Investigation is Collaboration

Exposing the Invisible Together
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Overview

Investigators are everywhere. They are requesting information from their local governments. They are using geolocation and satellite imagery to document human rights abuses. They are interviewing patients at a nearby hospital. They are holding up their cell phones in the face of police brutality. All around us, people are digging deeply to tell stories, expose the invisible, and hold power to account.

Unfortunately, investigation can seem like an isolating prospect for some, especially those living in countries where it’s safer to investigate under the cover of darkness.

But we’d like to see this change in time.

In early August 2021, Tactical Tech’s “Exposing the Invisible” project organised an online conference, which brought together civil society investigators, journalists, artists, human rights researchers and many others to demonstrate the power of collaboration.

We called the conference “Investigation is Collaboration.” It’s a simple yet powerful idea. There are so many kinds of collaboration, across skills, regions, topics, professions and goals. Each have their merits, leading to better coverage of topics, stronger safety, more diversity, happier investigators, wider audience reach, more substantial impact — the list goes on.

We heard from investigators at the forefront of the field who talked about:
→ investigating ‘in the open’ and reaching out to human sources confidently
→ making the best out of collaboration to enhance cross-border projects
→ how to keep safe and aware by assessing risks like a pro
→ overcoming data-phobia and getting started with datasets to tell the stories hidden in the numbers
→ investigative initiatives and new projects combining documentation, reporting, tech and yes, collaboration
→ best practices and tips on crowd-sourcing evidence for investigations
→ creative ways of telling investigative stories and reaching people where they are, not where we want them to be.

What follows is an invaluable list of resources and best practices that arose from those discussions, memorialized here for potential collaborators to access whenever, wherever. We hope you’ll use them to keep the conversations and collaborations going. Get in touch if you wish to talk to us, ask us something or share ideas: eti@tacticaltech.org
This e-book is a collection of articles providing snapshots from the inspiring sessions of the conference “Investigation is Collaboration: Exposing the Invisible Together” organised by Tactical Tech’s “Exposing the Invisible” Project on 2-6 August 2021.
"Ten years ago, collaborative journalism was something unusual, quite often weird – why to share my precious information with someone else? Fortunately, this has changed. Collaborative stories are a new trend, because they are powerful, they have impact and they protect the journalists; because killing one is easy, killing a network is impossible."
Investigators want to make a splash. Deep down, investigators hope their months or even years of meticulous research combing through spreadsheets, scraping the internet for data and tracking down sources has not been in vain.

But, as Pavla Holcová, a regional editor and investigative journalist with the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), knows all too well, a story's impact isn't something you can plan out perfectly. Sometimes you see the results of a story happen immediately, and sometimes you can feel its effects five years after publication. A bombshell investigation could help topple a regime in one country but have no effect in another country that was central to the story.

This is also unfortunately true with negative impacts. As an investigator working on sensitive topics, you could end up in jail or, in the most tragic cases, dead.

Pavla Holcová puts it this way:

“Imagine you have the story of your life. Sensitive material, classified documents, exclusive testimonies. You are the one and only journalist doing the story, the one and only who has it all. And you are going to show to all your competitors how powerful a story you can deliver. And this is exactly what makes you an easy target, this is what might get you killed.”

In other words, if you’re going at it alone, whatever happens to you also happens to your story and everything you were working toward. Fortunately, there’s a powerful safeguard: collaboration.

As Pavla urges:

“Collaboration can save your life. Not only your life, but also your colleague’s life, the life of your story and its impact.”

One example from Pavla Holcová’s work illustrates this point perfectly: Project Khadija.

In 2015, her close colleague, award-winning journalist Khadija Ismayilova, was sentenced to seven and a half years in prison on trumped up charges in her home country of Azerbaijan. Pavla and Khadija had collaborated on a series of stories uncovering corruption among Azerbaijan’s ruling elite, looking at their hidden wealth and influence abroad. The Azerbaijani government sought to silence Khadija (and other journalists) and to put a stop to her investigations through years of harassment, arrests and subsequent imprisonment.

But the government had underestimated Khadija Ismayilova and the power of collaboration. As Pavla Holcová says, “Collaborative stories are a new trend, because they are powerful, they have impact and they protect journalists; because killing one is easy, killing a network is impossible.”

Pavla and the team at OCCRP knew that the best way to honor Khadija’s sacrifice would be to continue to expose the corruption and misdeeds of Azerbaijan’s ruling elite, and so she and her colleagues did just that with a renewed sense of purpose under the banner The Khadija Project.

“We will be Khadija x 100,” they promised.

For months while Khadija was in prison, the team at the Khadija Project continued to publish groundbreaking investigations, with Khadija Ismayilova as the byline. The Azerbaijani government was furious. After each new story, prison guards would search Ismayilova’s cell, convinced that she was somehow smuggling information and articles out of the jail to publish.

The Khadija Project team and their investigations were finalists for the 2017 Global Shining Light Award from the Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN), while their efforts achieved something even more precious. Khadija was set free in 2016, thanks to the tireless efforts of journalists and human rights activists, and for the international attention gained through this collaborative project.

“Collaboration is a Lifesaver. Literally” says Pavla Holcová.

Recommended further reading: "Investigation is Collaboration: How to Make It Work", by Ankita Anand, in the Exposing the Invisible Kit. An extensive guide with advice, tips and resources on how to start and manage collaborative investigations safely and ethically.
“Do we know things? How do we know them? Philosophers have been asking these questions for thousands of years. But for investigators and researchers, they have a particular resonance. What do we do when we investigate? How do we derive meaning from data and the absence of data?” (Crofton Black*). - In this brief article we look at one investigative project that used creative means and plenty of collaboration to draw meaning from absent information in order to expose a global operation of rendition and secret detentions conducted by the CIA.
Welcome to the dilemma that investigators face day to day: “Do we know things? How do we know them?” - Investigators deal with imperfect knowledge, they build knowledge from little bits of data and oftentimes, they build knowledge from evidence gaps, from the invisible.

In 2010 writer and investigator Crofton Black started working on uncovering operations of the CIA’s (USA Central Intelligence Agency) Eastern European secret prison sites, also called “black sites” due to the secrecy surrounding them. This research took him and an large team - including other investigators, human rights defenders, lawyers and journalists - years of meticulous and creative work.

