

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH

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Research

BY MICHELLE LALONDE

- ▶ It may not sound sexy, but research is what makes or breaks your story.

Your writing may sing, your topic may have zing, but even the least demanding reader will sense the weakness if your research is shabby.

It's the iceberg analogy: your story is only the tip, and that huge invisible base of research is what will push your story out of a mass of dull grey newsprint and into a readers' consciousness. Most of your research will never see the light of day, but it will be detectable in the quality of the story and in the confidence of your writing.

If the base is weak, the tip will be blunt or invisible, and the reader will sail on by, the brain registering nothing. A strong, wide base will expose that devastating, razor-sharp tip so that it does what it's supposed to do: sink ships. (This is not to imply that our goal as journalists is always to sink ships. But it is a useful, if tired, analogy. We sink the ship of ignorance.)

The only limit on your research base is your deadline. Yes, you will have to leave yourself time to write, but the better the handle you have on your topic, the easier it will be to write a clean, clear, interesting story.

GETTING STARTED

Rule number one: Don't panic.

You have been assigned to a story and you don't know the first thing about the topic. No problem. Your first task is not to come up with answers. What you need are questions. One way to start

is to brainstorm everything you don't know about your topic.

For example: Your editor tells you a student has phoned the newspaper to report that she has been sexually harassed by a professor and has brought a complaint before the administration but is getting nowhere. You have the student's name and professor's name. That's all.

Here are some examples of questions you might jot down: What is the school's procedure on dealing with sexual harassment complaints? Has anyone used it before? If so, how did it turn out? What is the likelihood I will be sued if I identify the professor in my story? Can I write it without names? How many other sexual harassment cases have been reported this year on campus? Have there been any other complaints against this professor? Were there any witnesses to the incidents this student has reported? How long has this professor worked here?

Keep asking questions until you think you have exhausted those that are relevant.

Plan Your Research

The next step is to take some educated guesses about where you will get the most authoritative answers to those questions. Remember, the answers almost always exist somewhere and if you persist, you will find them.

Write a list of possible sources for the answers. Many of the answers are going to come from the same sources, so make lists of questions to ask each source. Do as much reading on the topic as you can before you start doing interviews. But don't go preparation-crazy. There

comes a point in every story where you just have to take a deep breath and dive in.

Dig In

The initial stages of your research will be a fishing expedition. You won't know exactly what you want, but once you start getting some answers, your questions will become more focused.

Be prepared to adjust to the information you get. Your original questions were just starting points. Your story can and should take you places you had not anticipated and answer questions you had not asked. Be flexible. Don't prejudge your story. Let it grow naturally.

You may get answers very easily, but always ask yourself, "Is this person really in a position to know? Is there a better source, a more reliable document? Can I get closer to this story?"

Don't be easily satisfied. If an 'expert' tells you, "All our studies indicate that this level of lead contamination is safe," ask to see the studies. Ask yourself if there could be any reason the studies would be biased. Who paid for them?

Don't report hearsay. If your interviewee says, "My roommate heard me yelling and came running," talk to the roommate.

PEOPLE

Most research starts with people. Journalists prefer documents to people as sources of information because documents can be kept, examined at leisure, and they don't change their minds or claim they were misquoted. But to get to documents, you almost often need to



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start with people.

In a sensitive story, it is usually best to start by taking the path of least resistance—start with ‘friendly’ interviews. In the example above, you would likely start by interviewing the student.

Since the student has voluntarily come forward, she will be easier to interview than the administration or the accused professor. He is likely to refuse an interview, or say very little unless you are equipped with good, reliable information and can convince him it is his best interest to respond.

What you need at the beginning is basic information so you can start building that strong, wide base of your iceberg.

This friendly-to-unfriendly rule of thumb holds for most stories. In environmental stories, for instance, you wouldn’t interview the president of a polluting factory until you know the history of the company, the extent of the pollution, the law, who is affected, etc. You don’t want to embark on the ‘unfriendly’ interviews until you have a very good grasp of the issue.

When talking to people, always keep in mind that they can lead you to those all-important documents. If someone gives you an answer that seems plausible and relevant to your story, ask where they got the information and whether you could have a copy of the document.

The key to success with research through people is keeping your questions clear. Remember, they are (usually) not getting paid to answer your questions, so be polite, direct and concise about the information you need.

Build your sources files with every story you do. Keep track of names, phone numbers, areas of expertise in case you need the person for another story. But beware of the “Golden Rolodex Syndrome.” Don’t always quote the same people and be aware that women and members of minorities are rarely quoted as experts. Only journalists can change that.

Cultivate a very good relationship with your school librarians. They can be immensely, invaluable, helpful.

ALMANACS, DIRECTORIES, INDEXES

Your school and public libraries are full of guides to answer any question you have. It’s just a matter of knowing where to look.

Directories such as *Who’s Who in Canada* or *Canadian Who’s Who* will give you short biographies of well-known personalities. Government directories and business directories can also save you time and embarrassment. *Sources*, an annual directory designed for journalists, is particularly well organized and helpful.

Keep an eye out for *Connexions Annual*, a directory of Canadian social activist groups published intermittently in Toronto. Your own campus may have a directory of experts and specialists, as well. Call the public relations department and request a copy, or check online.

Check out the almanacs and specialized encyclopedias in the library. Aids such as the *Canada Year Book*, *Familiar Quotations*, *Colombo’s Canadian Quo-*

tations, *The Dictionary of Canadian Law*, and *Stedman’s Medical Dictionary*, can also add spice to a story.

Always keep looking for innovative directories that can help you be a better journalist: for example, last year, the Women’s Directory Project published a *Directory of Women in Canada Specializing in Global Issues*. It’s a gold mine of untapped sources.

News directories like *Facts on File*, *Canadian News Facts*, and *the Canadian Periodicals Index* are cheap and easy ways of checking out what’s been written on a topic you are researching. Take a day and get familiar with the tools of the trade in your library. Most of these guides are very simple to use if you take a moment to familiarize yourself with their formats. Do this some time when you’re not on deadline. It will save you time, and probably face, in the long run.

For more information on this kind of thing, look for books like *Find It Fast* and *Finding Canadian Facts Fast*, which basically just chronicle research sources until your veins pop.

NEWSPAPER ARCHIVES OR DATABASES

Computerized databases are a key tool for the modern journalist. Quick access to what others have written on your topic will not only save you precious hours of research time, but will allow you to advance a story, double-check your facts, generate new angles and story ideas.

Most campus libraries have access to some daily newspaper databases. Ask



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your librarian how to access those.

If all else fails, you can pay to access an old article at fpinfomart.ca. It costs a little (\$4.95) to access an article, but everything you want is there. Google News is a free, but only offers limited archival access. If your school has access to the LexisNexis database, this is an invaluable media research tool.

COURT DOCUMENTS

Court documents are public, but usually not easily accessible. If you want to look at the documents for a certain case, bring as much information as you can to the courthouse. Talk to the lawyer of one of the parties to get the date of the trial or hearing, correct name spellings or better yet, the document numbers. Knowing the dates of the trial is also very important.

Recently, archived court documents have been posted online in a searchable database at The Canadian Legal Information Institute's website (www.canlii.org).

This database allows you to conduct full-text searches of court documents divided by status, courts, jurisdiction, and type of proceeding. The site has also posted links to international court databases including France, the UK, New Zealand, South Africa, Asian Legal Information Institute, and the Commonwealth Legal Information Institute.

COMPANY SEARCHES

If you know the name of a company, you can sometimes find out who owns

it and who is on the board of directors by doing a company check.

