

**“Alexa, file my FOIA request”**  
*Nine tools for  
staying organized*

**Who’s blocking whom?**  
*A guide to requesting  
social media blocked lists*

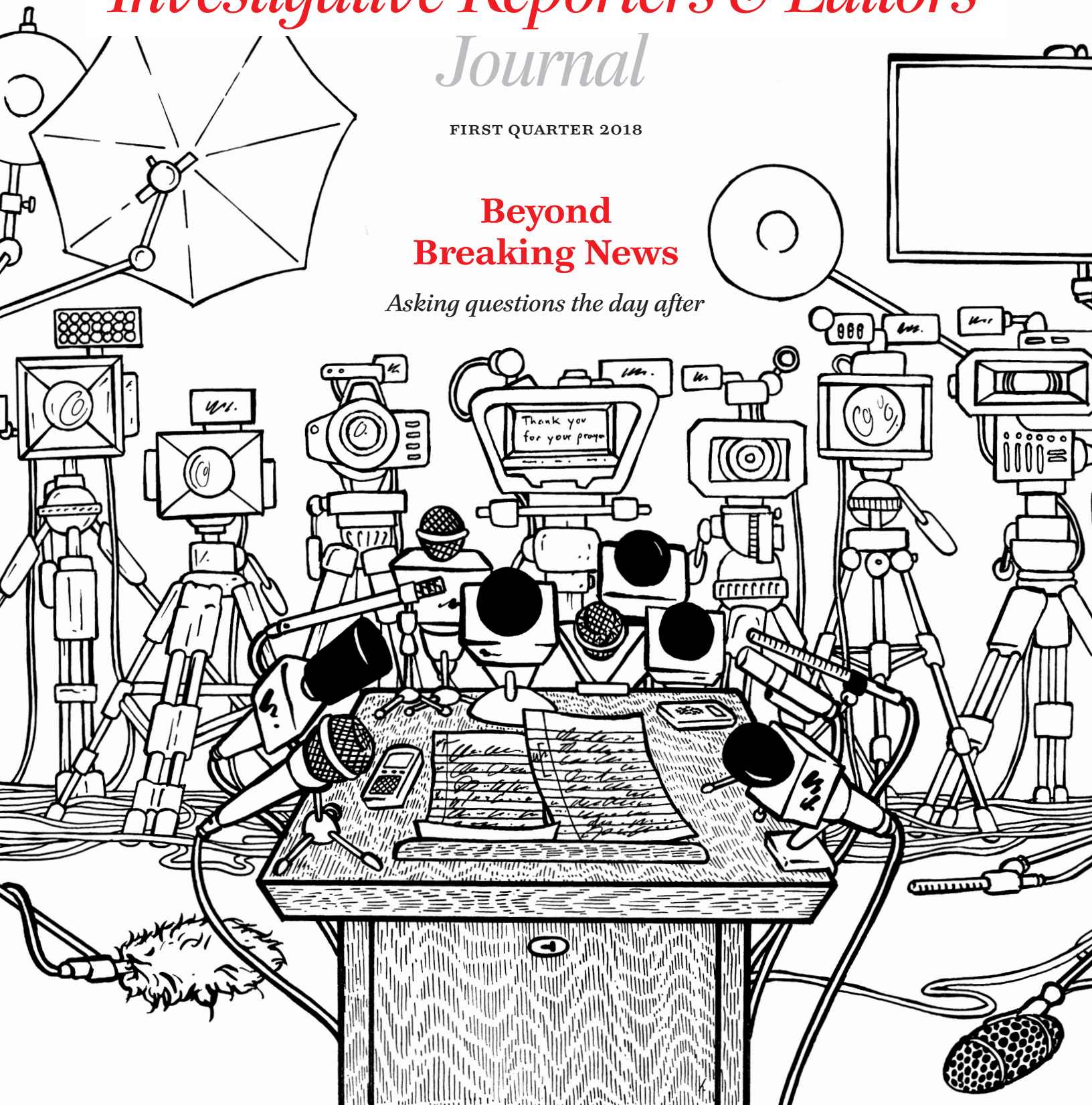
**The disaster plan**  
*Lessons from  
five newsrooms*

# The *Investigative Reporters & Editors* Journal

FIRST QUARTER 2018

## **Beyond Breaking News**

*Asking questions the day after*



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# IRE Journal

FIRST QUARTER 2018



JOSE CARLOS FAJARDO/BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

BEYOND BREAKING NEWS

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# The Journal is evolving – and so is IRE

My son's alma mater, the University of Rochester, provided him an engineering degree and me a personal and professional mantra: *meliora*. The university's Latin motto roughly translates to "ever better" or "the pursuit of the better."

For a perfectionist like me, it was a radical shift in outlook. Rather than judging myself and others solely on the end result, I've tried to focus more on the journey, the striving, the effort to improve.

During my first year as IRE executive director, I've worked with our talented staff, board of directors and many of you to ensure that our beloved organization keeps evolving to meet changing needs in a rapidly shifting media landscape.

This newly redesigned IRE Journal magazine is our latest effort at *meliora*.

Sarah Hutchins, IRE's editorial director, led the redesign project. During an IRE staff retreat, she showed us thumbnail images of Journal pages from previous issues. So many of the pages looked the same. The content was solid and helpful, but we all realized the magazine could be more inviting.

We're proud of the new IRE Journal, a creative collaboration between Sarah and our new contract designer, Larry Buchanan of The New York Times. You'll find a mix of short and long stories, eye-catching graphics, practical guides and an increased attention to data journalism. With each issue, we're striving for surprises. And we hope you'll make regular use of our tips and how-to guides as you strive to be ever better in your work.

Beyond the newly redesigned IRE Journal, our other *meliora* efforts include:

- A coding boot camp in Minneapolis last year that helped journalists learn to use Python. We'll likely host a coding boot camp in another part of the country in 2018.
- Hiring new staff members with sophisticated technical skills and experience: Data Services Director Charles Minshew (our R expert), Training Director Cody Winchester (our Python guru) and Training Director Mark Walker (who's leading our Total Newsroom Training program for smaller newsrooms).
- Creating a director of partnerships position and recruiting Chris Vachon to lead our efforts on fundraising, grants, sponsorships and fellowships.
- Forming a larger team to plan content for our two national conferences. Our goals include adding fresh faces, more diversity and timely topics.

We hope that our efforts help you continue your own *meliora* journey in pursuit of stories that make a difference. ♦



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## Q: What are your favorite – and free – websites for backgrounding?

## A: Tailor your toolbox to what works best for you – and your story.

Here are a few sites I've collected over the years:

**DocumentCloud** is a treasure trove of primary sources. I use it like a clip search, but for public records. With over a million documents in its repository, there's a decent chance the person or business you're backgrounding will show up in DocumentCloud.

**LinkedIn Sales Navigator** (formerly Rapportive) is a handy Chrome extension that connects LinkedIn profiles to email addresses. Simply enter an email address in your 'To:' field and the sidebar will automatically populate the person's LinkedIn profile and Twitter handle and tell you if this person is connected with anyone in your network.

**FamilyTreeNow** is one of the best free sites to get basic public information on a person. I can't say enough about this site. Go try it and see how accurate it can be.

*Lauren Grandestaff,  
Resource Center Director*

## Consider running for the IRE Board of Directors

Starting in April, IRE will begin accepting applications for candidates for the IRE Board of Directors. This year, seven of the board's 13 seats are up for election. Three incumbents have decided not to run for new terms.

The initial filing period for candi-

dates is April 16 – May 20. All candidates filing by this time will appear on the initial ballot when voting begins May 29.

You'll also be voting for two members of IRE's Contest Committee, which judges the IRE Awards. Those interested in judging will apply using the same procedure as IRE Board candidates and will be selected on the same ballot.

More details are available on the IRE website at [bit.ly/ireboard2018](http://bit.ly/ireboard2018).



## Announcing the 2017 Philip Meyer Award winners

A pioneering investigation that uncovered gaps in the pharmacy safety net is the first-place winner of the 2017 Philip Meyer Journalism Awards. Other top awards go to investigations that revealed racial disparities in bankruptcy protections and discrimination against foreigners in Germany's housing market.

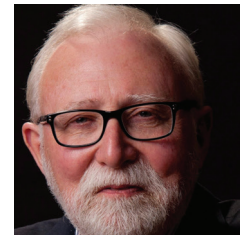
First place goes to "Dangerous Doses" by Sam Roe, Karisa King and Ray Long of the Chicago Tribune.

Second place is awarded to "Too Broke for Bankruptcy" by Paul Kiel and Hannah Fresques of ProPublica.

Third place goes to "No Place for Foreigners. Why Hanna is invited to view the apartment and Ismail is not" by Robert Schöffel, Christina Elmer, Oliver Schnuck, Patrick Stotz, Steffen Kühne, Achim Tack and Ulrike Köppen of Bayerischer Rundfunk and Der Spiegel.

An honorable mention goes to "The Tax Divide" by Jason Grotto of the Chicago Tribune.

Learn more about the winning stories at [bit.ly/philipmeyer2017](http://bit.ly/philipmeyer2017).



## Remembering Mike McGraw

Longtime Kansas City Star reporter Mike McGraw passed away from cancer in January. Help us remember Mike, who served six years on the IRE Board, and make a donation in his honor.

Visit [bit.ly/m-mcgraw](http://bit.ly/m-mcgraw)

All those documents, data sets and interviews are no good if you can't find them. **Here are nine tools to help.**

# Organization

## PROJECT MANAGEMENT

**Workflow**  
*workflow.com*

Free, but paying for pro gets you more features

This list-making app has less structure than other organization apps, which makes it great for brainstorming or note-taking. It works in your browser or as a mobile app and allows you to create sub-lists and nested lists.

**IFTTT (If This Then That)**  
*ifttt.com*

Free

A free platform (web and mobile) that connects with all your apps and devices to help you do more. Automated "applets" can download a specific user's tweets into a spreadsheet, remind you to follow up on an email after 30 days or add the next day's weather report to your phone calendar. It's simple and user-friendly.

**Whiteboard**

Free (minus the cost of supplies)

You know, the old-school, hang-it-on-the-wall kind. Create a tracking system or grid on your whiteboard and put it someplace you'll see every day. Use Post-it notes to track key assignments and when they're due. Move the Post-its through your grid as the project advances.

**Financial Times toolkit**  
*github.com/ft-interactive/projects-toolkit*

Free download

This PDF kit contains five modules to help newsrooms plan and execute projects: a project calendar, pitch template, production checklist, analytics template and review meeting plan. Use all five from beginning to end, or pull out a specific part that's most helpful.

