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CHAPTER 4

Background Research: Finding Documents, Data Searching, Working with Electronic Sources

In chapter 2, you read about database mining and getting to the right database. In this chapter, we'll expand on the concept of information gathering and background research. Used together, these resources will allow you to use the best of what digital media has to offer to find the right information for your stories.

ONLINE SEARCHES

Most people associate Internet searches with Google. In fact, the creative spirit and elasticity of the English language has transformed “Googling” into one of the most recognizable verbs for the “digital generation”; a commonly used synonym for “searching” and “looking something up”. Nothing wrong with that. Because of its ever-evolving and always-improving search algorithms, Google has almost cornered the market for online searching. At least for the “general public.”



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However, for the sharp digital reporter and storyteller, going beyond Google will mean the difference between being a perfectly good and a GREAT information gatherer. Since we want you to be great, we will focus on some of the search techniques that will get you there by taking you beyond the realm of Google.

Being on a university campus gives you access to an array of amazing search tools. Universities purchase powerful, specialized, and widely encompassing electronic databases for their libraries. Those databases are extremely expensive to subscribe to, but that's just about the best use possible of your tuition dollars, so you should take full advantage of them. Getting in the habit of using those resources—and using them well—will give you an incredible competitive edge, when it comes to finding the best and most accurate information out there.

BACKGROUND SEARCHES

We are using the expression “background search” in the widest possible way here: As a reference to digging for information on a great variety of subjects and topics, and not only on individuals. Every great story starts with finding background information that will allow you to understand what the issues are; what the (historical, political, social, economic) context is; where discrepancies may lie; and what may turn something into the scoop of the century.

When you start searching for background information for a story or paper you're writing, you want to know what has been written about and published about that particular topic or person. When you're looking for previously published information about something, the first place to look is NOT Google. Although Google now has a search category called Google News Archive, which archives media articles going back to the early 1800s, a quick search in those archives takes you to many news sites that have erected paywalls to keep you and I out of them, unless we're willing to spend some hard-earned money to read those stories.

Instead of Google, Google News, or even Google News Archives, using your expensive (but free for you) university library databases, you should go to Factiva and LexisNexis first. Another good library database resource that is getting very popular for background information is ProQuest, which includes ProQuest Newspapers.

Factiva is owned and operated by Dow Jones, which is a News Corporation company. Although Dow Jones is widely known and recognized as a financial information organization, Factiva gives you access to much more than only financial sources. Factiva is very intuitive to use, and it lets you customize your search in a way that targets exactly the topic, person or place you're trying to research. Factiva also lets you target the news sources where you want to research, and even the language(s) they're in.

If Factiva and Dow Jones are known for financial news and information, LexisNexis is known for information about legal issues and cases. Again, don't be fooled by this database's origins. Today, LexisNexis gives you access to much more than legal information. It is one of the best places to look for background information on prominent people and sources, for example. Just like Factiva, LexisNexis is a (handsomely) paid subscription service. If you have access to it for free—and most university libraries provide that service to their students—please take advantage of it. LexisNexis is not as intuitive and easy to use as Factiva or Google, but once you get the hang of it, your searches will become much easier and faster.

The ProQuest database, which includes ProQuest Newspapers, is another resource that is getting more and more popular for background information searches. ProQuest also includes databases such as ABI/Inform, and major newspapers that have started charging for user searches, such as the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

When you're using any of those databases for news searches, it helps if you're familiar with the Boolean logic for search engines. Boolean logic has its roots in mathematics, and lets you combine words and phrases in a way that targets exactly what you're looking for, maximizing your time and resources. At a very basic level, Boolean logic includes using the words "and", "or", and "not" to expand or restrict your search range. Like many search engines and databases, Google has incorporated Boolean logic into its algorithm, even letting you use signs such as " " (for complete statements or phrases), and - (to exclude terms).

Please keep in mind that when you use AND, you're actually restricting your search to sites that include *both* words or phrases included; when you use OR, you're searching sites that use *either* of the words or terms included, which in some cases may actually expand your search. Using NOT will explicitly exclude certain terms or words from your search.

The three library databases we referred to so far (Factiva, LexisNexis, ProQuest) also let you pick search fields (e.g., publication, author, year range, language) that will further help you to pinpoint your search targets and save some precious time.

