use as sources of story ideas?

respond

Go back to the list of story inspirations above. Analyse your own practice. Which of them do you look at, on a regular basis, as a source of story ideas? Which do you neglect? Which have you never considered? Before you go on, plan some practical steps you can take to systematically broaden your sources of story ideas.

	Regularly use	Occasionally use	Never use
Own experience			
Experiences of friends and neighbours			
Following up shallow news stories for deep investigation			
Reading			
'Roadside radio'			
Routine checks of public information			
Routine conversations with insider contacts			

Evaluating and dealing with tip-offs

Many stories that expose wrongdoing start with a tip-off. We have a whole vocabulary of newsroom terms associated with these, for example, 'Deep Throat', the term for an anonymous insider, and a legacy of Watergate; 'walk-ins': people who just drop by your newsroom with a story.

So, for example, a contact in the police will inform you of a car-theft racket involving the commissioner; a vengeful ex-spouse will phone the newspaper she subscribes to, denouncing her tax-evading former husband; a politician will tell a friendly editor about an untoward relationship between a company tendering for a government contract and a member of the tender board.

But this information may not be everything that it seems. It may be untrue, and designed to set you up. It may be only a partial truth, tailored to serve somebody else's agenda. And, true or not, it is an attempt to set your reporting agenda for you.

Investigative journalist Stephen Grey, who in 2004 broke the world exclusive story of the CIA's transport of prisoners to Middle Eastern countries where torture is routine, told the 2006 Investigative Journalism Workshop at Wits University in Johannesburg:

"For me, investigative journalism is saying: 'We ask the questions. We are the journalists and it's for us to say what is the issue of the day. And if that issue is determined by the fact that you're sitting round the breakfast table and there's a power-cut again, well, you go into the office and say: 'This is what we have to find out about!' Even if you're somebody who's churning out 20 stories a day for a wire agency, where you think you really don't have much chance to shape things. If you do one story a day where you turn stuff around and say, 'Well, this is a story where I'm going to choose what I write about', or where, when the press release comes in, you pick up the phone to find out whether it's true or not – then I think you are doing investigative journalism. It doesn't need to take years, months, weeks. To a degree, it's a state of mind."

If Grey is right, and setting your own news agenda ought to be part of the definition of investigative journalism, then the first thing you must do with a tip-off is question it. Ask:

- Is this a subject that I would have written about if I didn't get the tip off?
- Is what it uncovers an issue I feel passionate about?
- Has a truth been unearthed here that is really in the public interest?

If the information can be corroborated, then in exposing the police commissioner and his car racket, the answers would probably be yes, yes and yes. People are not safe as long as the police force itself, with the highest police official in the land as Godfather, is involved in theft.

These kinds of tip-offs are not as common as some journalists would hope. But Seymour Hersh would not have been able to expose the abuse and torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib in Iraq without information supplied by a range of concerned people, from senior military officers worried that standards of army conduct were being lowered, to the civilian mother of a soldier on America's East Coast. These were genuine tip-offs, clearly in the public interest, from people with genuine concerns:

"In the middle of publishing the Abu Ghraib stories for the New Yorker, I get a call from a mother ... She said: I have to talk to you ... she had given her daughter a portable computer to take to Iraq ... she said: I was just going to clean it up ... she opened it up and sure enough there was a file marked 'Iraq'. She hit the button. Out came about 100 photographs ... We published just one in the New Yorker. This is something no mother or daughter should see. It was the Arab man, leaning against the bars, the prisoner naked, two dogs on either side of him. What we didn't publish was the sequence that showed the dogs did bite the man – pretty hard. A lot of blood. This woman saw that, and she called me, and away we go."

Generating story ideas:

another corrupt politician – yawn!

But what are the answers if you ask these questions in the case of the Tender Board member or the tax-evading ex? Exposing another corrupt – or allegedly corrupt – individual may not have a major impact on social justice and the public interest in general. Particularly not in countries where corruption and evading taxes are systemic in state structures, and endemic in the behaviour of some social groups. Your readers might get a cheap thrill from the exposure and downfall of a famous person, but the value of the story could stop there. Journalists often argue that by exposing one wrongdoer, the others will 'get a fright' and the battle against corruption will be advanced. There is some truth in this: the danger of exposure will deter some aspiring robber barons, and at least that small amount of money may be saved to contribute to government spending. And it is taxpayers' money – the money of your readers. They have a right to know where it goes.