Extraordinary rendition programs are highly classified, extrajudicial operations, which involve government-sponsored actions of abducting and relocating suspects from their home countries to other regions for interrogation, torture and secret detention.

The challenge the team faced seemed initially unresolvable. Firstly, they were looking into a secret (by default) global operation. Secondly, when they finally got documents that could shine some light on the grievous issue they were investigating - that is, the CIA’s post-9/11 torture program, its victims, methods and those involved - almost all the important information had been redacted, blacked out literally. They addressed the challenge primarily through seeking and finding evidence from the absence of data and by combining various methods, skills and tools that only a collaborative effort could have enabled. Their years of investigation led to successful litigation at the European Court of Human Rights and a comprehensive report - CIA Torture Unredacted - on the history of the CIA’s extraordinary rendition program.

Snapshot by the author of an Extract from the Committee Study, with dates, CIA officers and cable data redacted, and with PSEUDONYMS for black sites and contractors; page 24; “CIA Torture Unredacted: An Investigation Into the CIA Torture Programme;” Project by The Rendition Project, The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, University of Westminster, The University of Sheffield, 2019; written by Sam Raphael, Crofton Black and Ruth Blakeley.
The team’s meticulous work produced perhaps the most detailed public account of the entire torture program led by the CIA in the time period of the so-called “war on terror” between 2001 and 2009. It is very important to read the entire report by Sam Raphael, Crofton Black and Ruth Blakeley to understand the scale, depth and extent of this program, including detailed profiles of prisoners, locations of secret sites, complex networks of private companies involved in the program and a detailed overview of apparent complicity by a number of key countries.

For a more complex review of this investigation and more insight into what visible and invisible traces, signs and symbols can help reveal in an investigation, read our Exposing the Invisible Kit guide Signs, Symbols and Other Visual Clues.

Crofton Black shared some lessons from this research process that took plenty of collaborative work, creativity and patience to unravel.

At the heart of this investigation was a sense of emptiness. Their team of researchers had to start with what was still visible in the otherwise heavily redacted documents in order to derive traces of prison locations from many different sources of incomplete data. This research could not include testimonies from prisoners so they relied on secondary sources from Amnesty International, inquiries in archives, flight records, financial documents gathered from Freedom Of Information Act (FOIA) requests and other sources.

Among the challenges they encountered were:

→ Heavily redacted governmental documents.
→ FOIA requests often depended on luck as some requests were successful and others were unsuccessful.
→ Disparate documents that required researchers to identify common themes - for example, synthesising flight records into one coherent flight pattern by connecting flight numbers, dates, and travel invoice numbers. None of these documents were machine readable so this information had to be manually entered to create a database.

Some lessons learned from this investigation:

→ **Learn the language and vocabulary of the ‘field’ you are researching** - In this case, investigators learned to understand the overall structure of the documents through understanding communication protocols and acronyms used by those running the rendition program activities.

→ **Look for the gaps in data and make use of them when building your evidence** - There were also many gaps or holes in the data the team had available. Prisoner testimonies were detailed, but contained inaccuracies and gaps. However, investigators used this to their advantage by using the absence of information as indicators. For example, investigators deduced that gaps in flight information represented prison transfers.

→ **Connect the dots to meet a goal** - Unlike journalistic reporting, filing a lawsuit (which is what this research was also used for) needs to prove an argument and have a focused goal. In other words, to clearly show a cause and effect from point ‘A’ to point ‘Z.’ Connecting between two points of data, investigators were able to see a pattern, and finally understood where a plane went from the flight data.

→ **Believe what you see...but verify** - When investigating, hypotheses don’t need to be true or probable, but must be consistent with the observations.

→ **Build a bigger picture, then break it down to understand the parts** - Investigators were “drowning in data” as they have collected 15 millions lines of transactions related to the rendition flights and the companies contracted to run the CIA operations across borders. It took years to synthesise the data into coherent information and ultimately into stories. It was essential for the team to create a chronology of records and find meaningful entry points into this data as well as human stories that could bring the data and the meanings behind it to a wider audience. In philosophical terms, investigators needed to understand the whole by understanding the parts.
Crofton Black is a writer and investigator. He is co-author of Negative Publicity: Artefacts of Extraordinary Rendition and CIA Torture Unredacted, and works on technology and security topics for The Bureau of Investigative Journalism in London. Before this he was a history of philosophy academic, specialising in theories of knowledge and interpretation. He has a PhD from the Warburg Institute, London and was a Humboldt Fellow at the Freie Universität Berlin. More info at https://www.crofton.black/
Crowdsourcing is increasingly used by journalists, activists, researchers and citizen investigators to collect information, verify it and build a body of evidence that can help expose issues affecting communities everywhere. What are the main needs, methods and considerations to be aware of when setting up and managing a crowdsourcing effort?
What is crowdsourcing and when to use it?
Crowdsourcing is the practice of asking large numbers of people to contribute feedback or information on a specific topic, incident, problem, etc. News organisations, NGOs, researchers and journalists are increasingly using crowdsourcing as a form of information collection in order to engage with communities and activate people by asking them to think about a subject, report issues or explore solutions.

The term crowdsourcing was first coined by Jeff How in a 2006 “Wired” magazine article where he defined it as a new way of sourcing labor enabled by the Internet. Different types of commercial and non-commercial crowdsourcing emerged since.

→ For instance, Wikipedia, is the best example of collective knowledge sourcing, while Ushahidi is a popular platform for crowdmapping information.
→ Bellingcat is an organisation focused on online citizen investigations and often uses crowdsourcing on social media to gather information, document and verify events as part of its stories and reports. For instance, one of their flagship investigations into the downing of the Malaysia Airlines 17 (MH17) passenger airplane in Ukraine in 2014 relied heavily on crowdsourcing.
→ Another example is a 2017 collaboration between Amnesty International and Airwars’ in a joint investigation into the bombing of Raqqa, Syria, which involved over 138 thousand volunteer contributors from 124 countries.

