Global Investigative Journalism Network

Citizen Investigations

A GIJN GUIDE

Overview

Titles Don't Matter, Investigate!

Curiosity fuels investigations, and there's no monopoly on who can be curious.

Citizens can investigate, and they do. GIJN provides some great examples below.

This GIJN guide aims to help non-journalists investigate even more. The sections teach the techniques used by investigative journalists.

Our guide will help with:

- Planning and carrying out an investigation
- Ethics and safety
- Searching the internet
- Researching individuals
- Finding out who owns corporations
- Looking into government records
- Investigating politicians
- Digging up property records

We welcome suggestions for expanding this resource. Please contact us via the GIJN website.

The online version of this guide can be found at https://gijn.org/citizen-investigations

Citizen Investigations Underway Worldwide

We took a look at the impressive investigative work being done around the world by citizens.

Citizen investigators include ordinary citizens, members of nongovernmental organizations, and non-journalism professionals interested in using investigative techniques to uncover wrongdoing and expose the invisiblve.

One of the most innovative and successful investigative outfits, Bellingcat, was created by Eliot Higgins, who was working various administrative jobs and taking care of his child at home when he started blogging about the civil war in Syria. Looking at video footage he found on the internet in 2012, he discovered that the Syrian regime was using cluster bombs and chemical weapons. He and Bellingcat have since conducted many important investigations.

GIJN has accumulated other recent examples, which are incorporated into the chapters of this guide.

As difficult as it is for individual citizens to bring their research to public attention, the truth finds a way out. Sometimes the findings get published through social media or as letters to the editor. Some citizen investigators engage with others in social activism and present their work at community meetings or before government bodies, or even take their findings to law enforcement officials.

What's in a Name?

Digital disruption has led to the empowerment of citizens both to choose what they consume and to use media to directly affect their societies. Investigations increasingly take advantage of more government information being online (though certainly not everywhere) and new techniques. Researching for citizens is made easier because of the internet. Investigations are done by analyzing public data, probing social media, and examining images from the air via drones and satellites.

People without professional qualifications working outside of organizations with an editorial structure are out there researching, investigating, writing, and shaping public opinion.

The line between professionally trained journalists and alternative investigators, be they citizens or nongovernmental organizations, is blurred.

Our use of "citizen investigator" suggests a broader group of people, but it's worth considering the role "citizen journalist."

The term "citizen journalist" has come to have multiple meanings, but usually refers to citizens who have a working relationship with established media outlets. Many media outlets have increased their appeals to citizens for tips, photos, videos, and opinions.They have made it safer to submit contributions.

Crowdsourcing has enabled journalists to gather more information, faster, and from many more people.

Smartphones have essentially created a worldwide network of potential eyewitnesses who can share photos or text first-hand accounts. This is sometimes called "citizen witnessing." Such contributions often help illustrate daily news shows and sometimes can form the raw material for investigative journalism.

Efforts to integrate "amateur" journalism into existing media haven't always succeeded, but the concept continues to be explored and developed.

And with access to the internet, many researchers and investigators are bypassing traditional media. According to University of Oklahoma professor Clemencia Rodriguez, in Latin America, for example, "citizen journalism is a practice of resistance that emerges as social movements, activists, and other social justice collectives refuse to embrace the notion that only professional news organizations can practice journalism and nourish the public sphere with information key

to democratic processes." (Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives – Volume 2)

At the same time, researchers and trained journalists are being hired by nongovernmental organizations to publish investigative stories (Matthew Powers 2015) that contribute to their advocacy and campaigning efforts. The NGO Global Witness, for example, employs journalists and has done investigations that have been picked up by major media outlets like the Financial Times, the Guardian, and ABC News.
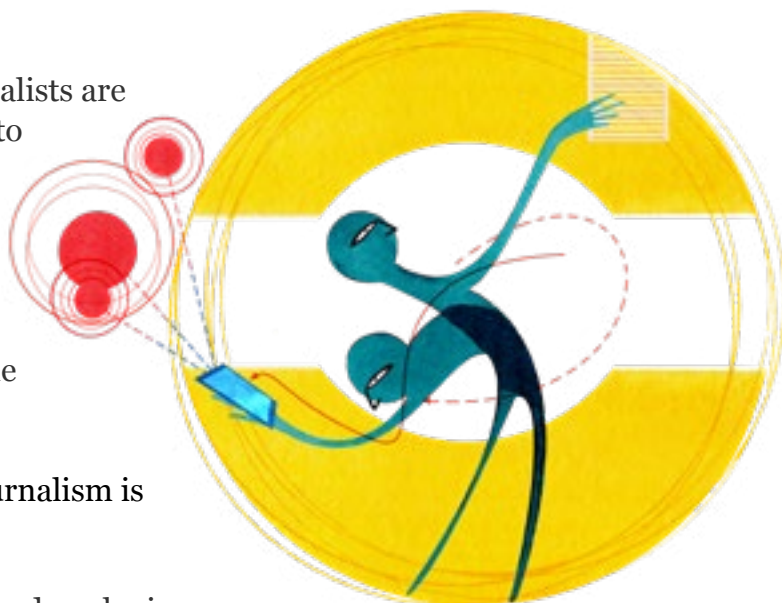
Unsurprisingly, there is a debate about what journalism is and who is qualified to do it.

"It has become fashionable in recent years to wonder who is and isn't a journalist," wrote Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel in The Elements of Journalism (2014), continuing:

> *"We think this is the wrong question. The question people should ask is whether or not the person in question is doing journalism. Does the work proceed from an adherence to the principles of truthfulness, an allegiance to citizens, and to informing rather than manipulating — concepts that set journalism apart from other forms of communication?"*

Drew Sullivan, a co-founder of the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, recognized the blurring of roles between activists, bloggers, citizen journalists, watchdogs, and journalists. "If you can't tell them apart, they are doing the same thing," he said, quoted in Global Teamwork: The Rise of Collaboration in Investigative Journalism. "They are all investigators. Journalists don't need to be activists — we just need to agree on the findings." He believes we need to define new roles and build networks of like-minded investigators.

This GIJN guide seeks to provide useful information from the world of journalism in order to stimulate and instruct the ever-growing number of citizen investigators — the ordinary citizens, members of nongovernmental organizations, and non-journalism professionals interested in using investigative techniques to uncover wrongdoing and expose the invisible.

Planning and Carrying Out an Investigation

Investigation: A Learnable Skill

Journalists have to learn how to conduct investigations. Citizens can learn, too.

Citizen investigators often begin with a very important advantage – motivation. Their drive may be based on a particular irritation, a suspicion, or a special interest. Whatever the source, having a goal is an advantage.

Another plus for citizen investigators is having local or specialized knowledge. Thinking through your idea and assessing your goals is critical. Beginning with a question sets the stage for research. After that come other basic steps, including:

- Honing questions;
- devising a plan for discovery;
- conducting research;
- assembling and evaluating your findings;
- summarizing your conclusions.

We'll provide suggestions in all of these areas, but this is necessarily an abbreviated treatment, a

synopsis drawn from the experience of investigative journalists worldwide plus guidebooks and articles about doing investigations.

For a deeper dive into investigative techniques, GIJN has compiled a list of manuals written for journalists. (See more on this below.) They are quite accessible to non-journalists.

One common theme that runs throughout the advice is that there is no single way to conduct an investigation, and improvisation will be necessary.

Mindset and Preparing Questions

Asking a question is the springboard to discovery. The right question both motivates and disciplines the investigative process. It doesn't have to be the perfect question. After all, you're looking into the unknown. Nor does it have to be precise, but it shouldn't be overly general.

What is it you really want to know? What are you looking for?

Framing the query as a theory, a hypothesis, is important. Keep it short, write it down, even pin it up. Some journalists like to draft the start of the story, as if the premise was true.

The question helps you move forward. From the overall question, subsidiary questions will likely flow. You may even hypothesize several alternative hypotheses. Having a hypothesis is not the same as having a bias. The foundation of an investigation will be shaky if it is built on a false assumption or a personal bias. Having too narrow a theory of what's going on might prevent you from seeing other rationales and facts. So question assumptions. If evidence points in another direction, it's essential to revise one's hypothesis. The facts make the story.

This is one of the toughest challenges in conducting an investigation. Continue to be skeptical as you go, and also be open to the evidence as it emerges.

This is particularly important if you have political views or a personal stake regarding the investigative topic. Evidence that contradicts your thesis needs to be included in your analysis. Remember that investigations may not always take you where you thought they would, but that's not a bad thing. Sometimes the facts will lead you down unexpected paths. Remember, too, that the world is a complex place, and bad guys are not always so bad, nor good guys always so good.

Beginning Your Research

At this beginning stage, take stock of what you don't know. Write down what you would like to find out.

Put another way, what facts would shed the most light on your hypothesis? Doing deep background research pays off. Many investigators prefer to do paper research before doing people research. Documents before interviews. But exceptions may be useful, such as to get a

basic education from an expert. Explore what's been written already about the subject.

As you read, try to learn about:

- the basic facts of the subject;
- relevant history and figures;
- the language of the subject area, the lingo (key terms and definitions);
- the key actors.

Remember the classic questions: Who? What? Where? When? And why?

Questions to Ask

As you go, keep asking (yourself):

- Do public documents/data exist and where?
- What nonpublic documents/data might exist?
- Where are documents and data kept?
- Who is involved?
- How are they connected? (Some researchers create maps.)
- What vested interests exist?
- What people might tell you about it?
- Where did/do things occur physically?
- What are the consequences?
- Who benefits and who is hurt?