But the press exposure of countless corrupt individuals in Africa has so far not very significantly impacted on systemic corruption, ingrained as it is in all structures and transactions in many African countries – and sometimes even in the structures that have been created to fight corruption.

What *has* happened however is that, in virtually all African countries where 'corruption' and 'good governance' are meticulously monitored by local and international institutions, clever officials and politicians have come to see the value of a 'corruption' accusation against a rival, or even a superior they don't like. Governments routinely investigate former governments (now in opposition) for corruption, and vice versa. "Of course we expose corruption," a Zambian newspaper editor once said, "the opposition is very corrupt". (His newspaper was government-aligned.)

Don't look at us; look at him!

At the 2007 FAIR Investigative Journalism Summit, Zambian investigative reporter Zarina Geloo explained how corruption tips can actually hamper deep investigative reporting. Geloo found it was extremely hard to unearth documents about a certain arms trading network, despite the fact that the authorities were aware of, and had written reports about, the network. What was much easier, however, was to access the bits of the reports that had to do with relations between the network and former Zambian president Chiluba, who was being investigated by the authorities under current president, Levy Mwanawasa. "As long as it shows that Chiluba was corrupt, you can get it," Geloo says. "But nobody is interested in giving you any other part of the story, or the whole story." The front company concerned is allegedly still connected to the Zambian government, but that connection will probably only be investigated once a future president decides to 'expose' Mwanawasa.

So before we get too excited about the secret documents handed to us, we should stop and think. It may lead to a Big Nasty Story about some VIP, but is it really important? Investigative projects often compete for scarce newsroom resources. If your alternative investigation concerns why the local clinic still has no medicines in stock, the public might be better served by your search for those who are siphoning off the health budget, rather than by your digging up dirt on the tax evader or the corrupt Tender Board member.

And what are the likely consequences of pursuing one investigation rather than another? In Malawi, 'good governance' monitoring led to the discovery of corruption in a drug-supply firm, whose contract was terminated. But no alternative importer had been identified, and the result was a major shortage of important drugs. It's important to distinguish between wholly corrupt processes, and small instances of corruption within generally clean processes – and to identify the difference you need a good general knowledge of how these processes are supposed to work.

But does this mean there is no story worth following in these little sins? Of course there is! However, it is a different kind of story. If you can use an instance of corruption to highlight flaws in the system that make tax evasion and bribery easier, then the impact of your story will be greater. If you can link the impact of tax evasion to the lack of resources for clinics, you can explain a public problem rather than simply bemoaning it. And if you can expose the way factions and parties use anti-corruption finger-pointing to take the spotlight away from their own misdeeds, you have informed readers about the hidden processes of your country's politics. Include the added dimensions of flaws that may be unconnected to corruption, such as ineffective targeting of activities or wastage. All of these require far more work, investigated more deeply and over a longer period of time, than simply using a windfall document to crucify one individual.

Generating story ideas: **establishing the truth of a tip**

Your first step is deciding whether the tip-off could lead to a story that is important and in the public interest. Only after you have made that choice can you move on: you must now try to discover whether it is true.

Sometimes it is not. It is fairly easy for a prominent state official or politician to access or create documentary 'evidence' that seems to underpin false or partial allegations. Documents can be forged by anyone with access to official letterheads, a computer and a photocopier. But even if they are real, documents can be carefully selected to paint an untrue picture; other crucial documents showing other aspects may have been left out.

Read the fine print! (Or find an expert to explain it)

Sometimes, documents can be so complex or technical that non-specialist journalists cannot understand them and have to rely on the source's explanation. Such documents should be discussed with independent experts, such as accountants, lawyers or doctors. But even seemingly simple documents are prone to misinterpretation. Recently, the South African magazine *Noseweek* was approached by a distressed informant, who claimed to have been paid only half of what was rightfully due to her by an attorney. As proof she produced a copy of the lawyer's trust account, which listed all transactions in a single column. She tearfully pointed out how the document proved that the lawyer, Mr A, had made a payment to Ms Y, claiming it to be the full amount due to her – but, look, he had then immediately made an additional, obviously irregular, payment for the same amount to himself! The reporter confronted Mr A, who pointed out that only one of the two 'payments' was a debit entry while the other one was a credit entry. The story never made it to print. Comments *Noseweek* editor Martin Welz: "One often gets documents that look obvious, especially when one has already been led along a certain way by a source. You then perhaps don't scrutinise them as closely as you ought to."