What to consider in crowdsourcing-based projects?
Tetyana Bohdanova - who researches the impact of technology on democracy, specialising in elections monitoring and civil society engagement - proposes a framework for developing and implementing crowdsourcing initiatives. This framework can be applied to any crowdsourcing-driven project, from collecting information from the public as part of investigations or monitoring ongoing events (like demonstrations, natural disasters) to mapping specific problems in an area or seeking answers to a question:

1. Define the purpose of your initiative
2. Consider ethics, legality, and safety
3. Define audience, format, and duration
4. Identify the best method
5. Effectively engage contributors
6. Identify the right tools
7. Set up a data verification process
8. Analyse data and present findings
1. **Define the purpose of your initiative**

Why do you want/need to crowdsource? It could be that you want to gather data and build evidence for a story, to support other organisations in their research and advocacy, to raise awareness about a problem, or to mobilise people around an important issue, event, etc.

Whichever the purpose, it’s important to remember that when setting up a crowdsourcing effort, you need to weigh the risks because data could be manipulated or corrupted by opposing entities. This method does not need to be the primary source of data collection for your project, it can be used in parallel with other sources like field research, satellite imagery research, or verification of other media sources to ensure data accuracy.

2. **Consider ethics, legality, and safety**

To ensure that “crowds” indeed have access to submit information to you, you need to make an effort to provide widely accessible tools and platforms for that to happen. This means using tools that are inclusive. For instance, don’t employ crowdsourcing platforms and tools that only work with strong internet connectivity or with laptops in a context when none of these may be easily accessible to the majority of people. In addition, when managing crowdsourcing projects, you are also responsible for raising awareness to and mitigating the risks of those involved, thus being transparent about the safety issues contributors may face.

3. **Define audience, format, and duration**

Consider who are the beneficiaries. Beneficiaries may be different than contributors.
4. Identify the best method
There are various methods and formats to crowdsource information, such as structured, unstructured, or a mixed approach - and they all depend on the goal, context, beneficiaries, among others:
When an investigation is fishing for tips, don’t limit the format. People contributing should be able to submit this data in an unstructured format that is easiest for them, e.g., email, text, or photo, etc.
In a scenario that involves a humanitarian response for instance, every piece of information should be submitted in a structured format - such as location and time - to be able to quickly analyze data and act upon it.
In case of a mixed method, investigators are aware that in the heat of the process people can’t provide data in one preferred format so allowing more flexibility might be necessary.

5. Effectively engage contributors
You may choose a great topic, collaborate with other organisations, use the right tools, but if the audience does not contribute, there is no crowdsourcing. Get to know your audience and think about the benefits and risks associated with this engagement. Audiences are inspired to participate when the benefits are clear, the process is transparent and the results can be quickly demonstrated.

6. Choose appropriate tech tools
Identify the right tools by considering the technology environment like the internet connectivity or high/low access to specific devices. Consider the habits of the audience involved as they may be slow to accept new technology. Also, how much security do you really need from the tech you use in crowdsourcing? It’s worth evaluating the tech tools and software you will use based on your needs and context. Start by reading some helpful introductory materials like the “Safety First!” guide in the Exposing the Invisible Kit and the article “Technology Is Stupid: How to choose tech for remote working” by Marek Tuszynski.

7. Set up a data verification process
Establish when data is considered verified or has been deemed ready for publication. An example of data verification may include comparing crowdsourced data with media reports. For more tips and methods of verification, check valuable resources such as the “Verification Handbook: A Definitive Guide To Verifying Digital Content For Emergency Coverage” and the “Verification Handbook For Disinformation And Media Manipulation.”

8. Analyse data and present findings
When presenting the collected data, it’s indicated to describe the method or methodology of the crowdsourcing process and the public’s engagement. Showing how results or conclusions have been derived could bolster the credibility of your findings and of the stories or reports you publish. It is also highly important to express gratitude and give credit to collaborators, team members, tool developers, etc.
Example: CrowdNewsroom - “It needs the crowd to get the bigger story”
The independent investigative non-profit CORRECTIV designed CrowdNewsroom as a platform for investigators to create and conduct collaborative projects with the help of communities. Justus von Daniels, Editor-in-Chief of CORRECTIV and one of the initiators of CrowdNewsroom, notes that while crowdsourcing is a powerful way to engage the community, databases of information collected from people via this process may raise various considerations related to validity of data, safety risks to people providing the data as well as the security of data storage and sharing by the project organizers themselves. Databases with crowdsourced information contain sensitive information, including personal data such as locations of people contributing - many of them being possibly at risk in their own contexts. These risks need to be made transparent to everyone participating. Therefore, while running such projects may seem like an easy way of gathering information, it requires a major investment of time, communication, skills and funding to ensure contributors’ and data safety, data validity and transparency as well as a desired impact of the findings and resulting stories.

CORRECTIV spearheaded Who owns Hamburg?, an ongoing crowdsourcing project, asking the public for information related to ownership conditions in their local residential real-estate market of the German city of Hamburg. The reason for starting this project was that there is no open and transparent database of residential property owners in German cities and nobody really knows who are the big real-estate owners controlling the local housing prices market.

With “Who owns Hamburg?”, data security and accountability were essential for establishing and maintaining trust with people contributing information to the project. Most of them were local tenants providing sensitive information about who owns the houses they rented. Security measures were crucial because such a crowdsourced project may be targeted by those being investigated or by anyone else opposing such an investigative initiative.

From the CrowdNewsroom’s experience, these are some questions that the public may initially ask to organisers of a crowdsourced project:

→ Who is running the server where my information is submitted/collected?
→ Where is server located? (It is essential for investigators carrying out crowdsourcing efforts to invest a lot in data security to increase trust.)
→ Who has access to database?
→ Who are your partners?
→ How trustworthy are your partners?

In addition to prioritising risk assessment and risk mitigation in such a collaborative effort, there is the need to motivate and engage contributors in order to have an effective and ultimately successfully crowdsourcing project. This includes understanding their political and social conditions and what drives them to want to contribute. People are more likely to participate when they are inspired by the investigation and clearly see the benefits of the investigation to address the issues and topics they care about or are affected by. A crowdsourcing-based investigation needs to strike a balance between demonstrating results quickly so as to inspire more contributors while also considering the long term safety and well-being of contributors.
*Tetyana Bohdanova is an elections and civil society development specialist and a researcher of technology’s impact on democracy. She has over a decade of field-based experience in citizen engagement and electoral transparency work across Eastern Europe and Eurasia, including the implementation of crowdsourcing projects in restrictive environments.