•[See: Ch 3. Covering corporations]

Check with the provincial ministry of consumer and commercial affairs, or equivalent, to find out where the company registry is. Once there, ask any friendly looking person how things work. Once again, not difficult, just tedious. There is usually a nominal fee for this service. If you prefer to stick to your computer screen, Goliath is a company that provides detailed reports on individual companies through an online directory (goliath.ecnext.com). The catch is that monthly subscriptions to the service cost \$50 and individual searches \$30. Some creative googling might be just as effective.

Going the other way around — you know the name and you want to know what the person owns — is a little trickier. Business directories, such as the Financial Post's Directory of Directors may help. Owens Media Partners has launched an online tool for searching directors by name, as well (<http://www.owen-media.com/directory.cfm?page=1>).

PROPERTY SEARCHES

If you want to know who owns a property, or how much say, the president of your university paid for his home, you might find the information at the land titles office.

Most cities still have the information recorded by hand in dusty volumes, but you can get your hands on these, if you are patient and know how to ask people politely to help you. It's daunting

at first, but after a few searches, you'll learn what to look for and how to get the information you need quickly.

•[See: Ch 4. FOI laws]

UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES AND ALUMNI OFFICES

These places are great sources for information on famous or infamous alumni. They are usually happy to let a student newspaper print old photos or let you pour through old faculty annual reports.

Believe it or not, people like to read about those who darkened the very same hallowed halls they darken now.

For example, when working on an article on Gerald Bull, the former McGill scientist who was allegedly murdered for his knowledge about big gun technology, the McGill archives had all kinds of valuable information. Funding records that McGill had given him to build a big gun in Bermuda, and several scientific articles he had written were all on file in the University Archives along with some great photos.

CITY HALL ARCHIVES

City council meeting minutes, among other useful records, are public. City archives keep track of who supported which motions too, often fodder for stories at municipal election time.

Students are interested in many municipal issues: public transit, green space decisions, prostitution by-laws, etc. Take a wander through your municipal archives library on a rainy afternoon. The shelves are full of story ideas.



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THE INTERNET

You know that it's full of information. But do you know how to use it? Become a prolific internet surfer, and you'll gather sources like crazy. Keep them organized with a tagging system like del.icio.us or furl, but remember to save the links on your computer — just in case.

STUDENT NEWSPAPER FILES

Don't completely dismiss the idea that files in your own office have been kept up. Every couple of years, someone comes along who really knows how to keep files and these can be a gold mine for those who follow. Check them out and add to them.

If it is hopeless, start your own clipping files. Keep the system simple so that you, and just possibly those who follow you, can keep track of what's where.

Be realistic. Don't file everything. Try to hypothesize about whether anyone could ever reasonably need the information again. If this seems truly unlikely, toss it brazenly into the recycling bin and forget it.

Also, use your computer for filing. Keep a list of file headings and cross-references so that your paper files are easily managed. Also use the computer for phone lists.

Keep your file headings very general, like student aid, sexual harassment, labour. They may be around for a long time.

•[See: Ch 10. Filing]

HAPPY SAILING

Keep in mind your right and responsibility to get at the best, most up-to-date information available. Nobody will fault you for demanding the best.

Don't be afraid to ask to actually look at the report, to talk to the lab technician who did the study, etc. Don't settle for the minister's aide, go to the legislature and corner the minister if they are the one with the information you need.

•[See: Ch 3. Covering legislatures]

Always think about who or what is the most appropriate source to answer your question and go for it. ◀



Acquiring more contacts

- ▶ Every journalist must have a firm grasp on their story before beginning to type. Everyone knows that. But what is often overlooked is the “comment” side of an article. You can have amazing research, powerful facts and an intricate understanding of the subject matter, but if your sources only present one side of the issue your story will suffer.

Reporters should develop as broad a contact list as they are able. Countless media studies have shown that the press repeatedly quotes a small sector of society. Political and business officials constantly appear in our daily papers while less powerful figures are absent from news stories. The result is a world view represented through the eyes of a tiny elite, leaving many readers silent in the streets.

Student journalists should not follow the example of their mainstream colleagues by focussing primarily on elite sources. If your paper only talks to student politicians and university administrators, you cannot criticize the professional press for constantly quoting government officials and business leaders while overlooking the rest of society.

TYPES OF SOURCES

Business and government officials

These powerful institutions can afford to hold endless press conferences and pay media relations firms to make them look good. Depending on the country, the military, churches and political parties may also have sizeable propaganda machines at their disposal. Similarly, people with less power and money, such as advocacy groups and unions, also form groups to fight for their inter-

ests – e.g. women or workers – but these have far fewer resources.

Analysts, critics and “experts”

This is a wide category of people that includes researchers, scientists and other academics, professional writers and independent think-tanks as well as journalists, commentators and former advisors, politicians, bureaucrats and other flotsam. Like everyone, they usually have their own built-in bias and knowledge base. Be careful how you label them in attribution.

Activists

A catch-all term often used to denote any left-wing voices – e.g. environmentalists or lesbian/gay rights activists. But your local preacher and Tory councillor are just activists of a different stripe.

The general public

The people you are supposed to be writing for and who are most often reading what you write.

DEVELOPING CONTACTS

These four categories make it seem like news gathering is balanced. But the more power and cash these sources have, the more accessible they are for the average journalist.

That being said, here are some tips for expanding on your source list:

Get a contact box

There is no point in building contacts if you cannot remember their names and numbers. Buy some file cards and a plastic or metal box to put them in. Decorate it, give it a name and hope it never leaves you. Always remember to list names, titles

and addresses of organizations. “Bill Favershum – 845-7865” may mean zilch a year from now unless you also mention that he was the 2005-2006 president of Save the Cats. Try to indicate whether the source is good, lousy, fabulous or articulate, any areas of expertise and other helpful details like home and fax numbers.

Basic cross-referencing is not a bad idea, nor is listing the PR flacks and their phone numbers along with the big figures they work for.

Collaborate with the other reporters on your paper or other journalists. Share your sources and build up as large a base as you can co-operatively.

Become informed

You must develop a reading habit and keep your eyes peeled for people, articles and events related to the subject of your fancy. Read the newspapers. If you do not know what is going on, your articles will represent that ignorance. Clip and file articles of interest and put any promising people mentioned, with description, in your contact box.

Read magazines. Go to an alternative bookstore or a decent newsstand. Buy what you can afford and browse like a bovine.

Search libraries. University versions in particular have scads of journals. They usually have reading rooms, microfilm and microfiche and some have the Canadian Business and Current Affairs and other indices on CD-ROM (disc) or on web-based search engines.

If you are not well versed in your subject, it will be hard to get anyone to talk to you – no one wants to be distorted, misquoted or have their time wasted



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because the writer didn't know the ins and outs of the story. Ask smart questions and write smarter articles and people will start to trust you, maybe even, *gasp*, respect you.

Be conscious of how you sound on the phone

If you are overbearing or timid, you might get the brush-off. Be persistent, but remember politeness and charm will always get you further than aggression. Most people like to be interviewed, but if someone is reluctant to talk, you can drop names judiciously; use the old 'the story won't be balanced unless I get your side' line, be humorous, or even use shameless flattery. Either way, once you call someone for a second interview, you can add them to your list of reliable sources.

Go to meetings, discussion groups, talks and forums

Faculties at most schools invite academic types from all over and are interested in expanding their visibility. Try to make contact with a new group every week and see what they're up to. This will put you in regular contact with some new campus leaders as well as the people they bring to campus.

