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Original Thought



You'll need to take time out to reflect on the bigger picture.

One of the great attractions of journalism is also one of its biggest frustrations - there's always the next thing to do; the next problem to solve; the next bit of production to sort out.

Clearly, original thinking needs a bit of time - though maybe less than you think. And you do need to reflect on those stories that stir your curiosity and seem full of unanswered questions.

Take time to get off the track everyone else has taken.

Paul Robinson at BBC Belfast says:

"We journalists ... don't stand back enough and look at the bigger picture - or take a sideways glance at the story."

Get up and walk away from the computer. Have a think."

But what time is there to look at the bigger picture? To let your thinking go beyond the obvious?

It's a choice you have to make - and even the busiest of us do have time to think, especially if it becomes a habit to pause when you come across something odd, something that fires your curiosity and kick starts your thinking.

Day dream

Lilliane Landor, a senior news executive in the BBC World Service, has edited a range of programmes and she knows the value of reflection:

"After you've spotted an interesting item on a diary or in the paper, spend two minutes not reading anything, just thinking to yourself how you could turn it into great radio."

Make the space to think. Day dream."

'Day dream' may seem a vague piece of advice but it does capture one part of the thinking you need to be original. The kind of thinking that looks away from the immediate story and wonders things like: 'what else is like this?' or 'where did I come across something similar?'

And if you need a place to start from, try challenging your first responses to the story. *Today* Editor Ceri Thomas says:

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"Be aware of your own prejudices ... Be yourself.

Your interests, enthusiasms and passions are part of what will make you a good journalist."

Challenging that 'self'; asking why you think that way or why that seems 'obvious' are good places to start. Nick Sutton of BBC Radio 4's *World at One* argues that many journalists tend to come at an issue from the liberal standpoint - it's in the nature of the trade. So:

"Try to break away from left-wing/liberal criticisms of an issue. Think about alternative approaches."

Especially approaches that don't come automatically - or make you feel uncomfortable.

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Contacts



Contacts are the vital tool of any journalist.

Obvious? Well, yes – but an obvious thing that's easily forgotten when you're working in a newsroom that feels like a production line.

Most newsrooms now produce multimedia output and the emphasis can seem to be on production, style, format, layout – and quantity. But you became a journalist to find things out and report in the public interest. And while there are now many more ways of getting information than ever before (yes, you can do original journalism at a PC), good contacts are still a source of some of the best stories.

Journalists have a tendency to talk about their contacts in mystical terms. But there is no mystery to building up a good contacts book.

It takes persistence and patience. And it's something you have to keep at – an out of date contact number is no use at all. Nor is a contact whose agenda you're unaware of or naive about.

Next

Collecting contacts



At its most basic, a contact is someone who talks to you; someone who answers the phone when you call them; someone who'll get involved in a conversation with you when you meet them at an event. Someone in a position to know what they're talking about – not necessarily the most important person in an organisation but certainly someone who knows what's happening.

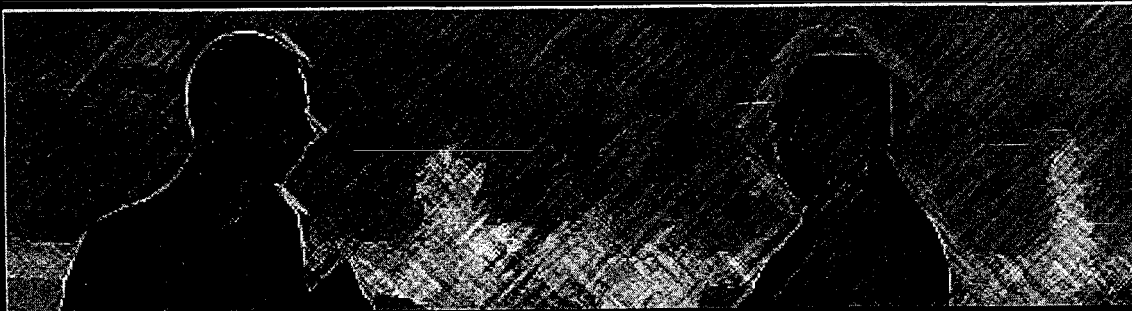
Michael Crick, Political Editor on BBC1's Newsnight, is an avid collector of contacts and that collection is a reciprocal relationship:
"Collect phone numbers obsessively. Make it easy for people to contact you. Be free in handing out your numbers, including your home number."