*Justus von Daniels is Editor-in-Chief of the german non-profit newsroom CORRECTIV. He joined CORRECTIV in 2015 as an investigative reporter. In 2018 he led the project "Who owns the city", a crowd-based investigation with 10000 participants and seven media partners. The project and individual publications won several awards. Justus is a trained lawyer and obtained a PhD before joining journalism.
"In an increasingly complex social, political and economic environment, and in times of lurking crises, from Covid-19 to the climate emergency, we need to collaborate if we are to investigate such complex phenomena. However, depending on how you go about it, being part of a collaborative investigation can be one of the most rewarding or one of the most stressful projects you participate in (or, most likely, both things at the same time)."

(Jose Miguel Calatayud)
In May 2021, a team of over 25 investigative and data journalists and visualisation experts from 16 European countries launched Cities for Rent: Investigating Corporate Landlords Across Europe, a collaborative effort looking at the critical housing issues affecting many European cities where people can no longer find affordable and decent places to live. This cross-border investigation found that since the 2007/2008 financial crisis international investment funds and housing corporations have been buying homes across European cities, driving the purchase as well as the rental prices sky high. In addition to making housing inaccessible to many of these cities inhabitants, stories have emerged of abusive practices by ‘corporate landlords’, the companies that buy and rent out housing for profit.

The Cities for Rent team, coordinated by the international non-profit Arena for Journalism in Europe worked for over seven months to collect, analyse and visualise data to address several crucial questions: Where is all that money coming from? Who are the companies and investors buying so much housing across Europe? How does this phenomenon affect people’s lives and homes in European cities?

We all know that such a collaboration across border and skills (remember it took a team of over 25 people in 16 countries) does not happen by itself and is by no means an easy enterprise. It requires communication, time, skills, money, access to data, collaboration, and most important of all - coordination, and someone to do it. This is where freelance journalist Jose Miguel Calatayud’s work, experience and resilience was key. As the co-initiator and coordinator of the The Cities for Rent team and project (and of many other collaborative projects before that), Jose shares the essential considerations to keep in mind when managing a collaborative investigation at any scale:

1. Maintain and coordinate a realistic workload
2. Clearly define goals and expectations
3. Facilitate communication and promote transparency between all partners
4. Plan, plan, plan
1. Maintain and coordinate a realistic workload
Collaboration is an opportunity to bring together a diverse team, and it can increase the richness and impact of what is published. Make an honest assessment of your or organization’s capacity and resources like time, expertise, and funding.

What type of collaboration is the best fit or aligns with your goals? It could be as simple as sharing contacts, amplifying each other’s work, exchanging skills and expertise. For example a potential collaborator may speak a language you do not speak.

2. Clearly define goals and expectations
Collaborators should have a shared vision. One tip to make sure everyone is on the same page is to share the group’s mission with the public. Collaborations often occur when individuals are seeking each other’s experiences. Expertise is helpful, but trust is just as important.

One question to consider when defining expectations and goals is who does what. Also consider how the team makes decisions: should it be a quorum, majority vote, or another avenue to obtain consensus? A memorandum of understanding (MOU) could potentially ensure accountability.

Here is a checklist of potential tasks to delegate:

- Securing external funding or support is needed
- Managing the data
- Documenting the project
- Promoting outcomes of the investigation
- ‘Post-mortem’ analysis (lessons learned after the investigation wraps up)

3. Facilitate communication and promote transparency between all partners
Journalists and others who investigate use phrasing and jargon or “technical language” that are different than what developers, activists or policy experts would use. Collaborators need to make an extra effort with individuals across different sectors or from other professional backgrounds. We may say the same thing, but do we mean the same thing?

Differences are not barriers. A mutual understanding of these divides will help you build bridges early in your collaborative efforts. Here is an example checklist:

- Different visions - are we informing the public or changing the world?
- Different pace of work - can we agree on the calendar? What is the timeline of the project? For example, the process for publishing in a newspaper or online media is often much shorter than for an academic journal.
- Different publication standards - can we publish each other’s work? For example, a piece may be considered by some publications to be an op-ed when the author considers it to be non-fiction.
- Different norms and standards - what constitutes independent research? What does transparent reporting mean? How do you evaluate you have enough evidence to publish?

4. Plan, plan, plan
Jose’s mantra is: plan, plan, plan. Plan for expected and unexpected activities and budgets, plan for the worse, plan to get stressed, plan for failure and success, plan to care for your and your team’s well-being. And plan all these together with your team and all throughout the project. Planning should never stop.
*Jose Miguel Calatayud is a freelance journalist based in Berlin, currently focusing on collaborative investigative journalism in Europe, and most recently he coordinated the Cities for Rent investigation. Jose also works with Arena for Journalism in Europe, a non-profit foundation that promotes cross-border collaborative journalism and where he lead the Housing Project, and has collaborated with Tactical Tech’s Exposing the Invisible project on training emerging investigators and developing resources for collaborative investigations. Jose also contributes to AlgorithmWatch and Eticas Foundation about algorithmic accountability reporting. More info at https://josemcalatayud.net/in-english.*
This brief article gathers tips on cross-border collaboration as learned from Editor-in-Chief Tina Lee and the team behind "Unbias the News", a publication striving to make journalism more inclusive and diverse.
Editors and journalists almost uniformly agree that diversity is important, and for good reason. Different perspectives and lived experiences lead to better stories, more thorough fact-checking, fewer blind spots, and more innovative solutions.

But as Editor-in-Chief Tina Lee and her team at Hostwriter, an open network that helps journalists to easily collaborate across borders, and its publishing platform Unbias the News have experienced it, most newsrooms and other media organizations are still fortresses of privilege. By and large, they lack meaningful diversity, which needs to include different skillsets, languages and life experience, as well as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender.

In her efforts to foster cross-border journalistic collaboration, Tina Lee observes the same tired arguments against assembling a more diverse team again and again. Here are just a few of these myths that she constantly debunks:

→ **Tragic or traumatic life experiences make you biased.** - On the contrary, such experiences enlarge your perspective, making you alive to new ideas and considerations.

→ **It's easier to work with people I know, or people in my immediate network.** - While it may seem easier, people in your network are often substantially similar to you, which narrows your story and the range of ideas brought to the table.

