

# CHAPTER THREE



## Planning the investigation

### Learning objectives

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

- Explain the difference between a story idea and a hypothesis
- Draw up an investigative reporting plan
- Create and deliver an informative, convincing story pitch
- Explain the uses and limitations of different types of source material and different investigation methods
- Understand what a paper trail is and how to begin tracking one
- Draw up and use criteria of authenticity and adequacy for evidence and
- Draft useable timelines and budgets.

If you are confident that you already have these skills, go straight to

- Chapter 4 for a detailed look at finding and using sources
- Chapter 5 for more on interviewing
- Chapter 6 for technical guidance on computer-assisted and number-based (e.g. financial) research
- Chapter 7 for advice on analysing your evidence, packaging it, and writing the story.

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FORUM for  
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INVESTIGATIVE  
REPORTERS

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A group of African investigative reporters working across several countries came together and discovered their communities had very similar problems. All were suffering resource exploitation and depletion, spearheaded by big multinational companies. All could pinpoint corrupt officials whose corruption was damaging service delivery and the rule of law. All saw – and in some cases personally experienced – the devastation of diseases such as HIV/Aids, malaria, pneumonia and the problems caused by lack of medicines to treat these.

They decided that there was scope here for transnational investigations where the experience

of several countries brought together could comprehensively explore the issue.

But this would be a massive and complex undertaking. Every aspect, from selecting the topic to carving up the work would need to be tightly controlled, in order to make sure the final project came together properly. The organisation was the Forum for African Investigative Reporters (FAIR) and the resulting transnational investigation, on the availability of medicines, forms the case study for this chapter, on page 3-19. First, we look at the ingredients that go into planning any investigative reporting project, large or small.

## Why plan?

The previous chapter looked at sources of good story ideas. We saw that while ‘tips’ from informed insiders are immensely useful to investigative reporters, they are not the only source of ideas, and that all sources have their own characteristics and limitations.

We also saw that the best story ideas are not necessarily the biggest: the best story ideas are those that go to the heart of a real problem in the community or broader society where reporters work.

But you cannot just move from idea straight to investigation. What you have is just a starting point. Because investigative stories carry a heavy social responsibility – and various legal risks – you must be sure your reporting is as thorough, accurate and comprehensive as possible. Because media work is a team effort, you also need to ensure that there’s good communication with colleagues. And because investigative reporting needs resources, you need to make certain these will be in place. For all these reasons, you need to plan the work that will go into your story.

Where your idea came from will be one of the factors shaping your work plan. If the idea came from your own observations, or from anecdotal evidence, you need to be sure that these individual experiences really represent a broader trend or issue. If the idea came from a tip, you must check the authenticity, reliability and possible motives of the source even before you move forward. We noted these questions in Chapter 2 and you’ll find more on source-checking in the next chapter.

But even if the sources are impeccable and the initial facts irrefutable, there is a first stage you have to go through: turning your story idea into a tightly-focused hypothesis or question that the investigation will prove, disprove or answer. You need to do this because:

-  **It makes the work manageable by giving it boundaries and goals**
-  **It assists in communicating and ‘selling’ the idea to others**
-  **It allows you to budget time and resources more accurately**
-  **It provides criteria of relevance for the evidence you collect**
-  **It lays the foundation for a coherent final story.**

However, a plan is never set in stone. As you’ll see from what follows, it has to have sufficient flexibility to cope with the new information and new directions your investigation will uncover.

# From idea to hypothesis

Very often, you'll find you have the story idea in broad general terms that will allow you to investigate a wide (and probably unmanageable) universe of topics. A good technique for developing and refining this idea is to write your way into it. Try to compose a story summary: a paragraph that describes what the final story will look like. This is a way of opening newsroom minds to the story, and sketching out a range of possible explanations. It also helps you to see whether the story can be treated as local, or whether it might have national, regional or even pan-African implications. For example:

## Local, national or regional?

A lot has been written about the impact of water privatisation on poor people in Africa. X municipality in our country privatised its water services three years ago, and our paper's local office has been receiving many complaints that water is now unaffordable and repair services are unreliable. Now there has been a big outbreak of diarrhoea in the area. Some people are saying the water supply is no longer poor; others are saying that people who cannot afford private water are using other unsafe sources. This story will look at the impact of water privatisation on the community and whether our water is still safe.

This 'big picture' approach is a good basis for further brainstorming. It takes you some way towards focusing the story, but not all the way. It's quite abstract and general – almost academic rather than journalistic. It doesn't define its terms, and raises issues that could take the story in different directions or split it into different themes.

- Is our focus safety or cost? These could be two stories.
- Does 'impact' mean impact only on the poor? Are there problems in middle-class communities too? What about industrial and agricultural water users in the area?
- Do we want to see if the same problems exist in other regions? In other countries around us? Internationally?

(These questions, of course, may form the basis of other, future stories. Don't throw away the results of such brainstorming.)

There are some other, more detailed frameworks that can help you tighten this very general level of description and see exactly what your IJ project should be. The first is the classic formula for focusing a story:

### **What's been happening? So what? (Why should our readers care?)**

**What's been happening?** This puts the focus of your story firmly on the NEWS aspect. There's been a major outbreak of water-born diarrhoea in X, a district where water supply has been privatised. **So what?** Our readers want to know why, and whether their own water supplies and health are also at risk. We need to find out the source of the epidemic. If it can be linked to privatised water, we need to discover that link. And whatever the risk factors, we need to see if they exist – or are likely to be created – anywhere else, and warn our readers.

This framework gives you useful ideas about packaging and presenting your story so it is appealing to readers. But it is still broad, and doesn't indicate the practical activities, precise focus or levels of depth in the investigation.

### **Who did it? How did they do it? What are the consequences? How can it be put right?**

This is an IJ outlining approach that many US journalism textbooks recommend. It clearly sets out the stages of the planned investigation and is appropriate for stories where there are already strong indications that corruption exists. But assuming somebody's guilt before you have looked at all the evidence can be dangerous. It ignores another key IJ question: **conspiracy or chaos?** In other words, is the outbreak the result of deliberate neglect and cost-cutting that risks safety, or the result of slackness, inappropriate systems that don't suit the circumstances, inadequate resources, or a dozen other causes that can't be pinned on one 'villain'. It might be better to ask more neutral opening questions:

### **What went wrong? How did it go wrong? Why did it go wrong? What are the consequences? How can it be put right?**

Thomas Oliver, assistant managing editor of projects (investigative stories) on the American newspaper *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, suggests three questions that bring together news and in-depth, focused planning:

### **What's the news? What's the story? What's the keyword?**

'**What's the news?**' makes us sum up in a sentence what might be going wrong: the epidemic again. '**What's the story?**' focuses on how it can be told – for example, by telling the story of how people find water when they cannot buy it from a private company. Or by going to the water plant and looking at the adequacy of safety checks in the process. And that third question, '**What's the keyword?**' makes the journalist boil down the story idea to a key aspect: perhaps 'affordability' or 'cutting corners'. Going through this process means you have to choose a direction for your investigation. When you have collected all your evidence, you can return to these three questions to direct your writing of the story. Oliver notes: "projects tend to become all-inclusive and sometimes exhaustively cover everything one ever wanted to know about a subject. This is a weakness, not a strength."

A final question to ask is:

### **What's the rationale? (Why are we doing this story?)**

Examining your rationale puts the spotlight on the values that underlie the story. This is the point where aspects such as public interest are examined, and asking and answering this question may put the brake on stories that are simply exposure for the sake of exposure.