READ Why have you been given this tip-off?

respond

Sometimes an allegation turns out to be true, but concerns a relatively insignificant piece of misconduct. Yet, having weighed up the issues as we describe above, you decide to follow the trail.

Politician X of the Blue Party is an important party official, so you decide it's worth trying to confirm that he traveled to Europe at taxpayers' expense simply to have a holiday, with a conference as an excuse. Part of your investigation must entail discovering why your source is telling you this. After all, many politicians take these kinds of paid holidays, and many do so unnoticed and unpunished. Why has your source decided that politician X, specifically, must not get away with it? Is somebody trying to get rid of X for other reasons? What has X done to make some people angry? What is the interest of the accuser?

You discover that X has been investigating fraud on the part of his accuser, a fellow office-bearer in the Blue Party.

So, do you:

- Showcase the accusation on your front page and assist in the downfall of X?
- Put the tip on hold while you ask X about the fraud investigations (and also about the trip to Europe)?
- Take time to find out what is actually going on inside the Blue Party?

Take five minutes to think about your actions, and your reasons.

When corruption allegations fly as commonly as mosquitos, journalists have to be very careful not to fall victim to the agendas of informants trying to use them to neutralise rivals, remove obstacles and realise their own ambitions. You cannot move further on the story above until you have investigated all sides of this story, and that involves investigating party factions and tensions, and the conduct of the accuser as well as the accused. You also need to decide where you stand: what are your reporting priorities, and where does the most pressing public interest lie? Once you have done that, you may decide it is still worth telling taxpayers how their funds may be misused for politicians' paid holidays. But you will be able to present the incident in context, and, perhaps, as far less important than the bigger story of Blue Party back-stabbing and fraud. We'll talk more about sources and their possible motives in Chapter 4.

All this shows how risky it is simply to rely on sources to give us tip-offs. The only reporters who can sit back, relax and just wait for the phone call or the meeting in the coffee-shop or bar, are those exceptionally hardworking veterans who have sources in all sectors, all government departments, all businesses, all NGOs, and all political groupings in our countries. They are extremely rare, if not nonexistent. The rest of us cannot allow ourselves to be galvanised into action by the sources we merely happen to have assembled around us, no matter how nice we think they are.

Generating story ideas: investigative journalism versus 'leak journalism'

None of this means you must never use sources. But that is the key: *you* must use *them*, not them, you. Too often, manipulative informants understand how we like to jump and run with our 'scoops' without taking the time to find out everything that is really going on. It is called 'story planting', and the type of journalists who fall for it are known not as investigators, but as 'leak journalists'. (Perhaps that should be 'leaky', since the resulting stories are so often full of holes.)

Generating story ideas: deepen story ideas; avoid false trails

1 List and prioritise your concerns.

Make a list of areas of concern and questions you would like to investigate. This is where that 'ideas book' we mentioned earlier becomes a very useful story planning tool.

- Do you want to know where the ruling party inner circle gets all its money?
- Or why there are still thousands of children living rough on the streets in spite of the existence of 12 childcare NGOs who together receive millions of Euros in donor aid?
- Why there is sewage in the streets even though the Campaign for A Clean City has been running for two years?
- Why people have been falling ill in your home village (built next to an abandoned copper mine) with strange pains in their limbs and blue-tinged lips?

What do you see when you look at the list? Could it be your own values, your own passion for exposing injustice and social ills? Actually taking time to draw up such a list will show clearly why good investigative journalism is so closely connected to the public interest. It is value-driven: our values are the values of truth and justice! Finding those concerns and passions that drive you will be the first indicator of the investigative projects you will target.

When you begin to prioritise, you will consider the scale and impact of the problem or question, weighing your own preferences against broader community concerns and what will make a compelling story for your readers. Already, you have moved beyond needing a tip-off to get you moving. You are working already.

2 Analyse your concern

Now you must analyse the top concern or question on your list.

Is it based on a public assumption, or on reality?

We worry about many problems that, on closer inspection, may not be what they appear.

The 'tidal wave' of teenage pregnancies

If you read the letters pages of South African newspapers, or listened to broadcast commentators, you might believe that there are now far more teenage pregnancies than there used to be 15-20 years ago. Yet when a research institute studied the problem, it found that teenage pregnancy rates had stayed almost constant over the period. Does that mean it isn't a story? No – but again, the story has changed.