→ **It takes longer to work with a diverse team, and I'm under deadline.** - Someone with a deep local context of the story you're covering might know shortcuts or more efficient paths to get the information you seek.

→ **I can only trust someone with bylines in mainstream/big media.** - These bylines only show that others trusted the author, but to make a full assessment you should read the work on your own. Prestige bylines could be a better indicator of access and privilege than of the talent or work ethics one might have.

→ **A journalist working in a country with a corrupt government is likely also corrupt.** - Often the very opposite is true. Journalists working in such difficult settings need to be more creative and resourceful to achieve the same results.

Once you have worked through these assumptions and prejudices, how do you then foster diverse collaboration? Lee has tips for that too:

→ **Base your judgments on the work, not on a CV or resumé.** - For the purposes of your investigation, specific local expertise may be far more important than a big-name publication or university.

→ **Pay everyone the same (period).** - This may be controversial in the field of journalism because the costs of standards of living differ between countries. However, equal pay sets a more even power dynamic and expectation of the same quality work from everyone.

→ **Adopt a mentor/mentee approach.** - Be honest about what you know and don’t know, and be ready to be flexible about when you’re the mentor and when you’re the mentee.

→ **Don't be a jerk.** - Working in journalism is hard enough, and bullying is one of the main reasons people drop out of the media or non-profit field. People produce better work when they feel welcome.

→ **Give yourself more time than you think.** - For many journalists or editors, internet blackouts, theft of equipment, political upheaval and canceled visas are all reasons to not go on collaborating with someone in that risky situation - until it happens to them. Be empathetic and realistic about the challenges people face across different contexts.

“Reaching outside of your network, working with people you’ve never met, and making a respectful and inviting collaboration is not a matter of politeness or political correctness, it’s about getting the context and perspectives essential to making your investigation relevant to stakeholders.” (Tina Lee)

*Tina Lee is Editor-in-Chief of Unbias the News, an anti-racist and feminist cross-border newsroom started by journalism network Hostwriter. Originally from the USA, she writes, researches and podcasts about migration, human rights, and the far-right and has previously worked for Human Rights Watch and the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network.*
“Is there a link between your local river drying up and European policies on climate and energy? Do you know which international energy companies are active in your country or region and what their track record on environmental protection is?” (Jelena Prtorić) The Arena Climate Network is an initiative that aims to promote and support “a cross-border mindset when investigating climate issues and develop the tools that would enable journalists, researchers and concerned citizens to collaborate across borders on climate stories.”
In 2019, investigative journalist Jelena Prtorić saw this photo of the construction of a liquified natural gas terminal on the northern tip of the Croatian island of Krk in the Adriatic Sea.


The government called the project a game changer, something to help Croatia achieve energy independence over previous reliance on Russian oil and gas.

But she was skeptical. As she dug into the story and interviewed dozens of people, she began to paint a picture countering the official narrative. Environmentalists and locals warned of marine life destruction. Energy experts said the project didn’t make sense, and economists doubted its fiscal viability.

Jelena Prtorić published the story, “Energy Independence: Critics Turn Up Heat on Croatian LNG Plan,” but she felt as though she could have done so much more. - “It would have been very helpful to me to have had a cross-border perspective.”

Jelena knew there were several European and even global angles to explore, given the interconnected nature of climate and energy policy, but at the time she lacked the network and resources to explore them. She simply did not know where to find a community of these experts, local journalists, and others conducting impactful climate investigations.

“What I needed was a network,” she remembers. “Stories don’t stop at borders, journalism shouldn’t either.”

A while after, working with Arena for Journalism in Europe - a foundation with the mission to support collaborative cross-border investigative journalism - Jelena saw an opportunity in laying the foundations of a collaborative community focused on climate related investigations, support and knowledge sharing among reporters. Since early 2021 she has been developing and coordinating the Arena Climate Network, a community of journalists and researchers working on climate-related topics, based on the principle of networking and the idea that every story is cross-border. She envisions a network that is topical, cross-border and community-led. With colleagues and collaborators, the Network
has launched discussion groups, a twitter account (@Arena_Climat), and plans to create secure collaborative spaces and provide training for climate investigations.

Like all great collaborations, Arena Climate Network is a work in progress, and Jelena Prtorić is transparent about both the challenges and opportunities ahead.

**Common collaboration challenges:**

- How to engage people (and keep the community engaged);
- How to define or limit the topic of climate (Is it the environment? Energy? Something else?);
- How to bridge differences between climate coverage and interests in these topics between EU countries;
- How to create a sense of community online, and how to maintain it;
- How to keep growing as a network;
- How to make a local story global, and how to make a cross-border story local.

**Opportunities that such a network will bring:**

- Deepening networking, learning and exchanging among members;
- Teaming up: knowing where to find trusted collaborators by skill, location, language or expertise;
- One-on-one climate mentorship;
- ‘Learning by doing’ climate training;

And, most importantly, “having a community also keeps us sane!” says Jelena Prtorić.
*Jelena Prtorić is a freelance journalist who has reported for a wide variety of publications in English, French, Italian, and her native Croatian. Her work has focused mainly on gender and human rights, migration, the environment and climate, culture and social movements. She also works with non-profit Arena for Journalism in Europe as the coordinator of the Arena Climate Network and its Climate Network Forum. She is an occasional podcaster and translator of graphic novels.*
This is an example that proves how, with curiosity, hard work and an openness to collaboration, you can expose human rights abuses committed by the most secretive governments, in places you can’t even access.
In 2016, Megha Rajagopalan, now a senior correspondent at BuzzFeed News, was working as a reporter in Beijing when she heard whispers about a deepening crisis between the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Uighurs, a Muslim ethnic minority group living in a region of China called Xinjiang. She also heard that the CCP was detaining Uighurs and “reeducating” them, but it was nearly impossible to travel to Xinjiang and investigate that without raising the suspicions of the Chinese authorities.

Through her network, she tracked down a former detainee in neighbouring Turkey, who told her about the Uighur detention center in his hometown of Kashgar, China. Megha traveled by car and foot to corroborate the former detainee’s account. After confirming its existence as a Uighur detention center, she published the story, only to have her journalist visa summarily revoked by the Chinese government.