Some questions that can flesh out the rationale for a story include:

- Who will benefit/ who may suffer if we do this story?
- Whom does the story challenge or call to account?
- How important is the issue?
- Will the story stir debate around values or behaviour?
- Will the story highlight faulty systems or processes?
- What could the story reveal that wasn't previously known?
- Has the story been covered before or elsewhere?

You may wish to take questions from all these frameworks and weave them together into a personal planning process. That's fine – any framework is useful if it helps you decide:

- Whether you really have a story;
- What that story is; and
- What direction your investigation should take.

## The Daily Dispatch and Frere Hospital

The South African regional paper, *The Daily Dispatch*, based in the Eastern Cape, published an investigation in July 2007 into what they alleged were hundreds of unnecessary infant deaths at a local hospital. The story had huge, national repercussions – including the sacking of the deputy health minister, who was accused of “not being a team player” because, among other things, she had supported the paper's claims of a crisis at the hospital.

Here, deputy editor Andrew Trench, explains how the story began, and was planned:

*“Our special investigation into the deaths of babies at Frere Hospital's maternity unit had a humble beginning. It started as an item some two months ago on our daily news diary as a report about a mother whose baby had died in apparently negligent circumstances at Frere. It was, unfortunately, a story familiar to us. Over the last year, a number of mothers had come to us to tell us of their ordeals and heartbreak after losing a child at the hospital. This time, we decided to hold back on publication for a day. We told our reporters to try and locate in 24 hours as many mothers as possible who had had a similar experience. Within a day we had located at least half a dozen. It was clear to us that we needed to dig further into this phenomenon to really understand what was going on. So we assigned three reporters to do nothing else but to investigate the truth behind these dreadful accounts. For the last two months, Chandre Prince, Ntando Makhubu and Brett Horner have done nothing else. They spoke to former and existing staff, and interviewed parents who had lost their children. They walked the corridors of Frere and dug out documents. They have pieced together the shocking truth which we reveal today...”*

You must turn this understanding of your proposed story into a **hypothesis** (a statement that your research will support or disprove) or a **direct question** that your story can answer. Your hypothesis or question helps you to decide what evidence will be relevant and what will count as proof. They can be short or long, one sentence or two sentences. But they must

-  Be concrete and specific
-  Avoid loose terminology that can be interpreted in different ways
-  Not beg any deeper, underlying questions that should really be your focus. (This is how biased investigations develop. They start in the middle of the process, based on assumptions that the story never tests.)

You might begin by thinking that two hypotheses are possible from our poverty, privatisation and water-borne disease story.

- A** Privatisation has made buying water too expensive for the poor. So they draw water from unhealthy free sources, leading to an epidemic, or;
- B** Private water companies are cutting corners and standards of water safety are falling, leading to an epidemic.

But you need to examine these hypotheses carefully. What assumptions do they rest on – and are we certain of the validity of the assumptions? Both these hypotheses rest on untested assumptions about the source of the epidemic: **A** assumes that it is 'unofficial'

water supplies that are at fault; **B** that the water plant is careless about standards. Actually, you need to look at both possibilities, because both these hypotheses rest on the same deeper question: where did the epidemic start?

A far better hypothesis would therefore be:

**The recent epidemic of water-borne disease in X municipality came either from the privatised water supply or from unofficial water sources.**

And this refined hypothesis allows you to go back to your story outline, and create one that is clearer and more balanced:

**There has just been a major epidemic of water-borne diarrhoea in X municipality, where water is privatised. This story will try to find out how that epidemic started. Was it because people can't afford to buy private water, and are using polluted streams and wells instead? Or was it because the private water company has dropped standards of purity at its plant to cut costs? We will talk to scientists about the causes of the epidemic. We will follow members of a poor community on their daily search for water, and visit the plant with an independent expert to look at their safety standards. When we have established how the disease got started, we will look at what needs to be done to prevent a recurrence.**

## Exercise #1

## Hypotheses

Read and critique the following IJ hypotheses. Note which are adequate as the foundation for a story, and which are not. How could the faulty hypotheses be improved?

- 1** "The immigrants flooding into this country are causing crime."  
Adequate/not adequate

Comments

- 2** "The death penalty should be brought back as it will deter murderers."  
Adequate/not adequate

Comments

- 3** "The restrictions imposed on Aids education by some donor institutions are making it harder to give a complete advice and support service."  
Adequate/not adequate

Comments

**4 “A bribe was given to Cabinet Minister X in 1999, to secure his vote in favour of a multi-million arms sale to our country.”**

Adequate/not adequate

Comments

**5 “Nurses at X hospital in Y province are selling medicines out of the hospital pharmacy for private profit.”**

Adequate/not adequate

Comments

**COMMENTS:**

**1 “The immigrants flooding into this country are causing crime.”**

This is not an adequate hypothesis. It is based on an assumption – that immigrants are flooding into the country – that isn't tested. It does not define what it means by 'immigrants': these could be documented or undocumented migrants, from countries ranging from the UK to Iran. And 'causing crime' is a vague term. Does the hypothesis mean that immigrants actually commit crimes, or change society in such a way that there are more opportunities for crime, or more people tempted to commit crime?

**2 “The death penalty should be brought back as it will deter murderers.”**

Again, this hypothesis has decided the issue before doing any investigation. There are a number of questions here:

- What deters murder?
- Is there one known deterrent or are different types of murder affected by different factors?
- Is the death penalty proven to be a deterrent?
- What could be the other consequences and risks of restoring the death penalty?

Taking all the above into account, would it be socially beneficial to restore the death penalty?

**3 “The restrictions imposed on Aids education by some donor institutions are making it harder to give a complete advice and support service.”**

This is an adequate hypothesis, but it would be stronger if that phrase 'making it harder...' was defined a little more – for example 'by preventing clinics from counseling sex workers or distributing condoms.'

**4 “A bribe was given to Cabinet Minister X in 1999, to secure his vote in favour of a multi-million arms sale to our country.”**

This still needs more work:

- Who gave the bribe?
- How much?
- And are we certain that the Minister would have voted against the arms deal if he had not been bribed?

You need more detail, and to focus the hypothesis on the actions of the Minister.

**5 “Nurses at X hospital in Y province are selling medicines out of the hospital pharmacy for private profit.”**

This is an adequate hypothesis. It defines the investigation, and the target.

# Making your research plan

Once you have developed a hypothesis, you need to create a research plan. This involves the following steps, which we'll look at in order:

- Listing likely sources
- Developing criteria of adequacy and proof
- Deciding on a methodology
- Creating a timeline
- Developing an outline budget

## Planning the investigation: **listing the sources**

Chapter 4 looks in detail at how you deal with sources and Chapter 5 at interviewing sources. This section explains the range of sources you may use, and the strengths and weaknesses of each.

There are two main types of sources: primary and secondary.

### 1 Primary sources

These are those that form direct, specific evidence or relate direct experience. For example, a patient who was sold drugs through the hospital back door by a nurse is a primary source about that experience – but not about what nurses are doing behind the scenes. So is the foreman at the water plant who was told to do purity checks once a month instead of once a week. So is the bank statement of a cabinet minister, clearly showing a payment from an international arms company. Primary sources – so long as you have verified them and made sure they are authentic – are the most valuable, because they provide direct proof of something. They are also, often, the hardest to find. People with relevant experiences may be reluctant to go on the record for fear of being victimised, and documents such as bank statements or hospital records may be kept confidential or even governed by privacy laws. The next chapter explains how to tackle these practical and ethical challenges.