Why, with contraceptives far more easily available than in the past, have teenage pregnancies not gone down? Is it because conservative clinic workers publicly shame young people coming in to request condoms or the pill? Is it because of the emphasis on abstinence campaigns, which, studies show, do not help teenagers to protect themselves against unplanned pregnancies, but rather push unsafe sexual activity underground? Is it because even 'modern' young men refuse to use condoms? Is it because having a baby gives some young women a sense of family and roots, at a time when old community and family structures are falling apart under the pressures of migration, poverty and sickness?

And what provokes these waves of public indignation (social scientists call them 'moral panics'), where people suddenly make noise about something being far worse than the figures show it to be?

This does not mean you have to study sociology or psychology before you can write a story! But it does mean you need to recognise that expertise is needed, and know how to access this, from your contacts, research or elsewhere. See Chapter 6 for research advice. One purpose of your analysis is to compile a list of useful sources – including an assessment of their likely credibility – and a short outline of the kind of background information you are going to need. The analysis will also help you to form your story hypothesis: your best guess at this stage as to what is happening and why. For example: "The Campaign for a Clean City is failing because it has never been adequately funded."

Can I define my story focus in detail?

As we have seen, a word like 'corruption' can cover (literally) a multitude of sins. Are you investigating fraud (lies and false information), rule-breaking, nepotism (giving a job, contract or favour to a friend or family member), bribery, negligence, inadequate controls, deliberate wrongdoing, or what? The point about a hypothesis (and we'll return to this in the next chapter) is that it is a term, and relates to a methodology, derived from science. It must be provable (or disprovable) by reference to concrete facts. A vague, undefined idea can't be proved or disproved.

Is it important enough to merit investigation?

There is a difference between a businessman stealing tens of millions from a miners' pension fund to finance his luxury lifestyle, and a secretary who awards her office coffee-machine contract to her sister-in-law.

What methods and processes could produce the evidence I need?

As we will see in Chapter 3, when you pitch your story you will need to be able to describe your investigative methods. So, even at this early stage, it is worth thinking about. It will also provide you with an early alert about legal and ethical dilemmas to be resolved, if you might, for example, need to work undercover.

3 Find the headline

Your initial background research will either confirm your starting hypothesis, or suggest an alternative. You may even have found the opposite of what you expected to find! But on this basis, you – not your editor, not your source, but you – can now sum up your story in a concise, punchy working headline. This may not be the headline the story ends up under, but it is a good way of holding on to the focus of your story.

- Lonely teenagers make babies "to feel loved"
- Drugs for clinics stuck at customs
- French cash funds President's lifestyle
- Where is the promised children's centre?
- Copper makes villagers sick
- City cleanup clean out of cash

Your working headline will help you to pitch the story, and may even help you to think creatively about how the story can be presented by your news organisation. You will modify it as you find out more. You are getting there!

Finding the right headline

“Doctors killing babies” versus “‘Saved’ babies sick on the streets”

Mark Hunter, a journalism professor now based in Paris, told the 2005 Global Investigative Journalism Conference in the Netherlands how he was instructed to ‘get the story’ on doctors in American hospitals ‘killing off’ premature babies.

But he found that the tip-off that led to this assignment was completely incorrect. Doctors were actually saving many *more* premature infants than ever before in history. Hunter ended up with the opposite headline, which was only mildly less shocking.

A new law inspired by the conservative religious-fundamentalist lobby, ruled that even infants who were so premature and weak they required constant, painful, invasive medical procedures, had to be kept alive. Babies who, before the law, lacked the physical basics to survive, were now subjected to operations, tubes, drips, tests, and yet more operations. Most of these babies were growing up into chronically sick, severely disabled toddlers. But another conservative-inspired law had simultaneously cut social spending. Now almost no free support services existed for disabled children from poor homes. Many of these ‘saved’ children now vegetated on the streets.

4 Source map your story

This is a key stage of your process. You already have a list of background experts. Now you must try to find sources of the specific information your story needs, through **source mapping**.

Who are the actors in your story and are there documents where their actions are recorded? Many records show what lazy governments, stealing hospital staff, irresponsible corporates, mafiosi and corrupt politicians have been up to. (For example, if your country has a ‘Hansard’ – a daily record of proceedings in Parliament – it will indicate what committees your politician sits on, what debates he attended, what questions he asked or what votes he cast. This is public information.) Your targets may not want you to look at this information, precisely because they have been lazy, or incompetent, or thieving. So no one will just *give* you evidence. But it can be found, often more easily than you think.