Curiosity and hard work had pushed her to pursue the story, but she hit a roadblock after the loss of her visa and, consequently, access to Xinjiang to further document the scale of the Chinese government’s campaign of persecution.

Fortunately, a chance meeting with her future collaborator Alison Killing, at an investigations residence organised by Exposing the Invisible in 2018, pushed Megha Rajagopalan’s investigation into high gear. Alison Killing, a licensed architect with expertise in geospatial analysis but also a ‘citizen’ investigator herself, had exactly the skillset Megha needed to investigate and document abuses in a place where physical access had become impossible. Killing came up with an idea to use satellite imagery and 3D modeling to locate the existence of unknown camps and the forced-labor activities happening there, as well as to confirm the existence of suspected camps.

Through this combination of skills and a long-term collaboration, Megha Rajagopalan, Alison Killing and programmer Christo Buschek uncovered a vast network of prisons throughout Xinjiang, capable of incarcerating up to 1 million Uighurs. In June 2021 they were awarded the Pulitzer Prize in international reporting as recognition of their reporting.
Mnemonic, the non-profit that runs Syrian Archive, Yemeni Archive and Sudanese Archive uses its position as a cross-sectoral, cross-disciplinary organisation to provide the tools and methodologies that enable human rights defenders to use digital information in the fight for justice and demand for accountability. This short article emphasises some of Mnemonic’s methodologies and key considerations that its team needs to navigate within the human rights investigative space.
“Collecting and analysing data is something that states and corporations have been able to do for a long time,” says Jeff Deutch, director of operations and research at Mnemonic, co-founder of the Syrian Archive, and Tactical Tech alumnus. “What’s different now is the potential for using this type of content has opened up to regular people, in order to hold those in power to account.”

In 2014, Hadi Al Khatib and Jeff Deutch co-founded the Syrian Archive in close collaboration with reporters and human rights groups as a rapid response project to preserve digital information of the Syrian conflict: images, videos, and other postings that are invaluable historical artifacts and potential evidence of human rights abuses.

These pieces of digital information largely fall under the umbrella of open-source intelligence, or OSINT for short. As the name suggests, OSINT refers to any publicly available information, including news content, maps, and social media. Anything collected through covert surveillance or spying is excluded.

→ Recently, OSINT methods have gone mainstream. The New York Times’ visual investigations look into different human rights abuses, as well as the BBC’s online investigations. Outside of the media landscape, human rights groups also deploy OSINT tools, including Amnesty International’s Digital Verification Corps and Human Rights Watch’s reports. Even the International Criminal Court cited evidence from Facebook in a recent arrest warrant.

→ Be sure to also check out our guide in The ETI Kit, “OSINT – Diving into an ‘Ocean’ of Information.”

“Mnemonic grew out of the recognition that Syrian Archive’s workflows could be adapted to other locations where human rights violations must be documented and preserved but the ecosystems to do so are underdeveloped,” says Deutch. Mnemonic is an NGO dedicated to archiving, investigating and memorialising digital information documenting human rights violations and international crimes.

**Why create an archive?**

Here are some reasons why a resource like the Syrian Archive and other archives that Mnemonic is currently supporting to develop are crucial to collecting, preserving and building a body of evidence that can ultimately serve as proof of power abuses and human rights violations:

1. **Important content is constantly lost**

Anyone documenting human rights abuses knows that their recording and storage devices are constantly at risk of damage or seizure in the often-hostile environments they find themselves in. Conflict zones and border checkpoints are high-risk areas where investigators are liable to lose precious hard drives or cameras.

But even when content makes it out of a conflict zone and onto a website, it’s still not safe. Targeted, repeated cyberattacks or take-down requests can imperil any content published on media platforms and social networks, especially those that use automated removals such as YouTube, Facebook or Twitter.

2. **Content is often unverified**

With so much user-uploaded content on social media, it can be difficult to sort through what’s real and what’s fake. And with the rise of deep fakes, the threat posed by disinformation and misinformation will only continue to grow.

3. **Content can be unsearchable**

For human rights researchers or any investigators hoping to use user-uploaded digital content for justice and accountability, it can be difficult to sift through massive amounts of content distributed across disparate platforms. Rich information stored in the metadata is also lost when files are uploaded to social media websites. Even reports by journalists or human rights groups are not often publicly available or provided in accessible formats, which creates additional barriers to accessing and processing data.

**How does the Syrian Archive work?**

There are now more hours of user-generated content about the Syrian conflict than there have been hours in the conflict itself. A recent data audit of the Syrian Archive found that it would take 40 years to watch all of the footage currently collected.
Using a variety of mostly free software, the team at the Syrian Archive uses the above process to build its base of evidence. Through analysis and investigations of chemical attacks and other human rights abuses, the Syrian Archive has helped to file criminal complaints, identify perpetrators’ intent, and clarify command structures within conflicts.

With the Syrian Archive, Yemeni Archive and Sudanese Archive, Mnemonic scrapes and preserves information online, while also adding context and making it searchable, reliable and useful. The organisation also trains human rights defenders to maximise impact of digital information, and builds and supports the development of open-source tools and methods.

Given the graphic nature of the content, Deutch says that Mnemonic and all of the archives try to incorporate several techniques to minimize exposure and trauma for the people working with this content. Simple methods include turning off the sound when it’s not needed to verify a video, or focusing on the non-graphic content (e.g., a street sign, or timestamp). They are also developing methods to blur faces and other graphic elements, and they organize regular therapy sessions for team members who need it.

For more on methods to deal with such trauma, visit Amnesty International’s “The hidden victims of repression – how activists and reporters can protect themselves from secondary trauma.”

Lessons learned

1. Building an archive can be tedious
As Deutch well knows, behind all of this work there’s a lot of non-glamorous infrastructure development and maintenance. Tools and hard drives break, and social media companies continually change their sites and remove content. This means impact is not easily quantifiable, and if the archive continues to work and make content available to investigators and researchers, that’s a win in itself.

2. Stress collaboration over innovation
There are hundreds of apps and tools to help with human rights documentation, but many aren’t used widely and none of them are perfect. Deutch points out that some of their most impactful work was done using only spreadsheets, a 50-year-old technology. One thing that always works, however, is collaboration.