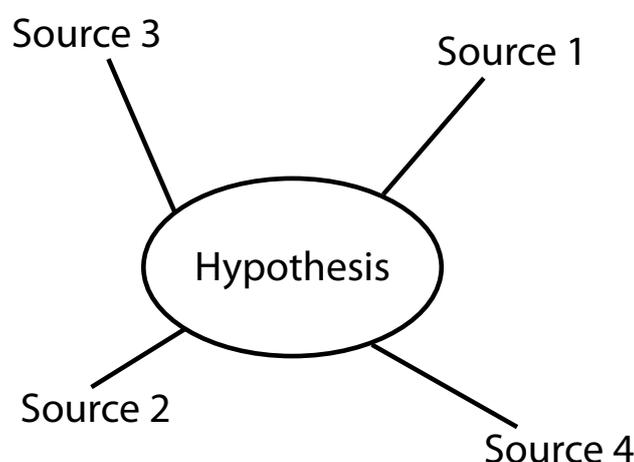
### 2 Secondary sources

These sources relate information at one remove. All published materials, including organisational reports, and second-hand accounts ("I had a friend who...") are secondary sources. Secondary sources are valuable, particularly for establishing context and background, helping to explain issues, and providing leads to good contacts, but any evidence you draw from them should be checked and verified, and the credentials of the author also checked.

### Mind-mapping

You need to make an advance list of the sources you will use to obtain both evidence and background. A good way to do this is to create a 'mind-map'.

Take a large sheet of paper and write your hypothesis in the middle. Then begin to draw 'branches' related to the different parts of the hypothesis. On these branches, list possible sources.



### Source material

There are three types of source material: human, paper and digital (web).

### a Human sources

Human sources fall into many categories: direct role players, eyewitnesses, experts and interested parties, eager and reluctant. Be sure you understand the status, credentials and motivations of the people you approach. If you are working on the water privatisation story, the representatives of anti-privatisation organisations will be able to provide a great deal of information. But that information will be informed by a particular position: you need to seek other viewpoints, too. If you are speaking to people from a community, be sure your selection of voices is representative: women, men, young, old and from the various income and interest groups. Human voices give your story authenticity and make it come alive. Try never to base a story on paper or electronic sources alone.

### b Paper sources

These can include books, newspapers and magazines, official records and business documents such as contracts and bank statements. Very often it is in the paper sources that you will find the proof you are seeking. We call this 'following the paper trail.' Veteran American investigative reporter Bill Gaines credits his ability to research documents with his success. "I was able to get stories that other people missed because I went to the places where you could find the documents." And very often, Gaines found what he was seeking in public documents, not by raiding secret files. He found the home of a key source by searching property records, and nailed a company for corruption because of something they had written when filing a business registration.

Investigative journalists in Africa face problems when seeking paper evidence: very often it does not exist, or public records are disordered and hard to search, or there are no freedom of information laws allowing the media to make paper searches. Even in South Africa, which has freedom of information laws in place, the attitude of officials can create obstacles. A 2003 study done by the Open Society Institute ranked South Africa bottom out of five newly-democratised nations in providing access to information. Follow-up research showed that one big problem was the attitude and lack of capacity of officials, who often stalled because they thought information was going to be 'used against the government'.

Nevertheless, in a modern society, everybody leaves a paper trail. The Internews handbook for Cambodian investigative journalists gives the following example:

#### Everybody leaves a paper trail in a modern society

- At birth, the hospital produces a *birth certificate*
- When you begin your education, you are registered (enrolled) at school and during your school years other records are produced including *attendance and grade (marks) reports*
- If you break your leg playing football and go to hospital you will have a *medical record*
- If you are prosecuted for breaking the law you will have a *criminal record*; if you are involved in a civil suit, other *legal documents* may be filed in court
- If you get married, the courts will issue a *marriage licence*
- If you buy a home, there will be *sale and/or bond (home loan) documents*
- If you earn enough to pay taxes, *tax return and payment documents* will be kept
- If you buy anything, you will be issued a *receipt* detailing what you bought, where, and often how you paid
- When you die, there will be an official *death certificate*.

The documents may have different titles in your country, but what this example illustrates is that everybody, however humble, is documented somewhere. One important piece of initial research in an investigative story is to discover what documents are used and required in the field you are investigating – where and how they are stored, and how they can be accessed. If advance permissions have to be sought, you need to do this early in your research, since official permits can take a very long time to come through. Don't overlook the obvious paper sources: directories and phone books.

### c Digital sources

Digital sources include information on the web and digitally stored records. Searching for these requires skill and some technical expertise, and is covered in detail in Chapter 6. The amount of information available on the web is dazzling but, as with any other source, you need to check who the provider is, and their credentials and possible motives. Remember, the web is relatively uncontrolled: almost anybody with access can post almost anything, including complete fabrications. In addition, web information often stays in circulation for a long time; sometimes long after it has become outdated. Always check the most recent sources first.

### d A new tool: 'crowd-sourcing'

This combines human and digital sources. Newspapers that have a web presence or good phone links are beginning to draw readers into investigative work. They might report a story like the one above, and then invite readers to add to it. When the US *Fort Myers News-Press* did this on a story about over-billing for local utilities, they were astounded by the response. Experts among their readership sent them analyses of balance sheets and technical papers, and there were thousands of phone calls and e-mails. Read the full story on the newspaper's website (<http://www.news-press.com/apps/pbcs.dll/frontpage>).

**Exercise #2****Approaching sources**

**What are the pros and cons of the following approaches to sources?**

- A** "I am investigating the impact of Chinese investment in my country. I plan to do many interviews with the employees of Chinese-owned factories. I know this will give me primary evidence of how Chinese investors exploit local workers."

Comments

- B** "I am investigating how poverty in my country has raised the cost of *lobola* (bride-price). I plan to start with a couple whose marriage has been made impossible because the young man cannot afford the price demanded by his fiancée's parents. I will talk to older married couples, traditional elders, pastors, marriage officers and a sociologist at the University to try and create a timeline of how the cost of marriage has risen over the past 10 years. Then I'll try to correlate this with other economic data, to see if I can prove that worsening family poverty is making parents more demanding. But I will also talk to parents, to get their viewpoint, so that the story is not just an attack on 'greedy' parents."

Comments

- C** "I'm investigating the links between multinational land ownership in my country and changing agricultural practices. It seems as if the foreign food companies put pressure on peasants to grow only crops for export. There is a lot of stuff on the web on this, from all over the world. All I need to do here is a couple of local interviews to confirm it's happening here too."

Comments

## COMMENTS

**A** "I am investigating the impact of Chinese investment in my country. I plan to do many interviews with the employees of Chinese-owned factories. I know this will give me primary evidence of how Chinese investors exploit local workers."

*There are too few sources here, and the angle of the questions does not cover the full scope of the investigation. In fact, it begs several questions, including how dominant Chinese investment is, whether it is limited to factory ownership, and whether Chinese factory owners are uniquely harsh with their employees. There is no attempt to contextualise, and this is an investigation that could end up simply reinforcing one narrow prejudice.*

**B** "I am investigating how poverty in my country has raised the cost of *lobola* (bride-price). I plan to start with a couple whose marriage has been made impossible because the young man cannot afford the price demanded by his fiancée's parents. I will talk to older married couples, traditional elders, pastors, marriage officers and a sociologist at the University to try and create a timeline of how this cost of marriage has risen over the past 10 years. Then I'll try to correlate this with other economic data, to see if I can prove that worsening family poverty is making parents more demanding. But I will also talk to parents, to get their viewpoint, so that the story is not just an attack on 'greedy' parents."