As you delve deeper, you will no doubt refine your goals. Make a timetable of the next steps for planning purposes. Set priorities. Many researchers prefer to circle in on the subject, gathering evidence before confronting key people. Consider your schedule. What activities might take longer, like a trip to a site or an official request for documents?

Interviewing

The interview is one of the most effective tools in the investigator's toolbox.

Good preparation and careful listening are keys to success. Good interviewing is an art akin to good conversation.

Let's look at these elements in more detail. For additional guidance see: GIJN's resource page on interviewing.

Good Preparation: This step begins by considering what your interview subject might know, what his or her motivations are, and what you want to learn. Choose a venue comfortable for the interviewee, put him or her at ease, and build trust.

Ground Rules: Explain who you are, why you are interested, and what you plan to do with the information. Agree about how the information can be used. How will it be attributed? Will the person's name be used? Consider whether their safety could be compromised.

Good Questions: Writing down your questions and organizing them logically is advisable. Some experts like to start with softer questions. Consider neutral, open-ended questions, but don't shy away from pointed inquiries or questions about feelings. Avoid questions likely to be answered by "yes" or "no." Instead ask questions such as "how," "why," and "what." Short, single-subject questions are good. Listen attentively and ask follow-up questions. Special care should be taken when interviewing young or vulnerable persons. Advice on this score is included in GIJN's resource page on human trafficking.

When possible, record interviews. Otherwise, take good notes. Keep a notebook and pen with you. Use a camera, including for photos of documents. Creating an accurate record of your research findings is one of the most essential tasks you'll be doing.

Your credibility will depend on the reliability of your information and your documentation. Consider how to protect yourself and your sources from harm.

Basic steps include strong passwords and encrypted phone calls. For tips on protection, refer to the section on digital security.
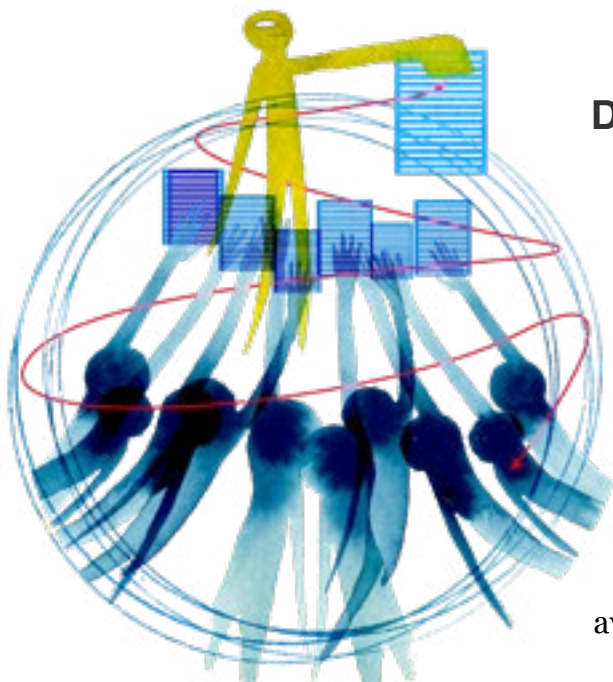
Doing Research: The Paper Trail

Among the most common mistakes investigators make is not starting off with a thorough search of what has already been published. Don't reinvent the wheel! Search news reports, academic reports, government records, local archives, and other sources of published information, until you are sure you have a full understanding of what's already out there. Then you can build on that.

The modern impulse is to do internet research first, which is fine. But remember that not everything is online. For example, some government documents may only be available physically, in government offices.

Besides, what's online may not be trustworthy, so evaluate if the source is credible and how the information can be verified.

Consider alternative places where the desired information might exist:

- Beside national government agency records, are there court records or state and local records?
- Who might have collected material and have an archive? Community

> activists, hobbyists, academics, and professional associations are among fruitful places to look.
> - Searching back issues of newspapers and magazines is often productive.
> - Librarians and archivists can be your friends.

Good probing requires imagination.

If one path is blocked, look for other sources of related information. If you can't get a desired document, ask how else can you get the information. Perhaps two parties are involved, such as a government and a contractor. Be flexible, agile, resourceful.

Government denials of information may not be the final word. Consider filing an official request using your country's access to information law. You may want to seek out a local access-to-information group for help in making an appeal.

Chapter 3 of this guide provides tips on effective internet research and will introduce you to the known tools for finding out about people, corporations, and governments. When journalists refer to "open source investigations," they mean using many techniques to find publicly available information.

Due Diligence

As you research, be cautious. As they say in the financial world, exercise "due diligence" by making sure that documents are authentic and being alert for factual contradictions and inconsistencies.

Throughout the research process, be wary. What you hear might be inaccurate. The accuracy of a fact needs to be confirmed. A source's word should be questioned. A photo may need to be verified. In the worst-case scenario, documents may be fraudulent. Authenticate and verify.

"Primary" documents are original documents that provide firsthand testimony or direct evidence about your topic.

When drawing facts from documents, look back for the original source. Follow footnotes. Examine the credentials of the source. Search for the authors. Look for criticisms of the authors or the study that gave rise to the "fact."

You may want to seek help in understanding complex documents, especially those involving technical, bureaucratic, legal, and financial language. As you consult experts, remember that they are not only sources of knowledge and opinion, but also may guide you to other documents and experts. Always ask sources questions such as: What else should I read? Who else should I talk with? Who actually witnessed this?

"Secondary" sources, such as published articles, websites, and social media may not be reliable. You're trusting the work of others. Verify!

Increasingly, citizen investigators have turned to social media to request information. Such "crowdsourcing" may be useful, but tips require confirmation.

Research has a way of expanding and investigations can be wearying. Some leads are disappointing dead-ends. That's just how it goes. Focusing on the original goal can be rejuvenating. At this stage, you may need to draft new questions and hypotheses. Stay alert for new developments.

Doing background research sets you up for interviewing. Your research should generate names of people to contact.

Sources

Unless there's a golden document, most investigation requires the direct knowledge and perspective of credible sources and experts.

Through open source research and by talking with people, identify possible sources. Some ideas include:

- experts, those who have spoken or written on the topic;
- officials, but don't think only of the top ones;
- affected parties, from all sides;
- advocates, people in groups associated with the topic, such as
- civic or professional groups;
- "formers" or people formerly involved with the subject, such as former employees.

Think about possible relationships:

- Who is affected, adversely or positively?
- Who gains?
- Who loses?
- Who might have heard or seen something?
- Who has an interest in talking?

Some investigators create source maps defining relationships. Spreadsheets can be useful for keeping a list of possible sources.

The number of sources you use is important to the integrity of the information. Two is considered the minimum, but more is better.
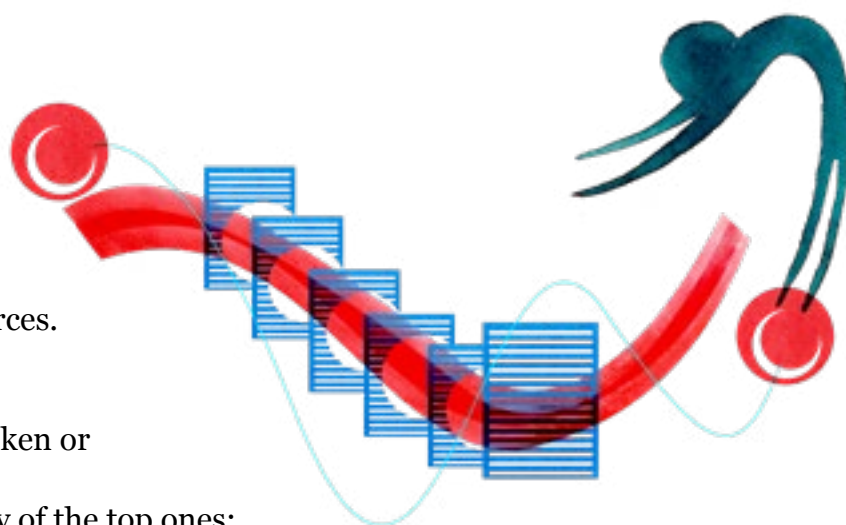
Not only does a larger pool of sources ensure the reliability of the information, it usually means more detail and nuance. You may have personally witnessed something, and that is usable, too.

Consider the source. Research them, too. Does the "expert" really have good credentials? Possibly a vested interest? Who are they? What's their agenda? Did the "eyewitness" really see an event, or just hear about it secondhand? Confirm their statements.

It may take time to cultivate a source, particularly when sensitive subjects are involved. Be sensitive to their fears. It may take several meetings with a source before he or she is forthcoming. These relationships are often built on trust, and it will be up to you to establish that.

For a discussion of journalistic ethics, see **Chapter 3**.

Take good notes. When possible and legal, record interviews, but take notes, too.

Besides talking with people, make site visits when appropriate. "Field trips" sometimes yield unexpected results. Visual checks may determine the accuracy of government reports by comparing claims with the reality on the ground. You may have chance encounters with people who can help.

Canadian Girl Tested Water Samples

How One Kid Stopped the Contamination of a River was the headline for an article about 11-year-old Stella Bowles. She collected and analyzed water samples from the LaHave River, which runs beside her home on the South Shore of Nova Scotia, Canada.

Documenting Your Research

Whether you are finding things online or talking with people, it's vital to maintain good records.