It's a good habit to end each interview with the same two questions:

- Is there anything you'd like to add, or anything else I should have asked?
- Is there anyone else you think I should talk to?

It's amazing how much juicy information these two queries can produce.

Keep in touch with as many contacts as possible

Government and business people are not going anywhere, but it is a good idea

to call them up every now and then for an update on past stories. If they are really busy, the occasional quick question will suffice. If you have hung them out to dry, they may not be terribly forthcoming, but a little bit of politeness and a happy goodbye go a long way to convincing them to speak with you the next time when you really need it.

Academics, experts and the like usually stay put for some time, but it never hurts to call with a question. If you stay in people's minds, you will eventually start getting calls from them. Activists seem to move around more, but regular contact may reward you with a forwarding address or number. Remember, people who float in similar circles often all know each other.

Be careful with unnamed sources

Try to get confirmation from at least one other source. Never betray an anonymous source, if you have agreed to it in advance, and use "off the record" information with care — your credibility is at stake.

Have doubts about everything

Back up all your quotes with solid facts or you are in danger of being manipulated. It is easy and often tempting to use an unchallenged comment or accusation. But when you do not try to reach someone for comment, you may end up being unfair yourself.

Your perspective and your paper's coverage may suffer and you may miss the boat entirely. Student papers are hectic and balancing classes with writing can be challenging, but try to call every contact you can think of. Your credibility, and the paper's, is at stake.

OTHER USEFUL PRINT SOURCES

The Blue Pages

The government contact list in the back of your phone book may be your most useful resource. Many government agencies also have online phonebooks for their departments, as well. For federal contacts, try the Government of Canada phonebook which covers all agencies and organizations: <http://direct.srv.gc.ca/cgi-bin/direct500/BE>

City directories

List residents by address and phone number.

Who's Who

Many universities publish lists of professors, researchers and their areas of expertise. Get as many as you can from different schools. In the interests of garnering increased media attention, a number of schools have joined a trend of publishing "experts lists" of faculty who have agreed to be interviewed on given subject matter.

Sources

A phone book-sized collection of contacts. Tons of corporate and mainstream contacts, plus numerous goodies. Updated quarterly and free to members of the media, i.e., your newspaper.

Alternative publications

Often list organizations and people you may not have heard of.

Other material to be skimmed: other student papers, news exchanges, publications like University Affairs and the CAUT Bulletin, anything else you can find. ◀

With files from Jeff Harrington

Access to information



BY JACQUES POITRAS

► What will you be getting?

Anyone who embarks on a government Access to Information request must first realize three things:

- 1• It's not going to be quick;
- 2• It may not result in a story;
- 3• If it does, the story isn't exactly going to topple the federal government.

But the Access to Information Act can lead you to interesting stories if you follow the rules when making a request. The Act is too bureaucratic, too expensive, too time-consuming and often too narrow in what it can get you, but it does help you to dig through government documents.

So pick an area of interest and think about unanswered questions and bits of information that might shed new light on the situation.

What did internal government polls show about opposition to the war in Iraq? Does the government monitor whether provinces spend transfer payment money on health and education as intended? How many letters has the government received demanding that sexual orientation be included in the Charter of Rights? How closely does the government monitor dangerous research on campuses? What qualifies as dangerous research?

Distinctions to draw

▪ *Between records and information:* “Information” is defined in the Act as the actual facts. “Records” are the pieces of paper the facts are printed on. The Act is used to obtain records, not infor-

mation, but you don't always need the records to get the information.

▪ *Between unreleased information and public information:* Someone, in some department, will often have the information you need.

▪ *Between the Privacy Act and the Access to Information Act:* They are often used synonymously, but they are not the same thing. The Privacy Act governs information about individuals. The ATI Act governs the rest (although you can obtain things like expense account records of senior bureaucrats and ministers with ATI).

Privacy concerns things like government employees, people suing the government, student newspaper editors being spied upon by CSIS, RCMP information on individuals, etc. Don't bother trying to find out if CSIS spied on the Mohawks, or on Queer Nation, or on the national chairperson of the Canadian Federation of Students.

The only person who can request a file on a specific individual is the individual themselves and even then you don't get much.

▪ *Between the federal and provincial governments:* Post-secondary education is provincial. You won't find a lot on PSE with the federal act. (More on provincial acts later.)

FINDING WHAT YOU WANT

The records must be accessed through their respective departments — like Finance, External Affairs, Indian Affairs, Justice. This can be tricky.

On education, for example, Secretary of State handles transfer payments, but Finance is where the documents on the money are. Employment and Immigration deals with summer job programs. Defence deals with defence, but Supply and Services is where all government contracts — including defence research contracts at universities — are routed. Oka might seem like Indian Affairs, but information about how much the army spent there would come from Defence.

A central repository of which department handles which records is available from a publication called Info Source. Info Source is published by the federal government and is available in most university libraries as well as online at: www.infosource.gc.ca/index_e.asp

Browse through the sub-categories. You'll see they are collected in related groups, and you should be able to find what you want. If you can't, and you've checked every possible angle, including other departments, call the access coordinator in the department, listed at the back of the section.

Each category will have a three-letter, three-number code, like DOF-010, and there will be a short description, i.e., “This category includes statistics on transfer payments to the provinces,” or “This category includes records of expenses for the Canadian Armed Forces.” The information you want may be on records that fall into more than one category. That's okay. You can list as many categories as you want.

At the same location in your library, you'll find the actual forms you need to fill out. These are also available online through the federal government and provincial government websites.



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Besides the usual spaces (name, address, etc.), there are two crucial areas. One asks for the category code, the other for the type of information you want.

In the first, write “DFO-010,” etc., and the other codes for however many categories could include records on your topic. List as many categories as you think may be useful. More, even.

The second crucial area is where you describe the information you want, in your own words, so that if you’ve completely screwed up with the category codes, someone at the office can look at your own description of what you want and find it anyway.

Be as general or as specific as you need to be. In the example we’ve been using, you would want to be specific. You might write: “I want to see all documents that detail the total financial cost of the Canadian army’s actions at Oka.” But you can be general, too: “I would like to see all documents relating to cuts to transfer payments to the provinces for education.”

Although you can request searches of more than one record category on a form, you can only request records on one topic per form. You cannot ask for information about Oka expenses and transfer payments on the same form.

Each department has its own access office, and its address will be in the back of the appropriate section of the register. Mail in the form with five dollars. The cheque should be to “The Receiver General of Canada.”

Now wait. You’ll quickly get a letter acknowledging your request. The date on

that letter is when the clock starts ticking on the 30-day limit. The government must, by law, give you what you want by then — or explain why it can’t.

You may get a call from an access officer in the department who will say to you, “I think we can give you the information without having to go formally through the Act.” They will ask you to withdraw your formal request.

This is not the Machiavellian ploy it may sound like. The access bureaucrats in each department are not usually the people who make the process difficult. If something is hard to get, it’s because someone more senior has already laid obstacles in their path. If the access staff say they can do it informally, it’s usually because they can save you and themselves useless hassle.

But use your judgment. Ask them point blank, “Will I get everything I asked for if I do it this way?” And never, ever say no to something they offer in passing, even if you think it doesn’t quite relate. You never know what you might find.

There will be dead ends. I requested a list of government defence research projects at Carleton. It turns out the government doesn’t categorize its research by the university at which it’s being done.

I would have had to request listings of all the research projects (there are probably thousands) and go through them all, searching for Carleton projects. I did not have the time to do this, nor the budget — you only get the first 100 photocopies free.