*This is a good selection of sources: human and documentary, with a clear attempt to balance different types of evidence.*

**C** "I'm investigating the links between multinational land ownership in my country and changing agricultural practices. It seems as if the foreign food companies put pressure on peasants to grow only crops for export. There is a lot of stuff on the web on this, from all over the world. All I need to do here is a couple of local farmer interviews to confirm it's happening here too."

*No, this is not 'all you need to do'. At best the web information only provides you with context and you cannot, in any case, accept it all without some verifying procedures. You need documentary context information about your own country too: perhaps surveys of farming patterns over a few years. You need to relate these to patterns of land ownership. And 'a couple' of farmer interviews may add voices and colour but, alone, they are far too few to provide any evidence about trends and patterns, and may be simply anecdotal.*

## Planning the investigation: **criteria of adequacy of proof**

Once you have listed likely sources for the evidence you need, you need to decide what will count as proof for your hypothesis, or an adequate answer for your question. Will it be enough to prove that the Cabinet Minister received a bribe and did, in fact, vote for the arms deal? Or do you need to look at his views on the arms trade, and whether his position shifted after he received the bribe? Will it be enough to prove that the water plant now does fewer quality checks than it used to, or do you also need to find out what the consequences of fewer checks were? Brant Houston reminds us that the best investigative reporters do not only assemble evidence that supports their hypothesis, but also evidence that contradicts it. For instance, a government official who is already very rich may be unlikely to waste his time doing a service for someone who offers him a US\$10,000 bribe. Considering contradictory evidence is the best way to avoid the 'wishful thinking' trap.

Ask yourself:

- What will count as complete evidence?
- What will count as reliable evidence? (How many sources? What types of sources?)
- What could invalidate/disprove my evidence? Can I deal with this during my research?
- Which pieces of evidence will require the most careful and detailed checking?

**Be careful with the notion of 'proof.'** Sometimes, it will be possible to prove a hypothesis completely. Sometimes you may be able to assemble enough evidence only to make it probable your hypothesis is correct. This is very similar to the situation in law where criminal charges require proof 'beyond reasonable doubt' and civil charges only require a 'balance of probabilities' weighed towards one side of a case. (Note that even criminal cases do not require proof 'beyond ALL doubt' – because this is almost impossible to construct!) Find more on proof in Chapter 7.

So long as your final story makes it clear whether you are presenting proof or probability, you may still have a story, even without watertight proof. But you will need to be very careful how you write it, and we discuss this too in Chapter 7.

Type of source	Useful for	Strengths	Possible problems
Human	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Giving life and authenticity to a story</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviewing does not require hi-tech resources</li> <li>• Accounts of first-hand experience make a story convincing – primary sources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People have biases, prejudices etc. – and may lie.</li> <li>• May only provide anecdotal evidence</li> <li>• Need to ensure your interviewees are representative</li> <li>• People may be victimised for talking to the press – how will you protect them?</li> </ul>
Paper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing hard evidence</li> <li>• Providing history and context</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secondary sources broaden background research beyond what you can tackle yourself</li> <li>• Primary documentary sources (e.g. bank records) are 'on-the-record' and reliable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May be protected by privacy laws, censorship etc.</li> <li>• Hard or slow to access</li> <li>• May need specialist knowledge to understand e.g. financial documents</li> <li>• Can produce a 'dead' or over-academic story with no live voices</li> <li>• Beware of using secondary sources only</li> </ul>
Digital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can do all of the above, depending on what's being retrieved</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can 'do it all' from your computer, including accessing sound and video</li> <li>• Information is posted fast and from a huge range of national and international sources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can produce a dead story</li> <li>• Needs electricity, technical skill and network access</li> <li>• Must have good verification procedures – beware of being misled or framed</li> </ul>

## Planning the investigation: methodology

We tend to associate this term with academic activities, but it simply means: how will I do the research? From the range of methods available, you need to plan the best mix of documentary research, live interviews, site visits and observation, and other approaches. You need to decide which sources to use, how much time to devote to each, what cross-checking procedures will be needed, and what stages the work will go through.

What you're looking for is evidence that will substantiate (add weight to) your hypothesis.

You can do this **indirectly** by building up the picture of a context, background, history or climate in which certain things are more likely to have happened. Journalism lecturer Derek Forbes says of this process: "Like a jigsaw puzzle, this section of your planning works best if you begin with the surrounding details before working on the image at the centre."

But most powerfully, you do it **directly**, by getting relevant evidence from your sources.

### Always have a Plan B

An important part of methodology planning is thinking ahead to the possible **obstacles** you may encounter. Supposing you can't obtain access to a particular document, or a key source won't talk to you? What's your Plan B? How can you put together alternative evidence that will provide support or proof of equal weight?

And remember that methodology should take teamworking into account. Will you need to work with experts? A photographer? A lawyer? How will you build these cooperative processes in, so that they are allowed enough time to produce results?

## Planning the investigation: constructing a timeline

You need to take decisions about methodology before you construct your timeline for the investigation and your budget. The timeline is your estimate of how long the investigation will take: how many hours you will spend in archives, or interviewing, or on the web, or writing.

As well as the time consumed by various tasks, two other important factors in constructing the timeline are deadlines and competition. You need to be aware of publication deadlines. If the story has already been commissioned or diarised, work backwards from the submission deadline, and try to bring the time you will need into line with the time you actually have. If you can't – negotiate. If, on the other hand, you are pitching the story to an editor, work forwards from your starting point, so that your pitch (see below) indicates which edition the story will be ready for. Again, negotiation is usually part of this process – but if you

have worked on a timeline you will be able to make rational arguments for the time you need, rather than simply sounding like an inefficient, slow reporter.

If the story concerns a 'hot' topic of public concern, it is also possible that other competitor media are also chasing it. If you know this, it may be necessary to speed up your work to publish first. Investigative reporting should not be rushed or skimmed: that way lie defamation suits. But with a timeline in front of you, you will be able to decide the earliest point at which something coherent and substantial can be published, even if it is not yet the complete investigation.

## Planning the investigation: **constructing a budget**

The other important estimate a project plan needs is a budget. How much will the investigation consume in money and resources? Elements to consider when putting your budget together include:

- Travel (mileage/petrol/transport fares)
- Accommodation and meals (Will you need to spend time away from your office? Will you need to provide modest hospitality for sources?)
- Fees for expert advisers, translators, transcribers or service providers
- Fees for legal advice
- Fees for conducting archive or record searches or getting notarised copies of documents
- Communication costs (phone, fax, internet)
- Photographic costs
- Photocopying

### Exercise #3

### Budgeting

**Budgeting raises one important ethical question: should you expect to pay sources, or pay bribes to get access to information? We'll consider an overall approach to making ethical decisions in Chapter 8, but stop for a moment here and think about your own position on this issue.**

Most journalists agree that it is not a good idea to pay sources. The lure of payment can encourage lies and exaggeration; the fact of payment can be used later to retract or discredit the evidence: "I only said it because they offered me money." And the fact that you are prepared to pay for stories does not reflect well on your paper's ethics or your own investigative skills.

Sometimes, in exceptional circumstances, a paper may compensate a source for working time lost giving an interview, or for travel or other costs. But even here it is important that both parties are clear what the payment is for, and to pay a low, 'normal' rate for the expense in question. (Remind sources that they are not, in fact, doing you or your paper a personal favour by providing information: they are helping the affected community or society at large).