Make sure you can point to the source of the information and prove its accuracy, and maintain records of your research and your contacts. Preserving your research record means retaining documents and knowing where they came from. It even means anticipating that online documents could disappear and protecting against that possibility by printing or downloading them. It means keeping track of who you heard things from and when, and having good notes.

Keeping your investigative findings organized will pay dividends. There's a temptation to skimp on good labeling and careful filing, whether in paper or digitally. A well-organized archive of material will make it easier to find what you know and define what you don't know. Some experts suggest creating a master file to serve as an index to where your material exists.

The End Game

For journalists, the outcome of an investigation is usually an article or broadcast. Citizen investigators might write an article, a report, a blog post, or a letter to the editor. Or they may take their evidence to legal or other authorities.

Regardless of the specific medium, you'll want to communicate your findings effectively.

It's almost always important to summarize your conclusions clearly and briefly.

Think about your organization. A tried and true organizational form is telling the story chronologically, but other systems can work, too. Before you begin writing, an outline usually helps, even if it changes later.

The redrafting process is a time to think about factual gaps and make sure that the facts are correct and attributed. Spell names and places correctly. Small mistakes undercut credibility. Have you avoided plagiarism? Violated agreements with sources?

When writing, and later when editing, ask whether the product explains things smoothly and clearly to a reader looking at it for the first time. Is the story meaningful to the reader?

Consider cutting extraneous language and material. Editors often talk about flow and rhythm — whether there is a "narrative" that carries the reader along.

Photographs, charts, and other visualizations also help tell stories.

The final days of writing typically mean double-checking your facts and speaking to subjects of the investigation that you may not have wanted to talk with before.

Ask persons familiar and unfamiliar with the topic to read your product critically.

As an investigator, you are not bound by the high legal standards of an honest

prosecutor, such as proof "beyond reasonable doubt," or whether the "balance of probabilities" tips one way or another. But these are useful touchstones, and something to keep in mind if your

intent is to submit information to a prosecutor or legislator.

Look down the road. Is there a danger that you could be charged with libel or

defamation? What might be the consequences of your investigation? Consider your safety as well as the safety of those affected.

> **US Family Documents Toxic Waste**
>
> Ayne Amjad, a doctor, continued her parents' information-gathering to document the medical effects of toxic chemicals dumped in their West Virginia community. She then advocated for action, a story told by The Washington Post.

Overall, are you satisfied that the result is fair? Can you stand behind it?

You may be praised or criticized.

Investigations rarely are final. So how can you follow up, as an investigator or an advocate?

Guides to Investigative Reporting

Many good how-to manuals have been written. Below we list some of the best.

You'll find a bigger collection here at the GIJN Resource Center. Also, guides in Chinese and Spanish.

We also have material on defining investigative journalism. While those definitions vary, among professional journalism groups there is broad agreement of its major components, writes David E. Kaplan, GIJN's executive director: "systematic, in-depth, and original research and reporting, often involving the unearthing of secrets." (Investigative Journalism, Defining the Craft). (See also Kaplan's video explanation.)

Kaplan states:

> *"Investigative journalism involves exposing to the public matters that are concealed – either deliberately by someone in a position of power, or accidentally, behind a chaotic mass of facts and circumstances that obscure understanding. It requires using both secret and open sources and documents."*

So let's get started:

Story-based Inquiry: A Manual for Investigative Journalists focuses on "hypothesis-based inquiry." Published by UNESCO in 2009, it is available in seven languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish.) It provides a guide to the basic methods and techniques of investigative journalism.

Investigative Journalism Manual: This useful guide began as a handbook for African journalists, with case studies and exercises, published by the German foundation Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. The latest edition is global and is designed for reporters facing repressive media laws, lack of transparency, and limited resources. It is available in various languages and as an interactive website. It takes a step-by-step approach, making suggestions such as: "After coming up with a concrete idea, creating a hypothesis, source mapping is the next stage of the investigative reporting process."

From Citizen Reporting to Citizen Journalism is a guide created by the group Media Helping Media.

Investigative Reporter's Handbook: A Guide to Documents, Databases, and Techniques. The fifth edition of this book by Brant Houston and the US group Investigative Reporters and Editors is available for sale online.

Concerning basic journalism skills, one of many resources is Journalism Essentials by the American Press Institute, with chapters on what journalists do, objectivity, and accuracy.

The Verification Guide for Investigative Journalists from the European Journalism Center has 10 chapters and three case studies. Topics include online research tools, data, user-generated content, and ethics.

There are only a few materials designed specifically for citizens.

Exposing the Invisible – The Kit: The Tactical Technology Collective's 2019 resource has chapters on what makes an investigation; advanced internet searching; finding and retrieving historical and "lost" information from websites; investigating the ownership of websites; using maps, geographic data, and satellite imagery to find and visualize information; extracting information from social apps; and more. Tactical Tech is an NGO based in Berlin that trains human rights advocates.

Raising Hell: A Citizen's Guide to the Fine Art of Investigation. This one is a rather old (1983) and US-focused, but is infused with a fighting spirit and good advice.

Citizen Journalism (subtitled: "A rough guide to telling stories in word and image") is a collection of articles by Australian "independent online and photojournalist" Russ Grayson.

Ethics for the Citizen Journalist, by journalist Isabelle Gubas, reviews how some basic journalism standards should apply to anyone doing investigations.

Should kids be overlooked? Here's a guide aimed at younger investigators, produced by Rappler, an investigative journalism powerhouse in the Philippines.

Using Data

There are many resources on how to do research using data.

The Data Journalism Handbook is a very inclusive guide to using data as part of an investigation.

GIJN's Resource Page has lots more on data journalism here.

Collaborations More Common

Research by groups, even whole communities, is increasingly possible, sometimes aided

by online data and applications. For example, a user-friendly tool for citizens to track the implementation of constituency projects was created by legislative watchdog OrderPaper Nigeria. The ConsTrack mobile app "comes loaded with verified and validated information on the location of the projects, amount appropriated, level of funding provided the implementing ministry, department or agency, status of implementation, and the profiles of the legislators concerned."

The Russian site Tak-Tak-Tak facilitates citizen investigations, gives free legal advice, and answers questions from the public. Any registered Tak-Tak-Tak network member can start a new investigation or join an existing one. The user who announces the investigation receives lead investigation status. For more about the process, see this section of the website.

A web-based app developed in India can be used by community members to collect data on tree cover, burned areas, and other changes, thus helping rural communities protect their land, according to reporting by This is Place.

In Italy, Monithon is an initiative to promote the civic monitoring of public funds.

Map Kibera in Nairobi, Kenya, is an interactive community information project that creates open digital maps of local communities.

Following the 2013 bombings at the Boston marathon, thousands of people used Reddit to share images and information to discover the identity of the bombers, not always with accurate results.

In Russia, citizen activists have established websites to identify and collect information about law enforcement officers suspected of misdeeds, for example Beware of Them and OVDinfo.