The direct approach to collecting contacts' phone numbers works. So get into the habit of asking everyone for: an office direct line, a personal mobile number, a home number.

You'll get more than you might expect, especially if you ask directly and give all your numbers in return. And you'll keep those contacts for as long as you don't misuse them.

Next

Your contacts book



Your contacts book is your crown jewel. Treasure it; nurture it; feed it several times a day. Have it by your side whenever you're reading, watching or listening to something.

Note the names of people who say interesting things; who have personal experience of unusual or significant events; or who are interviewed as experts on a particular subject. Find numbers for them later – try to speak to them if you think it could be a relationship that will help you with stories later.

Your contacts book should be more than just a list of numbers. Make a brief (one-word) note of the stories the contact has been especially helpful on; note the things they don't know about, too. You might think you won't forget, but you will.

When you speak to a contact, make a note of the date. With some contacts you'll want to call them from time to time to ask if anything is going on in their world.

Next

Anonymity

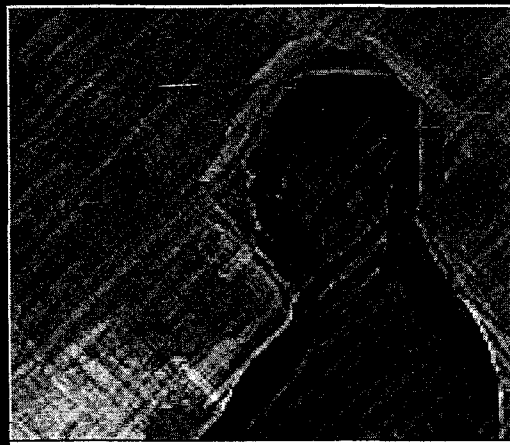
A contact will often ask you to keep their name out of a story. Clearly, if all they're giving you is a tip or helping you to look in the right place, then there shouldn't be a problem.

But if theirs is your main testimony or you intend to quote them or use them on air, you should do all you can to persuade them to allow you to use their name. Audiences trust their news more when they know where it comes from.

Where you and your editor agree that your source can be used anonymously, you then have a duty to protect their identity.

This will include keeping to an absolute minimum those on your team who know the identity of the source. Your editor, though, has the right to know their identity and may pull your story if the contact objects to that.

You must keep their details separate from your general contacts and other production notes.



'Keep my name out of it'

Next

Using contacts



It may seem mercenary but the point of having contacts is to generate original journalism. They might well be nice people. And you might like them. But they're your contacts, not your friends.

The most effective way to keep your relationship on track is to talk to them regularly, even when you're not researching a particular story. It's a good idea to call a contact if you can see a story coming up that might involve them.

The BBC regional journalist Peter Cook has this advice:

"Put in calls to your trusted contacts just to see how things are, what's going on.

"One TGWU rep told us of a port strike 24 hours before anyone else got it, just from a chance call.

"The agent for a wayward aristocrat in Suffolk told us he was about to be thrown out of Australia, from another chance call."

Next

Focus



When you're talking to a contact, you need to focus; it's not just a chat. Turn your curiosity up to full and keep asking questions.

Often there's a story in a half-reference – or even the fact that your contact should know about a story but apparently doesn't. Are they avoiding something that's happening on their patch?

The moment you need most focus is when you detect there's a story in something your contact didn't intend to say or which is potentially embarrassing to them.

Your priority is to get the story. And to be as precise as possible. You need to understand as much about the story as you can – you'll need to check and cross-check what you hear and pursue other angles.

Don't over-interpret or put words into your contact's mouth. Keep asking yourself: 'is there another way of interpreting this?'

Next

Notes



You will need accurate notes – especially if your conversation with your contact leads to a major investigation. It can be disconcerting to pull out a notebook and take notes. You may have no alternative – depending on how you plan to use the conversation.

If it's no more than a tip or a lead, it might be fine to write your notes up as soon as you can after the meeting, as near verbatim as possible and noting precisely any key words and phrases. If all you can do is record the sense of the conversation, note that.