## NOTE-TAKING AND WRITING

**Evernote**  
*evernote.com*

Free, but paying for premium gets you more features

Sync notes between your devices and upload photos and documents with this app. You can sort notes into specific notebooks and tag them to stay organized. It also allows sharing between users, making it great for multi-person investigations.

**Scrivener**  
*literatureandlatte.com/scrivener.php*

Free trial, then one-time \$45 cost to download the app

This no-frills word processor and project management tool allows you to create virtual note cards and move them around to outline your story. Take snapshots of your work to track edits, upload notes and research, and view them side-by-side with your copy as you write.

+1  
from Sarah Hutchins,  
managing editor of  
the IRE Journal

"This is what we use to track IRE articles, podcast episodes and other editorial content."

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## IRE members share their suggestions for staying organized during investigations.

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### ELLEN GABLER

Reporter,  
The New York Times

### 'Call log' spreadsheet

Free

Another IRE member showed me how to set up a 'call log' years ago, and I've used it ever since. **I take all my notes for interviews in the spreadsheet.**

It's very simple. In the header row, list out column names: Date, Name, Title, Organization, Phone number, Email, Slug, Notes. The "slug" field is important because it corresponds with whatever story the call is about. You can later use that field to sort the spreadsheet so all your interviews related to "opioids" or "nursing home deaths" come up together. The "notes" field is where you take notes while you interview someone.

The key to a call log like this is to be disciplined in your approach. **Use it every day for every call.** When you leave a message, write that down. It's helpful to be able to remind an official you've left 11 messages in the past four days and haven't heard back. Create the log in Google Sheets and you can have access at home, too.

---

### ANDY PIERROTTI

Reporter,  
11Alive News

### Amazon Echo

amazon.com/echo  
\$50 to \$150, depending on model

This may seem silly, but I find the Amazon Echo Dot extremely helpful. Whenever I'm at home and I think of something I need to do for a story, I simply say "**Alexa, remind me to do ... etc.**" It not only reminds you by audio, but it sends you a list of all your reminders.

---

### FRANCISCO VARA-ORTA

Data specialist and  
writer,  
Education Week

### Digital 'filing cabinet'

Free

When it comes to the data and documents that are part of my daily workflow, I try to imagine my computer drive, shared data folders and email folders as **digital versions of a filing cabinet.**

Keeping information in folders with recognizable names is important when working on a team project using a shared drive. It's helped us all see what we're looking at and the various versions of the data we've cleaned or analyzed over time.

With email programs like Outlook, I recommend setting up digital folders by category, such as story ideas, data tools and specific subject areas (like "parent engagement" or "tax reform"). Don't be afraid to create subfolders, too. These make it much easier to find documents when you need them on a whim.

  
+1  
from Samantha Sunne,  
independent journalist

"One of the really neat features is you can take pictures of your handwritten notes, and it makes the notes searchable."

# Rent a CAR

Data and visuals can make tough concepts understandable, especially when they involve subjects that affect readers' daily lives. We asked reporters to deconstruct their **computer-assisted reporting projects involving transportation** – including how you can replicate their analyses at your own news outlet.

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## ONLINE EXTRA

Timothy Healy of Newsday walks us through an advanced-level analysis using Excel, JavaScript and APIs  
[ire.org/blog/ire-journal](http://ire.org/blog/ire-journal)

**Beginner Level** MaryJo Webster, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*

When another Star Tribune reporter received a tip from the county medical examiner's office that the rate of accidental child deaths in the county was going down, Webster decided to take a closer look. She discovered the drop extended across Minnesota and was primarily **the result of a decrease in car accident deaths among teenagers.**

Webster mainly used WISQARS (or the Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System) to compare cause of death rates. The data tool from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention consolidates national, regional and state fatal injury reports. WISQARS lets you pull slices of the data, tailoring your results to look at causes of death, age ranges and years. It also offers per capita numbers.

Webster started by looking broadly at the data and then narrowing her analysis by cause of death and age group. She used line graphs in Excel to help visualize the data. Eventually, she realized that while most causes of death remained stable over time, transportation-related deaths saw the greatest decrease over the last 15 years, specifically car-related deaths among 15- to 19-year-olds.

The CDC only offered data up to 2015, so Webster used death certificate records the Star Tribune requests and keeps in house to figure out 2016 numbers. Webster and reporter Jeremy Olson used the data to write a public safety story on the reasons behind the decline, talking to law enforcement, experts and parents of teen drivers.

## Tools

Excel,  
WISQARS

## Tips from MaryJo

If you notice what you think is a trend, try and prove yourself wrong. Double-checking your work helps bulletproof your analysis.

Take your findings to experts. Do the numbers match what they're seeing in the real world?



**Intermediate Level** Jessica Park, *Hoodline*

Before Park started at Hoodline, editors had been receiving tips about transit inspectors targeting city bus and light-rail train citations toward specific neighborhoods. Editors at the hyperlocal San Francisco news website all had their own anecdotal evidence, **but no one had ever proved (or disproved) the hunch.**

When a tipster noticed you're more likely to get ticketed the closer you are to the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency headquarters, Park and her colleagues decided it was time to investigate.

It turned out the tipster was right — inspectors start their day at headquarters, working their way outward through the city, so most of the tickets are concentrated around the building. For example, public transit riders in neighborhoods near transit headquarters were much more likely to get tickets than residents who lived in neighborhoods farther from the city center.

Park requested about a year's worth of data from the agency. Officials took a few weeks to fulfill her request, first telling Park she could have access to copies of citations and then changing their minds. In the end, the agency provided a nearly 60,000-row Excel spreadsheet at no cost. But the document was a mess — empty cells, incorrect spellings, missing street numbers.

Park went through each citation, standardizing street names and consulting with her editors to figure out where tickets were issued on each bus route. Working with editors who knew bus stop locations and popular areas made the process smoother, she said. Park set up interviews with transit managers to try and fill in blank cells, but this didn't always prove useful. The managers explained that each transit officer had their own way of marking things down, so inconsistencies were inevitable. This meant Park had several hundred empty cells she couldn't include in her final analysis.

### Visualizing the data

To turn nearly 60,000 tickets into an understandable map, Park organized her spreadsheet

#### Tools

Excel

#### Tips from Jessica

Ask for the cleanest data possible.

Listen to your tipsters. In this case, readers on the ground helped drive the story.

Collaborate with others in your newsroom.

Chances are, there's someone who can help you figure out correct addresses or the best way to visualize your data.



Inspectors give out more transit tickets near agency headquarters in San Francisco. PARKER CRANE/HOODLINE

by neighborhood. Designers took her tallies and color-coded a map of the city — green spaces received the fewest tickets over the course of a year, yellow and red progressively received more. To reinforce the fact that most tickets were consolidated around agency headquarters, the graphic included red bars at locations with the highest number of tickets. ♦

# The Blocked List

Politicians love to use social media to talk directly with constituents (hello, POTUS). But when the conversation turns negative, **how many elected officials choose to mute or block dissenters?** Here's how to find out.

We reached out to reporters at the Courier-Journal in Louisville, part of the USA TODAY network, to learn how they unearthed the number of users blocked by Kentucky officials. Reporter **Morgan Watkins** showed us how she and colleague **Phillip Bailey** constructed a public records request that revealed Kentucky Gov. Matt Bevin was blocking nearly 600 people on Facebook and Twitter.

## Context

Watkins and Bailey had seen people post on social media about being blocked by politicians, including Bevin. There was even a hashtag: #BevinBlocked. The reporters figured it was worth asking how many users Bevin had blacklisted. They sent records requests to Bevin and other state and local officials who used social media in an official capacity. Below is a copy of the records request they sent to the governor.

**From:** Watkins, Morgan  
**Sent:** Friday, May 19, 2017 2:30 PM  
**To:** 'Stamper, Amanda (Gov Office)'  
**Cc:** 'Alexander, Mike (Gov Office)'  
**Subject:** Open Records Request from the Courier-Journal

Amanda,

Pursuant to Kentucky Open Records Laws and other applicable statutes, I am requesting the following records:

- the names and/or handles of accounts blocked by Gov. Bevin on his social media accounts (including but not limited to Facebook and Twitter)
- electronic copies of any and all direct messages sent to and received by the @GovMattBevin Twitter account
- the email address used to create Bevin's Twitter and Facebook accounts

I am making this records request on behalf of the Courier-Journal. If there will be a cost incurred for fulfilling this request, please notify me in advance before beginning to fulfill it so I can clear that expense with my supervisors first.

Under Kentucky Open Records Laws, you have up to three business days to respond in writing to this request. You can reach me by phone at [redacted], by email at [redacted] or by mail at [redacted].

Thank you for your assistance. Please don't hesitate to reach out to me with any questions you may have about this request.

Sincerely,

Morgan Watkins  
State enterprise reporter  
The Courier-Journal

**Address the letter** to your official's custodian of records or the spokesperson who handles records requests.

**Using language such as "including but not limited to Facebook and Twitter"** will help you cast a wider net. For one official, the reporters also received records for an Instagram account. Some specificity is good, Watkins said, "but you also want to kind of hedge your bets a little bit by including that, 'Hey, I'm not just asking for this. I also want anything you have that's pertinent.'"

**Limit your request** to the person's official accounts used for government business, rather than personal or campaign accounts. For example, Bevin had two Twitter accounts. His official one, @GovMattBevin, had a bio that read "Governor of the Commonwealth of Kentucky." His unofficial account, @MattBevin, had the bio "Christian, Husband, Father, Veteran," and directed users to his @GovMattBevin account for official updates. Government accounts offer something of a stamp of government activity, Watkins said. "For us, we kind of looked at it as an extension of their office."

Watkins and Bailey **asked for the email address used to create the accounts** because they were interested in who had access to them. "We were kind of curious whether that might indicate if there was a member of the staff that had direct access to that account and might be making decisions on who to block as well as the governor," Watkins said. As for the direct messages, the reporters thought they could shed more light on how public officials interact with their constituents.

Watkins and Bailey didn't receive pushback on many of their records requests. However, **if you get stonewalled**, Watkins said there are a few things you can do. "I would definitely ask for them to cite a legal exemption in whatever your state's open records law is, so that you can look at the statute yourself and see if that seems fair," Watkins said. Next, if your state has an appeals process for records requests — usually with the attorney general's office — you can file a complaint there.

## The Results

The records of blocked social accounts came in PDF form and included each user's profile picture, name and Twitter handle. Watkins' next step was to look up users one by one to see if the people behind the accounts were easy to contact. Then, Watkins cold-called or emailed folks and found a few who were willing to talk about why they might have been blocked.

After gathering anecdotes from blocked users, she reached out to sources including the American Civil Liberties Union and constitutional law experts to get context on the legality of public officials blocking users on social media.