Happy hunting and good luck!
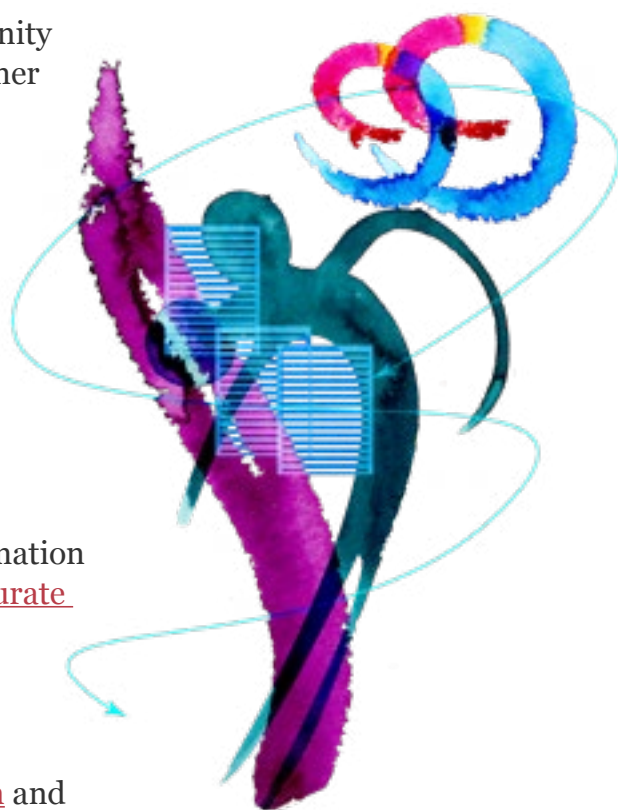
Ethics and Safety
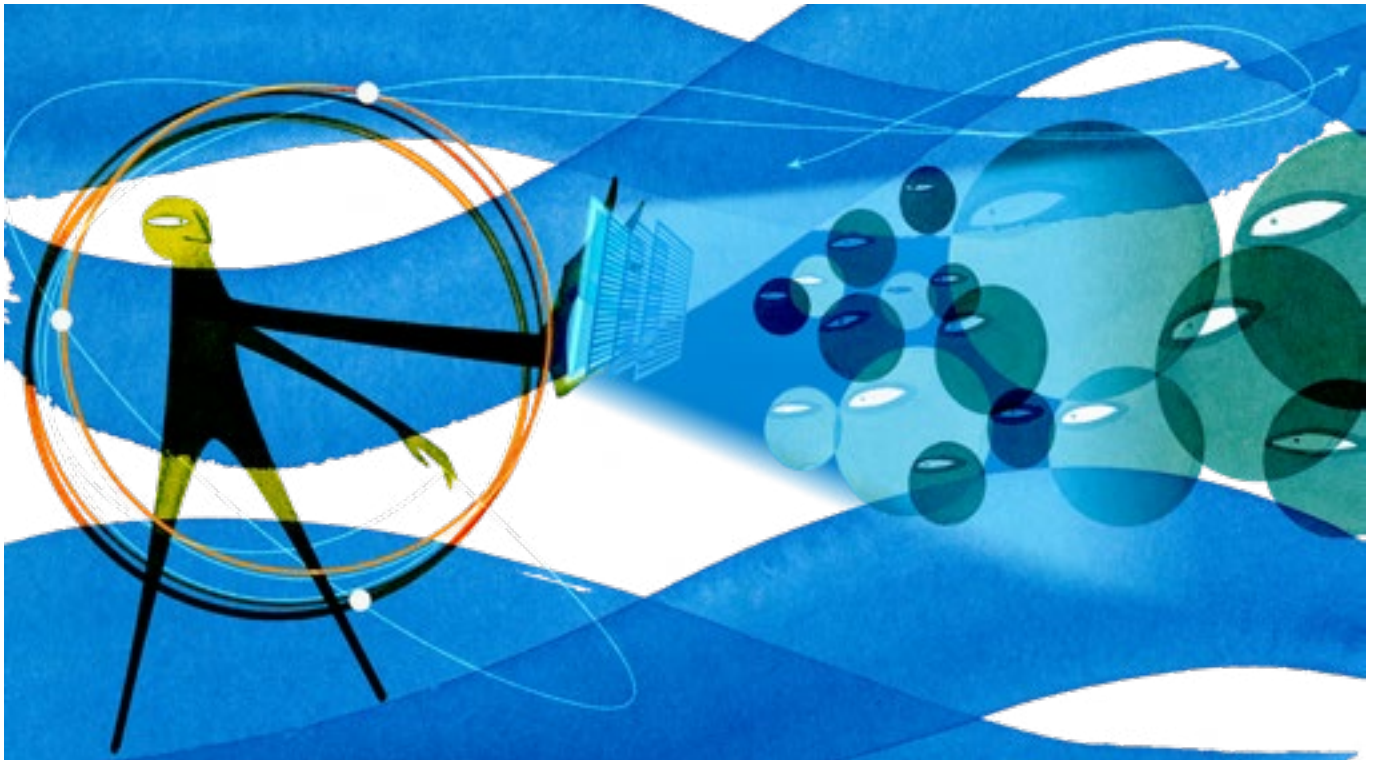
This chapter provides advice on ethical behavior for citizen investigators, and on how to work safely and securely. On both topics, we draw from the experience of the journalism world while trying to make it relevant for non-journalists.

Ethics

Codes of journalistic ethics are behavioral norms with value for citizen investigators.

Such ethics codes are often written in very broad terms based on widely accepted moral principles. It's their application to specific situations that generates debate. For example, should an observer stay neutral if a life is in danger?

Or, is misrepresentation ever warranted?

The Ethical Journalism Network, an international group, has five core principles:

> 1. Truth and Accuracy
> 2. Independence

3. Fairness and Impartiality
4. Humanity
5. Accountability

Dozens of ethical codes exist, largely along these lines, but often in more detail.

A Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists was issued in 2019 by the European Federation of Journalists. (See a long list of ethics codes of US media outlets here.) A 2019 guide to citizen journalism published by Sonke Gender Justice and Health-E News includes a code by the Press Council of South Africa.

Citizen investigators and nongovernmental organization researchers often perform tasks similar to those of professional reporters, but they may bring more of an activist agenda to their work and feel less bound by professional journalism ethics.

Standards such as accuracy and fairness not only carry moral weight, they also have practical value. Being transparent about the reporting process helps readers evaluate the quality of the work. Having high standards lends credibility to the story, a virtue for any storyteller.

NGOs, which increasingly do in-depth research and write detailed investigative reports (sometimes by hiring journalists), don't typically have written ethical codes for their reporting.

Human Rights Watch mentions standards in a description of its research procedures. Interview techniques may vary, HRW wrote, but "… the guiding principles, such as the need to ascertain the truth, to corroborate the veracity of statements, to protect the security and dignity of witnesses, and to remain impartial, are consistent throughout the organization."

The World Association of Non-Governmental Organizations has a code that includes: "Information that the organization chooses to disseminate to the media, policymakers, or the public must be accurate and presented with proper context."

Are citizen investigators different from journalists and NGO researchers?

In many ways, no. Citizen investigators have reputations to protect and should adhere to ethics standards much as journalists and professional researchers do.

There are various issues to consider. For one thing, citizen investigators may be working on their own and not be affiliated with an organization. This ambiguity is bound to raise suspicions with potential sources about how the requested information obtained will be used. Citizen investigators should have a clear and honest answer.

Journalists typically seek to obtain information "on the record" so that the source can be quoted, but may agree to various degrees of anonymity.

Citizen investigators may face a more difficult hurdle in gaining a source's trust, but should be

honest about the intended use of the information and their promises to the source.

For citizen investigators, as for journalists, temptations may arise in the pursuit of information.

Paying for information is generally frowned on by journalists for many reasons. "Checkbook journalism" may encourage sources to tell you what you want to hear. The working relationship may reduce the incentives to challenge a source or to find contrary facts. Readers may become suspicious, as might those in a legal proceeding.

Be skeptical, too, about using deception to get information. Asking a question without identifying yourself, or observing silently, may be okay in some circumstances, but not in others. Acting under false pretenses, such as going undercover or taking secret videos, poses risks.

Safety and Security

There are risks involved in doing investigations, and certain precautions may be necessary.

At the extreme end of the spectrum, a milkman in India was allegedly murdered by armed assailants in 2018. He had filed an application under the Right to Information (RTI) Act seeking information about a local construction project, according to a media report.

GIJN's Safety and Security Resource Center provides guidance on prudent steps for journalists and they have messages for others seeking information.

Here are some useful sources:

Committee to Protect Journalists' Safety Kit: CPJ's four-part Safety Kit issued in 2018 provides journalists and newsrooms with basic safety information on physical, digital, and psychological safety resources and tools. It is available in English, Spanish, French, Arabic, Russian, Somali, Persian, Portuguese, Chinese, Turkish, and Burmese.

The Practical Guide for the Security of Journalists was updated in 2017 by Reporters Without Borders and UNESCO. It is available in English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese.

Freelance Journalist Safety Principles: These guidelines were issued in February 2015 by a coalition of major news companies and journalism organizations.
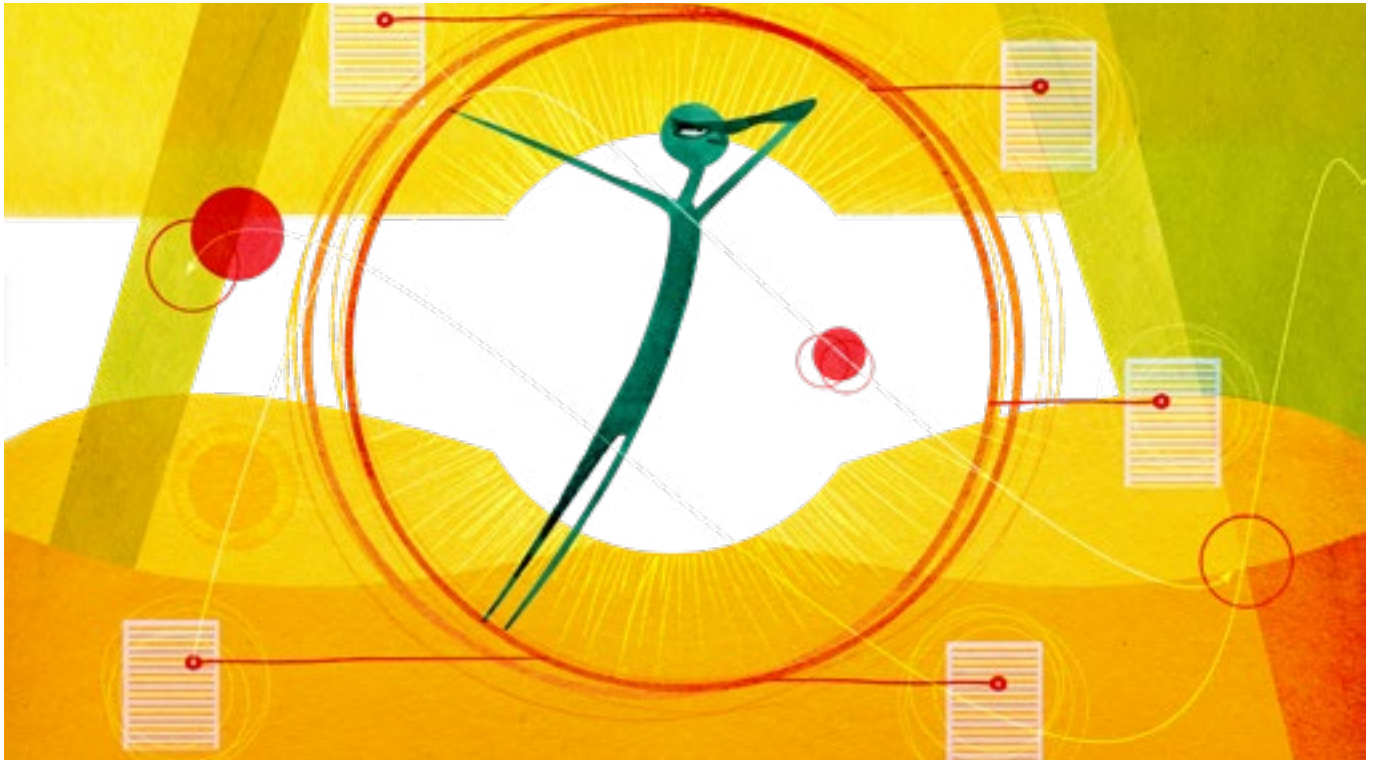
Translations are available in Arabic, French, Hebrew, Persian, Russian, Spanish, and Turkish.

