



Walkley
**Regional
Summit**

Serving Local Communities

Investigative journalism in regional communities

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Develop an investigative mindset

- Very limited time, staff and resources. Super challenging.
- Hard to get away from the daily grind- find a way to control the chaos/get organised.
- Put together an ideas file.
- Look for logical investigative follow-ups to general stories/do watchdog work on all beats.
- What can we do that no-one else is doing? Localism is our currency.
- Find a good idea and develop a plan to investigate it. With so little time and resources planning is even more crucial.
- Brainstorm methods and solutions with those around you. Find a mentor.
- Identify the central theme and identify supporting themes. Think about how you'll use them.

Develop an investigative mindset

- Good journalism must be relatable. People make stories.
- Prepare a pitch and take it to your boss- never over promise as you'll lose credibility.
- Show how the work will impact your community and set the news organisation apart.
- Negotiate for time and space.
- Be choosy, spend your time on what matters. Stay laser focused.
- Once you get your editor's support, keep it by being clear about what you are doing.
- Schedule time to work on the project. An hour a day or an hour a week and increase from there as you can.

Develop an investigative mindset

- Keep your boss informed, especially if the story changes. Some work out better, some have less juice than you thought.
- Categorise documents; know what's in each. Mark material you'll need when writing.
- Pictures, graphics, videos, maps etc
- Break up the project into manageable chunks. Keep momentum.
- One successful investigation will help you make a better case for getting time for another.
- Develop a reputation for delivering.

Some good starting points

- Listen to the people around you- complaints and concerns can turn into great stories.
- Get out of the office. Talk to people.
- Where possible attend council meetings, go to community gatherings and conferences, sale yards, collect business cards etc. Set up meetings with people and follow-up with phone calls.
- Always be on the lookout for story angles. They are everywhere.
- Key to comprehensive, authentic storytelling is building relationships of trust with people.
- Don't be afraid to tell sources you know things, it can get them to open up.
- Use resources that are under your nose- someone else has probably done a similar story. Check them out.
- Be diligent about keeping contact lists. Invaluable.
- Learn how systems work. In many cases investigations involve processes not working or being followed.
- Target areas that you are knowledgeable about or have experience in.
- Trawl through data and reports. Powerful information can be sitting in plain site.
- Focus needs to be on original reporting on issues important to your community.

Turning tips into investigations



Traditional shoe-leather reporting. Persistence and patience.



Follow up, follow up and follow up again. Be relentless.



Hear them. Be honest about any consequences.



Combine data and research into human interest stories.



Keep your sources informed of progress.



Who's in charge? Industry laws and regulations.

Turning tips into investigations



Dig through regulator documents and data.



Ask the experts.
Universities, NGOs,
community groups etc



Lodge freedom of
information requests.



Have promises been
kept?



Appeal, appeal and
appeal again. Lodge
more requests.



Long-term advocacy
reporting can affect
real change.

Turning tips into investigations

- Documents are just the beginning of your search not the end. They can put you on firm ground, but more importantly lead you to people.
- Don't be afraid of running the story. Publish what you have if you can't advance it, it can bring out whistleblowers or force institutions to reveal more information.
- Follow up, follow up and follow up again. Advantage of being a local reporter on the ground.
- Can you get the local politicians on board? Great for information. Don't be afraid to look at them too.
- Be dogged and relentless, don't give up. It gets attention.
- Break down issues, analyse, help inform or start community and/or political debate.
- If space is a problem, turn it into a series.
- Advocacy reporting is crucial in regional and rural areas, it can prompt real change.
- Investigative stories almost always lead to more investigative stories.
- Don't always have to be lengthy projects.
- Develop a reputation as someone people can come to.