Bribing an official to gain access is equally disreputable. But in some communities, officials have developed a culture of demanding small favours ('dash', 'cool-drink') for doing anything – including opening their offices in the morning! In this climate, you may be unable to work at all without oiling the wheels of officialdom. Yet you risk compromising your whole investigation through these trivial payments. However small and routine they are, they will still be 'bribes' if the official reveals to his bosses or rival media that you made them. You need a decision-making process for dealing with these kinds of demands: think each one through in relation to its circumstances. Could you justify it (most importantly, to your readers) if challenged later? It is always better to try and secure co-operation by explaining the importance of your work and building allies.

#### **Supposing your paper cannot afford the investigation?**

For many small media in Africa, budgets are tight. The kind of investment major US papers make in investigative projects would be enough to keep the whole newspaper running for a year. In these circumstances, you need to be creative about identifying other sources of support. A good starting point is international donor organisations. Sometimes they have areas of interest that coincide with your investigation. FAIR runs an (unfortunately still rather small) grant fund for investigative journalism projects: check it out on the FAIR website. In South Africa, the Taco Kuiper Fund awards research grants to deserving local investigative journalists.

#### **Funding investigative journalism?**

A freelance journalist in the DRC (\* who prefers to remain anonymous) was interested in the operations of major logging companies. He did not have the resources to conduct the investigation, and some newspapers he approached were nervous about offending 'big people' by looking at the logging industry. Eventually, he found a European donor

### Funding investigative journalism? (cont.)

organisation with an interest in resource exploitation more generally – and also in training journalists. He was able to secure a research grant from the organisation by broadening the focus of his research slightly and also by developing a methodology that involved mentoring other journalists with whom he could co-operate.

There are dangers in this approach. It's important to guard your freedom of operation, and maintain the priorities and focus that drew you to the investigation in the first place. Otherwise you may find yourself serving someone else's priorities – or being accused of doing so when your investigation breaks. Make sure that whatever contract you sign with a donor has safeguards for your own 'editorial independence.'

## Pitching your investigative project

If your publication or station has assigned the story, all the planning we have just described is the first stage of your work process. But if you are a freelance journalist, the planning provides the information you need to create a really convincing pitch for an editor.

A pitch is a short presentation that explains what the story is about and attempts to persuade the editor to support and run it. It needs to contain the following elements:

- Your revised story outline
- Why the story is right for this particular paper/readership
- Brief account of approach and methodology
- Timeline
- Budget.

Some papers will also expect you to be able to contribute to a discussion of how the paper should present the story – pictures, graphics, etc. – while others leave such issues to editors and designers.

### Exercise #4

### Pitches

**Look at the two pitches below. Do you find them convincing? If you do not, how could they be improved?**

**A** "An awful lot of people are talking about how driving standards in this country are dropping and that this is because there's corruption in issuing licenses. I talked to a guy who says he bought his license. I reckon if I hang about at the licensing office I can see what's going on, and maybe I could pretend to have a bribe to offer. If we could get a hidden camera that would be good. I can probably do it all in a week or so."

**B** "A friend's brother recently had a very bad experience at a circumcision school. The traditional surgeon didn't look after people, and the boy ended up in hospital due to starvation and exposure. And it turns out the organiser of the school was not licensed in any way. I think this would be a good story for our paper, because it's the season for circumcision and people here are tradition-minded. They need to be alerted to the dangers. If I start with this boy's story, I can then look at the theme of how unlicensed initiation schools are dangerous and actually against both traditional custom and the law. I'll talk to traditional, medical and legal authorities, and look at hospital records to get some figures on how big the problem is. I'll need to take a trip out to a traditional village to meet returning initiates from a recognised school – that'll just cost petrol because I can stay with my aunt there. I think I can have the story done in about a week."

**Exercise #4 (cont.)****Pitches****COMMENTS**

**B** *is almost a model pitch. It's short – but not so short that it omits vital information. The editor has a clear idea of the story's hypothesis, the sources, methodology, cost and timeline, as well as a rationale for the story.*

**A** *on the other hand, is a shoddy job. It moves from anecdotal evidence to a plan for 'going underground' with no verification checks, and no reference to any ethical considerations. The timeline sounds like guesswork. This reporter needs to go back, refine his hypothesis and work out a step-by-step plan for getting evidence:*

- that driving standards are falling
- that irregularly-licensed drivers are involved in many accidents
- that these irregularly-licensed drivers obtained their documents through bribery.

If this context can be firmly established, then it may be worthwhile setting up a 'sting' in an office that has been named as involved in corruption. But the ethics of doing this still need to be considered, as well as whether there are other, open ways of getting equally useful information.

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## How does it work in practice?

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**Planning the investigation:**

### doing good research on deadline

(Here we follow an imaginary investigation from start to publication, taking you through the decision-making processes and reporting activities at each stage.)

### **READ** Where do you start? What's your strategy?

#### **respond**

You work for a weekly investigative paper. Your editor calls you into his office. "I've just had a phone call," he tells you. "An NGO in the rural area says farm workers are being evicted by big agricultural companies, but are afraid to talk about it. The provincial government won't do anything, they say. This sounds like our kind of story; we can put pressure on the authorities to stop the evictions. Here's the name of our informant. Get on it. I want this for page 3 next week..." You have a week. Where do you start? Take a few minutes to plan your strategy. **Make notes before you read on.**

## Planning the investigation: **the basics of strategy**

Maybe you suggested doing some reading on land rights or the company involved. Both of these are good ideas – but an investigative strategy always needs to be based on:

- A clear understanding of what needs doing
- Balanced with a realistic recognition of the resources – including time – you have available
- And a hypothesis your research can substantiate or disprove.

Your editor has given you the working hypothesis here:

**HYPOTHESIS:** “Big agricultural companies are evicting and intimidating farm workers and the provincial government won’t help.”

## Planning the investigation: **the basics of research and interviewing**

Realistically, you don’t have the time to become an expert on all aspects of land rights and problems. It can be very intimidating if you believe that a journalist needs to know everything. In fact, a good journalist needs a different skill: knowing how to find out anything. So Stage 1 needs you to identify the best resources to help you. You need to find people who are expert in land and land rights.

First, obviously, you should talk to the initial caller to get more information on the story. This person works for an organisation in the area – so you have to consider that he or she may be biased. Many people ring up newspapers because they have an ‘axe to grind’.

**Take a few minutes to think about the advantages and disadvantages of using biased sources:**

### What about biased sources?

Biased sources can be very useful. They often have detailed inside knowledge, and can give you strong questions to ask the opposing side. But you need to remember that the information comes from one side of the case; it will need cross-checking. And representatives of organisations are often speaking on behalf of much larger groups of people; when they summarise group views, they may organise and edit community opinions in ways that change or exclude important aspects – sometimes quite unintentionally.

So you need to think about what the bias might be and read, interview and research widely, to put the informant’s statements in context.

Having got more detail from the initial informant, you can use the notes of that conversation to start planning your first lines of investigation.

- Start with your personal contacts, or fellow journalists dealing with the relevant rural area, land, labour (farm workers), environment and agri-business. Among other sources you should phone are university departments and libraries (including your own paper’s archive). Work outward from the sources you know to identify the sources you don’t yet know.
- Next, you should hit the phones. The phone book is your most important reference book: if all else fails, work through every entry with the relevant surname or keyword until you find the right person. Ring every relevant source you can think of. If you can’t think of any, use the phone book (or, these days, the web) to trace organisations with “land” in their names.
- Your research may produce complex or even contradictory results about who the best sources are. So it’s always useful to use a ‘two-source’ principle even for identifying sources. Check them more than once: via the phone book and Google; via Google and your colleague who knows the field. More on these techniques in Chapter 6.

Ask these contacts:

- Do you deal with /carry information on...?
- Who is the relevant person in your organisation to tell me about...?
- Do you know of anything (reports, articles, books) that’s been published about...?
- Can you suggest someone else it would be useful to talk to...?