Finally, if you get stuck, try the GIJN Resource Center, which has over a thousand tip sheets and

tools, and our [Help Desk](#), used by journalists around the world.

Happy hunting and good luck!

Searching the Internet

Online Search Strategies

We'll get to specific tips and tools on searching the internet in a minute, but the first suggestion is to consider carefully what you want to know. This is essential to effectively framing your search. It is usually best to start online searches with a few keywords. After seeing the results, try variants of the terms.

Expertise Finder has a good tutorial on planning searches, Google Search Tips For Journalists.

Also remember that the internet isn't the only place to look.

Think about where else documents might be located: libraries or government offices, for example. And think about who you could talk with.

Being imaginative pays off.

Google Searching Skills

With your target in mind, there are a variety of tools to improve your searching skills on Google specifically.

The advanced search page is a good place to start, but there's more.

Certain commands can refine your searches.

Placing a phrase in quote marks will yield only pages with the same words in the same order. And there's more: You can exclude terms, set date parameters, etc. Here's a quick tipsheet on the commands, prepared by BBC's ace online sleuth Paul Myers.

Google has training classes for journalists, including, surprise, a lesson on searching. Also see Google recorded webinars, a "power searching" course, and more.

> **Citizen Uses Social Media to Solve Crime**
>
> Elis Pacheco, a 47-year-old marketing manager in Brooklyn, analyzed a video of a man kicking a cat to figure out where it happened and then posted it online. The Facebook publicity attracted media and police interest, resulting in the arrest of the perpetrator.

Alternative Search Engines

Google dominates, with 75% of the search engine market, but there are alternatives. Some have the advantage that your searches are not recorded.

DuckDuckGo doesn't track you. For more detail, see DuckDuckGo vs. Google: An In-Depth Search Engine Comparison published by Search Engine Journal in 2019. Here's another list of alternatives from Techspot.

Search Engine Colossus lists search engines by country, such as the Russian Yandex or Baidu for Chinese. And here's a list of 12 alternatives done by Search Engine Watch. Another list of search engines was compiled by Mashable. A comparison of results from using different search engines was done by Make Tech Easier.

Looking backward? The Wayback Machine can help you find information from the past that has been archived.

And, are phone books too old-fashioned? World.192.com has a list of international telephone directories.

Setting Up Alerts

Setting up automatic "alerts" on a subject is like hiring a 24-hour detective.

Creating a Google alert is pretty easy. Here's how.

A fun blog called ResearchBuzz wrote: The Importance of Excluding Words When Setting Up Google Alerts.

If alerts don't produce relevant material, you can always delete them.

Domain and IP Info

You may want to learn about who operates a particular website.

Try the WHOIS domain database from ICANN (the International Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers), a listing of all registered domains (somewhat diminished by EU privacy rules).

Domaintools is one of a number of derivative search sites.

A search using the name of the website may yield the registrant's name/business and contact information. However, some registrars allow users to remain private and some domain owners use proxies. More detailed information can be found on GIJN's resource page: Online Research Tools.

Chinese Investigator Used Satellite Images

Shawn Zhang, a Chinese law student in Canada, began scouring Google Earth for evidence of detentions in Xinjiang, developing a collection of satellite images proving the detention camps' existence. "Zhang, a Chinese citizen, continues to do this research despite the fact that the Chinese police have previously pressured his family related to other content he has posted online," according to a China File article about his efforts.

Researching Individuals

Researching Individuals and Experts

There are many sophisticated online tools for conducting research on individuals. The range of digital investigative tools is visualized in this resource, The Open Source Intelligence Framework. Click on any category in the outline and see a wide array of options.

Online Research Tools and Investigative Techniques by the BBC's Paul Myers has long been a starting point for online research for GIJN readers. His website,

Research Clinic, is rich in research links and materials, including this exhaustive list; scroll down to "People Finders" for suggestions on locating people, and much more. Yet another goldmine is Open Source Intelligence Resources, maintained by the Canadian firm Toddington International Inc.

(Useful ideas for conducting investigations may be gleaned from TII checklists for investigations and cheat sheets.) Malachy Browne's Toolkit is a collection of more than 80 links to open source investigative tools by The New York Times open-source sleuth. Other resources on Startme.com include databases, search engines, and tools.

Finding People, Searching Social Media

There are many online offerings for obtaining information about specific people.

One major site is Pipl, a search engine for finding more than 3.2 billion people. Doing a search on Pipl is as simple as entering a name and an optional location. The search engine then pulls up matching records that can include details on the person's location, their work history, the people they are associated with, and much more.

8 Actionable Ways To Find Anyone's Email Address, by Nick Churick of Ahrefs, a website traffic monitoring company, also includes notes on the time-honored method of making educated guesses. One specific site often suggested is Hunter.io. Also, How to Find Someone's Email Address, by SiegeMedia, offers multiple suggestions. See also Find Any Email Address for Free With These Tips and Tools, from Jessica Greene of Zapier.

Also concerning Facebook, Paul Myers dives deeply into the topic here. Read six ways to find people on Facebook by LifeWire. More broadly, see Meyers' section on Social Media Tools, covering Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and more.

For using LinkedIn, here's a useful guide by PIBuzz.com, run by a US-based private investigator. Or try LinkedIn's own guide, and tipsfrom Zapier, a US-based apps developer.

For Twitter, start with the Advanced Search page. Tools, Useful Links & Resources, by Raymond Joseph, a South African journalist and trainer, includes more Twitter tips.

Another good general guide is 7 Great Tools for Social Media Search, by the marketing technology blog RazorSocial. There are many tipsheets out there, so search social media for ideas on other platforms.

Finding Experts

You may want to find out about certain kinds of people, such as medical doctors, or find an expert on a particular topic.

One place to start is to search for specialty groups, which may maintain lists of experts. Here's a link to CLEAR, where you can find a directory of professional associations worldwide.

LinkedIn searches can prove useful. Besides using advanced search, look for groups and company pages.
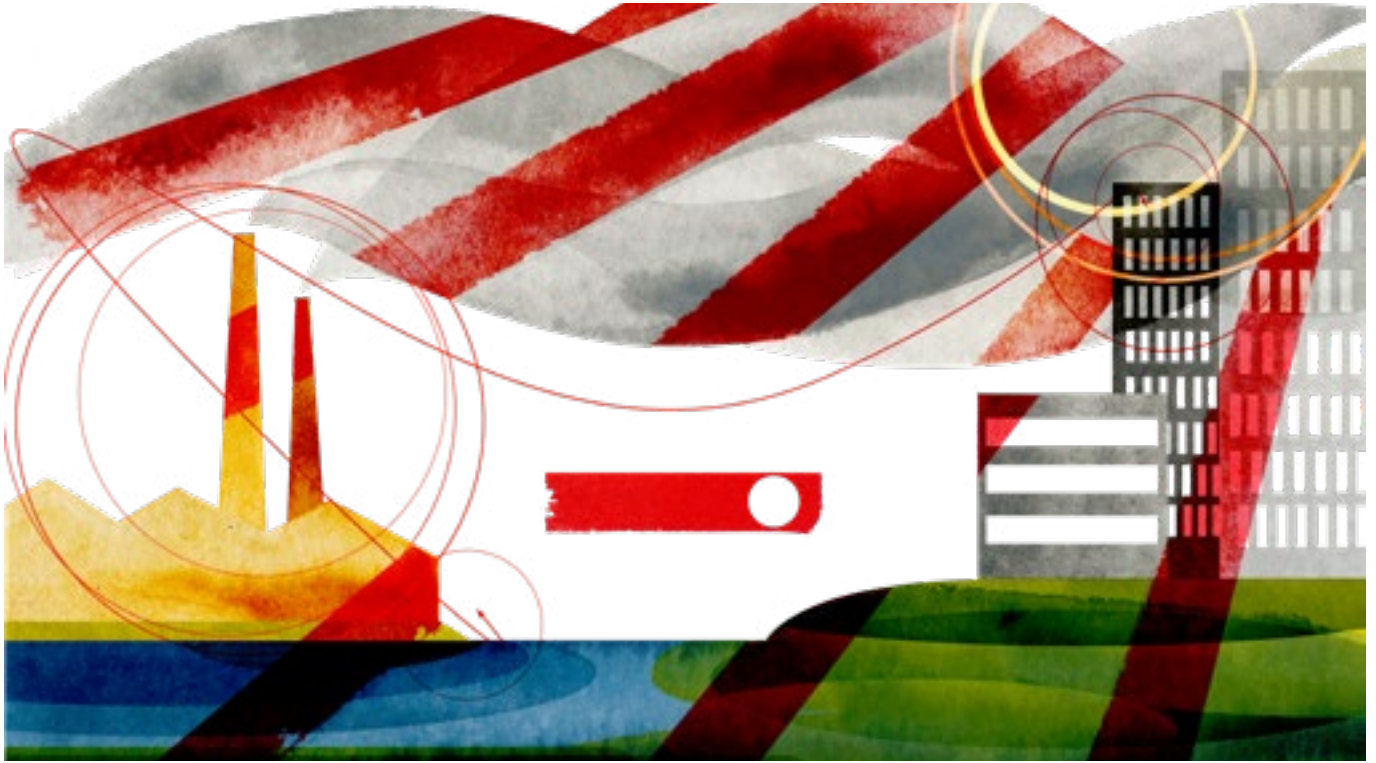
For experts, look at GIJN's special section on

Finding Experts Sources or see the Journalist's Toolbox.