3. Not all work is high impact
In certain investigations, Deutch and Mnemonic have seen far-reaching impacts, but virtually none in others. Still, he says it’s important to work on or file criminal complaints even if they don’t result in convictions or victories. There’s never a guarantee that prosecutors will take up the complaints, nor is there a guarantee that they’ll use the documentation in the archive.

4. This work is long term
With a lack of adequate international accountability mechanisms globally, Mnemonic and its archives will likely be holding onto content for years, if not decades. This work goes beyond any grant period, so sustainability and collaboration to maintain it should be a focus.
*Jeff Deutch is director of operations and research at Mnemonic and co-founder of Syrian Archive. With more than 10 years of experience in the human rights and nonprofit sector, Jeff previously worked with Tactical Tech where he engaged in research concerning the risk and barriers activist communities face in using technology for transparency and accountability. Jeff has a doctorate from Humboldt University in Berlin, Masters in Public Policy from Hertie School of Governance, and a Bachelor of Arts from Hampshire College. He is also a fellow and member of the steering committee at the Centre for Internet and Human Rights.*
Take a dive into the world of geolocation, visual analysis, and the importance of creativity in image based investigations. This brief article presents the basics as well as introduces some innovative solutions from practical cases.
Geolocation means finding the real world location of an object, such as the place where a photograph was taken. This process is rarely straightforward but there are various methods - some more creative than others - of doing so. You don’t always get enough clues from an image’s metadata (data about data, or exif data) and most images won’t typically show a famous landmark in the background to help you locate the area, town or even country.

More often than not images are fuzzy and unclear or lack sufficient elements to help you geolocate them with little effort. Over the years, investigator Robin Taylor from the Tibet Research Project team has honed the skills to deconstruct an image as if it were a puzzle waiting to be solved. Robin recommends a combination of curious, never-give-up like mindset, creativity and all the Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) tools one can get their hands on in order to approximate the geolocation of an image. Robin also shares his favorite methodology for “reducing an area of interest”:

Methodology: reducing your area of interest

Image from presentation by Robin Taylor

Context
Identifying the time, date, location of an image are part of understanding the context of an image. Other important questions to ask are:

→ Who posted the image? Can we trace the original source?
→ Where was it posted initially?

As an example, while searching for a missing person, an image of a banana leaf led investigators to research where banana production exists in the world. Any piece of information, no matter how minor it may appear, could give an image more context.

Image analysis
Analyze an image for its landscape or terrain like a road, frozen river, or steep hill. Look for unique features like vegetation, specific trees, windows, architectural details like light-posts, balconies or rooftops. In one particular case, airplane contrails (‘condensation trails’ - the white tracks planes leave in the sky) in the sky became the basis for mapping flight patterns and geolocating an image.

Platforms like Yandex, Baidu, Google, TinEye or tools like InVid and others can also be used for reverse image searches to trace if and where an image has been uploaded and used before.

Map markings: Sun, Sand, Trees...
Orienting an image on a map provides valuable insights. Local mapping platforms or data sets with a specific themes could provide information that traditional mapping platforms cannot provide. Robin shared a few unique sources like Weather Underground to check historical weather data to corroborate image dates with weather at various locations, WolframAlpha to establish a time frame based on rainfall or London Street Trees to locate a particular type of tree across the city. SunCalc is another useful resource to identify a particular location using the sun’s direction and shadow in an image.

Crowdsourcing from online communities could garner participation from individuals with highly specialized knowledge. During a Bellingcat
investigation to geolocate an image of mass executions in or near Benghazi, a Twitter user noticed the color of the sand was grey compared to other areas of Benghazi, where colors of the sand are more orange or yellow. This tip helped investigators identify the location to be in the southwest area of Benghazi. Furthermore, this was the first instance when (in August 2017) the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued its first ever arrest warrant solely based on evidence gathered via social media.

Trial and error
Sometimes you need to revisit previous assumptions. Look at the image below:

→ there is clearly a beer brand visible and that could give you some hints. But maybe not quite. Perhaps the beer is sold in other countries?  
→ could the horizon line tell you something? Is there an island or other geographic elements somewhere out of view and you just need to look ‘side-ways’?

When you experience tunnel vision or feel like giving up, go back repeatedly and revisit your assumptions, check if any possible suspicion or guess may be correct or not. Try to look for what is not in an image. Even when an image shows no clear horizon, the lack of a horizon could become just as useful to reduce your area of interest.

Creativity
Leonardo da Vinci’s map of Imola was perhaps the first ichnographic map, and it looks like a satellite map before the invention of satellites. Leonardo created this image with a tool similar to a compass and other equipment from that era. Similarly, Open Source Intelligence (OSNIT)-based investigations done by citizen investigators, journalists and others from the civil society are often not well resourced, sometimes not even funded at all. However, working with limited resources could potentially lead to ingenuity and spark creative solutions.
*Robin Taylor is a leading investigator on the Tibet Research Project. He is currently completing a research master's in criminology with a focus on visual evidence and citizen investigations at Erasmus University Rotterdam & University of Kent.
The Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN) has been developing a massive list of online resources about investigation methods, tools and cases - and they are open to everyone, not just journalists. This article explores some of GIJN’s learning and collaboration resources and expert tips that are essential for anyone looking to expand their knowledge and connect with other investigators around the world.
As a reporter for the Global Investigative Journalism Network, an international association of investigative reporting organizations and a resource hub for investigators of all stripes, Rowan Philp has an enviable job.

“I go around to the world’s best investigative journalists, twist their arms to get them to tell me how they pulled off their major stories, and identify which techniques are transferable to reporters in other countries,” Philp explains. In other words, he investigates the investigators and reports on the reporters, and, in the process, unearths some of the most innovative tricks of the trade.

With countless muckraking methods and digital tools emerging every week, it can be difficult to keep up for new investigators. But after speaking to reporters from Peru to Russia over the past few years, Rowan Philp recommends the following tips and methods, which are often low-tech or no-tech at all.

1. To grab a source’s attention, bring a folder or phone a friend overseas

Getting “cold” sources (i.e. people who don’t expect you showing up or calling) to speak to you is a common challenge for even the most seasoned investigators. But a conversation with The New York Times’s Ross Buettner tipped Philp off to a simple trick: carry a thick folder (binder) under your arm. On a subconscious level, the sight of a voluminous file under a reporter’s arm implies that the reporter knows most of the facts already and is only seeking verification or an extra fact or two. This often gives the impression that the story is not really about the subject whom the reporter is hoping to interview. And the folder... should contain serious research on the topic not random papers.