Following the Courier-Journal's initial reporting, the ACLU of Kentucky sued Bevin on behalf of two constituents who had been blocked by him on social media.

## Show Your Work In Action

### In Maryland...

The Washington Post found that Gov. Larry Hogan had blocked 450 people from his Facebook page.

### In California...

The First Amendment Coalition found Gov. Jerry Brown was blocking more than 1,500 people on Facebook and Twitter, despite Brown's argument that his social media accounts were private, rather than public.

### In Missouri...

Gov. Eric Greitens refused to reveal the number of users he blocked when the Columbia Missourian sent in a records request. He claimed his social media accounts were private, and then created new "official state accounts" after the Columbia Missourian's request.

### In Utah...

NPR member station KUER in Salt Lake City sat down Utah state Sen. Todd Weiler for a phone conversation with a constituent he blocked on Twitter. Before the call was up, Weiler said he had unblocked the constituent.

### Across the country...

ProPublica looked into the legality of government officials at several levels blocking and deleting posts on social media. They found that while the issue is still being debated in courts, people contesting social media policies in several states have reached settlements that ended the blocking.



Dan Horn, Cara Owsley, Carrie Cochran, Liz Dufour and Amanda Rossmann look at photos in The Cincinnati Enquirer newsroom.

MEG VOGEL/  
THE ENQUIRER

By **Taylor Blatchford**,  
IRE & NICAR

*Sometimes your best resources  
are inside your own newsroom*

# The Home Team

Collaborations are a great way to extend your investigative reach. From the two-newsroom team to sprawling global alliances, we've seen plenty of examples of the power of partnerships. But the next time you think your story is too big for one or two reporters, consider a different kind of partnership model: the internal newsroom collaboration.

The Cincinnati Enquirer published "Seven Days of Heroin: This is what an epidemic looks like" in September with more than 60 reporter, photographer and editor bylines. The project aimed to look at the scope of the epidemic around Cincinnati by intensely reporting on one week in July. To do that, the paper used its entire news staff.

The result was a comprehensive package made up of short anecdotes, photos and videos from around the city, organized chronologically over the week with timestamps. At the end of each day's section, a graphic showed the number of overdoses and deaths. The total at the end of the week: 180 overdoses and 18 deaths.

The format of the story demanded much more

than one reporter, editor Amy Wilson said. Reporter Terry DeMio had covered the heroin epidemic full-time for two years, but she couldn't do this alone. Reporters and photographers fanned out around Cincinnati, editors kept the operation organized and data journalists called agencies every day for overdose statistics.

Mobilizing the whole newsroom took planning and strategy, Wilson said. The lessons they learned can help a newsroom of any size carry out similar projects.

## Define the format of your project

It's hard for an entire newsroom to write a cohesive story, but thinking beyond conventional project formats opens up more options.

Defining the structure of the project early on was crucial to future planning, Wilson said. They drew inspiration from The New York Times' "A Weekend in Chicago" project, which documented three days of gun violence in the city.

When it came to the heroin project, Wilson



said, “we didn’t have a beginning, middle and end because that was also the point. We wanted to give the idea of the grind. This is day in and day out. I think a traditional narrative would have missed that point entirely.”

After they settled on a structure, it was easier for editors to prep staff members on the content they wanted. Setting limitations on the project’s scope was also helpful, Wilson said. In this case, they kept all the scenes within one week in July.

### Use your newsroom’s strengths

Assignments for a large project can be broken down based on existing reporting beats. That way, reporters are covering areas where they have expertise. In the Enquirer’s case, the court reporter paid special attention to heroin-related cases that week. The health reporter covered hospitals.

Communicating with pre-existing contacts was also helpful, Wilson said. The fire and police departments were familiar with reporters riding along with them, and they agreed to accommodate them when DeMio reached out and explained the project.

Wilson and DeMio also met with reporters beforehand to explain the type of reporting they wanted: observations of what they saw and heard, like they were taking notes on movie scenes. They wanted to show readers the epidemic rather than telling them about it or asking experts to explain it.

“We tried to give (reporters) as much freedom as possible to go out there and learn,” Wilson said. “I think people came back from their own beats with new eyes.”

Stephanie Gaffney holds her 8-month-old baby at the Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center.

CARA OWSLEY/  
THE ENQUIRER

*Taylor Blatchford is a senior at the Missouri School of Journalism studying investigative and international reporting. She works as an editorial assistant at IRE.*

### Plan ahead and stay organized

The reporting staff covered 129 individual assignments during the week of the project, DeMio said. It took several brainstorming meetings starting in May to lay out the week of coverage in July. Reporters spread out to courtrooms, jails and treatment facilities, and talked with addicts on the streets and families who’d lost loved ones.

After reporters returned from an assignment, they had to check in within three hours and turn in their notes within three days. DeMio and reporter Dan Horn sorted through the raw notes and asked reporters additional questions. Then they put each scene on a 3x5 note card and taped them on the wall in chronological order. After cutting scenes they thought were repetitive, they split up the pile of note cards and turned them into dozens of vignettes.

“I thought it was very seamless when it came to the reporting and writing efforts,” DeMio said. “I knew the content was there, and I felt like we’d placed people in the right locations. I learned we could do this, and it’s quite doable.”

### Spread out responsibilities

Most of the 60 staff members who contributed weren’t working on the project full time. After all, Wilson said, they still had a daily paper to produce.

Reporters typically worked on one or two heroin assignments each day for a few hours, and a staff of seven summer interns helped keep up with daily coverage while reporters were pulled away for the project.

Most of the response to the project was positive, DeMio said. She and Horn spoke at community meetings, with university students and on public radio.

“Some were surprised at how entrenched heroin is in our communities,” she said. “Others, especially those who have felt the heroin epidemic personally with loved ones addicted, were not surprised, but they expressed thoughts that people needed to see the impact of heroin and other opioids in our communities.”

The project wasn’t easy, Wilson said. Even after all the planning, miscommunications led to problems, and she’s sure they’d make different mistakes if they tried it again. But overall, she said, the common goal brought the staff together.

“It’s exhausting, but I also can’t tell you how rewarding it’s been,” Wilson said. “We’re a better newsroom because we did it.” ♦



# Ditch the press conference.

In this issue, we'll help you ...

Plan for the worst, turn breaking news into a database, master the rolling investigation, expose hidden hazards in your community, track down witnesses on social media, report around a media blackout, find new ways to tell a story, and build an arsenal of government data and documents.

# B. Y. O. D. B.

Harness the power of breaking news to **build your own database.**

By **Erin McKinstry,**  
*IRE & NICAR*

1. **Think about who will maintain the tracker before you start.** Joel Currier, who runs the crime tracker at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, said he spends at least an hour and a half each week on their homicide map. He's the only one running it and says it can be a lot of work for one person. The data needs to be gathered, entered and audited. Consider spreading the workload across a couple employees.

2. **Match your platform and software with your experience level.** When the Chicago Tribune started their crime map, they had a team of staff developers who used Django to create a custom news app. Liam Ford is now in charge of the app and said if you don't have those skills on staff, don't hire someone outside your newsroom. "Once you're talking about someone who's not your actual employee and they're dealing with sensitive information like that, there can be questions and risks," Ford said. Instead, keep things simple. That's what KGET Bakersfield reporter Kristin Price did. She didn't have any programming experience, so she used Google Fusion Tables to collect their data and create visuals.

3. **Collect data that's hard to get.** Use your DIY database as an opportunity to gather and analyze information you couldn't just pull from a government website. Ford suggested collecting as much demographic information as possible, as well as dates, times and exact locations. He also suggested linking the data to any reporting you've done.

**M**ost newsrooms understand the importance of using data to back up anecdotal claims, but accessing that data can be a different story. Open records requests often require back-and-forth negotiation, and data collected by local and national agencies can be flawed or incomplete. So, some news organizations are taking matters into their own hands: They're collecting the data themselves.

The St. Louis Post-Dispatch, the Chicago Tribune and KGET Bakersfield all use breaking news reports, police and coroner's data and their own reporting to maintain in-house trackers. And although they all focus on crime, their insights could apply to any beat.

But with so much information readily available online, why create your own tracker?

Because then you're the one in control. You can decide what you want to track, how you want to track it and when you want to publish stories and update databases. You're on your own timeline, rather than waiting on annual reports, monthly data releases or emails from public information officers.

So, with all those advantages in mind, what are some things to think about before starting the process? Here are five tips for building your own database:

4. **Consider making some of the data private.** If you're collecting names and exact addresses, remember that while it can be useful for internal analysis and reporting, it can also be dangerous for victims and an invasion of privacy. Ask yourself: What should the public be able to easily access? Make that available and safeguard the rest.

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Is your newsroom using breaking news to collect data? Have an idea for how to apply these tips to your beat? Share your examples and ideas on Twitter with the hashtag #IREJournal.

5. **Use the data to inform your stories.** Price said KGET's tracker helped reporters notice an unusually high number of pedestrian fatalities, so they wrote a story about it. After publication, the police department took notice and started a public safety campaign. Currier said collecting case numbers has helped reporters draft more precise open records requests. And Ford said the Tribune started tracking data right as Chicago began seeing an increase in crime. The new mayor wasn't releasing as much information, but it didn't matter. The Tribune staff could use their own data to paint a better picture of what was going on in their city. ♦







BEYOND BREAKING NEWS

# Chasing the Ghost Ship

By Matthias Gafni, *Bay Area News Group*

**A**s I stood in the Wendy's parking lot, the fire chief slowly walked toward our small smattering of reporters. The charred purple-and-green facade of the Ghost Ship warehouse glowed in the morning sun across the street, its spray-painted name faded and nearly erased by fresh black soot. Light tufts of smoke wafted from its collapsed roof where nine bodies had already been spotted by first responders.

I jotted down notes as Chief Teresa DeLoach Reed gave the impromptu and somber first press conference regarding the Ghost Ship fire.

"It was filled end to end with furniture."

"Crews had difficulty making entry ... it was like a maze almost."

"There was a makeshift stairwell."

"We're unable to locate 25 people."

We rotate Saturday shifts at the East Bay Times, and on that December day, I happened to be working the morning shift. I didn't know it at the time, but that moment in the parking lot would launch months of investigations. Some started that morning; some are still ongoing. Some would focus on the cluttered firetrap. Some would question how city departments missed a litany of red flags at the building. Some would even lead to the sudden retirement of Chief Reed. A second deadly fire at a halfway house would raise fresh new questions and reinforce old concerns of systemic problems in the city of Oakland.