Always take notes of these conversations. Get contact details to add to your contacts book for future use. Build up a ‘contacts tree’ using the ‘working outwards’ strategy until you find the people you need.

Notice we haven’t mentioned government sources yet. You do, of course, need to get official views. But you need to be well-informed to ask useful questions, so this first stage of investigation may not be the best time to do a formal official interview. Also,

you may waste too much time setting up an interview with someone who – when you’ve refined your research – may not even be the right person! If an official will talk to you off the record or informally, that’s best at this stage. You can always go back formally to get confirmation.

### Respect the ground rules of informal conversations with sources!

Sometimes either interviewer or interviewee makes the wrong assumptions about the status of ‘informal’ interviews, and this can lead to problems later. So if there is any possibility of misunderstanding, it’s best to ask: “Are we on or off the record here?”

- ‘On the record’ means you can use everything you’re told.
- ‘Off the record’ means you can use the information, but not in a way that allows the source to be identified.
- ‘Background only’ means don’t use this at all; it’s just to help you understand the context.

If you want to confirm off-the-record or background only information, take it to someone else and (without revealing your source), ask them if such-and-such might be true and if they’ll confirm it on the record. You must tell your source that you will be trying to verify their information. And when you do the verification check, keep it sensitive and very low-key. There may be real danger for your source in being identified: getting sacked, sued, deported, arrested or even killed.

These ‘on/off the record’ conventions aren’t laws, they’re only understandings between journalists and sources. But you may be required to disclose your methods, if an investigative story becomes controversial. And if you breach these conventions, you will – at best – very likely lose your sources and get a reputation for sleazy behaviour. At worst, your source could suffer real harm. Find more on these issues in Chapters 5 and 8.

### What next?

Your phone calls should have given you further names and contacts to follow, plus lists of reference material. This may include ‘grey’ material – material which is widely circulated but which may not have been formally published (e.g. studies commissioned from private organisations, academic dissertations) or which may be officially confidential.

You have located eight possible phone contacts who may be prepared to talk to you. One of them sounds like the main expert on rural land rights in the area, but does not respond to messages. You feel you’re really stalled until she gets back to you.

## READ

### How would you spend your day?

#### respond

From the web and your own paper’s archives, you have also found a dozen newspaper articles on farm worker evictions, two NGO case studies on landholdings in the rural area concerned, and a post-graduate dissertation on national land law reform. Tomorrow, you travel out to the countryside with a photographer. How should you spend today? **Take a few minutes to note your answer before you read on:**

You might feel that you should get through as much as you can of the reading. But this isn’t always the best strategy. Reading is slow and – especially if you’re doing internet research – you may have identified not a few, but a few hundred relevant references. You could easily spend the whole night reading and still not finish, or have time to make sense out of what you have read.

Once you understand the issue better, much of the reading you've located may be irrelevant. At this early stage, skim-read only the broad, background stuff – in this case, probably the newspaper articles. Make sure your web-search has not been too wide (putting "..." around the key words will give you only those articles that include them all). Bookmark any web references that look interesting, so you don't have to spend time later searching for them again.

Don't waste time on that elusive expert. Chase up as many of the people on your phone list as you can. And go back to the people you first talked to with any related questions you've thought of.

At this stage, you need to search **broad** rather than **deep**.

- Make a mini-timetable in advance, working backwards from your deadline. Decide how important each segment of the research is, and how much time you can afford to spend on it. Never waste extra time chasing up just one elusive person, document or figure – find another way to get what you need, or some other information that will do instead.
- Plan your questions for the live and follow-up phone interviews based on what you are finding out. As new inputs land, decide in more detail what might be going on, what is being alleged, and who might be the culprits. You should be in a position to replace general, abstract terms like "corruption" or "injustice" with concrete, specific, allegations that X did or did not do Y to Z.
- And begin putting yourself in the shoes of the people you are talking to. What might their agendas, motives, hopes and fears be? This way you can get a perspective on what they tell you.

You've skimmed the basic reading and had a number of very interesting phone interviews. And you've visited the district and seen the situation for yourself. You've found out the following:

- The evictions are taking place only in one district. And the four families concerned have actually been very open in talking about their problems. In one community newspaper article, they blamed a district civil servant, Job Nkomo, for being lazy and not responding to their complaints. They repeated this when you spoke to them.
- The commercial farming company concerned HAS been buying up land and trying to move small farmers off it. But it has been using legal process and following the rules. Your law expert says the company has not broken any rules. And elsewhere in the province, there are at least a dozen cases on record of evictions being successfully contested. The provincial government has been very energetic in publicising land rights, and there are posters up almost everywhere – although you didn't see any in the district where the evictions are happening.
- The NGO that initiated the complaint was only established three months ago and is still at the stage of securing funding for itself. Apart from establishing a small office, advocacy for the evicted families is the only activity it has undertaken so far. So maybe its agenda, while sincere, has elements of wanting to make a reputation for itself..?

Remembering your brief ("This sounds like our kind of story; we can put pressure on the authorities to stop the evictions") can you now go ahead with the story? And what should your next steps be? Take a few minutes to decide on your answer before you read on:

- Yes, there is still a story there. But it's a different story: one about a small area that has been left behind by provincial land rights work – possibly because of a grossly negligent district official. The NGO's agenda is to establish itself as a representative of the community, but its input is not very relevant; there are better quotes from the local people themselves. You can even see the new headline in your imagination: "The land the law forgot".
- Your hypothesis has changed. Never be afraid to redefine your story in the light of new information! Flexibility is one of the most important principles in doing a good investigation. Don't cling rigidly to your original idea and try to force the new facts to fit.

## Planning the investigation:

## from research to writing – the next steps

Tell your editor what's happening. She may need to re-plan space or place this different story on another page. You **MUST** do this as early as you can.

Now is the time to deepen your research and discard what's irrelevant. Most of the reading can probably go back on the shelves, except anything dealing with that particular district. And your notes on the broad situation of the province may no longer be useful.

**It hurts to discard work you've done. But you must. File your old notes: they may prove useful for some future story.**

Now you can look for meaningful official comment.

- Face Mr Nkomo with the accusations against him. Ask the provincial (and/or national) land departments whether their policies should be applied everywhere, and how they feel about areas the new law hasn't touched.
- You will, however, also need to go back to the most interesting contacts and references to find out if there is anything in the history of that district which has led to it being so neglected, and to ask other relevant questions.
- What you're looking for is a sequence of events and/or chain of evidence that links the district official's inaction to the evictions of the four families. It helps if you can find a rule that has been broken or an action that is required but was not taken. Again, you need concrete, specific evidence to replace the abstract accusations like 'laziness' that people have laid against Mr Nkomo. And

be sure to deepen your understanding of Nkomo and his actions if he is to be your focus. You don't want a defamation suit – nor do you want to omit any aspects of his misconduct.

- Flag the risk of defamation with your editor. She may need to pass the finished story to a lawyer for advice.
- Forget anything you can't verify. Look for conflicting points in your notes – can they be reconciled? And what do your 'biased' sources have to say about it all? Try to get on-record comments. Check, cross-check and check again.

It's very rare to find absolute proof of something – the 'smoking gun', as it is called. That is what you are looking for: the documentary proof Nkomo did not respond to an appeal: for example, a memo from him saying the problem did not exist. But

- you may not have the time or resources to find this (Remember, this is now a smaller story of local government neglect, not a big story about multinational agribusiness. It is still worthwhile, but may not be accorded the same resources.)
  - finding it may require steps (like searching an office) that are illegal and/or ethically unacceptable.
  - it may not exist!
- You can build up almost as convincing a case by sheer weight of evidence: a detailed time-line, for example, of what happened, what should have been done, and Nkomo's failure to communicate, supported at each stage by facts and relevant comments from role players and experts.