Documents, databases and records

1. GIPA/FOIs- Information and Privacy Commission (NSW) for most appeals
2. GIPA/FOI disclosure logs- great for ideas and free information
3. Census/ABS data
4. Community- newsletters, meeting minutes etc
5. Government- reports, taxpayer-funded consultant reports, annual reports, compliance audits, data etc
6. Government spending- budgets, financials, audits, grants, contracts, tenders etc
7. Crime statistics- (BOCSAR in NSW), victims of crime groups, domestic violence advocacy groups/shelters
8. Property ownership - Names, details and data. CoreLogic, PriceFinder etc
9. Development consent- Council DA trackers, zoning and approvals

Documents, databases and records

- 10. EPA regulation - Licences, applications, notices, audits or studies and reduction programs, convictions and civil proceedings, enforceable undertakings and penalty notices
- 11. Environment- Contaminated site registers, National Pollution Index, site assessments etc
- 12. Court records - Caselaw (NSW), Commonwealth Courts Portal, court registries, prosecutors, defence lawyers etc
- 13. Financial regulation - ASIC filings or enforcement, liquidator/admin reports. Set alerts for changes in companies.
- 14. Political donations- Electoral Commission
- 15. Regulators- industry safety breaches, data, compliance audits, worker injuries, enforcement action etc
- 16. Universities- research, publications, experts, journals etc

Broad areas to explore

- Long running community issues not being addressed. Community and advocacy groups.
- Local government- financials, decisions, developments, confidential sessions, staffing levels, rates, contracts, parking etc
- Politics- pledges, promises, travel records, spending, support for projects/policies, breaking laws/rules/policies etc
- Taxpayer- waste, inefficiency or mismanagement of funds etc.
- Government- corruption, abuse of power, change of laws, grants, support, funding, services, partnerships, lack of action etc.
- Corporate/business- liquidation, fraud, corruption, abuse of power, creditors, innovative initiatives, booming etc.
- Social injustice- bullying, disability sector, aged care, people who have been wronged/holding power to account etc.
- Education- staff assaults, funding issues, school performance, facilities/lack of etc.
- Health stories- patient safety, health worker abuse, lack of resources/services/staff, wait times, substance abuse etc.

Broad areas to explore

- Crime- unsolved crimes, cold cases, crime stats and trends, flaws in system, abuse of power, fraud, animal abuse/neglect, agricultural, firearm stats etc.
- Courts- check judgements online, health care complaints, judicial system overloading/wait times, trends etc.
- Environment- regulator documents and databases, contaminated sites, industry breaches, pollution, wastewater etc.
- Consumer- dodgy tradies, safety breaches, predatory lending, unlicensed and practicing- dentists, doctors, lawyers etc.
- Economic stories- employment, Census data, lack of/no access/closing services, agricultural trends, postcode wage data, real estate data etc.
- Trends- social, industry, economic, positive/negative, disadvantage, financial counsellors
- Social media
- Follow-ups

Look for solutions

- Strive to be a champion for your community.
- Look for resolutions, solutions or positive outcomes.
- Conduct your own testing, voxpops etc or team up with a university or expert.
- Don't shy away from difficult topics. Seek help. Ask the experts-academics, professional associations etc.
- Be relentless and dogged.
- Make sure promises are kept. Go back and check.
- Raise any legal concerns with your editor. Get stories checked.

Dealing with people you know

- Dealing with people you know can be challenging.
- Best to look at the proximity as an advantage, even though it's not always comfortable. Take advantage of chance meetings.
- Be accountable for what you are reporting. Would you say it to their face?
- Be fair, balanced and humble when you make a mistake. Acknowledge mistakes immediately and correct them.
- Build a reputation for being honest and fair and it won't be so hard to call people again the next day.
- Be upfront about what you are doing. No surprises means you can't be accused of trickery or being underhanded.

Dealing with people you know

- People may not like the story, but if you have been fair, balanced and given them a heads up most people will understand. It's the best you can do.
- Have thick skin.
- If someone wants to give you a spray, if it's within reason, listen. Let them get it off their chest, it can lead to better understanding.
- Sometimes you have to agree to disagree. Always stay professional.
- Some investigations impact advertising. Talk to your boss about this and leave the issue with them.
- Keep your editor informed about any safety concerns. They should be reported to the police.