SEEEEEERIOUS BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Now we're talking about the step after you've done your news-based background searches. Let's say you're writing a story about "fracking", the process of fracturing a layer of underground rock or soil by injecting powerful water jets into it (in order to loosen up oil reserves embedded in the rock, for example). You've done your targeted news search the way we talked about before, and found a slew of relevant news stories published by other news organizations. Now you want to find additional scientific and academic data about the subject, or even identify potential academic and government sources for your digital story.

Once again, your university library databases come to your rescue! Through them, you can have access to hundreds of thousands of government documents and academic publications that delve into the topic with a lot more detail than most of the news stories you've already found. The best scientific databases are often changing their names, reflecting the acquisitions and mergers going on in this area, but the companies Reed Elsevier, EBSCO,

Cengage, Thomson Reuters, Routledge, and a handful of others have developed a solid reputation in the field of academic publishing and indexing.

As for the research databases themselves, it all comes down to what is the topic and focus of your story. Most times, these databases are divided by academic field, so it really helps to enlist your librarian to assist you with your search. Depending on what your focus is, both reference librarians and area librarians may come in real handy, when it comes to choosing the appropriate database. Most university library web sites try to make your job easier by letting you click on the subject area, once you are ready to start your search.



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Even for a topic such as “fracking”, it all depends if your approach will be strictly scientific (geological), socioeconomic, political, environmental, etc. Most likely, it will be a combination of all of the above, at least until you figure out in which direction you want to take your reporting.

PUBLIC RECORDS

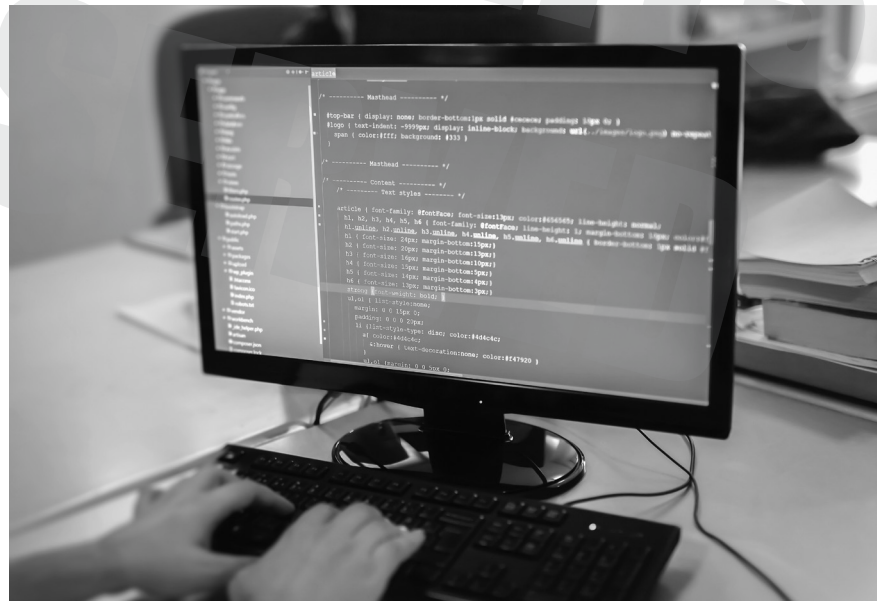
Once you have done your news-based and academic searches, you will want to enrich and expand your research by looking at public records. Those may include legal decisions and cases, property ownership information, laws and regulations pertaining to the issues being researched, information from government agencies, and financial reports filed by publicly traded corporations, among many others. They may also include things such as reports published by watchdog groups, non-governmental organizations and individual whistleblowers.

Most if not all of that information is available today for digital reporters and reporters-in-training via Internet searches. If you’re writing about private citizens and privately owned companies, a lot of information out there is completely private and off limits. These are things such as social security numbers, dates of birth, trade secrets, financial statements, and registered patents. However, there’s a great deal of information available and accessi-

ble through a few short mouse clicks about public institutions, legal cases, publicly traded companies, public officials, and even prominent private individuals (celebrities, for example).

It's also possible to find out a lot of information about privately owned companies and private citizens out there, but as a digital journalist, you want to be careful about how much of that information you make accessible to the general public. It is important to know the laws and regulations in your jurisdiction (state, county) about what kind of information you may or may not divulge. That might even include things that you may assume are a matter of public record, such as legal decisions and settlements, or someone's criminal history.