Thirty-six people died in the warehouse fire on Dec. 2, 2016. They were mostly young and unfamiliar with the two-story building in Oakland's gritty Fruitvale district. The warehouse was filled with pianos, wooden furniture and Balinese statues. Dozens of artists lived illegally inside as part of an underground artist collective. The night of the fire, however, a group of DJs and electronic dance music fans converged at the eclectic space for a party, unfamiliar with the interior maze and how to navigate a rickety staircase made out of wood pallets.

Federal investigators said they couldn't pinpoint what sparked the fire. Most of the victims were trapped on the second floor, huddled together, as thick black smoke choked the life from them.

## THE NEXT DAY

Thomas Peele awoke Dec. 3 to a one-word text from photographer Karl Mondon: "Fuck."

At the time, nine people were confirmed dead in the fire. The investigative reporter said goodbye to his wife, told her he wasn't sure when he'd get home and drove to the paper's Oakland office.

"At first it was incredibly basic. I wanted to know who owned the building," Thomas said. "It was also ID'ed as a warehouse ... I went to the city code enforcement site and found an open investigation for an 'illegal interior building structure.' This kind of jibed with reports from the scene that people were living illegally in the building. This was enough to post the first story."

It was the weekend. There would be no visiting the building department, no perusing county clerk terminals to find property records. We would have to get by with the limited information available online.

"Because of the long recovery period of the bodies, the government's priority that day was the grieving families," Thomas said. "It was hard to get answers about zoning and the code en-

forcement investigation."

Less than 12 hours after the fire was extinguished, Thomas had established the warehouse's ownership, the land-use permit history and the fact that city code inspectors had visited recently to try to investigate an illegal living situation.

As Thomas dug into the building's history from our downtown Oakland office, I remained out at the scene. By the afternoon, I was sending Thomas details from officials, friends, tenants and visitors at the warehouse to drive home those dangerous living conditions.

At one point, I simultaneously spoke on two cell phones at once: relaying questions from Thomas to my colleague Julia Prodis Sulek, who was at a bar speaking with mourning friends.

## 2-7 DAYS LATER

After Day 1, I was pulled from the scene and essentially locked in a conference room with Julia. We had five days to file a tick-tock piece detailing the hours leading up to the deadly fire and its aftermath.

We wanted to tell it through a variety of characters: firefighters, neighbors, victims, survivors, family and friends. We quickly learned that, especially with the young demographic of the victims, we could glean a wealth of information from social media. We found tweets promoting the party and reacting to the tragedy, Instagram videos of dancing and Facebook posts expressing guilt. Most importantly, for our purposes, they were all time-stamped to provide us a clear chronology.

But for the main characters in the story, we needed more. Within a week, we needed to gain the trust of strangers who were coping with the worst moments of their lives.

I was tasked with finding a firefighter who had battled the blaze and would be willing to talk. I normally worked in different cities, so I was starting from scratch with sources. Officials were tightly controlling the release of information, but I knew the city workers with the most autonomy would be union leaders. I finally tracked down a cell phone number for the president of the Oakland firefighters' union.

It turned out the Oakland native was on the second engine to arrive and actually battled the fire. It took two days of delicate, off-the-record conversations to gain his trust. The fire had clearly affected him, and I did a lot of listening before I finally broached the subject of whether he would go on the record. He did and shared a harrowing





tale of crawling on his hands and knees through the warehouse's maze of antiques as searing flames beat down on him.

He also shared a nugget of information that would drive future investigative stories: On the way to the fire, a colleague told him this warehouse was cluttered and the fire would be extremely difficult to fight. There was prior knowledge of this building's dangers.

Meanwhile, Julia went to a vigil for the victims. It was a somber event and highly charged, as mourners had grown wary of the growing media attention.

"Emotions were raw all around and as I began quietly asking people whether they knew someone who died in the fire, an anti-media tone began spreading through the crowd," Julia said. "Even our videographer, Dai Sugano, was yelled

Oakland firefighter Lt. George Freelen walks away from the scene of the deadly warehouse fire.

JOSE CARLOS  
FAJARDO/BAY AREA  
NEWS GROUP

at as being exploitative. Unfortunately, in this 'fake news,' anti-media era, this kind of reaction is becoming more common."

Julia decided to wait until the end of the vigil to approach two particularly distraught figures. One of them was Max Harris, the doorman that night.

"I greeted almost every single person who walked through that door," he told Julia, "and I'm usually the one who says goodbye to them at the end of the night as well."

"His story was heartbreaking, but I knew then we had our lede, and the structure for the narrative came into focus," Julia said.

Prosecutors eventually charged Harris with 36 counts of involuntary manslaughter along with Ghost Ship founder Derick Almendra. Prosecutors allege Harris helped construct the interior fire

trap and claim he blocked a stairwell that could have allowed partygoers to escape the blaze. Both men have pleaded not guilty to the charges.

#### 1-4 MONTHS LATER

As days turned to weeks and months, we had to keep the pressure on the city to release public records. That included writing an article on how our attorney threatened to sue the city for withholding documents detailing all the times the police, fire and building departments came into contact with the Ghost Ship warehouse from its inception a few years earlier to the deadly fire. We wanted to see if the city had been warned of the fire dangers.

In February, less than a week after we wrote about our lawsuit threat, the city released hundreds of documents from all three departments. We successfully fought the city to unredact many of the police reports, which allowed us to learn about numerous visits to the warehouse where officers learned of illegal parties and housing, but failed to act.

On March 27, nearly four months after the Ghost Ship fire, a candle inside an apartment sparked a blaze at an Oakland transitional halfway house. Firefighters rescued tenants from windows as others tied bed sheets together to escape the flames. Four people never made it out.



East Bay Times reporters learn they won a 2017 Pulitzer Prize.

JANE TVSKA/  
BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

We quickly switched gears from the Ghost Ship and turned our focus to that deadly fire, where we soon discovered more fire department dysfunction. We learned fire inspectors had found serious fire code violations in the building just three days before the blaze. Through a public records request, we obtained a string of emails that showed firefighters had long warned the inspection bureau of the dangers and need to scrutinize — especially in a post-Ghost Ship world — but there were significant delays.

Our reporting uncovered that firefighters had been warning inspectors to examine certain buildings with dangerous conditions through the department’s antiquated computer system. However, when they checked the “referral” box, absolutely nothing happened. No follow-ups. No inspections. Nothing at the city’s most vulnerable sites that had been flagged as dangers.

We decided to dig deeper into the fire department and inspection bureau. We made public records requests for lists of all the referrals made by the fire department, all the inspections and all the structure fires going back a decade. As Thomas would say, the data was crap. We drove to dozens of buildings where firefighters had sent warnings of code violations — but no inspections had been done — and spoke to frustrated renters.

It was worth it. From that data, we determined nearly 80 percent of warnings from firefighters to inspectors calling for reviews of unsafe fire conditions went unchecked.

*“Even our videographer, Dai Sugano, was yelled at as being exploitative. Unfortunately, in this ‘fake news,’ anti-media era, this kind of reaction is becoming more common.”*

—Julia Prodis Sulek

## 6 MONTHS LATER

We spent many months chasing down a rumor that seemed almost too outlandish to be true — firefighters had once partied at the cluttered Ghost Ship warehouse two years before the fatal fire.

“We got the tip early,” reporter David DeBolt said. “It was a story that lingered. We’d talk about it from time to time, pick away at it when we could, but it was one of many big stories we were chasing, and frankly a hard get.”

Our big break came from deep sourcing — and months of hard work by reporter Aaron Davis — that yielded two unique details of the party in question: a pig roast and a long list of bands.

David used Facebook to find a flyer from the organization that rented the Ghost Ship that night.

“Social media became our best tip sheet,” David said. “We scoured Facebook and Instagram for the list of people who had commented or said they attended. It was a treasure trove of sources we later tracked down through LexisNexis or Facebook. I found one man who took hundreds of photos and let us use them.”

Members of a band playing at the party even told us their sets were interrupted by power outages caused by the haphazard spider web of extension cords and wiring.

Once we nailed down the date of the party, we realized firefighters had responded to an arson call for a couch fire the night before. The crew returned the next day, witnesses told us, and hung out at the party for a couple hours, commenting on the warehouse filled with combustible materials that would later fuel the deadly fire that killed dozens.

“Establishing that firefighters were inside was key,” David said. “People trained to fight fires had been inside — on a day very similar to Dec. 2, 2016, when 36 people died at a dance party — and made no warnings.”

## 10 MONTHS LATER

More questions arose as I dug through the documents we received from the trio of city departments. Back when we first got the documents, I noticed some police reports indicated an officer turned on his or her body camera during an incident at the Ghost Ship. I determined which of those interactions might be potentially newsworthy based on the report’s narrative — some calls to the warehouse were for stolen cars or other unrelated topics — and filed a public records request for the body camera footage. It took months of constant pressure from our team of reporters and our attorney to get a look at the footage.

In September, about seven months after I sent

in my request, we received a body cam video from a police officer who went to the warehouse in 2015 — about a year before the fire — for a report of an illegal rave.

He warned the occupants: “I will be talking to the city, and we’ll be dealing with this place.”

He never did.

## ALMOST 1 YEAR AFTER

In the 10 months since the fire, just about every corner of the newsroom has played a role in covering the Ghost Ship aftermath.

As I write this in October 2017, we are planning our one-year anniversary coverage. We are filing public records requests for various city documents to look at what has changed since the tragedy. Which promises were kept? Which were not?

As I type this, I am in the second week of investigative coverage following the deadly California wine country wildfires that killed at least 42 people and destroyed 8,400 structures. Sometimes news dictates you shift gears or take a break, but we aren’t stopping our Ghost Ship coverage.

Our next big investigative push is another data story. Thomas is analyzing inspection data from 11 different fire departments — including Oakland — going back many years. State laws require basic yearly safety inspections at schools, high-rise buildings and apartment buildings, among others.

“Oakland, clearly, has failed to meet that mandate for years,” Thomas said. “The question is what other departments have done. It is important, given the situation in Oakland, to look at the effectiveness of this important public safety function. The cities don’t audit this, and neither does the state fire marshal, so the findings are likely to be revealing.”

Traffic for our stories has fluctuated over time. We believe there’s some Ghost Ship fatigue by readers. But we sporadically get reminded why we continue the search, like in June when we received an email from a woman whose sister died in the fire.

“In the six months since the fire, it’s become so obvious that this whole tragedy could have been prevented in a number of ways,” she wrote. “The work that your team has done to uncover and highlight the facts, and to force the process at certain points, has been nothing short of amazing. I do really, really appreciate all of that effort and ownership and the taste with which you have handled it all. When I was ready to deal with the facts, it was all there for me, and I have continued to follow your reporting on the topic since.”

