Key Tools and Key Skills for Freelancers & Tiny Newsrooms

—Trevor Aaronson, Florida Center for Investigative Reporting
Kelly Virella, The Investigative Fund

Just as the barriers to entry for media organizations have been torn down in the past decade, so have they been for journalists, making it more possible than ever to succeed as an independent journalist. These are the list of skills and tools we recommend for those of you working alone in the media wilderness.

Data

While the more data skills and experience you have, the better, you don't need to write a SQL statement or use GIS for the vast majority of data journalism tasks. However, these should be in your toolbox:

- **Excel:** At a minimum level, you need to be able to handle spreadsheets, sorting data, adding columns, finding duplicates, etc. This isn't hard. Just learn it. If you find basic spreadsheets enjoyable, move on to more advanced functions, such as pivot tables. Also, no need to donate to Microsoft if you don't already have Excel. The free and open source LibreOffice has an excellent spreadsheet program. Many prefer it over Excel.
- **Google Refine:** Got some dirty data? Use this. It's free.
- **Text Editor:** If you're working with data, you'll need a text editor. VIM and Emacs are popular and free (or try Aquamacs if you're on OS X).
- **Decent Document Scanner:** When you get access to a motherlode of data that is only available to you on paper, having your own scanner will help you keep your data secure and private. Be sure you get one with an automatic document feeder.
- **Optical Character Recognition (OCR) Software:** After you've scanned in your data and converted it to PDF, you need this tool to manage the data entry. OCR automatically converts a PDF of a spreadsheet to characters that can be exported as an actual spreadsheet. Google Drive has free OCR software.

Collaboration and Organization

Working with another journalist? Providing a bunch of records for fact-checking? Trying to get a source to send you some files? Need to a scan a document in a pinch? These can help:

- **Dropbox:** This widely used, cross-platform cloud-storage service is easy to use and fairly ubiquitous. In addition to sharing files with Dropbox, you can use it to request files -- giving you a link to share with someone who can then upload files to you.

- **Google Drive:** Another widely used, cross-platform cloud-storage service, Google Drives excels at allowing multiple people to edit and collaborate on a single documents. A less well-known feature is its ability to turn your phone into a mobile document scanner. In Android or iOS, run Drive and tap the [+] button for a new document. Then select Scan. The app will use the phone camera's to scan documents and turn them into PDFs, which are then backed up to the cloud.
- **Evernote:** An organizational and collaborative tools, Evernote might change your life. Many swear by it. Like Google Drive, it can scan documents with your phone's camera, even making them OCR.
- **DocumentCloud**: Upload PDFs, and DocumentCloud will make them searchable. You can also use it to share files with groups and the public.

Encryption

- **Pretty Good Privacy (PGP) Email:** It can still be cumbersome to use, but more and more people, including sources, are using it. You should too.
- **Signal:** A free Android and iPhone app, Signal allows you to communicate via text and voice with end-to-end encryption. Other options: WhatsApp, Telegram, Wickr, Gliph.
- **Encrypt Your Laptop Disk Drive:** There are options available for Windows, OS X and Linux.

Device Duplication

Do you carry a camera, recording device, and a phone when you go out on a reporting trip? Do you wear a watch too? Hey, it's 2016. Just get an iPhone or high-end Android device and lose the rest. Your phone can do everything now, even keep your grocery list.