If you live in or near Ottawa, you can go to the access office in the department

and look at the originals. If not, and your budget is limited, avoid requests that will require more than 100 pieces of paper. Don’t say, “Send me everything you have on post-secondary education.” It’ll cost too much and 99 per cent of it will be useless.

The office will call you anyway to get you to authorize the expense before it proceeds. You can decide then, but don’t assume that the fact they have over 100 documents means you’ve hit paydirt. It could be 200 pages of nothing. They won’t know it’s nothing, or won’t tell you, so you end up being forced to gamble.

This is where it helps to be very specific with your requests. If you know exactly what you’re looking for such as “Fire and electrical inspections on York St. in Fredericton, NB between 1993 and 2006” you’re far more likely to hit pay dirt with little incurred cost.

PROBLEMS WITH THE ACT

What I’ve described is how things should work. Often they won’t. Your main limit is how many five-dollar requests your paper can afford. The *Globe and Mail* can file thousands of forms, but it’s important that the Act is not used merely by the journalistic elite.

If a question occurs to you, think it through and make a request. It’s a flawed tool, but it’s important that people keep using the Act. If it falls into disuse, there’s an excuse to eliminate it. If it is used more and more, it will be difficult for the government to ignore complaints about it.

Aside from the five-dollar fee, the limits



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that are placed on you include:

Overload

As in the example above, the Act can yield you a mountain of information with no summaries, explanations or indices. It can be close to impossible to find any relevance in it.

This is the more subtle way that the government makes information hard to obtain. They don't have specialists willing to compile information for you, or easy-to-use guides. In fact, if they do, you should be suspicious — you're getting public relations, not records.

Other expenses

Particularly photocopying and phone calls to the bureaucrats handling your request. Get them to call you. You'll have to decide if you have the money for the photocopies, but remember there's a good chance you can get what you want with less than 100 pages. But even 300 pages of documents is only going to cost you \$30 at 15 cents per page — sometimes it's worth it.

Extensions

If the office "can't" give you information within 30 days, it can grant itself an extension. The conditions for the extension are loose and they're being used more and more. Don't be surprised if this happens, and if you don't think they're just dragging their feet, make a complaint.

Poor record keeping

The bureaucrats who review, categorize and file records don't do so for your convenience, or even for the convenience of the access bureaucrats. They file things either to fulfill some strange governmental need or to bury them.

In fact, since the advent of information access law, much of the clandestine business of government has shifted into the oral and/or shreddable realm, to make access impossible.

Fear

Access workers are sometimes afraid to release damaging information because the guidelines on when to release such information are vague. Usually sweet talk will be more helpful in this case than bullying. Talk them into giving you at least part of the information.

Outright concealment

A really sensitive request may get a straight "no," or, in the case of the recent Afghan detainees scandal "that document doesn't exist." But something partially sensitive may get you documents with parts inked out.

Yes, they actually do this. Your first reaction should be to call and ask why, appeal, or figure out another request that may bring out the information that's been blotted out. Often enough, however, blacked out portions of documents are sections which would identify individuals which would violate the Privacy Act. Before you run to the phone to complain, you can generally figure out from the context of the rest of the document what's being omitted. If you still feel that you should be able to read the blacked out parts, you can file an appeal.

APPEALS

It is possible to appeal through the Information Commissioner's office if you are refused records. There is no charge. If you get a no, launch an appeal. The best plea is that it's in the public interest.

Every appeal is another signal to the government that people won't accept a secretive government. These add up and the Information Commissioner's annual report, which routinely includes a condemnation of secretiveness and calls for improvements to the Act, will be bolstered by a high number of appeals.

You can also appeal for a waiver of photocopying fees if you can show that your paper is poor — not hard in the student press — and that releasing the information is in the public interest.

If you get nothing, call the same bureaucrat who wrote you to acknowledge receipt of your request. Remember, the access people at that level are fairly disinterested and thus more likely to be honest. Their masters' paranoia is what makes it harder for you, rarely their own.

Ask if they think there is a better way to get the information. They may suggest something. If they don't, you might contact another journalist or researcher who's worked in this area and ask for advice. Or pursue other avenues of research.

There exists an online database of previously filed requests, which can be useful for researching how to file requests or save time if you're looking for the same thing that somebody else has already filed.

The searchable database can be accessed here: <http://www.onlinedemocracy.ca/CAIRS/CAIA-OD.htm>

Also look at independent ATI watchdogs such as On the Identity Trail, a website that helps citizens file their



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own requests: http://idtrail.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=284&Itemid=88

Contact people who will be pissed off about what you've found. Then, call the honchos responsible, and get their perspective.

PROVINCIAL ACTS

All provinces except Prince Edward Island have some sort of Access To Information or Freedom Of Information act.

These laws vary, but they have procedures similar to the federal act. Check into them with a local media lawyer or professional journalist. Typically, provincial acts are more amateurish and expensive, but less bureaucratic and more forthcoming.

Education is a provincial responsibility, and intersects with many governmental concerns. Papers in most provinces can dig for funding info, dirt on the liquor licenses for your campus bars, health inspection reports on campus cafeterias. . . . the list is endless if you make an effort to know who is responsible for what.

Write your story. Come up with a hard-hitting standard news lede and cite the Act. It gives the story validity and reinforces the fact that people can use the Act to get information that concerns them. ◀

GETTING THE STORY

Getting the story, frankly, is simply a matter of reading through every document, being alert and making connections. Don't do it all in one sitting or your brain will start to numb.

Keep the cover letter. As you sort through the records, you may have questions. For example, I did a request on a poll but the records didn't say who conducted the poll or how many people were surveyed. I called the person who wrote the cover letter and he tracked down the person in the office who commissioned the poll.



Freedom of information laws

PREPARED BY IRA DUBINSKY
(MANY THANKS TO ZACH DUBINSKY)

- ▶ Get a copy of the relevant access-to-information law. If you're filing an Freedom of Information (FOI) request with a university, the provincial law will apply. You should be able to find the law online. Use the Web sites listed in these pages; many have links to the provincial and federal laws.

1• Find out who the relevant access-to-information officer is. Even if you live in a province where universities are not covered by FOI legislation, look into your university's own FOI policies and find out who handles requests. In most cases, the Secretary-General, General Counsel or Legal Services department handles FOI requests. If you can't find it on the web, call the university's top administrative office to find out who the access-to-information officer is. The executive assistant to McGill's principal seems to be able to answer every question I've ever asked her. Other provinces should have similar Web sites that list the directory of access-to-information officers.

2• Assuming you have an idea of what you want to look for, write a business-style letter mentioning that you're making a formal request for access to information under the (presumably provincial) access-to-information act. Use broad language to describe what you're looking for if you don't already know that certain documents exist, e.g.: "All documents pertaining to an agreement or a proposed agreement for the provision of cold beverages on campus."

Then specify documents you think might or should exist, using words like this: "And including, but not limited to:

Any and all correspondence between university officials and either Pepsi or Coca-Cola; any and all internal assessments of the viability of a contract for the provision of cold beverages; any and all correspondence between university officials and third parties hired to consult on or to abet the conclusion of a contract for the provision of cold beverages."

Universities are unwieldy bureaucracies, so if you don't mention that you're interested in correspondence between administrators and Coke execs, it might get overlooked in the execution of your request. If you already know a document exists, ask for it: "A letter sent by SFU president Tom Tippleworth to B.C. Education Minister Martha Mercerney dated on or about June 24, 2001."

Remind your intended recipient that they have to notify you of any costs associated with executing your request before said costs have been incurred.