“It feels as though you are fighting for us, for her, for the public.” ♦

*Matthias Gafni is an investigative reporter with the Bay Area News Group, publishing articles for the East Bay Times and San Jose Mercury News. He and his colleagues won a Pulitzer Prize in 2017 for his breaking news work on the Ghost Ship warehouse fire. You can follow him on Twitter at @mgafni.*

Don't wait for disaster  
to report on the dangerous  
chemicals in your community

# Hidden



An aerial shot of the damage at the West, Texas, chemical plant after an explosion in 2013.

SMILEY N. POOL / HOUSTON CHRONICLE



By Matt Dempsey,  
*Houston Chronicle*

# I had been working for the Houston Chronicle for only a few months when, in November 2014, a chemical leak killed four workers at a DuPont plant in La Porte, Texas.

icle to be caught flat-footed before the next disaster, since we're located in the hub of the chemical industry.

For the next year, these questions sent me and colleagues Mark Collette and Susan Carroll on a reporting journey through a catalog of databases, sources and reports.

We ended up collaborating with Texas A&M University's Mary Kay O'Connor Process Safety Center to create a first-of-its-kind chemical hazard index, something the government didn't have. Using that index, we showed which facilities in the Houston area had the highest potential for harm to the public.

To be honest, I knew practically nothing about covering the chemical industry. My previous stops in Phoenix and Atlanta didn't have a robust industrial chemical sector, so it hadn't come up in my reporting.

As the data reporter for the Chronicle, I knew I could dig up pollution databases like the Environmental Protection Agency's Toxic Release Inventory, but that wouldn't help me learn about disasters with immediate effects on workers or the public.

As my colleagues on the investigative team learned more details about the DuPont disaster, a long list of questions started forming in my head.

The chemical that killed those four workers was called methyl mercaptan. What is that stuff? Why is it dangerous? Who else in the Houston area has it? Are there other chemicals that are more dangerous?

The DuPont plant had a long list of mechanical and maintenance issues. Was there a way I could find out about other chemical plants that have similar problems?

With the approval of my editor, I went into full research mode. I wanted to know which facilities could cause the most problems if things went wrong. I wanted to be able to find out which chemicals posed the greatest risk to the public.

I thought about the stellar reporting the Times-Picayune did on the levees in New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina. I didn't want the Chron-





With that analysis as a starting point, the Houston Chronicle produced an eight-part series on the hidden potential danger of chemical facilities and the startling lack of government oversight.

In the process, we learned a number of techniques to report on the chemical industry in our city and quickly get key data in the middle of a disaster.

A year after our project, our reporting paid off again when a plant we identified in the series erupted with chemical explosions during Hurricane Harvey. We knew exactly where to look and what to ask.

### Mining online data and documents

Your first step should be to look for the facility in the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's inspection database — or your state OSHA database, if your state runs its own OSHA program. It's not perfect, but it's a good first stop. The database should tell you whether the compa-

A yearlong investigation by the Houston Chronicle/Texas A&M University ranked Texas chemical plants by the highest potential for public harm.

MICHAEL CIAGLO/  
HOUSTON  
CHRONICLE

ny was inspected in the last few years and the basic results of those inspections.

OSHA can cite companies for any number of safety regulations. The ones we looked for related to the handling or storage of hazardous materials, usually called "process safety management." If a company has an incident with hazardous chemicals and its OSHA history shows violations and fines for mishandling those chemicals, that's a great detail to be able to report in a breaking news situation.

The OSHA database often does not include very recent actions and it is not always complete. If you find an inspection with a lot of scary-sounding violations, you can call or email the local OSHA office and ask for the full inspection report. Sometimes you can get it without a FOIA, but making a request is worth it. The details you get can flesh out a longer story about the facility, even if it's months later. An inspection report we obtained on one facility that had multiple fires revealed it was using hanger wires and duct tape to attach chemical hoses.

The second step is to look into your state environmental agency. Check for histories of complaints, violations and whatever else your agency has to offer. The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality databases and documents are notoriously confusing and intimidating for people without working knowledge. Get to know your state agency and its systems before a plant blows up or a pipeline leaks.

Third, check the EPA's ECHO database, which offers an overview of federal environmental violations at facilities. If a plant violated federal regulations such as the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, Resource Conservation and Recovery Act, or Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act, it will show up there. It also has a handy chart that shows you how many quarters the site was not in compliance with federal rules for the last three years.

Next, check whether the facility has a Risk Management Plan on file with the EPA. If a company has more than a threshold amount of specific chemicals, it has to file such a plan. It requires the company to detail what a worst-case scenario could look like and how it could happen. The company is also supposed to list what it has done to prevent that from happening. There's great detailed data in there too, such as how many injuries or fatalities the facility has had.

One caveat: Companies have to file them every five years and those five-year periods can be differ-



ent between specific locations. So, you can't compare the RMP statistics from one company to the next because the time periods will be different.

The Chronicle has made it easy to check RMP data on companies in your communities. Visit [rtk.net](http://rtk.net) and search by company name, city, ZIP code, county and state. You can even look up all facilities with a specific RMP chemical on site.

The online information won't provide all the details. To view the complete plan, you'll have to make an appointment with an EPA reading room. When you arrive to view the document, you'll be joined by a U.S. Marshal who will watch to make sure you don't take pictures, make copies or scan anything. You can only take handwritten notes. But those details can reveal a lot. For example, you can find out what area and how many people would be affected by a company's worst-case scenario.

Another key document to look for online in the aftermath of a chemical incident is the material safety data sheet, or MSDS. These sheets detail how a particular chemical is used, what makes it hazardous and the physical effects of exposure.

Chemicals can have confusing names, so always ask first responders or chemical companies what chemical is leaking or being released. If they can provide the Chemical Abstract Service number for the substance, that will make things easier. Then use the CAS number or chemical name to find the MSDS for the substance involved in your incident.

## Paper and persistence

There are a number of other key documents and sources that aren't easily accessible online. First among these are Tier II forms. Created by the Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act, these documents are chemical inventories for facilities that store a threshold amount of hazardous chemicals. The company provides the inventories to first responders, the state and local emergency planning committees. Under federal law, they're public records, but a clause in the law allows states to make them private or more difficult to acquire.

If you can get them, however, they can be invaluable. They detail the names and amounts of all chemicals on the site, expressed as a range (e.g., 50,000 to 100,000 pounds). This allows you to ask companies and first responders about specific chemicals during a breaking news event.

The hard part is getting them. The laws are different in every state, so check over the records statutes for your area. Start with the state en-

# *The chemical that killed those four workers was called methyl mercaptan. What is that stuff? Why is it dangerous?*

vironmental agency to see if it will provide the whole database of inventories. From there, work your way down to local agencies like fire departments and local emergency planning committees. Either should have the inventories for facilities in your area.

Be persistent. Sometimes the best source for an inventory is the company itself. In Texas, the state rules make it hard to get inventories, but you can get them directly from a facility if you ask. The company might fight you, but I've found citing any local laws in your favor can get them to bend more times than not.

Find out which agency in your area is the best at hazardous material response. There's likely a municipal fire department or county fire marshal office that is the lead agency for these kinds of calls. It takes a lot of training and experience to do well. If you can identify that agency, develop a relationship with them before news breaks. Show them you know what you're talking about and you're just looking for straightforward answers during responses.

Get to know your local emergency planning committee. For most cities, it's going to be your county's office of emergency management. The committees are often barely functional, but if yours is up and running, it can serve as a valuable way to get access to companies and the government agencies that respond when something goes wrong.

Some areas have something called a Citizen Advisory Council. It's essentially a group of local industry officials who talk about issues going on at their facilities, and members of the public are invited. If you have a large number of chemical facilities in your area, check for CACs, because they are a good way to find out what companies are worried about. Plus, it's a room full of potential sources.

Covering chemical incidents can make even experienced reporters feel out of their depth. But if you get familiar with the resources detailed above, you'll have more informed stories about chemical incidents in your area. ♦

*Matt Dempsey is the data editor for the Houston Chronicle. He previously worked for the Arizona Republic and Atlanta Journal-Constitution.*

# Tracking down sources on social media

When videos of a man being dragged off a United Airlines flight surfaced on social media last April, **Daniel Victor** got to work. **The New York Times Express Team** reporter's first step: confirming with a United spokesman that the incident did, in fact, happen on one of their planes. From there, Victor worked to cull more details from social media. Here are some tips for how to do the same in a breaking news situation, using the United Airlines incident as an example.

## Start with a social site.

### Facebook's Advanced Search

Search for people who posted or checked in to a place near the scene of the event.

#### HOW

Start with the Facebook search bar and use keywords like "chicago o'hare international airport united airlines." Then filter your results using the tools on the left side of the page.

#### TIP

"Posts From," "Tagged Location" and "Date Posted" filters can help you narrow your results.

### Twitter

Use Twitter Advanced search to find tweets coming from a specific location (like the O'Hare International Airport).

#### TIP

Think about how you would write a tweet: Use "my" or "me" plus relevant keywords (flight, seat, plane) to find witnesses or victims.

"If this happened to you, you don't say, 'A man on flight dragged from airplane.' You don't write like a headline," Victor said. "You say, 'Oh my God. Someone on my flight is being dragged off the plane.'"

### YouTube & Instagram

Use hashtags and location searches to find people posting video and photos of the event.

#### EXAMPLE

Hashtag #flight3411 or search for the location of the O'Hare International Airport.

### LinkedIn

Current and former employees can be great sources.

#### HOW

To find a former employee, use this formula in the LinkedIn search bar: `prevpositions:companyname - currpositions:company name`

#### TIP

Make sure you have spaces on both sides of the minus sign.

#### EXAMPLE

`prevpositions: "United Airlines" - currpositions:"United Airlines"`

#### TIP

Use the company's full name in quotation marks to get the best results.

## Find someone? Now you need to verify.

### Check a potential source's activity prior to the event.

If the news is unfolding at the Chicago airport, was the person tweeting from Chicago or about their trip leading up to the event?

"If there's no clear signs the person belongs there, you want to get in touch and get some confirmation, get the back story," Victor said.

### Try to get an official to confirm the basic events.

A video or photo posted on social media might only show one piece of the story.

"I always think about the five minutes before and five minutes after the video," Victor said. "If the video is a small snippet of something, you might see the reaction, but not what instigated it."

### Contact the person who posted the video or photo and make sure it's original.

If you're going to hang your story on a social post, make sure you talk to the person behind it.

"There are a lot of people who will simply take someone else's video and upload it themselves," Victor said.

# The Disaster

*Five newsrooms explain how they added context, clarity and creativity to their breaking news coverage.*

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## Reporting a problem in plain sight

**A**fter a horrific fire in London's Grenfell Tower killed at least 80 people in June, officials tried to determine if the inferno was fueled by the combustible panels that clad the sides of the building.