But if you intend to use quotes or any precise terms, you have no alternative but to make notes or a recording for note-taking purposes.

Be straight: 'Look ... this is very interesting. Do you mind if I make a few notes?' Misquoting a contact or source – apart from being journalistically indefensible – is a very quick way of ensuring you lose that contact or source.

Next

Agenda and record



All contacts have an agenda – no-one speaks to a journalist without a motive. It might be retaliatory (putting the record straight), altruistic (a public-spirited whistleblower), self-aggrandisement ('he didn't do this, I did'), defensive ('I wasn't involved') – whatever.

It doesn't matter in itself that your contact has an agenda – so long as you're aware of it. You need to be professional and realistic too about your contacts' track record. Bluntly, have they ever used or misled you?

Keep your relationship with contacts distant and 'professional'. If you want someone as a friend, don't use them as a contact. They can rarely be both. There will inevitably come a time when your and your contact's interests do not coincide; when you have to break a story your contact has asked you to hold; or run a story a contact has denied; or when you're convinced your contact hasn't told you enough of the truth.

There may even come a time when, in spite of your best efforts to conceal a confidential contact, that source is inadvertently identified or suspected.

Next

Contacts and leaks

As long as publicly accountable bodies keep secrets there will be leaks to journalists.

They're a staple of journalism, especially investigative journalism. Many of the great stories in journalism's history started with leaked information. But, as the former BBC political correspondent Nicholas Jones warned in 2006:

"Leaking is just one of the many means by which information is traded with journalists and when we look at that relationship ... we have to come to terms with two very important factors.

"First, the balance of power has shifted in favour of the information traders. Increasingly, it is the providers of information such as public relations consultants, in both the commercial and public sectors, sports and celebrity agents, political publicists and so on who are gaining the upper hand and extending their stranglehold over journalism."

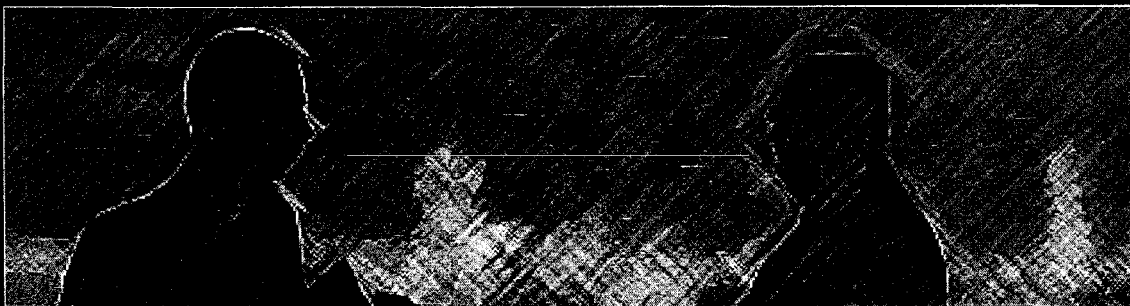
In other words, a leak will almost certainly lead to a good story – but you need to make sure you're in control and the leaker isn't in control of you.



There will always be leaks

Next

Pros and cons



A leaked document has a lot going for it, from the journalist's point of view: you have a potential exclusive; you have a document to check and cross-check; and you can shape your questioning precisely and accurately.

On the other hand, leaking is never a neutral act – if you report a leak uncritically and without rigorous fact checking, you risk encouraging the rationing of information. A leaker, like any other contact, always has an agenda.

Leaks from known contacts are obviously much easier to assess – you'll have a clear idea of your contact's agenda and you'll know their track record. You'll probably know why they're leaking the document to you – you might even have asked for it.

Leaks from an unknown or untested source are more difficult. And the enquiries you need to make to validate the information can change the story and make your leak worthless. You can even end up gagged by an injunction.

Next

Checking leaks



So your first step may need to be to check your document, initially, in other ways.

Pull out the full background to the story - what's been reported before? What can you find out about the background to the story? How does this leak fit into that? Does it make sense?