First find your main ‘target’. As soon as you have defined your headline, you will know where to look for the player who is accountable for the ‘wrong’ in your story. This is often an individual or organisation, but not always.

In the case of our ‘teenage pregnancy’ story, a fragmented, traumatised society full of fragmented, traumatised families, could help explain why ‘be responsible’ messages do not get through to teenagers. Interviews with teenage mothers (your own *mini survey/vox pops*) will confirm what the problem is, and your headline now has to make the point that the existing policy and structures are not helping. **“Teenagers have babies to ‘feel loved’”** may become **“Health services neglect teenage despair”**.

This begins to suggest your structure for the actual story: explaining how, with many adults working far away, or sick, or dead, or preoccupied with their own problems, teenagers have only clinics and schools to guide and protect them. You’ll need to demonstrate why massive support and refurbishing of these structures, including outreach into the communities, is needed to cope with the problem.

In this example, your specific sources are easy to find: the teenagers themselves. Their *statements* will show you the way to other sources for confirmation: are the clinics unhelpful due to understaffing? Clinic leadership will be able to provide you with *data* on this, and the nurses will just plainly tell you (*more statements*) how fed up they are. How does the school handle issues like sexual relations between pupils? There must be *policy papers* or at least *minutes of education committee, teachers’ or school, board meetings*. (If there aren’t, in the face of these problems, this could amount to negligence – another story.)

As for the neglected street children, you can find paper trails: *income and expenditure records* of the street children’s NGOs compared with the *income* as received by the shelter catering for them. Experts in NGO affairs or accounting can tell you if these income and spending patterns look typical or reasonable (*interview statements*).

In the case of the rich party officials, they may have made their wealth from friendly contractors hoping for *tenders*, or possibly from party coffers, in which case you will want to see the *party books*. Bank accounts are by law confidential (think whether you would be prepared to try and get around this, and how you’d justify it), but you can look for evidence of windfall income in somebody’s *spending patterns*, such as building a new luxury home or buying yet another flashy car. It is unlikely that you will get to see the party’s account books – even if you find a friendly party member who agrees to ask for the books on your behalf. But your efforts, and the evasive responses you get from those trying not to answer your questions, will make for interesting reading, especially if combined with *lists* of the wealthy party members’ assets. (More on doing these types of interviews in Chapter 5.) Try to obtain these with the help of a search at the *company registry* and, in the case of MPs and ministers, the *parliamentary asset declaration* record. If the asset registers are empty, or only list a crate of good whisky, whilst the private jet of the person concerned can be *photographed* from the road, that’s a story in itself.

If you decided to investigate the continued flow of sewage in the streets or the suspected copper poisoning in your home village, you can enlist the help of an environmental expert or institute to analyse the *records* of the ‘Campaign for a Clean City’

(what was done, how much sense did that make?), and in the copper case, test the villages' *soil and water*. Your own *observations, inhabitants' testimonies, local council records and budgets* (or in the case of the copper poisoning, the copper companies' *budgets and environmental records or environmental impact studies*) will make the story complete.

A source map lists all these possible sources of data and which parts of your story they could help to expand or confirm. Doing a source map helps you plan where you will look for information.

READ Which of these is real investigative journalism?

respond

A wealthy foreign import/export tycoon, now resident in your country, has recently joined the golf club in the capital city: the place where the elite go to play, socialise and do deals. He has been generous. He helped junior cabinet minister X to secure a loan for a new home; he sent a case of fine imported wines to every club member last New Year. He makes donations to all the right charities. Everyone speaks well of him – although nobody knows exactly what it is he ships. He has told another local paper his main business is “sewing machines and similar goods” – but you suspect he may be channelling arms to the civil war in the country north of yours. How would you start to find out more about this mysterious charmer? Draft a source map to indicate what initial questions you might ask, and where you'd look for answers. Take about 15 minutes to think about this.