This led to an obvious question for almost anyone who lives or works in a high-rise building: Could that happen here?

In many places, it can and already has.

Grenfell Tower was covered in polyethylene-core panels — two sheets of aluminum that sandwich a rigid core made of a petroleum product that can burn with great intensity. Our investigation for *The Wall Street Journal* found numerous examples around the world of buildings covered in the same type of combustible-core panels that were quickly consumed in flames.

The fires were documented in fire-safety reports, academic journals and short news items in *Factiva* and *LexisNexis*. For example, since 2012, fires have raged in a half-dozen Dubai high-rises that had these panels. One tower there, the Marina Torch, has burned twice in three years.

In addition, the *Journal* tallied thousands of buildings — including schools, hospitals, airport terminals and hotels — clad with metal panels with combustible cores, which architects like for their sleek design qualities.

The result is a gamble between aesthetics and safety. Builders have known the panels' cores

By **Jennifer S. Forsyth,**

*The Wall Street Journal*

The June 2017  
Grenfell Tower  
fire in London.

were combustible and dangerous for more than a decade. Arconic Inc., the manufacturer of the panels on Grenfell Tower, said it expected builders to exercise caution and use other kinds of panels in high-rise buildings. "As soon as the building is higher than the firefighters' ladders, it has to be conceived with an incombustible material," explained a company pamphlet reporters found online.

Grenfell wasn't the first deadly fire. In Baku, Azerbaijan, a fire in a 16-story building killed 15 people and injured 50 others in May 2015. Authorities suspect the fire was started by a cigarette butt thrown in a nearby trash container that set the building's exterior panels ablaze.

It was never clear to us why companies continued to manufacture panels with combustible cores when other less dangerous options were available. The combustible panels were cheaper to make and sell, though not by a lot.

Many of the media reports after Grenfell erroneously stated that aluminum panels with combustible plastic cores were generally not allowed on high-rise buildings in the U.S. and many other countries. The standard for U.S. building codes did at one time reflect the view that these panels shouldn't be used on high-rises — but that changed five years ago.

*Journal* reporters learned this by studying the current model U.S. building code as approved by the International Code Council, a nonprofit advi-

# Plan

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## A fragmented story for a fragmented year

By **Brent Jones**,  
St. Louis Public  
Radio

The fatal  
shooting of  
Michael Brown  
in Ferguson,  
Missouri.

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sory group that writes the building codes typically adopted across the U.S. The reporters couldn't find wording that banned such panels, and in fact, the wording appeared to allow the panels on most high-rises. So, they asked the ICC: What gives?

It turned out that in 2009, at the request of a panel manufacturer, the ICC's 14-member fire safety committee unanimously recommended loosening the code to allow the panels to be used at any height. Some conditions applied to their use, including installing interior sprinklers and at least 20 feet of clearance from other buildings. And the panels couldn't cover more than half of a building's exterior.

The Journal spotted this change by reading the ICC committee's meeting minutes. A video of the meeting, which the ICC gave to the Journal upon request, showed there was little debate about the change.

The cladding investigation was a reminder that dangerous conditions are often literally right in front of us, where we live and work. We should ask hard questions about how buildings are constructed and who is ensuring that safe standards are met. It's also a reminder of the need to scrutinize primary source documents, in this case the International Building Code. That might sound obvious, but it led us to a eureka moment when we figured out the code was loosened and a panel manufacturer had pushed for the change.

*Jennifer Forsyth is the deputy chief of investigations for The Wall Street Journal.*

“**W**hat's it like right now?” As a journalist working in St. Louis after Michael Brown was shot and killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, in August 2014, I was asked that question a number of times.

As the first anniversary of Brown's death approached and St. Louis Public Radio began to think about how best to encapsulate the past year, we kept coming back to that question. Each person who was part of that story — protesters, police officers and their supporters, Ferguson residents, Brown's family, business owners, politicians — had their own answer to that question. We decided to let them tell it.

We organized the multimedia project “One Year in Ferguson” around five phases: confusion, grief, waiting, the grand jury decision and organizing for change. Audio editor Bill Raack and newscast producer Stephanie Lecci wrangled audio for us, sifting through hundreds of hours of recordings gathered by our reporters in the field to identify representative and balanced pieces that reflected those five phases. The finished project includes more than 150 individual cuts of audio — more than an hour and a half — including environmental sound like protest chants and police giving orders over a loudspeaker.

Kelsey Proud, our digital innovation editor at the time, worked to cull the visual representation to nearly 150 photos that would complement the audio. We coordinated with the St. Louis American, a weekly newspaper serving St. Louis' African-American community, to feature their outstanding work. We also used photos from our own reporters, local photographers shooting for the press pool and police evidence.

While my colleagues selected the audio and video pieces, I had to figure out how to make them all work together. I've long admired the NPR visuals team's work, including their commitment to working in public and open source. I had recently seen a project of theirs called “Life After Death” about an African village dealing with Ebola. It was an audio slideshow that prominently featured photography but also allowed for captioned audio.

Using this framework, we were able to combine environmental audio with interviews and photos. As the reader clicks through the slideshow, new photos appear and corresponding audio plays. Aside from basic descriptions and audio captions, there's minimal text. And while the project is arranged in loose chronological order, there's no overarching narrative thread to tie the whole piece together.

This was done purposefully. Newspaper designers have an adage when it comes to great lead photos: "Run it big and get the hell out of the way." I took the same approach with our audio. All these people sharing their stories were answering the question, "What's it like right now?" We decided to get out of the way and let them tell their own stories in their own words.

This piecemeal process served another purpose, too: The project seems disjointed. There are jarring transitions. We decided this was acceptable at the time, and now I see it as a strength. One common feeling during the events was a sense of the unknown. Every day we were doing our jobs, collecting these pieces of stories. But nobody knew how it would all fit or what the finished puzzle would look like. We decided the project should reflect that.

As journalists, we could — and often do — fit these pieces together to tell a nice, coherent retrospective. But in answering the question "What's it like right now?" that's cheating a bit. We're hearing these stories one by one, piece by piece. There wasn't a single, coherent answer. So, rather than putting the puzzle together and presenting the finished image, we decided to dump the pieces out on the table and help our audience hear them as we did, piece by piece, with each person in the story having a chance to answer, "What's it like right now?"

*Brent Jones is the data visual specialist at St. Louis Public Radio.*

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## Portrait of a gunman

By **Leslie Eaton**,  
*The Dallas Morning News*

[The 2016 ambush that killed five Dallas law-enforcement officers.](#)

*Leslie Eaton has been investigative editor of The Dallas Morning News since January 2016.*

**W**hen my three dozen donuts and I walked into The Dallas Morning News at 6:30 a.m. on July 8, 2016, I knew how my investigative team would spend the day: profiling the gunman who shot and killed five Dallas law enforcement officers during a peaceful protest downtown the night before.

Based on my unfortunately extensive experience with mass shooting stories, I knew we would need reporters not only to start pulling public records and social media on the gunman, but also to show up on the doorstep of every person we could link to him. Phones weren't likely to work. Who answers a call from an unfamiliar number these days?

Nothing beats the door-knock, especially if you get there first. So while other DMN teams focused on identifying the victims and nailing down the events of the previous night, I began rounding up volunteers from all over the newsroom, including reporters from our education and business clusters, our Spanish-language publication *Al Día* and even the summer interns.

Before 10 a.m., a name had surfaced on social media: Micah Johnson. We started sending reporters to addresses for locals with that name, using driver's license data from a subscription site, *Publicdata.com*. Even before police confirmed, we knew we had the right person — Micah Xavier Johnson — because officers had his house cordoned off and crime-scene technicians were removing bags.

Facebook proved crucial. Our data team immediately found and copied pages for Johnson, his sister and friends before they came down. A reporter in our Austin bureau found a mutual acquaintance and successfully reached out. We got basic military and school records. By early afternoon, we published a bare-bones profile.

As the day went on, we added to the portrait,

*We decided to get out of the way and let them tell their own stories in their own words.*

finding a friend of Johnson's mother through bankruptcy court. Records from a suburban police department revealed officers had once questioned him after someone thought he looked suspicious sitting in a car outside a strip mall. Trying to figure out the location of a photo Johnson posted, a reporter met a source who could place him at a Malcolm X film festival.

We were reluctant to aggregate unverified information from other news outlets. There was a lot of bad information flying around about Johnson, including fake social media accounts. Neither his family nor the police were talking. But when we saw two reports that Johnson had been forced out of the Army, reporter Sue Ambrose confirmed them with his military lawyer.

By early evening, we had a pretty complete portrait. There were 14 bylines, and I'm still not sure we included everyone who deserved credit.

In the following days, reporter Brittney Martin used Facebook and other social media outlets to find soldiers who had befriended Johnson and believed he had been mistreated in the military. Veterans reached out to us with a very different version of Johnson's time in Afghanistan.

In the three weeks following the shooting, we had submitted almost 100 public records requests to federal, state and local governments. Our in-house records genius, Steve Thompson, kept a running list of our filings. We also employed a tracking tool developed by our data team, which reminded us of crucial deadlines. It was so useful that we rolled it out to the entire newsroom in 2017.

One victory came after the Department of Veterans Affairs denied us Johnson's mental health records. Reporter Kevin Krause explained to the agency that it had released such records after the death of the Navy Yard shooter in 2013; we got the documents. They confirmed what we had been reporting for weeks: Johnson returned from Afghanistan with serious psychological problems.

The Dallas Police Department, famous among locals for its hostility to the media, has released almost nothing on the ambush since July 2016. We don't know if Johnson was using drugs during the attack, or all he said to negotiators before he was killed by a bomb-bearing robot. We don't even have his autopsy report.

We may never get any of this material. Under a loophole in the Texas public records law, police departments can choose to withhold information in cases where there is no judicial adjudication. Johnson is obviously never going before a grand jury. The News has been trying to change that law — and meanwhile, we just keep asking questions.

# *Nothing beats the door-knock, especially if you get there first.*

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## A focus on traditional watchdogging techniques

By **Jason Kandel**,  
NBC4 Los Angeles

*An explosive fire at a Maywood, California, recycling plant.*

**I**mages of an explosive fire stuck in my head for days after a metals recycling plant lit up in flames and prompted an evacuation of hundreds of residents in Maywood, a city in southeast Los Angeles County.

NBC4 videographers captured the hellish scene on June 14, 2016 — intense flames and an explosion that completely whitened out the picture, erasing everything on screen. When the images returned, we saw firefighters scrambling for cover.