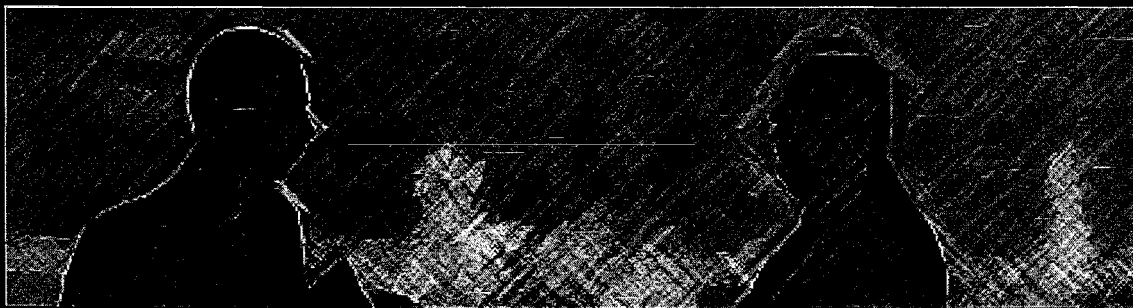
Then you'll need to think about why you've been given the document. Why you? Who'll benefit from the leak? Who'll lose out? What's the whistleblower hoping to achieve?

Then think: what's the counter-argument? What would you look for if you wanted to undermine the validity of the leak?

Then use your contacts, especially experts in relevant fields. Does the leak make sense to them? Is it actually already well known about in their world? What's the bigger picture that this fits into?

Next

Leaks: making the approach



When you've assessed the leak and feel you know both the story and the context, you'll need to make approaches to the parties involved. Take it slowly and reflect on each stage, particularly if it's a sensitive story.

Begin with a neutral approach – unless time is tight and you have a deadline, you don't need to be precise about what you have at this stage:

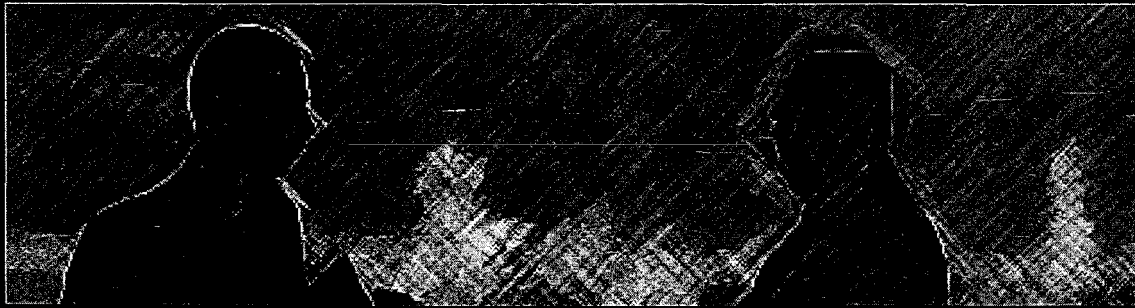
'I have information that I believe is reliable that shows the NHS trust has spent £50,000 on executive entertainment ...'

'I understand from a reliable source that an HSE report is about to be published that finds noise levels in your plant are above legal limits ...'

You are under no obligation at this stage to reveal that you have a document. Tell those you approach that you have information and you're seeking their response to it. Similarly with the parties that the leak seems to benefit – again, you're looking for their response to the general thrust of the story.

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Precision



You need to know the status of your leak.

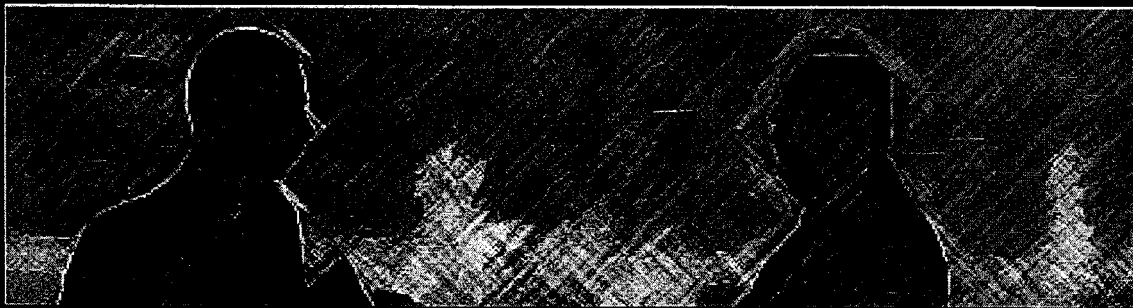
It may well be genuine – but is it an early draft? Part of a bigger document? A summary? A working draft? Often, part of a document will be sent to an individual for comment – quoting from that document might identify your source.