Questions to be asked	Sources of answers

Obviously, few people in a close elite social circle are going to stab their new-found benefactor in the back, although business rivals might be prepared to speak more freely. However, a reporter doing a ‘society portrait’ of the man might fill in a lot of his background, so it might be best to keep your initial, public enquiries on this discreet basis. Your first searches – and there will, of course, be many more – will therefore look something like this:

Questions to be asked	Sources of answers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is he? • What favours, exactly, has he done? Has he asked for anything in return? • What contacts has he made through this network? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Google • Interviews with golf club colleagues
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does he deal in sewing machines? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do customs papers show imports of sewing machines under his company's name? What are their alleged retail destinations? • Will dock-workers talk to you about the crates, what they looked like and where they went? • Do they end up in shops? (visit and interview dealers in destination suburbs/villages)

Generating story ideas: **using the law to help you**

To obtain data that are more difficult to access, there may be laws to help you. In South Africa, the Promotion of Access to Information Act provides some assistance, and there may be similar laws in your country. Chapter 8 looks at legal frameworks that are helpful (and unhelpful) to journalists doing investigation.

Generating story ideas: **from source map to data map**

From this point, you will follow the trails suggested by your source map, using the techniques of project pitching and planning, interviewing and research that are described in subsequent chapters. As you collect the evidence, record it, using the mind-mapping style described in Chapter 3. This is the start of your data map, which can be used like a real map to find what you are looking for.

Where you find connections, draw arrows from your intended headline and your background expertise to the findings that provide support for these. Draw other kinds of connections – for example, jagged lines – between bits of evidence that throw up contradictions or puzzles. For example, the *customs papers* say 500 sewing machines went to a certain village; *inhabitants* of the village say that they wouldn't know what a sewing machine even looks like, and certainly none have ever arrived at the trading store. Contradictions are often the most fruitful, explore these – constantly asking why – and you will find that your story idea grows not only legs, but wings!

Data mapping and ordering information

Mark Hunter and Luuk Sengers provided the following hints on data mapping and keeping your information on a story in good order:

- Create a chronology that describes events (dates, places, who was there, what was said, what was done); keep this information in a consistent format so you can instantly find the fact you need.
- Create a list of people you spoke to with their contact details (but remember to keep it secure)
- Create a to-do list of people who might know something about the project and whom you still need to contact, with their contact details
- Establish and draw up diagrams of the relationships between the various people involved
- Make a list of key documents, indicating those you have/have seen/still need
- Index your documents, and if you work with a computer create hypertext links to full electronic versions where you have these
- Highlight the facts you can consider as having been firmly established
- Note the status of other information you have
- Always keep a notebook with you to jot down ideas

Generating story ideas: **the minimum and the maximum story**

To satisfy yourself (and your editor) that you will not be wasting time following up your story, think in terms of 'minimum' and 'maximum'. John Grobler, for instance, knows that a chicken farm his Namibian government has planned for, in a very inhospitable area without good water reservoirs, will probably amount to a waste of money, because chicken farming and slaughtering require a lot of water. That is the minimum story he is aiming for. But maybe the bizarre scheme is the result of kickbacks to politicians paid by crooked businessmen, and if he can prove that, he will have the maximum story. (Grobler is still investigating.)

Generating story ideas: **communicate**

As soon as you think you may have a story, it is worth communicating with other newsroom players who are likely to have a role in the investigation. This is an essential part of team-building and managing your own project, and also part of the broader enterprise of building good working relationships.

Of course, you will use your common sense. You'll communicate discreetly, not boast wildly about the upcoming story in a general newsroom meeting. Office doors do sometimes need to be closed! You'll select the people you talk to carefully: people you can trust to be discreet themselves. You won't give away every tiny detail of what you're working on – it is still only a proposed story

and you need more checks – and you will make the status of the information you're sharing and the need for discretion very clear.

But by communicating with trusted colleagues and decision-makers as soon as a story starts 'shaping up' you will be laying the foundations for a powerful team, and for good treatment of your project on your publication's pages.

Case study

Case
study

The little pill that could, by Joyce Mulama

Joyce Mulama is a Kenyan investigative journalist with a particular interest in gender and reproductive health stories. She got her story idea for "The Little Pill That Could" not from a dramatic tip-off, but from a report presented at a conference. The story was published by Inter Press Services in March 2006. Here, Joyce tells us about her work.

Please give us a brief outline of your story:

Previous articles written on abortion in Kenya had largely focused on the consequences of abortion. My story, "The Little Pill That Could," sought to expose hidden realities in the abortion scenario in the country. It explored why simple interventions to address unsafe abortion undertaken in other countries had not been considered in Kenya, a country where women increasingly die from unsafe abortion. It was a story about Misoprostol, a drug used to induce what has come to be known as "medical abortion".