Some web sites have done a great job of compiling and making available public records. For example, www.publicrecordsources.com has them divided by state. You can click on your state and find out exactly what's available for you to search, in terms of free public records databases. Those databases are mostly organized by county. However, you'll find out from visiting this last web site that there is no one-stop shop or clearinghouse for all public records. As you conduct these searches, you'll get better at identifying the virtual places you need to go to find the specific information you're looking for. The good news is: today you can do most of the background research you need to do from your own workstation.



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From your computer, you can have immediate and free access to court records, property information, quarterly reports, government agencies' reports, and most of the other types of documents mentioned above. As with everything else in this book, you'll have to use a lot of critical thinking and discernment figuring out how to use and cross-reference databases and information you're able to find.

Professor Neil Reisner, from Florida International University, has set up a very useful web site for his students and for other journalists, called "Finding (Almost) Anybody", that lists many of the resources available when you're trying to (legally) track down someone and their public record (<http://www.nreisner.com/FindingAlmostAnybody.htm>). Professor Reisner lists on his site the most common types of documents that will help digital reporters find their sources, from birth certificates to voter registrations and wills.

FINDING SOURCES

Following the steps we have outlined so far in this chapter should produce a wealth of news stories, government documents, legal public records, academic papers, and other sources of information that will put you on the right track to write a great digital story. These resources should also unearth some interesting expert sources for your story--among them, government officials, grassroots activists, scientific experts, and concerned citizens, just to name a few. However, if you still need to find other expert sources to interview for your story, there are some additional resources you should know about.

If you are a university student or live anywhere near a large university, you should look at your school into a giant "expert source resource." Most if not all universities have a place on their web sites where they list their faculty and researchers by area of expertise. Here are some examples:

- UCLA: <http://newsroom.ucla.edu/portal/ucla/faculty-experts.aspx>
- Harvard University: <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/for-journalists/>
- Stanford University: <https://experts.stanford.edu/>
- Florida International University: <http://sourcebook.fiu.edu/>
- UC Berkeley: <http://www.berkeley.edu/news/extras/>
- Indiana University: <http://journalism.indiana.edu/faculty-and-research/journalists-resources/>

Other great source of resources for journalists is the web site The Journalist's Toolbox, set up by the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ): <http://www.journaliststoolbox.org/>. The Journalist's Toolbox also has a page especially dedicated to finding expert sources: <http://www.journaliststoolbox.org/archive/expert-sources/>

Similarly, professional and non-profit organizations such as the Poynter Institute (<http://www.poynter.org>); Investigative Reporters and Editors (<http://www.ire.org>); International Center for Journalists (<http://www.icfj.org>); InterAmerican Press Association (<http://www.sipiapa.org>); Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism (<http://www.journalism.org/resources/principles>); and Online News Association (<http://journalists.org/>), just to name a few, have set up online resource centers for working journalists, where you may find incredible resources and ideas to get your digital stories started.

AMAURY BLONDET

Have you ever wondered what exactly do digital media professionals do? How much dedication and effort it takes to get into the profession? What leads a young professional to choose digital media as their field of work? In this Q&A, Amaury Blondet, a very talented 31-year-old originally from Puerto Rico, shares some of his secrets as the digital media manager for Discovery Communications Latin America and US Hispanic.



Amaury Blondet

RR: Can you please describe your present job at Discovery and the work you currently do?

AB: I am in charge of all the content production and strategy for the websites, the mobile and TV apps, social media, and the entire editorial content for all those platforms. I currently manage three brands in particular, the Discovery Channel, Animal Planet and Investigation Discovery for Latin America, Brazil and the US Hispanic markets.

RR: Does that include producing actual videos and content for the websites?

AB: Yeah, although we have a video production team, I am in charge of approving all the concepts and the final products for videos. Those include short form content that we edit from the actual shows, and original series and shorts that we are producing just for the website and the social media platforms.

RR: How many separate websites do you currently have?

AB: I manage seven, but as digital media in Latin America, Brazil and US Hispanic, we probably have around twelve or thirteen sites.

RR: And how many people work on those twelve or thirteen websites producing content, designing, coding, and everything else?