3• Make sure you get official acknowledgement that your request has been received. You might hand-deliver the request and have the recipient sign a statement or a copy of the request acknowledging receipt. This formal acknowledgement is important if you decide to appeal a decision by the university not to release certain information, or if the university is taking too much time to execute your request and you want to complain.

4• Wait. In Quebec, requests are supposed to be executed within 10 days, with a possible 10-day extension. In practice, it can take months, particularly with the federal government. You should get a reply, with at least an estimated time of arrival and an estimate of

copying costs within a month. FOI stories can take time to come to fruition, be patient and start early.

5• You'll either have your request rejected or fulfilled. If rejected, skip to Step 7. If it's approved, you usually have the right to see the original documents, or copies, at the target institution, typically at no charge; or, you can ask for copies, for which you can be charged (each province has different rules about how much public bodies can charge for photocopying documents in view of executing an FOI request. In Quebec, the maximum is about 25 cents a page. McGill tends to charge considerably less.)

6• Pay any charges, and get your documents. Then *read everything!* In case that wasn't clear: *read every darn word of every document you get!!* Your university will try to censor out passages it doesn't want to reveal. But in every request I've seen, the redactors' black markers have missed some crucial, scandalous words. This is particularly true when you receive hundreds of pages of documents — just think about the tedium of a university official poring over all of that to censor it, and it has to be done in 20 days! Even though they blacked out the amount of your cold-beverage contract 19 times, they might have missed it on the 20th.

7• Decide if you want to appeal any action by the institution. They might have rejected your request outright, and you want to contest their grounds for doing so. They might have granted your request in part, and left out key pages of documents you think you have a right to see. They might have blacked out passages they shouldn't have. In all cases, *decide soon* — usually, you'll have 30 days or less to file



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an appeal with the information commissioner. To file your appeal, you typically just write a letter to the commissioner stating the facts of the case — when you filed your request, what you asked for, when it was executed, what documents you got — and then giving the reasons for your appeal. You typically need to include all the documents, request letters, and response letters relevant to the case. You can find out how to contact the relevant information commissioner on many of the pages listed under FOI Web sites.

8• File follow-up requests, if necessary and/or possibly fruitful. The institution might have overlooked some documents when it executed your initial request, but you now know of their existence because the documents you did get referred to them. So file another request asking specifically for those newly revealed documents. Go back to Step 2.

FOI WEB SITES

- Government of Canada's Access to Information and Privacy site, with links to FOI request forms, the Access to Information Act, and a list of access-

to-information officers for federal departments, agencies and corporations. http://infosource.gc.ca/Info_4/atip/ATIP-Menu_e.html

- Direct link to the list of access-to-information officers of federal departments, agencies and corporations. www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/gos-sog/atip-airp/ATIP-Coords_e.asp

- FOI request form for the federal government and its agencies. http://infosource.gc.ca/Info_4/dwnld/ATI-Request-Frm_e.pdf

- The Department of National Defence maintains its own FOI Web site, where you can download access-to-information request forms or peruse FOI requests filed in the last several years. www.dnd.ca/admfincs/ati/intro_e.asp

- Commission d'accès à l'information du Québec. www.cai.gouv.qc.ca

- For the United States, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists operates a primer site. www.icij.org/dtaweb/index.asp?L1=30&L2=50&L3=0&L4=0&L5=0&State=

OTHER SITES

- Open Government Canada is a coalition fighting to broader freedoms of information. Their site has extremely useful links, including links for each province. www.opengovernmentcanada.org

- A professor at Syracuse University has a great site with resources for Canada and the U.S. including a regularly updated list of FOI requests that have been filed. Use this for "piggybacking." www.foi.net

- The site of the Canadian Association of Journalists has links to provincial and federal FOI sites, plus others for the U.S. Very useful. www.caj.ca/car/foi.htm

- Julian Sher, investigative journalist, maintains this site with FOI-related links for the U.S., Canada and the world: www.journalismnet.com/media/foi.htm

- Freedom of Information and Privacy Association of B.C. <http://fipa.bc.ca/news>

RESEARCH TOOLS

Lobbyist Registration System

http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/cgi-bin/sc_mrksv/lobbyist/bin/lrs.e/lrsmain.phtml

Under the federal Lobbyists Registration Act, anyone lobbying the federal government has to register as such, declaring who and what they're lobbying for (i.e. what company, what policy), who they're lobbying (i.e. what government department), and more. Click on the VIEW/SEARCH link

Examples of some real FOI requests:

Request No. A-2002-00633 Target: Department of National Defence For DND assessments, reviews from 1 Jun 02 to 25 Oct 02 of US Ambassador Digging For Gold: Getting the Most from Freedom of Information Laws 2 to Canada's comments on Canadian military needs, to include communications exchanged on these comments and background to DND Ministers replies.

Request No. TBS2003000156 Target: Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat From January 1, 2003 to November 4, 2003, all records on costs, contracts, plans, rationales and logistical problems relating to making public the information on government federal employees' travel, accommodation, hospitality/other expenses. Provide other records released/to be released under the Access to Information Act on the above subjects.



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on this page to search the database by company name, lobbyist name, subject of the lobbying, government department, etc. Input the company name “UNIVERSITY” and you’ll find that McGill, for instance, employs someone to lobby Ottawa about pensions; that McMaster is lobbying for support for “expanded health-related research capabilities”; or that Concordia is lobbying over its “infrastructure program.” The University of Phoenix — North America’s largest private university, which is making notorious incursions into Canada — is lobbying the federal government over the Canada Student Loans plan, a feat that might be worth investigating (will the government extend loans to students enrolling at U of Phoenix? Has it considered doing so?). Trolling this database can give you leads for a successful Freedom of Information request.

Public Registry

http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/epic/internet/inoec-bce.nsf/vwGeneratedInterE/h_oe01270e.html

The Public Registry contains all of the documents that a federal public-office holder must fill out as a condition of being appointed/hired to their job. The Conflict of Interest and Post-Employment Code for Public Office Holders requires that certain assets called declarable assets (the companies/stocks/equities Paul Martin owns); certain permissible outside activities (sitting on the board of directors of a company or organization, in the past or present); and permissible gifts, hospitality and benefits must be declared publicly (for an example of the latter, Herb Gray, the former deputy prime minister, had to declare that he received a

“pair of night-vision binoculars” as a gift from the PM of the Republic of Tatarstan in Russia.) Click on the link to PUBLIC REGISTRY to get to the search screen, where you can search by name, position (Minister, Parliamentary Secretary, Deputy Minister), or free text. Follow the instructions carefully. You’ll find that Paul Martin owns the Plaza Building and the Dunbar and Varsity theatres in Vancouver, plus significant stakes in many other companies. Coupled with a search of the Federal Corporations Directory, you could find Martin’s home address (51 Belvedere Circle, Westmount) and then, using the Montreal Island property-value database, you’d know his home was built in 1912 and is worth \$2.1 million, and then, using a Reverse Address Search, you could find out the phone numbers of his neighbours and give them a call . . . or not.

Federal Corporations Directory

http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/cgi-bin/sc_mrksv/corpdire/dataOnline/corpn_s_e

Every company registered in Canada at the federal level (incorporated under federal law, so it’s usually the bigger firms) has to make certain info publicly available — even if it’s a private company. Use this database to search, for free, among federally incorporated companies.

The names and home addresses of the company’s directors used to be available online but you now have to make a written request to get this information. Other fun stuff related to subsidiary companies is still available. Many companies are merely provincially incorporated (eg. the Daily Publications Society, which publishes the McGill Daily, or the Student’s Society of McGill

University), and you have to search the individual province’s corporation database. The Quebec one is freely available (see below), but for Ontario, you still have to pay.