### Now you can start to write...

We can see here the basic stages of investigation:

1. Define the initial question
2. Build up contacts
3. Do broad research
4. Look again at the question. Redefine or completely re-cast it if the facts have revealed a different angle or story
5. Discard irrelevant material
6. Do narrow, deep research (including back-tracking)
7. Plan and write the story.

The two question-defining stages are crucial. A story doesn't exist until a subject area has been given angle and focus. And if you're failing to come up with answers, it may be because you're asking inappropriate questions.

### Planning the investigation:

## researching on very short time

We've looked at the example of an extensive story done over a few days so that we can focus on every stage of the process in detail. But what happens when you are trying to research two stories in half a day before the deadline for a daily paper? Exactly the same principles hold good – that's why we looked at a one-week example.

The temptation is to cut the planning time, and dive straight into the research. That's a mistake. Good research – whatever your timeframe – depends on good planning. That's particularly true when your time limits you to fewer sources and fewer questions – you have to make sure that you use your time wisely; asking the right questions of the right sources. When you're working to a tight timeframe, the stages of the research don't change:

- ✓ Define what you're looking for. Spend more time here, sorting out story priorities, so that if you only have time for a little research, it will be relevant. Check with your editor how long the story should be, and what angle the paper is seeking.
- ✓ Research broadly. You may have to settle for one Internet-sourced overview and contacts from two, rather than a dozen, phone calls. But it's still vital that you check you have a story, and that it's what you think it is.
- ✓ Redefine. Does your angle still hold? Then start writing at this stage. Use the research narrow stage simply to confirm key facts. And remember two important points:

**Some stories don't need deep investigative research** – make sure the story is worth the effort (and consult). They simply need accurate fact collection and clear writing. This is particularly true for those sections of the paper that still carry fairly short, 'hard' stories. Even here, you need to make sure the story is valid and worthwhile, but having done that, you can go ahead and write it.

**And some stories are simply too important and/or complex to be tackled in two hours.** Don't be afraid to make your case to your editor if you believe your story needs more time and research. But don't use this argument to cover up work not done. You'll need to have gone through the early investigative stages and have solid facts and reasons if you want more time. And there may be scope for a compromise, where you deliver breaking facts on time, but plan for a longer background or context piece later in the week.

# Case studies

Case  
study #1

## FAIR transnational investigation:

### *FAIR Transnational Investigation Case Study on the availability of medicines in Africa*

#### **What FAIR set out to do**

Transnational Investigations have been conducted successfully by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) and also by networks of journalists in South America and the Balkan. Such investigations have yielded impressive results, from identifying global arms traders to highlighting problems with the privatisation of water supply.

FAIR recognised from its inception that Transnational Investigations would be important to conduct in Africa. International forces, such as multinationals, international financial institutions, development aid, and international crime impact on all countries on this continent. Within Africa itself, countries share similar problems, from conflict and civil war to poverty and weak state infrastructures. FAIR's view therefore is that African issues should, when and where possible, be investigated in a transnational way, with a broader than local focus and scope. A well-conducted and well-publicised 'TI' would help to highlight an important issue, that impacted on the whole of Africa, on the international agenda. FAIR saw it as its role to pioneer such a project.

#### **Getting the project going**

It took FAIR up to 2007 to find funding for its first Transnational Investigation. By then, it had worked out a framework for an international team-based operation and chosen a subject that answered to two criteria: it had to be truly international (and therefore of interest to international donors) and it would have to be of interest to the participating African media audiences. This subject was 'The pharmaceutical industry and lack of access to medication in Africa'.

## **Transnational Investigation framework**

- 1 Definition of Transnational Investigation goals, inputs, outputs
- 2 Process:
  - Initiation stage: team, editor, subject, guidelines in place
  - Production stage: team works closely with editor
  - Closure: work is produced, data are stored
- 3 Work methodologies: maximum effort combined with maximum peer mentoring
- 4 Ethical monitoring procedure: in relation to sources and audience and within the team itself
- 5 Publication strategy: both internationally and vis a vis African media houses

## **On budgeting**

Combining goals, inputs and outputs will be the core of your proposal. A 'tasty' subject choice will also help. Donors who want to fund investigative projects will likely fund a project that answers to all the relevant criteria (see below under Subject Choice), as long as your methodology is included in the proposal and is realistic. However, beware of donors who push towards their own priority issues – if they aren't the same as your own – and don't waste your time on

donors you know won't support you.

**Heads that need to be budgeted for are:**

- An initial workshop where the whole team can exercise through the subject matter and emerge with a clear to-do list
- A project manager's fee (the central project manager is an extremely important element; it is this person who has to ensure sufficient and relevant input from all team members AND put it all together or there will be no dossier!)
- The designing of a format in which the process to follow is clearly sketched out (when and how do the team members liaise together, when and how and how often does the project manager liaise, what is the editing, revising, feedback and correcting process at every stage of incoming results, how to troubleshoot when necessary input does not materialise, how to get everybody to agree on final results; also, the relationship and decision-making process between the project manager and the organisation's leadership needs to be spelled out; contracts need to be signed between the project manager and the organisation's leadership, and also between the latter and the team members)
- Communication
- Some expenses for team members and expenses for the project manager (it is important to be clear on what is going to be refunded and what not: the issue of paying sources for documents is likely to come up here)
- A field trip (preferably two, one at the start and one just before the end) by the project manager to the teams in each participating country, in order to revise/finalise the hypothesis (as per investigative process) and ensure the requests made from the teams are realistic as well as detailed
- Grammatical and spelling edit, proofreading, lay out, printing
- Postage.

## On subject choice

**This must be:**

- Collectively arrived at
- Newsworthy
- Feasible (you need to have a fairly good idea of how and where information can be found on this subject)
- Relevant to both African and international public (you want to make headlines in the *New York Times* and attract western donors for your next project – but relevance to the African public is even more important as per your journalists' mission of serving your audience; so beware of fashionable donor issues that might not interest the people in your own town)
- Of interest to the journalists who will work on it, to create eagerness and commitment – it mustn't be a chore (this is more likely if point 4 is met; journalists will most likely feel strongly about an issue their community/audience feels strongly about, too).

We had a discussion on the FAIR listserv and at a special Board meeting where it became abundantly clear that lack of access to medication was such an issue.

## On work progress

- The project manager engages in a coherence-exercise. A workshop is held in which all team members and the project manager thoroughly exercise through the subject matter. Do we all understand the ins and outs of, and questions around this issue? How will we go about this? Revisiting good IJ practice in this workshop is crucial, it will determine the quality of the end result. Best practice and ethics will be a part of this discussion too. Will we eavesdrop, go undercover, pay for documents if needed, or not? And what is our personal interest in this matter as members of the public? An initial working hypothesis is developed and to-do lists are drawn up of required background information and sources. Contracts are signed between team members and organisation.