AB: On the content side, including my boss (the director) and the producers for video and editors and all that, we probably have fifteen people. But in addition to that we have a technical team, we have a research team, we have an ad operations team that works with our ad sales group, so they can track all the sales and we can put the banners in the system and all that stuff; and we have business development, and I think those are the main areas that we cover.

RR: Take us through a one typical workday for you, or one typical workweek. What are some of the things that you do on a typical day or typical week?

AB: I have a lot of meetings. Some stuff that we do, we work very closely with the marketing and programming teams of the networks. As I mentioned, I manage three networks on the digital side, so usually we have weekly meetings with the different groups: on air, marketing, programming, to make sure that we are all aligned and we are supporting the goal of the network that week, that month, and for the whole year.

On a typical week, I usually start on Monday with a “catch up” with my direct team that includes the producers, the social media manager for the brand, and the video producer editor. We go through the week; we do a catch up on projects we have; where are we going; if we have anything that we need to put our red flag on and take care of; and then, every two weeks, I have calls with the technical team. Although now we have four members in Miami, our main team is in London for the international division, so I have calls with them, to make sure that everything that is in the pipeline is going fine.

Especially at Discovery, there are a lot of changes in terms of shows, so I meet with the different stakeholders to make sure that we are covering that, and that we have enough material to produce something that is of quality and is appealing to our users. I review the [website] traffic probably two or three times a day. I'm kind of a research freak right now, because that is very important. If I don't know how my content is working and if it's attracting my users, I think I am losing and not doing my job correctly, so I work on that.

Other than that, I am always looking for ideas to improve the site, improve the content, to take the division in a different direction. I usually have one or two pitches that an agency or another company comes in to present.

RR: A lot of emails?

AB: Yeah, a lot of emails. That never stops. At the beginning [of my career], I was first a civil engineer, and then I was thinking about Med School or something related, and I said, "No, I am not going to do that." I prefer to talk to people, but I also don't want to work every day. I just want to spend time with my family. But now I realize that it is the same here [at Discovery], because I am connected to my phone or my iPad or email anywhere all the time.

It's not that I need to work fulltime on weekends, but I am always connected. I receive emails all the time, anytime, and on Sunday night I usually catch up and see them and work too.

RR: How did you get into this job? Did you always know that you wanted to? Digital is a very new area, so how did you get into it?

AB: Actually, I was very, very lucky. I used to hate computers. I remember when the first computer came to my house; I think it was the Apple. I was like six or seven years old, and I saw this big box with a black screen and green letters and I said "What is that?" Is that just to play games? Because we had Atari, but I never liked it.

When I was in high school, I felt asleep in [computer] class; I didn't like it. When I was going to college, I didn't like it either. I need to write on this? I prefer to write on paper. When I got the job at Discovery, I got a job working at the library, where we have all the tapes and we put them by ID number and all that, so they can go on air on time. When I started working there, I had no idea about anything; a tape, a show, nothing. I watched TV at that time, but mostly sports and Discovery.

I didn't have any idea of what to do or anything like that, but I always have a passion for learning. So I started, maybe against policy, to print a lot of pages from the Internet. Printing books, taking webinars, looking for everything that has to do with TV. I wanted to learn it. I was lucky enough that my wife studied TV, film and radio, so I read all her books, and I started watching at least a short film daily for a couple of years.

I also started seating with people, with editors, with the broadcast operators at night. I used to work from nine to six, and my wife used to work from three to eleven. So I stayed at work from six to eleven, and I would seat with a broadcast operator, with the editors, with the producers, with everyone. I asked a lot of questions: I was even more annoying that I am right now, but I learned a lot.

[My job] was a temporary position, but once people saw my enthusiasm and passion, they offered me a position to work as an assistant producer for one of the networks, Travel and Living. I was lucky enough that I had a great producer, and he was my mentor, so he showed me a lot. He was tough on me, but he let me do it, and I learned as I was working with him. And since I have all this passion, I was seating in a room with a lot of producers.

There was this one position open in this "new media" department that no one knew about, but [some of the producers] said: "Amaury doesn't know anything about that, but he can definitely work and learned and all that, so I went to a couple of interviews, and they saw my passion, and I said "Hey, I don't know anything about this, but I'll learn, and I'll do it".