Quebec Business Directory

<https://ssl1.igif.gouv.qc.ca/slc0110.html>

Not for the weak-of-French, this site is the Quebec provincial equivalent of the above. It’s free, and it lets you search for a company’s directors and their home addresses, the firm’s subsidiaries or parent companies, and more. The search works for any business or organization, sole proprietorship, partnership, or corporation registered provincially in Quebec. You can search by corporation number (Numéro d’entreprise) or keywords, including directors’ names (Noms ou mots recherchés).

Montreal Property Values

<http://www.evalweb.cum.qc.ca/Roleactualise/Recherche.asp>

Montreal, unlike Ontario, allows you to anonymously look up, for free, as many properties as you like. You’ll find information on property value (based on the municipal tax assessment), size and age of lots and buildings, and more. This is where you’d go to discover that Brian Mulroney’s Westmount home is worth \$2.2 million.

Ontario Property Values

<http://www.opac.on.ca>

You used to be able to find out the value of any residential property in Ontario for free at the Web site of the Ontario Property Assessment Corp. Times have changed, however, and now you must register with the Municipal Property Assessment Corp. in order to get 12 free lookups.



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Federal Contracts Database

<http://csi.contractsCanada.gc.ca/csi/prod/en/applctrl.cfm?cmd=start>

This database chronicles every contract awarded by the federal Department of Public Works and Government Services over the last three years. Newspapers used it during the Alfonso Gagliano/Don Boudria porkbarrel-politics scandals to find out whether the government was issuing contracts to the friends of ministers or to organizations that had made significant donations to the Liberal Party. Beware: it doesn't cover all federal contracts.

Elections Canada: Campaign Financing

www.elections.ca/intro.asp?section=fin&document=index&lang=e&textonly=false

There are three juicy databases here:

- 1• The database of individual candidates' election finances from a general election or by-election, so you can find out how much money Jean Chrétien received in direct donations and from whom for the last election, and what he spent it on.
- 2• The database of political parties' election expenses and contributions year-by-year, whether there was an election that year or not. You can find out how much money Bob Rae donated to the NDP in 2000, for instance (\$440), and what the party spent the money on.
- 3• Reports from third parties that bought political advertising during an election campaign. The key in these databases is that corporations tend to donate mountains more than individu-

als, and the most money gets donated to parties not to individual candidates. So, while former Royal Bank CEO John Cleghorn (also a member of McGill's board of governors) gave \$300 to the Liberal Party for the 2000 election, that amount was eclipsed by the \$91,000 the Royal Bank gave to the Liberals, the \$95,000 it gave to the Canadian Alliance, and the \$35,000 it donated to the Tories (now that's covering your bases.)

Reverse Phone/Address Lookup

www.infospace.com/canada/reverse_ca.htm
www.411.ca/

InfoSpace and 411.ca have a Reverse Lookup page for Canadian phone numbers and addresses. If you know the phone number of someone you're looking for but not their name, you can use this site to get their name and address, and vice-versa. It has a reverse email feature too.

Trademark Database

http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/cgi-bin/sc_consu/trade-marks/search_e.pl

Search this database to find out what company or person has registered which trademarks. You'll notice that Thomson Canada Ltd., former owner of the Globe and Mail, registered a spate of national newspaper-sounding TMs around the time rumours started to fly that Conrad Black was launching a new national daily. Thomson registered Canada Today, the Canadian Citizen, the Canadian Observer, the Canadian Times, the Canadian, the Daily Telegraph, the Independent, the Nation, the Nation Today, the National Observer, the National, the Telegraph, the Times of Canada, the Times, the World Today, and the World. Perhaps that's why Con-

rad and Co. settled on National Post — because every other title was taken! You might use this database to find out what companies make the school clothes sold in your campus bookstore or clothing store (if they're sold under a brand name and not a company name), or who manufactures any number of other products sold on campus.

Patent Database

<http://patents1.ic.gc.ca/intro-e.html>

If you can dig up muck like the above from a trademark database, who knows what you'll find rollicking with the patents?

TWELVE FOI STORY IDEAS

(these won't all work in all provinces)

- 1• Find out where your school's administrators have travelled to on the university's budget, how much they spent and on what. Universities that are part of the Universitas 21 consortium (in Canada, UBC and McGill) routinely send top officials to international meetings in places like Scotland, Shanghai and Australia. At McGill, it was found that a former principal spent \$10,000 on one such trip and \$7,000 on another.
- 2• Find out your university administrators' salaries and see how much they've increased (or decreased) in the last five years. Compare the rate of increase to salary raises for professors and other staff.
- 3• Request your university's course schedule in electronic form for the last several years. Create a database or spreadsheet to analyze how many science courses are offered per registered



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science student compared with how many arts courses are offered per arts student. You might find that, lately, the trend shows increasing per-student course offerings in science, year-over-year, and decreasing per-capita course offerings in arts. You could also compare the university's course calendar to the course schedule to see, year-by-year, how many courses described in the calendar aren't actually offered. Any trends you find might be newsworthy.

4• Request any contracts your university has with the Canadian Department of National Defence or the U.S. Defence Department. Is your school helping to build better bombs or other instruments of death and destruction?

5• Request the contract(s) for any exclusivity deals your university has, particularly for cold-beverage exclusivity deals with Pepsi or Coke. Some points to consider:

- Who pays who how much?
- Are there quotas in the contract (i.e. does a certain amount of pop have to be bought for the university to reap certain revenues)?
- Does the contract grant advertising to the beverage provider? If so, where and how much? At the University of Saskatchewan (I think) Coke got its logo on the backs of library due-date slips and had a giant Coke billboard installed on a main field. Advertising may or may not be permitted in classrooms, libraries, hallways, etc.
- Are there any price guarantees in the contract? If not, your university might experience what anyone would

expect in a monopoly situation: prices will skyrocket. At York University, the price of bottled water on campus shot up 76 per cent after Pepsi inked a deal with the school.

6• Request any contracts your university has with private scientific research firms, such as pharmaceutical companies, biotechnology companies, etc.

- Does the private company have the right to censor or bar the publication of research results obtained by researchers at your university? If so, the situation smacks of the Nancy Olivieri fiasco at the University of Toronto, where a scientist was not supposed to publish damning evidence about a medical drug she was testing.

- How is the financing arranged? Is your university paying the private company, or vice-versa, and how much? Are grants from public bodies (the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council) being put toward the private company?

- Who gets to keep any intellectual property stemming from the partnership? Does the private company get exclusive rights to use and/or market any intellectual property?

The quandary in this last question is that a public institution operating from public funds — the university — might cough up the rights to a diabetes cure, for example, as part of a research partnership with a private firm. The private firm will reap windfall profits from the medication they develop, and while your university might get to keep some of it, the costs will be almost entirely borne by the public through high drug prices. But the public fostered the de-

velopment of the drug in the first place by funding the university.

7• Request a list of your university's investments. Does it have its endowments invested in stocks of corporate malefactors? Probably. McGill owns shares in tobacco companies, oil companies with execrable human-rights and environmental records, and more. Your university might own stock in an operator of private prisons, a gun manufacturer, one of the notorious U.S. defence corporations, and so on. Check if your university's holdings conflict with the corporate executives sitting on its board of governors, especially if those governors are the ones who decide how the university invests its money. Imagine the conflict of interest if a bank executive on your board of governors oversaw an endowment-fund portfolio that invested in — you guessed it — bank stocks. (No stretch here. It happens at McGill).