The GIJN Resource Center page, Online Research Tools, has a wealth of additional resources about online searching, providing deeper information on all the topics mentioned above.

Finding Out Who Owns Corporations

Researching Corporations and Their Owners

Learning about corporations is one of the toughest challenges for investigators, professional or amateur. Unfortunately, the identity of the real owners may be WWlegally disguised. The good news is that there are many ways to research companies. These include:

- Free databases
- Subscription databases
- Official records
- Corporate websites
- Court records
- Internet searches

International Free Resources

A number of nonprofit groups collect the reports that companies must provide to governments. Such official corporate archives are often called "registries."

Here are the best compilations:

OpenCorporates is an open data source for information on more than 150 million companies. The information is sourced from national business registries. The database can provide such things as a company's incorporation date, its registered addresses, and the names of directors and officers. It can show connections between companies. It's also developing a database of corporate events.

Investigative Dashboard, sponsored by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, has millions of relevant items from data sources around the world, including many about corporations. Search for documents beginning here (click "search" for advanced search options). Not every database is searchable by the public, but there's a lot there.

The **Offshore Leaks Database**, by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), is a database of corporate information based on leaked documents about nearly 785,000 offshore companies and trusts. The database can be searched by names, companies, and addresses connected to offshore entities and country, or by jurisdiction.

ICIJ's archive of stories based on the Panama Papers makes for good reading. Also see Beyond Panama: Unlocking The World's Secrecy Jurisdictions. See three tips on using the database.

For good background information, the World Bank's STAR (Stolen Asset Recovery Initiative) includes beneficial ownership guides on 23 countries that show what steps to take to identify beneficial owners and other related parties.

Commercial Sources

There are many private databases about corporations, most of which require a subscription for the best information, but free access may be available through libraries.

One long-established database is D&B Hoovers. Its free website offers capsule descriptions of thousands of companies based in the US and abroad. More detailed descriptions are available on the subscription service Nexis.

Other major subscription vendors include: Arachnys, ORBIS, Bureau van Dijk, Bloomberg,PrivCo (a source for US private company businesses), Thomson Reuters, LexisNexis, and DueDil. For more of a focus on developing countries, see Sayari.

To get some idea of the array of resources, check out library websites of university business schools, such as that of Harvard University Business School.

Official Government Registries

Many governments require corporations to register, but often with minimal and misleading

information. To find them, check out:

- The Commercial-Register is a listing of national registries maintained by Swiss researchers.
- Another list of registries worldwide is maintained by the UK regulator Companies House.

Links to Resources for Some Large Economies

United States

The Securities and Exchange Commission holds information in its EDGAR system, including mandatory filings. The online system allows you to research a company's registration statements, prospectuses, and periodic reports, which include financial statements. Start with the annual 10K report, a comprehensive overview of the company's business and financial condition, including audited financial statements. EDGAR also maintains annual listings of International Registered and Reporting Companies, those foreign-owned firms that are required to file periodic reports in the US.

Many businesses are incorporated in the state of Delaware, so a good place to start is the Delaware Division of Corporations. No data is collected on beneficial owners, however, and "company formation agents" can act as nominee directors. (See a Transparency International description.)

The National Association of Secretaries of State can get you to all state sites (see "online business services" in small print at the bottom after picking a state). There you will find links to places such as the California corporation search and New York's Corporation and Business Entity Database.

Look for US government contractors here.

The United Kingdom

Companies House provides some details including:

- Company information, for example registered address and date of incorporation.
- Current and resigned officers.
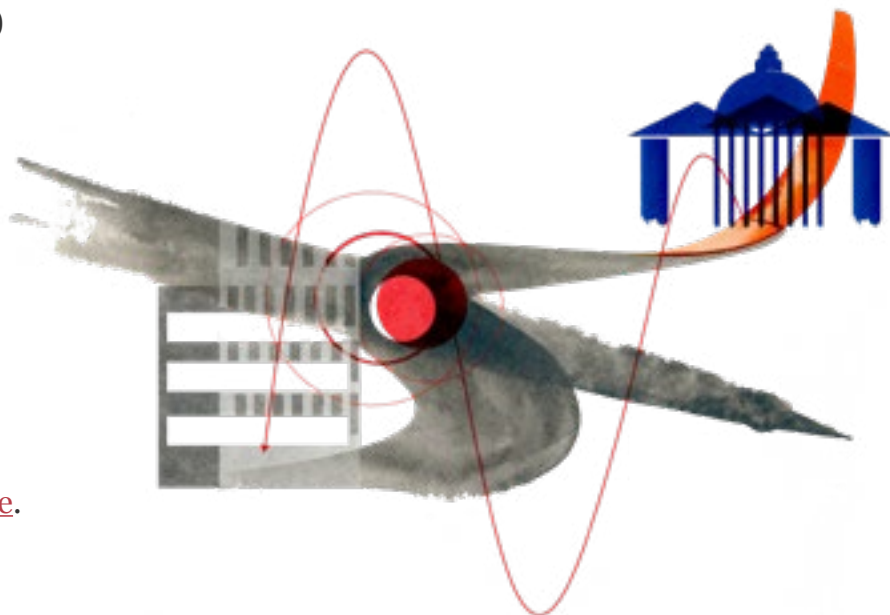
- Document images.
- Mortgage charge data.
- Previous company names.
- Insolvency information.

Canada

SEDAR is Canada's site for public company filings, which began in January 1997.

France

Infogreffe provides basic company information free of charge. In French.

Germany

Company Register allows free searches, in multiple languages, but some documents cost money.

China

The "National Enterprise Credit Information Publicity System" can be accessed here. Here's a description of what's available, by China Checkup.

Other Sources

- Online searches of corporate websites and social media will surface scads of information. Here are a few recurring suggestions from professional researchers:
- Search for company officials and directors. Check out methods included in Finding Former Employees, a presentation at the 2017 GIJN conference.
- When looking for media reports, pay attention to the business and specialty press. To find them, try getting access to subscription services like Ulrich's Periodicals Directory or trade publications.
- Look up the company address and phone number.
- Corporate philanthropy may be a backdoor for information. In the US, see CitizenAudit, ProPublica's Nonprofit Explorer, and Guidestar. For the UK, see Open Charities and CharityBase.
- Contact nongovernmental organizations such as groups concerned with pollution or human trafficking to see what information they have. Violation Tracker is a US search engine on corporate misconduct in the US.

More Official Places to Look

Every point of intersection between governments and the commercial sector may generate a public record.

Here are suggestions of where else to look for a company's interactions with government:

- Land ownership – Names and descriptions (see related GIJN resources)
- Land development – Building, zoning, special permits.
- Environmental regulation – Discharge permits, emissions reports, enforcement actions.
- Labor regulation – Professional registrations, labor disputes.
- Court records – Litigation by and against.
- Financial regulation – Filings or enforcement.
- Intellectual property – Patents and trademarks registrations.
- Government contracting –Bids and awards records.
- Government subsidies – Records of payments.
- Political donations – Contributions to officials.
- Lobbying registration – Disclosures about influence

Thinking in terms of which sector the company operates in may lead to the discovery of pertinent information.

Consider what laws and regulations affect the business and what paperwork is involved. These connections will vary dramatically by locale and the type of business, but may provide leads.

Some official actions, or requests for official action, may be reflected in governmental publications of record. For Europe, checkout Open Gazettes, which makes European gazettes more visible.

Related GIJN resources:

- GIJN resource page on corruption.
- GIJN resource page on business and trade.
- GIJN resource page on extractive industries.
- GIJN resource page on supply chains.
- GIJN freedom of information resource centre.
- Finding former employees, a presentation at a 2017 GIJN conference.

Digging into Government Records

Investigating Governments

Investigating governments and their actions is a vast challenge. There are tools to use, but the best place to begin is self-education about how things work in theory and practice. Whatever the investigatory goal, success will be enhanced through fundamental knowledge of how government works. What you learned in school may lay the foundation for the mechanics of how government works. But how things work in the real world may be different. So get to know your topic by reading and finding knowledgeable helpers.

Here are some basic areas to think about:

- laws and regulations related to your subject;
- background history;
- bureaucratic structure;
- decision-making processes;
- officials involved inside;
- "stakeholders" outside;
- publications of record;
- official documents, such as budgets, procurement, and financial records.

If it sounds like a lot, well, pick and choose, but these generalizations can help with visualizing the government ecosystem.

Who Is Involved?

Who is influential in the subject area you are concerned about?

Consider not only elected officials, but also who else might be part of the equation, including:

- bureaucrats;
- special interest group representatives;
- civic leaders;
- business community leaders;
- subject experts;
- academics, etc.