As you start to put your story together, be realistic and honest with yourself. Keep asking, 'is this really a story?' Keep looking for the counter-arguments or the context that would materially change what you have. How serious, really, are the allegations?

Assemble the elements of your story in draft form. What do you have that substantiates each statement? What would undermine that part of your argument? Keep checking background and context – keep talking to people who know more about the context than you do.

Next

Allegations



Once you're clear about the story you intend to broadcast, you'll need to make a direct approach to the concerned parties with the facts you intend to report.

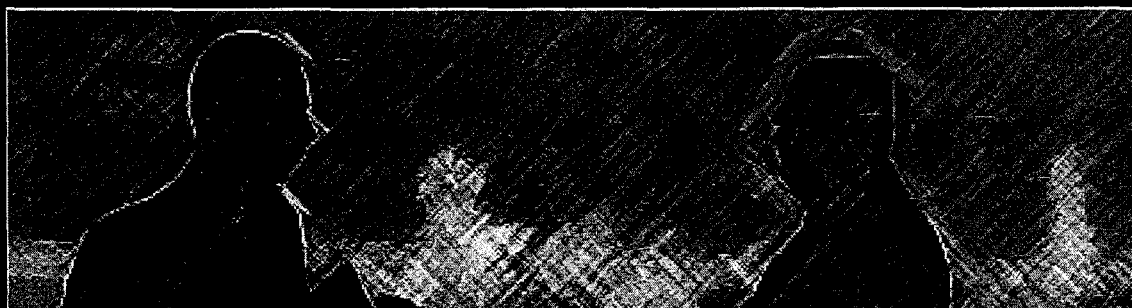
No matter how serious the allegations and how sure you are that you have chapter and verse, a person you're making serious allegations against has the absolute right to the opportunity to reply to them.

Timing is everything. You have to give a person time to respond in detail, and in their own words, to the precise allegations you're going to make in your report. At the same time, you want to avoid them killing the story, perhaps by briefing against the leaked document or its author, or getting their retaliation in first.

It's not normally acceptable to ambush a live guest with a leaked document, nor to doorstep one of the parties without making a conventional approach first – there may be circumstances where crime or corruption is involved, but it's essential you take legal and policy advice first.

Next

Delivering your story



Be straight, measured and even-handed.

Don't over-egg your story just because it came from a leak.

If your document is an early draft, say so. Apart from anything else, it indicates to the audience that you know what it is that you're dealing with. In any event, the status of the document will become known in due course – if you appear to have skated over some important detail, such as all that you have is an executive summary, it won't help your trustworthiness.

If there are other possible explanations of the facts, you should mention them. Again, it will do your trustworthiness no harm to be clear, open, honest and impartial about your assessment of what you have.

And in any interviews, don't take the stance that the leak is more likely to be true than any official source. It may be the case ... but it may not. Most leaks are a partial truth – in both senses of the word – at best.

Next

So, a quick summary

Collecting and using contacts is a vital skill.

Collect the numbers of everyone you meet – and be prepared to give your numbers in exchange.

As you read, watch and listen, collect the names and descriptions of contributors to track down later.

Call your good contacts from time to time to keep the relationship going – you might also get some good leads.

Keep your focus during any conversation with your contacts – it's not just a chat. Be aware of your contact's agenda. Take careful notes – even if it feels awkward. Your relationship with your contacts is professional not personal – avoid 'favours'.

Leaks are good things – so long as you treat them with care. A leaked document is the start of the process, not the end. Be realistic about what the leak gives you; check and re-check; consider how the significance of your leak could be changed by context. Don't over-state your leak in your output.

Allegations that arise from leaks have to be put to the parties concerned in the form you intend to express them in your output.