8• Find out where the clothes sold in your campus shops are made. Are the UBC sweatshirts made in sweatshops? McGill's are. Request a copy of any contracts or deals between your university and its suppliers, then trace the suppliers from there (this part is a bit harder, admittedly, but there are plenty of sources).

9• Obtain copies of different kinds of audits your university has done — for example, as a Ubysey reporter did with a financial audit of UBC's parking service. The audit found that the university was at high risk of losing the cash revenues from its parking. As with the federal audits performed by the auditor general, egregious money-wasting or other scandals can often be turned up.



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10• Has your university hosted any events at which luminaries or celebrities were visitors? File a request to see what arrangements were made with the university. A Ubyssy news editor got 1,100 pages of documents related to the 1997 APEC summit, including correspondence between UBC's president and the Prime Minister about security concerns.

11• Request documents on all donations over \$500,000, or another amount. Request documents about corporate donations, or donations tied to the naming of buildings (to see if the name is forever or just a few years). Check if the university has received donations from any questionable corporate sources, like tobacco companies. Last year, using an FOI request, the McGill Daily found that the McGill Medicine Faculty had received millions from Imperial Tobbaco.

12• Any other hot issue on campus that might have riled administrators. For instance, a heavily-censored Simon Fraser University report obtained by the Georgia Straight in 1995 by FOI described shortcomings in the university's handling of internal disputes. Your university might have completed environmental audits or health-and-safety assessments on buildings, it might have scandal-ridden internal correspondence concerning the government. Several universities are considering privatizing their law schools or other professional schools. Request documents to see if your university is considering the same.

SOME ADDITIONAL STORY IDEAS

- Find out who sits on your university's board of governors (at public universities, this information usually has to be released by law. Most often, you'll find it on your university's website). Then search the above databases to see what companies the governors have holdings in or administer, to whom they've made political donations, where they live and how much their homes are worth.
- Divided political allegiances (your university's governors might be donating big sums to political parties that are cutting back on education spending).
- Corporate malfeasance (they might own shares in or be directors of corporations with shoddy records).
- Conflicts of interest (they might "help" your university invest any endowment funds, in which case they could be in a conflict because it would be in their interest to have the university buy shares in their company and drive up the price).
- Visit the local courthouse to search for any lawsuits under way against your university.
- Search corporations databases to see if any prominent researchers at your university are running private companies on the side, and find out if they're using university funds to buttress their private gains.
- Search the land registry at your city hall to find out if your university owns or once owned any property you didn't know about (the University of Toronto owns stretches of top-notch commercial property in downtown Toronto).

- Find out who your university is lobbying and why. Couple it with an access to-information request to find correspondence or invoices from the lobbyists your school hired. ◀



Computer assisted reporting

BY WILLIAM WOLFE-WYLIE

- ▶ Thirty years ago it was inconceivable that a reporter should be asked to do their own photography. These days, it's inconceivable that a reporter not know anything about photography. Similarly, newsroom librarians are nearly extinct. Reporters are increasingly becoming their own researchers, writers, photographers, videographers, and everything else in the grab bag of journalism. Competitive newsrooms and decreasing budgets have also forced reporters to become ever more adept at finding their information quickly, effectively, and, most importantly, accurately.

So why are we using our super-powerful computers for little more than googling and word processing?

Computers were designed to, well, compute. Handling large amounts of information quickly and effectively is what computers are good at and humans are bad at. So let's give them the hard work and we can concentrate on writing, which, after all, is the fun part of our jobs.

This guide will help you to learn how to import files into data-sorting programs and how to work with Excel for more than just making fancy-looking graphs and tables. It will also introduce you to the basics of the virtual web browser (fancy term, huh?).

Be forewarned: If you don't consider yourself a computer geek or if you apply the term "computer illiterate" to yourself liberally, the following guide might be hard to chew through. With this in mind, though, this guide is organized to place the simpler concepts at the front and the more complex at the

back, so you can feel free to stop reading at any time and know that it wasn't going to get easier as you continued.

Section 1: Importing directly from the web (Excel and finding stories)

Section 2: Everything is electronic (and you are allowed to see it!)

Section 3: Getting more complicated (depending on what circles you float in, some might call this "hacking")

Onward!

LESSON 1: LOOKING AT WEB PAGES SUCKS.

Imagine for a moment that you are a journalist working in Santa Barbara County, USA. Unemployment is on the rise and there are a lot of professionals who are out there looking for jobs and aren't having a whole lot of luck finding them. Luckily for some of them, there is a job-search website which is providing a listing of what people in different jobs can expect as starting pay.

www.jobaps.com/sbc/auditor/salary-table.asp

It's not going to be the meat of your story on unemployment, but it might make an interesting sidebar or lede (depending on your angle) to note that a cook starts at \$16/hour while a cook at a sheriff's office starts at \$19/hour. But that's a little bit dull. What you really want are the minimums and maximums. Who's making the most money out of the gate and who's getting shafted? To do this manually you're going to have to sort through all 724 entries and, in the end, it won't be worth the time for what it'll add to your story.

Microsoft Excel is your friend here. It

will drastically reduce the time needed (depending on how long it takes your computer to open Excel) to find the data you need. Here's how:

We'll use a Canadian example for our data-sorting project. The province of Ontario has a law which states that all salaries over \$100,000 per year which are paid from the public purse must be publicly disclosed. This, conveniently enough, includes universities. So every year the province of Ontario publishes a list of university salaries over \$100,000. The 2006 list is here:

www.fin.gov.on.ca/english/publications/salarydisclosure/2006/univer06.html

The problem is that the list is organized alphabetically by university. What if you want to find out who the highest paid university official in the country is? Again, in this case there are more than 6,700 people listed so it would be prohibitively time consuming to sort through it all manually.

Copy and paste the information into Excel.

It's that simple. Highlight all of the records that you'd like to copy into your Excel workbook, hit COPY and then go into a brand new unedited Excel workbook and hit PASTE. Now you will have 276 pages of university salary records (6,728 records, in case you were wondering) databased into an Excel workbook that you can then sort according to which ever category you desire.

This kind of trick is useful in thousands of different places. Anytime you see a table generated on a website, it generally means that it's a tab-delimited file



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on the server end (this means that a “tab” space is used to differentiate between different pieces of information in a table) and that’s the exact same format that Excel was built on. So every time Excel sees a “tab” character, it moves the information into a new box and automatically re-creates your table in the Excel workspace.

Now let’s have some fun with our new toy.

Make sure that none of the boxes in your Excel document are highlighted and choose the “DATA” toolbar from the menu. By going Data → Filter → Autofilter you will be able to sort the data in the entire spreadsheet according to the column you choose. A little arrow should appear beside the top box on each column. So beside the “Salary” column, choose “Sort Descending” and you will find that Felix Chee, president/CEO of the University of Toronto made \$581,868.04 in declared earnings in 2005.

It’s also worth noting that this is more than \$170,000 per year more than the second place administrator made. The president of McMaster university made a paltry \$410,055.04 in 2005.

Let’s try another one: click on the column marked “taxable benefits” and choose “sort descending” and you’ll find that the University of Toronto’s Managing Director of Investments makes the most taxable benefits of any university administrator in Ontario at more than \$77,000. Combine this with his salary of more than \$300,000 and he actually makes more than many other university presidents. Are we starting to think of news story ideas yet?

If you’re an accomplished Excel user, you can have even more fun with this data and make graphs, compare them with archives of previous data, draw up comparative charts, and all sorts of wonderful things. Also remember, if they collected the data for the 2005 tax year — the odds are pretty good that they collected the data for previous years too. Try tracking salary increases in comparison with faculty contracts or track increases university by university. The possibilities abound.

