

Building a Beat and Cultivating Sources for Freelancers & Tiny Newsrooms

—Kathryn Joyce, freelance reporter, *The Investigative Fund*
Trevor Aaronson, Florida Center for Investigative Reporting

In a large, traditional newsroom, story ideas and sources might come in through a tip line. Freelancers rarely have access to the same institutional platform, but there are a number of ways that they can make themselves known and available to potential sources or discover important and undercovered stories themselves.

1. Build a beat

One of the best ways to identify stories that need to be told is to immerse yourself deeply enough in a subject that you recognize when a development is a new and noteworthy departure.

- Read the news about your issue, not just when it's covered prominently, but also at the level of community blogs. Set up Google alerts using a variety of terms related to your subject.
- If you're reporting on a community, learn where its members gather online to talk: in forums, listservs or social media groups. Sign up for the groups you can. Consider contacting closed groups asking to join as a journalist, both to better understand the concerns and news of the community and to reach out to members for interview requests. (Note: this may not be appropriate for all beats.)
- Look for possible sources in documents: FOIA'd materials, court or public records.
- Be aware of how the work you publish, as well as your public presence, will serve as a calling card for potential sources. Future sources are often past readers, who may approach you either because they know from your past work that you understand a subject, or because they appreciate how you've handled different but similar situations before (i.e., demonstrated sensitivity with traumatized sources or civil treatment of those with different opinions).

2. Cultivate sources

- Always ask people you're interviewing whom you should speak to next. The third- or fourth-degree connection might be your story.
- Do long interviews. Be prepared to listen to hours of discussion that might not end up being useful, or doesn't immediately seem relevant. Not only do surprising details come out of wide-ranging discussions, but as sources relax, they say better things, whether a new revelation or just the eloquence of their departing from rote statements.

- Meet in person when you can, including when you're traveling for unrelated stories but find yourself near someone else who might be a source.
- Stay in touch with your sources between stories. They're more likely to think of you if a new development arises that might make a good story.
- Think about your own policy and comfort level for connecting with sources on social media, knowing there are pros and cons either way.

3. Make yourself known and accessible

- Websites are cheap. Register [YourName].com/net/org and put up a site that includes information about you and your work, links to previous stories, and most important, an easy way to contact you.
- Establish and maintain a social media presence, including on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn.
- Make yourself easily accessible through encrypted channels, such as PGP email or apps like Signal and WhatsApp.
- Do interviews with media yourself, within reason. There are thousands of people who may never read your work but who will watch or listen to you talk about your reporting on a cable news show or podcast. Try to do these interviews when invited, keeping in mind that everyone has a podcast these days, so vet the requests and invest your time wisely.

Prepared for IRE 2016
Investigative Reporting on a Shoestring
Thursday, June 16, 2016, 9 a.m.
Sponsored by The Investigative Fund
theinvestigativefund.org