Hundreds of residents of the mostly Latino area were forced to leave their homes for days while firefighters worked to contain the blaze at Panda International Trading Company. Others were displaced for weeks as officials from the health department, an air quality board and the Environmental Protection Agency converged to test homes and the surrounding area to figure out when it would be safe to return. Officials found magnesium, copper, zinc and lead, which became the focus of an EPA Superfund Response Team cleanup.

In the days and weeks after the fire, resi-

dents reported breathing problems, nausea and headaches. Some people moved out permanently. Others couldn't afford to. They returned to a neighborhood behind the scrap yard that had sat vacant for months while winds kicked up debris from the fire.

I scoured the web and read everything about the fire, the business and its operators in order to create a timeline of the blaze and its aftermath. I found an old news release about the company from the California Department of Toxic Substances.

The agency executed a search warrant in 2013 after someone reported black dust on a sidewalk in front of the business. The department suspected the dust contained high levels of metals. On its website I found a felony criminal complaint charging the owner with violating state health and safety laws for improperly storing hazardous waste without a permit and an earlier complaint fining the company for handling hazardous waste without a permit.

I requested documents under the California Public Records Act from the Los Angeles County Fire Department, which handled the response to the fire and oversees inspections for such businesses across the county. An online search led me to information on filing records requests, including which documents are typically released and a spreadsheet of contacts.

I requested everything the agency had on Panda International going back a decade. I received numerous documents, including previous calls for service and inspection reports that tipped me off to other problems at the warehouse before the fire.

The county fire department initially denied interview requests about the plant, citing an ongoing investigation. But after I repeatedly called the spokesman, the department allowed us to interview the chief of the hazardous materials unit, who was leading the charge to change state policies about how metal recycling plants handle hazardous materials.

In addition to fire department records, I requested call log records from the Vernon Police Department, the first agency to see the blaze and call in firefighters. These records helped fill in gaps, added texture and provided a moment-by-moment chronology of the initial police and fire department responses. I put this into a spreadsheet and worked with a multimedia producer on an interactive timeline.

I contacted a community activist who knew neighborhood residents and helped my broadcast colleagues and me with homeowners in

Maywood, some of whom only spoke Spanish and were reluctant to talk.

We found that years before the toxic fire, the owner of the facility was cited for environmental health violations, that complex rules about operations for hazardous materials sites leave residents in danger, and that tens of thousands of California residents live near small facilities that use hazardous materials. I wrote a three-part series that ran online and several broadcast pieces summarized the findings on air.

After our story ran, state legislators passed a new law strengthening regulations on recycling plant business practices. Meanwhile, I'm still sifting through thousands of pages of EPA documents I requested shortly after the fire. The agency finally released them — a year after my request.

*Jason Kandel is an award-winning journalist with more than 20 years' experience covering news in Southern California.*

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## Investigating around a media blackout

By **Karisa King**,  
*Las Vegas Review-Journal*

**A deadly shooting on the Las Vegas Strip.**

*Karisa King is the assistant managing editor of the investigations team at the Las Vegas Review-Journal.*

**I**n the wake of a mass casualty event, one of the toughest challenges newsrooms face is balancing the insatiable demands of a non-stop digital news cycle with deeper dives.

It takes time to dig for records and develop sources, and doing that kind of investigative work on breaking news stories may seem counterintuitive. But it's important for reporters looking for accountability angles to jump into the fray.

Fewer than 12 hours after a gunman opened fire above a music festival on the Las Vegas Strip in October, the Review-Journal filed public records requests seeking 911 recordings, search warrants, autopsies and dispatch logs.

Las Vegas authorities rejected the requests, citing an open investigation into a massacre that left hundreds injured and 59 dead, including the shooter. Two weeks after the shooting, police stopped news briefings and declined interviews. Police imposed an information blackout for three months after the shooting.

Many questions remain unanswered about the gunman's motive, how he stockpiled high-powered rifles in his Mandalay Bay suite and how building security and authorities responded to the shooting.

Without open channels of information, reporters have had to get creative.

One key to advancing the story has been a newsroomwide push to develop background sources and obtain confidential documents.



*We did not treat the shooting as the domain of only the breaking news team or police reporters. Instead, we asked every corner of our newsroom to dig. The strategy paid off with scoops from varying news desks, including health and features.*

We did not treat the shooting as the domain of only the breaking news team or police reporters. Instead, we asked every corner of our newsroom to dig. The strategy paid off with scoops from varying news desks, including health and features.

As the law enforcement investigation came up empty on the shooter's motive, Paul Harasim, our medical reporter at the time, obtained records that might be able to shed new light on the gunman's mindset. The documents showed that three months before the massacre, the shooter received a new prescription for an anti-anxiety medication that can trigger aggressive behavior and psychotic experiences.

Investigative reporter Jeff German also used sources to break multiple stories. One article revealed that the gunman shot at jet fuel tanks near the concert grounds before he opened fire on the crowd. Police speculated that the shooter targeted the tanks to spark an explosion and create a distraction before killing. In response to the story, county officials ordered a safety review of the tanks to assess the danger they might pose to the Las Vegas Strip.

After authorities changed the timeline of when a Mandalay Bay security officer was shot by the gunman, German learned from sources that the officer was staying at one of the company's properties at their expense. The story raised concerns about possible corporate influence over a key witness in the criminal investigation and civil litigation against MGM Resorts International.

With little access to vital public records from Las Vegas authorities, reporters working to assess the emergency response to the shooting sought documents from a state agency charged with overseeing such plans.

Investigative reporters German and Anita Hassan found that the Nevada Division of Emergency Management had not reviewed emergency plans for casinos on the Las Vegas Strip — including Mandalay Bay — for five years before the mass shooting.

The investigation showed the agency had all but ignored a state law passed shortly after the 9/11 attacks requiring resorts to file their plans. Reporters also found a 2008 audit that slammed the state for lax enforcement of the law and suggested the poor oversight was hurting the state's ability to respond to emergencies.

In response to the story, state officials created a task force to overhaul the process for drawing up the emergency plans to make them more useful. The task force may recommend legislation that would allow the state to enforce the law requiring the plans. But much of our investigative work is yet to come. ♦

74

SECONDS

*How MPR News turned 74  
seconds of news into a  
deep-dive podcast*

*By Jon Collins, MPR News*

## In the summer of 2016, as a reporter for Minnesota Public Radio News, I was assigned to cover a police shooting — a traffic stop turned fatal.

Many of the details echoed what was happening across the country: A black man had been killed. Protesters were gathering. Politicians were calling for an investigation.

But this shooting was different: Philando Castile's final moments were streamed around the world. Castile's girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds, used Facebook Live to document the aftermath from the passenger seat of the car where he was killed, sitting in the driver's seat.

Because of that video, Castile's name, face and final moments were everywhere in an instant. For the second time in less than a year, Minnesota was plunged back into the national spotlight for a police shooting. The previous fall, police in Minneapolis had shot and killed Jamar Clark, a 24-year-old black man.

So, as details about Castile's shooting began to develop, our entire newsroom snapped into action. We produced daily online and radio stories, profiles and more. MPR News had reporters out at the scene of the shooting, following midnight marches across town and checking in with Castile's family members.

This is what became clear:

Castile, a 32-year-old black man who worked in an elementary school cafeteria, was driving his girlfriend and her young daughter through the Twin Cities suburb of Falcon Heights when he was pulled over just after 9 p.m. on July 6, 2016.

Jeronimo Yanez, an officer with the St. Anthony Police Department, walked up to the driver's side window and told Castile he had a broken brake light. Castile disclosed to Yanez that he had a firearm. Seconds later, Yanez fired seven bullets into the car. Castile suffered fatal wounds.

Four months later, the county attorney with jurisdiction over the case took an unprecedented move: He charged Yanez with manslaughter.

We had never heard of a Minnesota police officer being charged for killing someone while on duty. Our reporting later confirmed the hunch.

The officer's trial was set for May.

I wondered: What was the best way to cover this? It felt too big for our normal methods.

I'd followed the podcast "This Land is Our Land" by Oregon Public Broadcasting, which covered the trials of militia members who occupied a wildlife refuge. If that podcast hadn't existed, I would have only read one story when the trials started and one when they ended. But the pod-

## So you want to launch a podcast...

Before “74 Seconds,” Minnesota Public Radio News had never produced a podcast. Here are Jon Collins’ tips for journalists who want to make their own show.

### **Don’t underestimate the importance of archiving and labeling audio.**

Our colleagues did an amazing job preserving audio from the events surrounding the shooting.

**Be creative.** We broke some cardinal public radio rules by using tape of TV newscasts or chatter from a phone call that would never make it into a traditional radio story. That helped make it feel real to listeners.

**Don’t try to sound like someone other than yourself.** Both Riham and I work in radio, but we come from print backgrounds. That’s not a bad thing. We sound like real people, with all the quirks that sometimes entails.

**Don’t feel compelled to include everything you know.** Long-form audio offers the opportunity to dig into a story, but some things you uncover might never be used because they’ll just distract or confuse the listener from the main story.

**Do group listening sessions.** We recruited journalists from all over our building to listen to rough drafts of early episodes. Almost every suggestion improved the podcast.

**Have a formal process for fact-checking.** We kept intense-looking Google Docs where we fact-checked every line of our scripts. This protected us from publishing any inaccuracies, streamlined the story and helped build a solid foundation for the later episodes we had to produce more quickly.

**Keep it simple.** In our early episodes, we did dozens of drafts with complicated structures. In the end, we almost always returned to straightforward, chronological storytelling.



cast allowed me to follow the cases every step of the way. The journalists behind it were able to explain all the legal nuances that are difficult to understand in an incremental story.

I sat down with my colleague Riham Feshir and we started to work on a pitch for our own trial podcast — one that would cover the death of Castile and trial of Yanez. We holed up in a recording booth after our shifts were over and wrote up a rough proposal. We wanted to cover the trial, but also, at a very basic level, we wanted to answer the question: What happens when a police officer goes on trial for killing someone in the state of Minnesota?

We also knew this wasn’t just a local story. We made clear in our pitch that we wanted to place the podcast in the national context of police shootings: Castile was one more name on a growing list the public knew. There were questions for the whole country to consider. How did police train for these encounters? How many officers nationwide had ever been found guilty in cases like this?

We ran our pitch past our bosses, who were supportive despite the fact that our newsroom had never produced a podcast like this before. Of course, everything always takes longer than you expect: By the time our pitch was formally approved, we had just about two months before the trial was set to start.

We started to sketch out what the podcast would look like in meetings with our editors and producers. We didn’t want to start with “The Trial: Day One.” We wanted to ground listeners in the characters, issues and political context we

The “74 Seconds” team included editor Meg Martin, producers Hans Buetow and Tracy Mumford and reporter Jon Collins.