LESSON 2: WHAT ABOUT THE STUFF THAT ISN’T ONLINE?

This trick is great for the stuff that we find online and need our computer to crunch through. Anyone with more than a year or two in student journalism has come to appreciate the wealth of information that Google has placed at our fingertips. But know this: Almost nothing is written on the web. Just as you do your job on your home laptop in a word processor or in excel or in a database, so does everyone else. Whenever you see content on a webpage, it was probably written on a home or office computer.

Whenever you see summaries or conclusions, they are parts of larger documents that are still on those computers. When summaries are sent out, headlines are printed, these are segments of larger files that are archived on a computer somewhere on the planet.

Statistics Canada and other government reports are wonderful examples of this. If you are looking at a web page of StatsCan information and only see the summaries, you know that this was information was gleaned from a larger

spreadsheet with all of the information collected — more than they thought would ever be useful in the final report. Through Canada’s Access to Information Act, you have a right to that information. And since it’s electronic, all you need is to have it emailed to you (hint: this means “free”). But most of the time it’s far easier than filing ATI.

How does this work? Let’s walk through it.

Let’s say, for example, that we’re doing a story on gas prices and we want to look at whether the increasing gas prices have affected the rate of consumption around our campuses. Are poor students reacting to the higher gas prices by driving less? It’s an interesting story and Statistics Canada would be a good place to turn to.

A quick search of the site reveals an entry in The Daily about Domestic Sales of Refined Petroleum Products for the first quarter of 2006:

www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/060707/d060707b.htm

Jackpot! But wait, the table provided only deals in totals by product sold (motor oil, gasoline, diesel fuel, etc.). Interesting, yes, but not what we’re looking for. Scroll down to the bottom of the page and StatsCan provides nifty contact information for the people who conducted the survey.

Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number 2150.

For more information, or to enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact the dissemination officer (toll-free 1-866-873-8789 or 613-951-9497; energy@statcan).



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ca), Manufacturing, Construction and Energy Division.

Note: It's always a good idea to let them know who you are and who you work for. This helps them keep on top of who is using their services and helps them to improve their services in the future. Letting them know the angle of your story is also useful since every now and then you'll find that you're actually asking the wrong person and they can forward your request to someone who is better suited to answer it. Since StatsCan is a collector of data and generally not a body that you're reporting on, you don't generally have a whole lot to hide from them, so don't.

The other thing to remember is the same thing that you've learned while reporting on all other stories. E-mail is the devil if you're trying to get information quickly. Weeks can pass, emails can be tossed to the bottom of the inbox, they can be forgotten about, they can be forwarded and lost — emails are terrible when you want things to happen quickly with people you don't know.

Call them. Use the 1-800 number. It's free. You'll talk to a real person. The data will be sent to your email account pronto. You'll have a story.

Ask if they'll send you an excel file, otherwise you might end up with a PDF document and that'll be just as useless to you as a stack of paper.

LESSON 3: SO WHERE DOES THE PROGRAMMING HAPPEN?

As our world becomes more and more electronically and digitally oriented, our access to information as journalists

should only grow. But this isn't really always the case. There are some tables that we'd like to import into Excel that are only available through search fields requiring a minimum number of characters to be entered. Things like court databases and contact information sheets are usually behind such walls that forbid us from accessing them in any conventional way. But does this mean that they're out of reach? Hardly.

Note: this is only the beginning of where this stuff can go. The following pieces will introduce you to the tip of the only iceberg in the world that is actually growing. The world of web-programming for journalistic purposes is growing so quickly that the New York Times has an entire department devoted entirely to what has become known as "web scraping." If you are both a journalist and computer savvy, this is somewhere you can really make your niche in an emerging market. A lot of government organizations (Transport Canada has become notorious for this) have found themselves denying Freedom of Information requests on the basis that the information is already online — but it is always hidden behind such walls. This is where CAR really comes in useful — breaking down these walls and getting at the hidden information behind them, organizing it, and publishing it.

If you have any friends who are involved in computer science, they may it strange when you start to learn CAR programming. Mostly because the language of choice that people are programming in is Perl. Perl is the archaic mother tongue of programmers. The writer's equivalent would be to say that you're learning to layout your paper in MS Publisher; yes, it works, but why on earth would you want to?

Perl is a good programming language for CAR for two reasons. The first is actually because it's so old. Perl was built around the time when the web was composed of little more than text and tables — graphics don't figure heavily into Perl and so it has a tendency to ignore anything that isn't alpha-numeric — convenient for us who are mostly concerned with manipulating text and data. The other reason is that Perl programmers are obsessive about their craft. Perl is an intricate and very insular sub-culture in the world of the web who like to share the pieces of program that they have developed. CPAN is the end-result of this obsession (The Comprehensive Perl Archive Network). This is an online database composed of thousands of modules and programs which have been made publicly available for use by other Perl programmers. This is also useful since it'll save you lots of coding time on your own since you can essentially copy and paste the required pieces of their programs into your own.

So what can Perl programs do for you in terms of your ability to find news stories and information? Well let's try this on for size: in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, the New York Times used a Perl script to download the entire Red Cross Victims Database into their office. From there they were able to figure out in a matter of hours that within seven months of the Katrina evacuation effort, that more than 60% of families had still not been reunited. A big story with national implications resulted. Want a Canadian example? The Halifax Herald used a Perl script to download and manipulate ten years worth of crime statistics and plotted them on a MapQuest map, leading to a five-part feature on the history of crime in the city.



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The possibilities really are only limited by your imagination and this is truly indicative of how the web has transformed the way we access and store information in the 21st century.

Let's get started:

The first thing that a beginner programmer is going to need is an Interactive Development Environment (IDE) which is actually a lot less complicated than it sounds. This is essentially a program in which you build your own program. It knows the syntax that Perl requires to properly execute and will automatically correct any major errors that you make and allows you to test segments of your program while you're still developing it so that you can be sure that you're on the right track.

I spent weeks looking for free IDE and couldn't find a decent one. Sadly, this is one of those things that you'll actually have to pay for since it isn't common enough to pirate in the traditional bittorrent fashion. Komodo 3.5 by ActiveState seems to be the best on the market right now (and is currently being used as a developing environment by the New York Times' CAR crew). The advantage of this one as well is that it has a three-week trial period which is enough time to make sure that this is something that you really want to explore. After three weeks, you'll have to pay to get a license.

There are a number of Perl training manuals out there which are publicly available online. The best Perl trainer is in an eight-part series called Perl 101.

Perl 101 starts from the basic "Hello World" program and moves through to writing material to the web and down-

loading web pages to your computer and manipulating the information there. It's a thick booklet of more than 100 pages so it's not copied here but a PDF is available in the CUP Document Depot for those interested.

Following your mastery of Perl, you need to know the basics of applying these new found skills to the world of journalism. Check out these guides on Mining the Web for Data, and Advanced Scripting which are actually guides put together by our team at the NYT for their use.

There is also a growing community of web scrapers and CAR-ers in Canada. Check out these links to explore those communities:

www.Carincanada.ca
www.ryerson.ca/~ricarc/
www.sources.com/SSR/Documents/SSR37-2-DeansDigital.htm
www.journalismnet.com/canada/

Google away — most modern journalism programs have developed their own CAR classes and there is a growing knowledge base on how to manipulate the information on the web for our own ends. What is contained in this guide is just a taste of all that is available and a true understanding of how to manipulate information through computer programming is far from possible by reading a single online guide such as this: practice and study are the hard knock realities of this kind of work.

But, hey, that's what we're good at, right? ◀