How did the story get started?

The story idea was inspired by a report launched at a conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in March 2006. The meeting brought together over 140 researchers, policy makers and health care practitioners from 16 African countries to discuss existing abortion research, and identify and prioritise areas that needed more research. Discussions also touched on ways of disseminating research findings in order to spur policy change around the contentious issue of abortion.

It was from the report that I learnt of something I had not known about before: Misoprostol and its effectiveness in procuring abortion if administered under supervised medical care (in countries where abortion is legal); its cost-effectiveness (it is cheaper than surgical abortion), and its value in saving women from unnecessary death in countries where medical abortion exists.

I got curious to find out if the drug, which has existed for years in other countries, was available in Kenya – and if not, to find out the reasons for its absence.

What reference documents did you use?

Apart from the Addis Ababa report, *Preventing Unsafe Abortion and its Consequences*, I looked critically at several government publications on Kenya's reproductive health sector, focusing on material about abortion. I studied yet another report, *A National Assessment of the Magnitude and Consequences of Unsafe Abortion in Kenya*. This is a joint study conducted by the Kenya Medical Association, the Federation of Women Lawyers (Kenya Chapter), health ministry officials and Ipas: an international NGO that lobbies for women's sexual and reproductive rights. I also referred to publications from established non-governmental organisations working in the area of reproductive and women's health. Besides these references, I also talked to several authorities including the Kenya Obstetrical and Gynaecological Society (KOGS) as well as authentic non-governmental organisations concerned about the subject.

What difficulties did you encounter?

It was extremely difficult to get comments from the government, particularly the Kenya Pharmaceutical and Poisons Board, which registers drugs. Yet this would have been a crucial voice, given that my investigations had revealed that Misoprostol was actually a registered drug in Kenya, but only as an anti-ulcer treatment, and not for abortion purposes. I was tossed up and down, being referred to an endless list of officials who would insist they were not the ones to respond to the matter. The story finally had to run without any comment from the Board.

It was also a challenge to find the right information about Misoprostol. Different medical experts gave me conflicting information about the drug. I had to spend a lot of time sieving through the information I was given, over and over again, and pressing for more details.

What happened after the story was published?

The article resuscitated campaigns led by KOGS to have Misoprostol registered for gynaecological use – including that related to abortion – in a country where unsafe abortion accounted for a large number of maternal deaths. In addition, campaigns by pro-choice activists intensified, seeking to have the abortion legislation reviewed. Presently, abortion in Kenya is illegal unless the mother's life is in danger.

But women abort regardless of what the law says, which means the practice goes on in the backstreets, the very places where

quacks also thrive.

This does not mean, however, that illegal abortion does not exist secretly in high places too. The difference is that the majority poor, who cannot afford to pay for safe services, are dying from complications from unsafe abortion practices carried out by doctors with questionable qualifications. This is also one reason why the story elicited public interest, with many people, including professional colleagues, confessing that they had never heard about Misoprostol before, yet it would rescue lives.

The story won an award from the Population Reference Bureau in 2006.

How long did the investigations last?

Having to make endless trips to the offices of the pharmaceutical board was quite a time-consuming exercise! There are days I would camp there from morning to evening. I felt devastated that after all that effort, I still could not get any of the officials to say something. After doing my reading of the documents, I spent two weeks conducting investigations about the situation of Misoprostol in Kenya.

Have there been any follow-up stories?

Indeed this is a story that warrants a follow-up. However, neither I nor other journalists have followed up on this story. The closest I got was to do an article on how a small community in a remote setting in western Kenya was addressing unsafe abortion. But this is an issue I am passionate about and I plan to follow it up.

What did you learn from doing the story?

Investigations take time and require a lot of patience. While one can easily get frustrated, it is important to stay focused on the subject and remain guided by the core role of journalism: serving as the watchdog of society and offering a voice to the voiceless.

The significance of a wide network of contacts cannot be over-emphasised. It was the rapport I had previously established with medical professionals that gave me access to the information I managed to gather. Talk to as many people as possible to corroborate facts and to obtain a variety of information that could add to the twists in the story. Needless to add, extensive reading of material related to the subject is important. More often than not, you will find some supportive background and pillars here to strengthen your findings.