The website everypolitician.org tries to list elected politicians worldwide, but local knowledge is likely to be more complete.

Read news about the relevant government bodies, their activities, their leaders, etc. Pay attention to names mentioned. Knowing who has opinions on the topic is key to locating people to contact for information.

Also ask yourself questions such as:

- Who is most affected?
- Who cares the most?
- Who else might be interested in my topic?

Gathering such information will result in a valuable "map" that will help your investigation.

Activists Use Indian RTI Law to Get Documents

In India, so-called RTI activists use the Right to Information Act to make all sorts of discoveries. Shakeel Ahmed Sheikh obtained data on how many people died because of overhead train wires. Neeraj Sharma found out that the government was spending more on public relations than was previously known. Bhimappa Gadad revealed the private misappropriation of 51 acres of government land.

Online and Offline

Although an obvious starting point will be online searching, this may well turn out to be insufficient.

For all the modern emphasis placed on internet research and government transparency, what you want to know just may not be online. Searching the websites of government agencies is necessary, but it may not be enlightening.

Person-to-person contact remains a staple of investigation. Go to meetings. Observing who attends and how the body works can be unexpectedly rewarding.

Try to locate the person in the government who knows the most about your subject. Burrow down to find an expert at the lower levels. Ask the workers.

Government communications officers may respond more readily to media questions, but it doesn't hurt to try.

Outside of government, there are often groups which may share something of your interest and have information, or leads.

Always ask open-ended questions for advice such as, "What else could I read?" or "Who else should I talk with?"

The specifics of your investigation obviously will dictate the direction of research.

If you hit dead-ends, resourcefulness and doggedness may be the best play, but there are some legal tools that can be helpful to crack open government information.

Access to Information Laws

More than 125 countries have freedom of information (FOI) laws giving citizens the right to seek government documents. These laws provide formal mechanisms to request documents and appeal denials.

This road can be long and frustrating, but ultimately fruitful. Despite mythology that FOI is mainly for journalists, citizens are the major users.

GIJN's FOI Resource Center includes lots of practical suggestions and country-by-country information.

We reviewed the advice from dozens of FOI experts and boiled down their tips.

GIJN's 8 Top Tips

1. **Plan ahead**: Figure out what you want. All experienced requesters stress the value of doing advance research.

2. **Poke around**: Try other avenues. Ask for the information informally and pursue alternative sources before going down the official road.

3. **Plot**: Understand where the information is located. It's important to know not only what you're looking for, but where it's located within the

government.

4. **Prepare**: Learn about the law. Study the access law you will be using. For example: What fees might be involved? What's the timeframe for answers? What are your rights?

5. **Pose precise questions** (to the right place). All experienced requesters stress the value of asking clear questions. Ambiguity can work against you. Asking focused questions can speed up the processing of the request. Some experts prefer a series of small requests to a big conglomerate request. "Give me everything" queries have their place, but are not the most effective or efficient requests. "Why" questions won't work. Translate your interests into precise questions. So, instead of asking "What does the director do?" state: "Please provide the job description of the director."

6. **Play the game**: Following up pays dividends. Don't just sit by and wait while a request is being processed. Stay in contact with the responsible officials, being friendly if possible. Patience and persistence are necessary, and perhaps negotiation.

7. **Appeal**: Do it. Denials are common, so be prepared. Appealing is recommended, even if you don't (or can't) litigate.

8. **Publish**: Don't be shy. Write about your requests from the beginning. Win or lose, report on the outcome.

NYC Citizen Becomes Watchdog

New Yorker Aaron Carr "did not start out as a tenant activist," explained The New York Times. But after being sensitized to tenant grievances he developed a "bottom-up enforcement approach" of scrutinizing public records, eventually creating a small but effective watchdog group.

Open Data

More and more governments are making their data "open."

This means that you may be able to search databases about government operations such as pollution, arrests, property assessments, code violations, official salaries, school attendance, and many other subjects. To help make this easier, some NGOs have created searchable databases. But you may need a geeky friend.

If the data isn't already posted online, ask for it. Data is covered by FOI laws.

Follow the Money

How governments spend money may be a part of what you want to know, but in many countries this information is difficult to find.

One preliminary step is to look for the budget documents in which the government reveals its spending plans and for documents disclosing actual spending.

These may or may not be adequately detailed. Assume there is more to find out. A FOI request may be necessary.

There's a paper trail you can follow to document government contracting and purchases. Governments buy goods and hire contractors to perform many operations. And as noted above, groups may be collecting such information. For example, ELVIS gathers contracts from Eastern Europe.

How much is disclosed will vary substantially by country, notwithstanding the growing international pressure for governments to disclose contract documents.

A FOI request may be called for eventually.

There may be officials charged with conducting audits or investigations into government spending. Their reports may be available.

Building Your Own Database

Increasingly, citizen groups have used mobile phones and social media to gather information about whether and how money was spent. For example, by monitoring how many new schoolbooks were really purchased.

This perspective, proactively collecting information, may produce some of the most effective results.
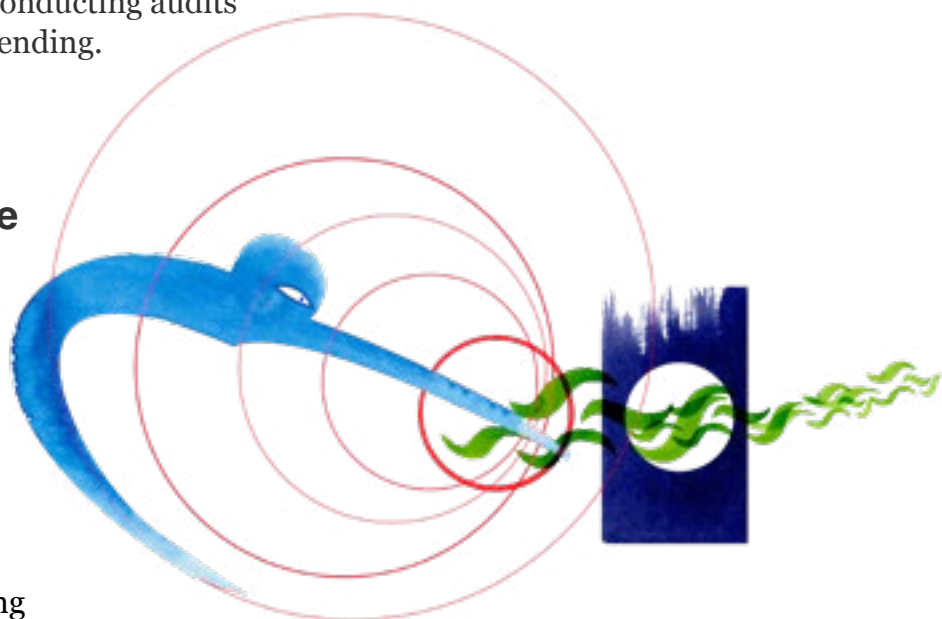
Investigating Politicians
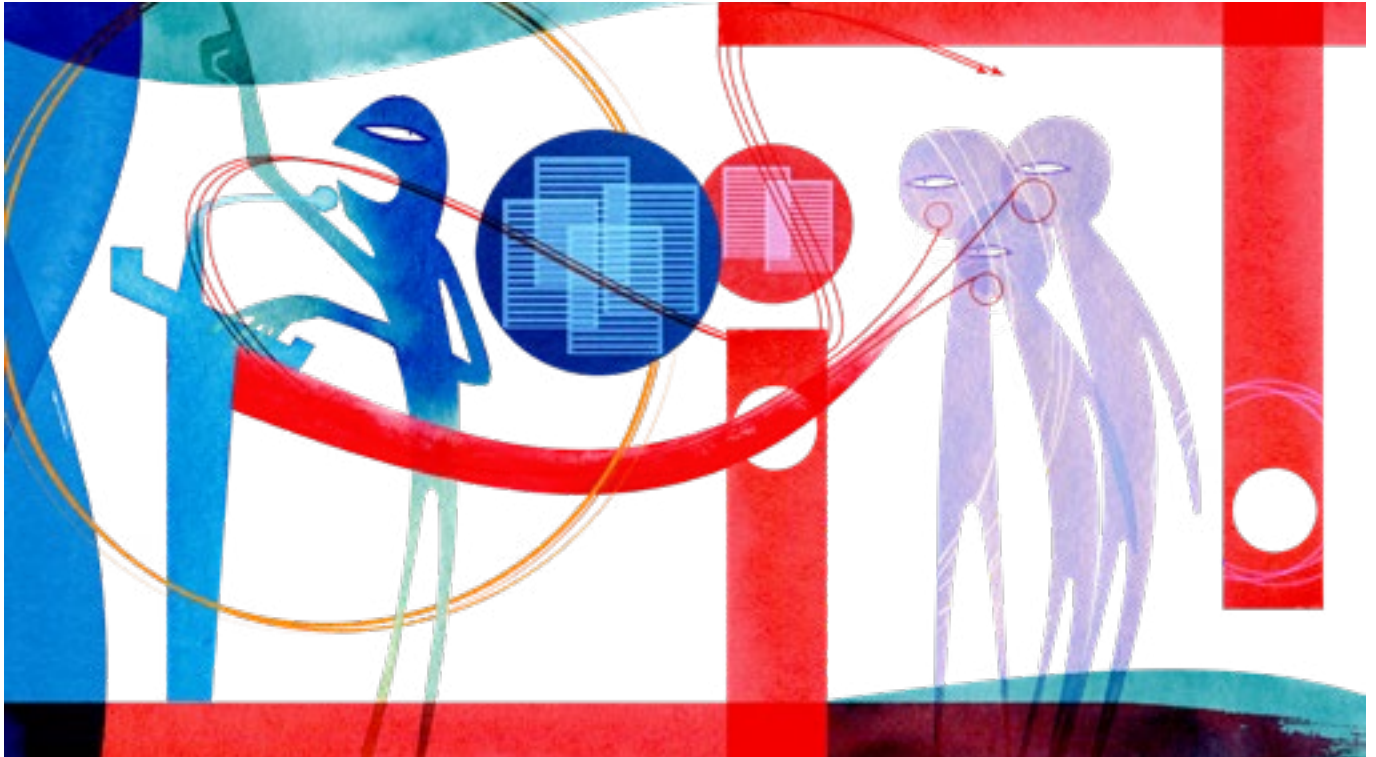
Researching Politicians

There are many ways to dig into a politician's finances and political record.