So almost seven years ago I got this position as a producer/editor, actually as a producer at the beginning. I almost quit the first week because it was super overwhelming, and I didn't know anything about mobile or VOD, or VOD-to-PC. So it was very, very, intense. After a couple of months, I was learning a lot and I noticed we were spending a lot of money in video production. We were spending \$25,000 a month outsourcing materials to produce short films. We were not making that much money at the time, so I sat down with my boss

and told him that if he bought me the equipment for \$12,000, I'd start editing it myself. I took weekend classes at Miami Dade College, and I started editing for Discovery.

In addition to producing, I started editing too, so I started saving the company a lot of money at that time. I did that for two and a half years, and I was looking for a job for one of my interns and found this position at SapientNitro, which I think is the biggest digital agency in the US and one of the biggest in the world. They offered me a position there, so I worked there as a Program Manager, which is a mixture between a creative account person and a project manager.

I worked on accounts such as Citibank, CBS, Coca-Cola, Celebrity Cruises, and I did that for two years and I loved it. It was my first experience working at an agency, but that was mostly general market, and I still love more Latin America. I think it was my passion, and it was my language, and I felt that I wanted to get back into that. So two years ago, I got offered a position to do kind of the same that I was doing at the agency [here at Discovery].

After a year [back here, they] asked me to move full time to content, and I trusted [my boss] and I have been in that position now for probably a year and a half, and I am very happy and comfortable doing that and not having to worry that much about the clients.

RR: So basically you're saying that a lot of what you do, because it's a new area, a lot of the work you learned on the job, and through your own research. Now that students have the opportunity of starting maybe earlier, do you see a connection between the academic majors that you choose (Engineering and Business) and your current job, or is it something that, no matter what area you specialize in when you're in college, if you are interested and passionate it can take you to different places. How do you see that compared to where you come from?

AB: I'll say that a lot of depends on the person, and also on situations that you live: where you grew up, what are the opportu-

nities that you create in your life. But I think that if you have passion and you got that courage to try new things, you can make it anywhere. I am very happy that I chose the business career [for my Master's], because it has helped me a lot. It gave me strengths, in terms of finance management, and also the international business part, because I work with I don't know how many countries in Latin America and one of my central teams is in London. It has given me different skills that I can apply on my job.

If I knew that I could study something like TV or film, I probably would have done that. But it is great to have an opportunity to actually study digital media. It's amazing, and I wish I had had that opportunity before.

RR: You work for a television channel, although on the digital side of things. Do you see a lot of combination between television and digital going on? Where do you see that going in the future? Is it becoming more mixed, in terms of the production process? Do you think it will become even more connected, in terms of the final product and the website?

AB: Yeah, I think that's the future. If you are not connected and you are not thinking digitally, it's going to be a tough road down there. Apart from the music business, I think the industry that has been more affected by digital has been the television industry. And although many people have seen it as a challenge, I think it is also a great opportunity. Look at the example of Brazil. There are more people connected to the Internet than there are cable subscribers in Brazil, although cable is growing by almost half a million new subscribers every month [in that country].

But in some areas where you're not able to get cable, you can start getting to know the brand through the Internet. So you'll know Discovery, and how great our content is, based on the Internet. The day it becomes available on cable, you'll want to watch it and check it out.

Discovery is very conservative in terms of digital, but two years ago [we] hired our first Chief Digital Officer, so that was a great

step towards moving into the digital future. There is a corporate strategy that definitely includes digital, because that's very important. The future looks very interesting, because there will be a lot of challenges to the industry. You're already seeing TV networks going straight to Xbox or some other connected boxes, without going through Comcast, Direct TV or anything like that so that's a big challenge. That's a disruption of the model that has been used for years worldwide. And also the "a la carte" model, which is starting in some areas, especially here in US and in Europe, and it is clear it's coming for good. You have 300 channels but you only watch three, so why would you have to pay for the other ones [that you're not watching]?

RR: Do you think it is particularly important for students or other people trying to get into this new market to be entrepreneurial, to be a self-starter? How important is that, entrepreneurship, creativity and all that?

AB: It's super, super, important to be a self-starter, and I am very lucky to have producers who are like that. I don't need to keep telling them what to do. They want to have the work done, and that's incredibly positive and important.

In terms of creativity and innovation, that also very, very, important for us here at Discovery, but that's something that you can actually learn. I never thought that was possible. I thought that if you are creative, you are creative. But I have actually learned to do that.