RIHAM FESHIR/  
MPR NEWS

thought was essential to understanding the trial as it unfolded.

To do that, we created four background episodes. For each one, we wrote out a long list of reporting that needed to be done to keep us focused. It was during those weeks leading up to the trial that we filed many of our public records requests and made contact with the main sources who helped us tell the story.

Our first two episodes started by profiling Castile and Yanez. We touched on their backgrounds, their work lives and the circumstances that led them to the scene of the shooting. With both episodes, we also tried to get at the broader issues, like how reductive media coverage can be of black men killed by police, and how the St. Anthony Police Department had disproportionately ticketed black drivers.

Our third episode was dedicated to the timeline of the shooting itself. The incident unfolded in just 74 seconds; that's the time between when Yanez flashed his lights to when he fired seven shots. The escalation immediately makes you ask: "How?" We devoted the episode to walking listeners through everything we knew about those key seconds using all the materials we'd gathered so far.

Our fourth background episode set up the back-and-forth between protesters and politicians, leading up to the announcement of the manslaughter charge.

Once the trial began, the podcast took a stark stylistic shift. We went from deeply narrative episodes into breaking news mode. We began producing real-time updates on the trial, walking listeners through the details of jury selection or the evidence presented. We relied on reporter debriefs and interviews with legal experts to make these episodes work.

Never forget that simple explanations have the power to be fascinating. At one point, we had a defense attorney who had previously represented a police officer in another state walk us through how he would pick a jury.

These trial episodes were complicated by one key hurdle: In Minnesota, no cameras or recording devices are allowed in most courtrooms. We had to rely entirely on our handwritten notes. During the rare breaks, we would run out of the courtroom to call our producers and editor back at the office and recount what had happened. We were lucky to find a spare moment to grab a drink of water or use the restroom before court resumed. After court let out, we would head back to the newsroom to file stories and work with producers to put together an episode.

*Jon Collins is a reporter for MPR News, where he co-hosted the "74 Seconds" podcast along with reporter Riham Feshir, editor Meg Martin and producers Tracy Mumford and Hans Buetow.*

Our original plan was to do weekly recap episodes of the trial. We had specifically said we wouldn't do daily updates — but more often than not, that's what we ended up doing. The critical moments in the trial came faster than we expected. The dashcam footage of the shooting, which we had anticipated as one of the biggest reveals, came during opening statements. All of a sudden, we were churning out three or four episodes a week instead of one, as originally planned. There were too many important things to include, and we felt we owed it to our listeners to keep them as up to date as possible.

After a week of testimony and nearly a week of deliberation, the jurors found Yanez not guilty on all counts.

But the podcast didn't stop with the verdict. There were questions and stories beyond the courtroom that we still wanted to tell. We took listeners to the protests that erupted after the trial. We spoke to black men about the realities of carrying a gun in Minnesota. We walked through the evidence that became public after the trial.

Over the course of three months, we put out 22 episodes, in addition to radio and online coverage. To craft the finale, we returned to many of the people we had met while covering the story. Many of their lives had been drastically changed. And we also returned to the national context.

We closed the podcast by running through the numbers on police shootings with reporter Wesley Lowery of The Washington Post. The Post maintains the essential database on the issue, and those numbers show there hasn't been any real shift in the number of police killings despite all the media attention in recent years.

Most of our feedback was surprisingly positive. Before we launched, we got pushback from a few people who questioned why we would cover the trial when the families of Castile and Yanez were no longer publicly commenting. After listening, some of these vocal critics became close sources. We also got good responses on social media, especially from people in the legal world who valued our depictions of the way the criminal justice system works. Cops and activists also sent us feedback, most of it unexpectedly positive.

We're excited to see more podcasts being done by journalists, holding to the same standards we use for telling stories in newspapers or on public radio. If we had another story that could benefit from being told as a long-form podcast, we'd certainly propose it again. It was a privilege for everyone on the team to spend so long focusing on this important issue. ♦

# A practical guide for the data prepper

## Records worth stockpiling to deliver on deadline

**G**overnment databases are useful for in-depth projects, but they can also add oomph and context to deadline reporting. The key is creating a records stockpile, keeping it up to date and having it on hand for breaking news.

Here a few government records — most available for free — that, once collected, will help you on deadline.

### Crashes

Provide context to any traffic fatality with data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's Fatality Analysis Reporting System ([bit.ly/FARSdata](http://bit.ly/FARSdata)). You can download fatal crash data involving cars, motorcycles, bicycles and pedestrians going back to 1975. Use the data on deadline to explain the history of a deadly intersection or trends in the type of crash you're covering.

If downloading and cleaning this massive database seems like too much work, NICAR sells a ready-to-analyze version as a CSV for pretty cheap ([bit.ly/NICAR-crash](http://bit.ly/NICAR-crash)).

Take your prepping to the next level by collecting recreational boating accident data from the U.S. Coast Guard ([bit.ly/BoatData](http://bit.ly/BoatData)), plane crash data from the Federal Aviation Administration ([bit.ly/AirCrashes](http://bit.ly/AirCrashes)), or the train crash database from the Federal Railroad Administration ([bit.ly/TrainData](http://bit.ly/TrainData)).

### Crime

Having local crime data on hand can help you provide context whenever a public safety story breaks. Some news organizations keep an updated database from city or county police. The national FBI Uniform Crime Reporting database ([ucr.fbi.gov](http://ucr.fbi.gov)) has its shortcomings, but it can provide general comparisons and trend information. NICAR also offers a cleaned-up version in CSV or SQL format ([bit.ly/FBIdata](http://bit.ly/FBIdata)).



By **David Cuillier**,  
University of  
Arizona School of  
Journalism

*David Cuillier is the director of the University of Arizona School of Journalism in Tucson, Arizona, and a member of the Freedom of Information Committee for the Society of Professional Journalists. He is the co-author, with Charles Davis, of "The Art of Access: Strategies for Acquiring Public Records."*

### Natural disasters

If Mother Nature pummels you occasionally, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Storm Events Database might come in handy to provide context on tornadoes, hurricanes, winter storms or flash floods, going back to 1950 ([bit.ly/StormEvents](http://bit.ly/StormEvents)). The data include fatality information as well as longitude and latitude, so it can be easily plotted on a map.

It doesn't hurt to gather other records before disaster strikes, such as local building permits issued in areas prone to wildfires or flooding, building inspection records to identify weaknesses in earthquake readiness, dam and bridge inspection data, or local tornado siren testing inspection records.

### Industrial accidents

Every now and then, industrial plants wreak havoc on a community. Having the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's workplace safety data on hand can provide context for companies in your area that have poor track records ([www.osha.gov/oshstats](http://www.osha.gov/oshstats)). The Environmental Protection Agency's Toxic Release Inventory is also helpful for identifying environmental polluters ([bit.ly/ToxicRelease](http://bit.ly/ToxicRelease)). Mining accidents are recorded by the Mine Safety and Health Administration ([bit.ly/MineAccidents](http://bit.ly/MineAccidents)).

### Backgrounding

Often a breaking story involves backgrounding individuals who are thrust into the spotlight, usually unwillingly. Having easily accessible public records about people can help in backgrounding on deadline.

Some newsrooms collect a variety of local databases that often contain addresses, including voter registration, pet licenses and property records. Government employee salary data can include job start dates. Access to vital records, such as marriage licenses and birth certificates, can vary depending on the state. Some newsrooms collect court conviction data, which can be invaluable in breaking news situations when the courthouse might not be open.

More and more of this information is available online, particularly at the national level. But often the best databases are those collected locally and not available online.

The key is to acquire these records before they are needed, keep them updated and maintained systematically, and use them frequently to understand their nuances and limitations. That is power deadline reporting with a document state of mind. ♦

# Whatever you do, don't panic.

Lessons from more than three decades covering breaking news



By **Stephen Stock**,  
NBC Bay Area

**A**fter more than 35 years working in television newsrooms, covering everything from hurricanes to serial murders to space shuttles, I've found one common thread that runs through almost every newsroom when the scanner goes crazy and news breaks: frenzied, hysterical panic.

But in the rush to get out the door and get a crew to the scene, I have found that the journalism organizations that handle breaking news best always do something else: They stop. They exhale. They think. Then they call a meeting.

Too often we don't stop and think about the issues, angles and perspectives that would better inform our communities if we just took the time to report them instead of rushing to the fire, crime scene or disaster.

Yes, reporters on the ground must get to the scene. But newsrooms shouldn't stop there. We must dig into the how and why — not just the who, what, when and where.

With the advent of the internet and social media, we can do much of that digging quickly, adding depth and perspective to our coverage. And we can do it without ever leaving the newsroom.

Put into practice, this mindset can prove invaluable. Here are some examples:

## **Asiana Flight 214**

After Asiana Flight 214 crashed on a San Francisco International Airport runway in July 2013, NBC Bay Area was able to track the flight path of the plane's final approach within hours of the crash. Once the initial response occurred and crews were sent to cover the event from the

ground, other reporters and editors gathered in a meeting to vet ideas. Using a whiteboard, we outlined ideas, topics and issues we believed needed to be explored and covered in greater depth.

Using a variety of internet sources, we listened to air traffic controllers before and after the crash and found photos of the airplane as well as detailed descriptions of its physical properties. Online digging also turned up a detailed history of crashes involving 777s and other large commercial airlines, a layout of SFO Airport and specs on the airplane and the flight plan of that particular trip (plus its previous flights).

We also used Banjo, a social searching tool, to track people tweeting and posting on Facebook and Instagram about the crash and found a passenger who had been on the plane. We were able to connect and interview him live as he stood waiting to be evacuated beside the runway.

## **Mass shootings**

When covering breaking news, always remember the bigger picture. For example, less than two hours after two suspected shooters opened fire in 2015 in San Bernardino, California, we were on the air with details from an FBI study on mass shootings. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention helped us put the tragedy into context. All of these records were available online.

Similarly, we used these techniques after the shooting at Oikos University in Oakland and the Oakland warehouse fire that killed 36 people.

## **So, remember...**

While journalists love to compete, our ultimate goal isn't to keep up with the other guys. We want to provide meaningful coverage that makes a difference in readers' and viewers' lives. Giving your community depth, perspective and context is more important than rushing to the scene.

To do this, newsrooms must have leadership that understands getting to the story and getting it on television (or the front page or the homepage) isn't the goal of covering breaking news. The story doesn't stop there. That's where it begins. ♦

*Stephen Stock is a senior investigative reporter at NBC Bay Area. His work has been recognized with numerous awards, including a Peabody, a duPont, three Murrow awards, 15 regional Emmys and a national Emmy nomination. His work has changed state laws in Florida and California.*

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