Also critical is the fact that a journalist needs to allocate himself/herself enough time for investigations, in order to avoid working in a rush.

Following the right steps

Joyce makes all the most important analytical points about her own work. But notice that she followed the process we recommend in this chapter, starting with setting and following her own agenda. This is a subject she cares passionately about; reading about Misoprostol in a report 'clicked' with her because of that pre-existing interest, and she shaped a story that was relevant to Kenya from it. It was a story that provoked public interest – and won an award – because it was researched with the head, but written from the heart.

Key points from this chapter

- ✓ **Story ideas come from a range of sources, including some that might appear routine or unexciting. Don't neglect:**
 - Your own experience and that of friends and neighbours
 - Follow-ups on previous stories
 - Reading and the Internet
 - Street, café and taxi gossip
 - Routine checks of public information and with contacts.
- ✓ **Keep an ideas book to record issues you come across.**
- ✓ **But in every case, evaluate these ideas for their currency and public interest, and for any biases or lack of representivity related to their source.**
- ✓ **Tip-offs can produce dramatic stories, but should be handled very carefully.**
 - Evaluate their worth. Story tips about corruption have the most value when they can be used to shed light on some important aspect of public life; merely crucifying an individual is not always the best use of reporting resources.
 - Evaluate their truthfulness and the possible motives of sources.
- ✓ **Investigative journalism sets its own agenda, and uses sources and tips to uncover important truths. When sources and tips use the journalist, this is called 'leak journalism', not investigation.**
- ✓ **Wherever a story idea comes from, journalists should start with their own and their community's real concerns:**
 - Analyse those concerns
 - Boil the story idea down to a clear 'headline' to focus the investigation
 - Source map the story
 - Data map the information as it is uncovered.

So, what should John Nyamu have said and done about his videotape?

Well, since he does not know who the source was, that might be one starting point. Any further information (such as a detailed description from the stallholder of the "man in the white shirt" or his car) might help with future investigations. But his paper cannot simply print stills from the video as 'proof' of anything. John needs to look at whatever financial or lifestyle evidence he can access, and talk to as wide a range of people with insight as possible, to clarify the nature of any financial relationship between the businessman and the President. Depending on the media freedom climate in his country, this could carry serious risks. John's news organisation needs to weigh these up when deciding how to proceed. If the corrupt shielding of criminals goes on at such a high level, this is certainly an important story in the public interest, and deserves to be followed. But whoever left that envelope, should have added a large label saying "Handle With Care!"

Glossary

- **Bias** – bending or skewing any aspect of a story to fit prejudices or preconceived ideas
- **Data map** – a diagram of information discovered in the course of your investigation, showing important connections, gaps, etc
- **Follow-up** – a story based on a previous story by picking up some unanswered question or gap in the first story, or a fresh angle. NOT simply a rewrite of a story published elsewhere
- **Hypothesis** – a statement suggested as the basis for further debate or investigation, without any advance assumption that it is true
- **Minimum and maximum story** – what your story can certainly deliver and what would be first prize
- **Misoprostol** – a drug used to induce medical abortion of a foetus
- **Radio Trottoir** – French term for the rumour factory that operates on the streets of any big city. Literally “pavement radio”
- **Representative** (experience, instance, etc.) – a single experience or example which provably represents a broader situation
- **Source map** – a diagram or list of all the sources who might have information about a topic
- **Story planting** – action, often by those in authority, to drop misleading information into journalists’ laps in the hope they will believe it and publish it. The information may be wholly false, or simply incomplete, but is always designed to draw attention away from a true situation
- **Urban legends** – unproven stories that circulate regularly in big cities: for example, the “ghost hitch-hiker” or the “magician who steals penises” – but also unproven stories about the goings-on of the rich and famous. The same urban legends can crop up in different cities at different times; their source is often “A friend of mine knows somebody who...”
- **Working your contacts** – the professional journalistic practice of cultivating and maintaining regular contact with sources, even when you do not need their help with a specific story

Further reading

- Read Joyce Mulama’s full Misopristol story at <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=32716>
- Read Seymour Hersh’s interview on doing the Abu Ghraib investigation at <http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=05/01/26/1450204>
- and read his *New Yorker* articles on the magazine’s website at <http://www.newyorker.com>
- Find more about the Wits University’s Investigative Journalism Workshop at the journalism school website at <http://www/journalism.co.za>