Official resources are a good place to start. Despite their frequent limitations, you might find:

- income and asset disclosures;
- campaign funding disclosures;
- court records;
- public records about actions in office.

This resource will focus on using official records and assume you'll also be using the internet. Media searches are obviously one key method for learning about speeches and interviews, as well as for articles in which the official expressed opinions.

But not everything is online.

Offline, try talking with people. Hint: Opponents and critics may be the best sources of critical information (but also the most suspicious).

Asset Disclosures to Look For

Elected officials in about 160 countries must disclose some information about their income and financial assets.

What's revealed is often incomplete, but sharp-eyed readers have found plenty of stories in such materials. Hint: Comparing claims with reality can be fertile territory.

GIJN compiled some of the best investigative journalism in which asset disclosures have played a part and pulled together some of the tools necessary to look for hidden assets. See GIJN's Resource on Asset Disclosure.

Unfortunately there isn't a spreadsheet describing where to look in each country, so "local" research will be required.

However, in a handful of countries, journalists and others have created databases to enhance official asset disclosure records and make them easier to use.

Millionaires Among the Nominees is a story by the Bosnian Center for Investigative Reporting based on investigating the property holdings of 121 local politicians. Its reporters compiled information about the candidates' property from land records and asset declarations, combining them into a CIN database of "politicians' assets."

A clever tool developed in Australia, DisclosureBot, sends out tweets when politicians amend their disclosure forms.

To learn about national disclosure systems and what's available, look out for citizen groups that advocate for election reform or transparency. Such open government advocates may be the most reliable sources about who's covered by disclosure rules, what's available, and where to find it.

Sadly, many laws allow for ambiguity and under-reporting. So once official disclosure forms are located, it's often clear that these documents are best viewed as rudimentary starting points.

Still, checking the veracity of what is disclosed may turn up inaccuracies and discrepancies. Look for not only what has been disclosed, but what hasn't.

Other Places to Look

There are other sources that will help with fact-checking politicians' financial claims.

Searches of legal databases may turn up relevant asset information. Check for divorce proceedings, wills, and land disputes. (See more below.)

Property ownership records may be useful, too. (See separate guide on this and related records.)

Social media accounts of family members have proved helpful at times.

Looking into a politician's lifestyle more informally is another classic way to go about it. One Asian politician's excessive spending was exposed when observers noted the parade of many different expensive watches on his wrist. Wrist photos were collected by a journalist and published.

Campaign Finance Disclosures

Campaign contribution records can reveal not only how much money was donated, but who gave it. Learning about a politician's supporters can be revealing.

In some countries, laws mandate the disclosure of campaign contributions for those seeking office.

The Political Finance Database by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance can provide the national context. But it doesn't provide links to national disclosure sites.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe describes campaign

finance regimes in election observation and assessment reports done by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

For the United States, the disclosures reside on the website of the Federal Elections Commission, which has a database. Also useful are opensecrets.org (from the Center for Responsive Politics) and FollowtheMoney.org. Mostly behind a paywall is politicalmoneyline.com. Knowing the names of donors may raise more questions, such as who they are and why they donated.

So the trail keeps winding. One path is to compare campaign contributions with disclosures by lobbyists. In some countries, lobbyists must register and make some disclosures about their clients and expenditures.

Public Records About Official Actions

Elected officials, and even unelected officials, gradually leave tracks.

These can be found in such dull places such as:

- official publications of record, such as gazettes;
- records of legislative proceedings;
- voting tallies;
- minutes of meetings;
- documents held by agencies;
- agency publications.

The specifics of these resources will vary nation to nation. They won't necessarily be online or up-to-date. Nevertheless, they are substantive and official.

Hint: Try asking librarians for help; they know a lot.

In some countries, official records are being downloaded and analyzed. For example, see OpenAustralia.

Filing a FOI request to an agency in which the person worked might turn up something. (See the resource on researching governments.)

Court Records and More

Check for court records to learn about:

- litigation the persons might have been involved in;
- bankruptcy;
- tax liens;
- divorce records;
- criminal charges.

From there, think of other places to look.

One veteran "political opposition" researcher in the US, former journalist Alan Huffman, said in an interview:

> *"Really anything that is public record, we're going to look at. If we go to the courthouse, I always stop and just look at the building directory and look at every single office in that building. I think, is there anything that they keep that might be illuminating? The permit office, for example, if the guy's a big developer or landlord. We just kind of go through the whole list every single time."*

So, this list could include:

- real estate holdings;
- military records;
- vehicle ownership;

- aircraft and watercraft ownership;
- businesses owned or operated;
- professional licenses;
- education verification.

And more. Use your imagination!

International Databases

Information about politicians is mostly found in their home countries. There are only a few free international databases of much use.

EveryPolitician is a downloadable database on the world's elected representatives compiled by the UK nongovernmental organization mySociety. It lists more than 76,800 politicians from 233 countries, providing only very basic information about the representatives, but sometimes this includes social media addresses and contact information.

To understand national policies on government campaign finance, look to the Political Finance Database by the International Institute for Democracy and

Electoral Assistance. It describes the political finance policies in more than 180 countries based on answers to 43 fundamental questions. The Swedish-based group uses four broad categories: a) bans and limits on private income, b) public funding, c) regulations, and d) spending and reporting, oversight, and sanctions.

The database doesn't link to national online resources where they exist.

The Investigative Dashboard Database sponsored by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project has millions of relevant items from data sources around the world, including many about corporations.

Commercial services exist to serve financial institutions and other businesses that need to conduct "due diligence" research on so-called politically exposed persons (PEPs).

These subscription services include Dow Jones Risk & Compliance.

Digging into Property Records

Land Ownership Records: Useful But Hard to Find

Researching property records is mainly a local game.

In some countries, learning who owns a piece of land or a house is easily done via online searching, but in other places you'll need to visit government offices and dig through records. That is, if the records exist. In most parts of the world, property records are not kept. Or they may be confidential to protect property owners.

So there are many hurdles. To figure out what records are available, you'll want to learn about the laws and regulations governing property. Potential sources are local officials, real estate brokers, and lawyers.

In many places, "titles" on land are the official records on ownership, kept in land registries. The boundaries and location of land are described in what's called "cadaster" records. These records systems may be combined or separate. Records on land value, taxes, land use, and information on buildings often exists somewhere else.

What You Might Find

Despite all the variations and complications, government records can be rich sources. Potential finds include:

- name of the owner;
- address and parcel number;
- geographic description of the property boundaries;
- description of buildings and features on the property;
- price last paid for the property;
- records of previous sales;
- tax assessments now and in the past;
- allowable uses and restrictions for the property;
- details on the owner's rights and restrictions to the land;
- liens placed on the property by a court;
- legal disputes about the property;
- records related to construction on the property, such as building permits;
- mortgage loans that encumber a property;
- servitudes, encumbrances, public right restrictions.

There may be barriers to getting information. In many countries, privacy laws restrict access to the name of the landowner. Fees may be charged for the information. The accuracy and quality of the information may be suspect. The real ownership may be disguised, perhaps with the name of a relative or a shell corporation, setting up another research challenge.

Where Else to Look

Land records are not the only potential sources of information.

Scouring court records about property disputes may prove productive.

Some researchers have had luck with official gazettes and government publications of record. They may reveal requests for land use changes and building permits.

> ### Activism and Investigation in Guatemala
>
> Rodrigo Tot, a 60-year-old farmer and an indigenous land rights activist from Guatemala, won one of the world's most prestigious activism awards, the Goldman Environmental Prize. The beginning of his work was pure investigation, gathering evidence to secure legal ownership over communal lands.

Records about different types of land rights, such as mining rights, may exist.

Information about farm subsidy payments may be helpful.

Besides relying on government records, researchers suggest checking out company reports and websites, media reports, advertisements, and social media. Aerial images may be available.

Listings of properties for sale also may provide good information. Check out national sites such as Zillow in the US, Loopnet.com for commercial US properties, Windeed in South Africa, Lianjia in China, Magic Bricks in India, and many, many more.

Real estate brokers, banks, insurance companies, lawyers, and others have a vested interest in knowing who's buying and selling and could be potential sources. Nongovernmental organizations concerned with land rights issues might also be helpful.

 Site visits also may pay dividends. What can you see? Ask around.

For more detailed information, see GIJN's Resource Page on researching property records.

Global Investigative
Journalism Network

www.gijn.org
Twitter: @gijn