- In a field trip, - to be made a few weeks after the team members have started -, the project manager monitors the situation on the ground in each participating country and takes account of the challenges faced by each team. During and after the trip, viability of the subject and achievable goals are determined by the project manager; the working hypothesis is revised (if necessary, which it usually is); (new) sources are identified and more detailed and corrected to-do lists are communicated to the teams. The project manager reports to the coordinator.
- The project manager and Board consult and achieve an understanding of what the contribution of the journalists in various countries is likely to be on the project's issue. The project manager targets a 'minimum' story as the outcome of the project. A 'minimum' story would at least broaden the view of the public in many countries about the issue covered before the publication of the project as a local issue. The common story will identify pieces of the puzzle from the team members stationed in various countries/locations that will in the end form a common story that will be of relevance internationally.
- After the first steps on the track with the editor, the country teams will continue 'alone'. They will be in touch with one another and with the editor on an internet mailing list, reporting regularly to the project manager on their progress and, most importantly, also on the setbacks. Lack of access to information, failure to verify, need for centrally accessed expertise will likely feature here.
- The project manager communicates, either upon request of the team or per own initiative, centrally accessed expertise and information back to the teams that are in need of it. The project manager also updates teams about the progress made by other teams, in such a way as to create synergies. One team can serve as an example or an inspiration to another; a team in trouble can benefit from 'we've been there' advice from another.
- Filing of documentation (interviews, acquired documents, reports) is consistently done on the team's internet mailing group, so that a database of source material is constructed.
- The project manager decides HOW to use the input from the different teams: task each team to write its own report (this worked well with the FAIR 2007 TI, but one will then have different styles in one dossier, unless – as happened in the FAIR TI - the project manager then rewrites and restyles all the chapters) or merge all info into one dossier written entirely by the project manager on the basis of the different submissions: US style. The project manager communicates his/her conceptual design of the final product back to the teams and asks for comments/ amendments.

## On ethics

- Roles must be clearly defined so that conflicts of interest are avoided. In the case that a team member is simultaneously a board member, these persons need to recuse themselves from board decisions pertaining to TI progress.
- Team members will be provided with a relevant best practice guide from the FAIR website and urged to read through it and raise anything that would be difficult to comply with in the specific situation/country in which they operate.
- Jointly with editor, coordinator and FAIR Board these issues will be discussed and a policy will be designed to deal with such issues.
- The team will from then on operate on the basis of the best practice guide together with the designed policy.
- The editor will request regular reports on achieved goals and methods used to achieve these. (S)he will alert the coordinator and the FAIR Board if ethical guidelines thus agreed are violated by a team member. The FAIR Board will then discuss the case and implement an adequate (dis)incentive to ensure that such a violation is not repeated.

## What lessons did you learn and what advice would you give others?

**Firstly**, valuable information often stays hidden from the lone individual journalist, and you have to be prepared to fight for it as a team. This is illustrated by the following example from FAIR's Transnational Investigation in 2007:

### Keeping things hidden

In the early 2000s a suspicious company, with a background in the arms trade, got a lucrative contract to store, manufacture and supply medication in Zambia. Pharco even was to supply ARVs locally: it got an exclusive license in 2004.

The Zambian public was not aware that Pharco was in fact a reincarnation of mercenary- and arms trade outfit GMR. If it had been, there likely would have been questions on why a company with such a background would want to branch out into the continental trade in little white tablets. But Pharco's background was well hidden behind a company name change, an excellent PR machine and official government endorsement. Zambia's sick and dying pinned their hopes for locally produced medication on this company. But ARVs were not produced. When the company, confronted with the increasing public call to finally start the promised ARV production, couldn't duck the issue any longer, they blamed the World Health Organisation: the WHO, they said, had sabotaged Zambia's ARV manufacture by withholding permission for production. The WHO was not in a position to lift the lid on Pharco's background and simply repeated that Pharco's production facility was not 'up to standard'. Which it wasn't.

All the while, Western diplomats, donor representatives and government officials in Lusaka were aware of the dicey background of Pharco and the impossible situation the Zambian government had allowed itself to get into. Yet, none of them cared sufficiently about the Zambian public to speak out. The information stayed hidden and all authorities seemed to agree that Pharco was right in pointing the finger at the WHO.

No-one, not internal, nor 'outside' authorities would allow such a situation, where citizens die daily in their hundreds, to continue in, say, the Netherlands. In Zambia, and many other African countries, such disrespect, neglect and carelessness seems to be the usual mode by which the 'elite' relates to the 'masses'. Journalists who care to inform these masses are confronted with those brick walls – if they get wind of the situation at all, that is.

In the case of Pharco, the story would likely never have come to light if an international health consultant (important enough to have been confided in by some in the Zambian governing and donor elite) had not informed journalists in his home country in Europe of the link between Pharco and GMR. Again, that information would not have reached journalists on the ground in Zambia, if FAIR had not provided a network through which one of these Western journalists had contact with a Zambian colleague. And without the journalists in Zambia working with this 'tip-off', Pharco would not have been confronted and Zambian government documents on the Pharco contract would not have been unearthed.

But he did, and she had, and they managed!

**Secondly**, team members should have a detailed understanding of what the research questions are and what the current expertise on a certain subject is. Halfway through the 2007 TI, the FAIR team discovered that some team members investigated herbal medicines as an alternative to scarce pharmaceutical products, whilst the other half investigated the pharmaceuticals' scarcity. Central intervention was needed to save the TI. It would have been better if differing assumptions between team members and disinformation present in each of the participating countries had been recognised as a challenge from the start.

**Thirdly**, the team should have a clear understanding of their own position vis a vis the research topic. During the 2007 investigation into lack of access to medicines, one team member became severely ill; another one died shortly after contributing his report, and several team members battled to help sick relatives and friends. This led to a prominent declaration of 'personal interest' by the team in the introduction to the TI report.

**Lastly**, if the result is good, and a publication strategy is in place, media in a number of countries will publish (and hopefully pay for) the story. In the case of the FAIR TIs, the first one did not pay for itself at all, the second one resulted in salaried publications by team members, and in the third TI in 2009, FAIR set up a system whereby free-lance team members would be reimbursed from central sales of the report.

# Key points from this chapter

- ✓ You need a framework of structured questions that will allow you to move from a broad, theoretical story idea to a tightly-framed hypothesis or question your IJ project can prove or answer
- ✓ You need to plan your project, thinking about rationale, sources, obstacles, timeline and budget
- ✓ You need to base any story pitch on this plan
- ✓ Consider all sources: primary, secondary, paper, human and digital
- ✓ Be aware of the uses of each, and construct a methodology that allows you to dig for information from sources that are appropriate.

## Glossary

- **Broad research** – the first check to test the viability of a hypothesis, checking a large variety of sources
- **Crowd sourcing** – inviting feedback and contributions from ones' own audience by telephone or internet
- **Deep (narrow) research** – focusing on the key questions that have emerged and attempting to find in-depth answers
- **Pitch**- the story in concept as one presents it to the editor, containing hypothesis, rationale, methodology, sources, obstacles, timeline and budget
- **Proving and disproving evidence** – evidence gathered from human and documentary sources that either confirms or invalidates a hypothesis
- **Rationale** – reason for the focus on this particular story
- **Timeline** – the chronological reflection of the story project

## Further reading

- There is a very interesting worked example of investigative planning in Chapter 4 of Derek Forbes' *A Watchdog's Guide To Investigative Reporting* (Johannesburg: KAS, 2005, pp 15-26), Forbes links each planning stage to steps in the process by which the *Sunday Times* investigated corruption accusations involving then South African parliamentarian Tony Yengeni.
- The full investigative file on Frere Hospital can be found at <http://www.dispatch.co.za>
- Thomas Oliver's article on "Stages of Planning and Producing a Project" is at [http://www.poynter.org/content/content\\_print.asp?id=4568&custom=](http://www.poynter.org/content/content_print.asp?id=4568&custom=)
- The FAIR transnational investigation dossier is posted at [www.fairreporters.org](http://www.fairreporters.org); you can also order a hard copy from the same website