

## College of Journalism

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### TV Investigations



#### Investigative journalism on TV is often very challenging.

The essence of TV is that the audience can see the story; that the evidence is visible and on the record.

Much investigative journalism, however, deals with evidence that's off the record; tip-offs from anonymous sources or whistleblowers; leaked documents, evasions and half-truths. Turning that kind of evidence into robust TV journalism is never easy.

In this video, BBC *Newsnight* reporter Matt Prodger explains how he went about his 2009 investigation into the deaths of vulnerable children in the Doncaster area.

It was his coverage of the Baby P case in Haringey, London, that made him aware of systemic problems with other local authority children's services departments. Doncaster stood out. Seven children had died in four years and five of those deaths had been within the past 12 months. Matt says:

*"The deeper we dug the more interesting the story became."*

#### Research

The first step of any investigation is to lay the groundwork by thoroughly researching the subject. In the case of Doncaster, the council's own website published the findings of Serious Case Reviews, or SCRs. These are multi-agency investigations carried out when abuse, neglect or a failure by child protection agencies are known or suspected to have played a part in the death.

Reports in the local newspaper and the BBC's online cuttings service were useful, too.

But all the reading in the world is no substitute for talking to people affected by the crisis:

*"You need to speak to as many people as possible in as much detail as possible."*

*"It's hard work, it's time-consuming, it takes a lot of resources - but that's really the only way you get the story. It's the only way you get the different viewpoints."*

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### Confidentiality

Unsurprisingly, people close to the heart of the story were reluctant to speak out openly. So how do you deal with nervous sources who want to talk off the record? Matt explains:

*"It's very important at the outset of these conversations to provide an assurance to very firmly establish the terms on which you're speaking."*

And what exactly does talking 'off the record' entail?

*"That means you don't mention them in your report. That means, in this case, you don't mention their identity to other people."*

*There were a number of people I spoke to off the record who insisted that I not mention that I had spoken to them, because you would give away their identity to other people. Word would get out."*

And a couple of important details: keep copious notes and make sure you've got personal emails, home and mobile phone numbers for key contacts.

### Impartiality

The *Newsnight* team soon found that a number of people who were willing to speak to them had axes to grind. Add to this the mayor's refusal to be interviewed and the prospect arose of producing a one-sided report.

*"We had a lot of people queuing up to attack the mayor, but we didn't have his side of the story. So we had to speak to other people within the council who were more sympathetic towards him, to try to get that side of the story - to make sure we were trying to pursue a more balanced approach."*

Crucially, given the serious nature of the allegations, a BBC lawyer was on board from an early stage. Matt points out:

*"You are looking ultimately for the truth."*

### Pitching

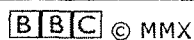
Some editors can be reluctant to undertake an investigation of this nature. It takes time and it costs money. There's no absolute guarantee of a result. And the prospect of a libel action can soon persuade a cautious editor to go with something less controversial.

Here's Matt's advice in these circumstances:

*"Keep plugging away. Get as much detail and evidence as possible. It's simply not enough to say 'this sounds a bit fishy' or 'there's something going on here, I'm not sure'. You need to ... build up, essentially, a dossier."*

*It's hard work, the rewards are slim and not immediate - and it doesn't get you on air immediately either. But when it does it's extremely rewarding."*

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