Case study-

Your Right to Know

The Newcastle Herald

Judith Neilson Institute
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AMBULANCE
DENIED
50 LONGEST AMBULANCE RESPONSE TIMES
WHAT THE HERALD ASKED FOR: Details of the 50 longest ambulance response times in the Hunter over the past two years.
THE RESULT: Application was deemed invalid because it did not contain sufficient information to enable the government information to be searched for. A request for the same information four years ago was approved without question.

STOLEN AND MISSING DRUGS
DENIED
WHAT THE HERALD ASKED FOR: A list of stolen, missing or lost medications from Hunter New England hospitals or health facilities since March 1, 2018 by date, health facility name and location, and medication type.
THE RESULT: HNEH said it did not keep a central record of stolen, missing, or lost medications from the region's hospitals or health facilities. HNEH previously provided this information as part of freedom of information requests in July 2009 and August 2015.

ONCOLOGY WAITING TIMES
DENIED
WHAT THE HERALD ASKED FOR: Oncology waiting times at Calvary Mater Newcastle from March 1, 2018, to date by date and type and stage of Cancer.
THE RESULT: HNEH said it did not keep a collective record of oncology waiting times. HNEH previously provided this information as part of a freedom of information request in July 2009.

FREIGHT BYPASS
DENIED
WHAT THE HERALD ASKED FOR: Alignment designs and minister briefing notes produced in the past three years relating to the Hexham to Fassifern freight rail bypass (Lower Hunter Freight Corridor).
THE RESULT: Transport for NSW said it had identified 15 briefing notes related to the Lower Hunter Freight Corridor, but ruled some out as they were drafts that had not been sent to the minister and refused to release others as they were "Cabinet in confidence". Other documents relating to the investigation area were also refused for the same reason.

BROADMEADOW PRECINCT AND LIGHT RAIL EXTENSION
DENIED
WHAT THE HERALD ASKED FOR: Details of the master plan for the 63 hectare Broadmeadow sports and entertainment precinct.
THE RESULT: The NSW Office of Sport said it initially located 4350 emails and 740 documents related to the project. A refined search reduced the total number of relevant documents to 354.
This was ultimately reduced to 16, however, each of these documents were classified as "Cabinet in confidence".

- Are waiting times for cancer treatment improving or getting worse?
- How long were children exposed during a school's asbestos contamination crisis?
- Is the government serious about extending the city's public transport network?
- Can we see a ratepayer-funded consultant's report detailing long-term solutions for an erosion crippled beach?
- What are the longest ambulance wait times and paramedic staffing levels?



Newsroom collaboration

- Utilise beat reporters to identify important issues where information is not in the public domain.
- Reporters need to carve out time for in depth stories - particularly in smaller newsrooms
- Look at everything - health, education, environment, government operations etc
- Produce bulk public record requests.
- Keep an up-to-date Google Sheets document that everyone can access to track progress.

- FOI requests - don't be vague. Keep them simple, focused and specific. No fishing expeditions.
- Look at previous FOI applications and reproduce them - this is the best way to test if there has been a change in access to information.
- Be laser-focused in meetings - stick to an agenda so you don't get off track.
- Appeal, appeal and appeal again. Denials are common.
- Win or lose, publish the stories.
- Individual stories have power, but the real power is in the collective power of a series of stories.

- Look for trends in the approvals or denials
- In essence we built a large pipeline of information requests on issues important to our community.
- Return on investment was anything but positive.
- Rather than success stories, we collected denial, after denial, after denial.
- Journalists worst nightmare. Turned the paradigm of a scoop on its head and collected and highlighted our newsroom failures.
- Result was really powerful. When governments hide the truth, journalists must ask what they are covering up?
- Replicate. Small newsrooms can make a big difference.

Thank you

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