Philp has also heard investigators have luck getting nervous officials or elusive interviewees to talk by asking a foreign colleague to call them. For some reason, officials often respond to overseas investigators more readily than domestic ones.

Another tip is to question an official’s decision that is not in question. “Righteous indignation can draw even bad actors to the interview.”

2. Search smarter, not harder

“Sometimes, the best stuff is the stuff right in front of us, the Google search bar or Twitter advanced search,” Philp says. “You just have to know how to use it.”

Many people think too literally when querying search engines. For example, when searching DuckDuckGo, Bing, Yahoo, Google or other search engines for a particular map, many people will include the word “map” in their search, even though that word usually doesn’t appear in the results. Instead, try “scale,” or something that would actually appear on a map.

For more on this, check out GIJN’s Online Advanced Search resource page and this “Search Smarter by Dorking” guide in the Exposing the Invisible Kit.

3. Use that camera

“For better or worse, it’s increasingly clear that video has an outsized impact in getting your investigation in front of eyeballs and moving the needle in terms of accountability,” admits Philp. When Russian opposition politician and activist Alexei Navalny was arrested by the government and his group, the Anti-Corruption Foundation, was banned, his collaborators released a video documentary on YouTube that quickly amassed over 118 million views. The bottom line: video sharing is a powerful platform, and the era of impact through text may be waning, at least in situations when urgent actual and reaction is needed.

4. Master the master tools

Today’s investigators have an impressive suite of tools at their disposal. Some are open-source and free to use, while others cost money to subscribe to. Some reporters don’t think twice about using certain tools, while ethically questionable to others. But whatever the task, chances are there’s a piece of software or investigative method to get the job done.

Check GIJN’s series “My Favorite Tools” where investigators from around the world provide tips and insights into their preferred and most effective tools and software that help them get their work done. For a more comprehensive library, and how-to guides, check out GIJN’s Resource Center.
5. Pretend you're not living in an autocracy
Where it’s safe to do so, investigators in autocracies should report as if institutions of justice and accountability in their country work. This has an effect on both reporters and their subjects. “This pretense prevents self-censorship, embarrasses corrupt officials, and reminds repressed audiences that they deserve better,” says Philp.

Or, as editor Nic Dawes puts it: “One of the ways you keep the democratic imagination alive . . . is to act as if it’s a democracy.”

For more on this, check out GIJN’s “Why Journalists in Autocracies Should Report as if They’re in a Democracy.”

6. Make Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, even abroad
As many journalists know, Freedom of Information (FOI) laws allow citizens to request information from their governments. But what many journalists don’t know is that they can often make these requests to governments other than their own.

For more on this, check out GIJN’s Unlocking Laws to Set Information Free: GIJN’s Global Guide to FOI and RTI.

Investigators are awesome!

In addition to these masterful tools and methods, the one thing that Philp has learned above all is: “Investigative journalists are awesome!” He’s heard from editors of the INK Center for Investigative Journalism in Botswana who took a severe pay cut to pay for one satellite image proving government corruption. He’s learned from investigators at Bellingcat and The Insider who took just three months to identify the people responsible for the chemical weapons attack on a senior Russian opposition politician - when not a single law enforcement agency in the world dared to do so.

“At the end of the day, anyone who can responsibly and ethically collect strong evidence should be given the same kind of respect as big newsrooms,” says GIJN Program Director Anne Koch.
Anne Koch is the Program Director of the Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN). She worked as a broadcast journalist and executive for more than 20 years, mostly for the BBC, before becoming a director at anti-corruption NGO Transparency International (TI), overseeing nearly 50 independent TI chapters in Europe and Central Asia. During her award-winning career in BBC journalism Anne was deputy director of the English World Service, executive editor of the BBC’s flagship radio news and current affairs programs and editor of the World Tonight. She has produced or edited over a hundred documentaries and worked as a producer on BBC Radio 4’s investigative journalism program File on Four.

Rowan Philp is a reporter for GIJN. He was formerly chief reporter for South Africa’s Sunday Times. As a foreign correspondent, he has reported on news, politics, corruption, and conflict from more than two dozen countries around the world.
Conducting investigations is risky. Unfortunately, individual investigators rarely have the resources and guidance to comprehensively assess and mitigate their risks, especially if they work independently, as freelancers or in small groups that don’t benefit from the constant support and resources of a newsroom or organisation. This article provides a brief introduction to the concept of risk and presents a practical method to help individuals or small teams manage the risks of their investigation.
Investigators face a great deal of risks that affect not only themselves but also their sources, collaborators, close ones as well as the information they work with. Unfortunately, individual investigators rarely have the resources and guidance to comprehensively assess and mitigate their risks. Freelance investigator Léopold Salzenstein, a journalist focusing on climate change and societal safety, suggests a practical method to help individuals or small teams assess and manage risk in their investigations.

Salzenstein recommends using our investigative mindset to better understand risks associated with an investigation since risk assessment is more of a mindset than a checklist.

One definition of risk is the answer to three questions:

→ What can happen?
→ How likely is it?
→ What will the consequences be?

What can happen?
It is helpful to first define what the objective of your investigation is, and what a success scenario — when everything goes as planned — would look like. Once this baseline is set, you can start imagining all scenarios that deviate from it. This helps you to consider the potential risks that may arise during each stage of the investigation. It’s important to find a balance between the worst (credible) scenario and the most likely scenario. It is useful to consider the worst to help you prepare.

Example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Travel</th>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Equipment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Success Scenario</strong></td>
<td>Flight to and from location</td>
<td>Had meeting with source</td>
<td>Communication with encrypted messaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Potential Risk Scenarios</strong></td>
<td>Visa restrictions, issues with transport</td>
<td>Meeting location with interviewee has not been vetted</td>
<td>Border patrol at security checkpoint seize equipment, equipment failure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Image source: presentation by Leopold Salzenstein.*
After you have considered the likelihood and consequences of possible threats, you can plot out those threats on a risk matrix. A risk matrix is a representation of different risk levels, and it can help to visualize the lowest to highest risks you may encounter during an investigation. This matrix gives you insights into the scenarios with the highest risk and enables you to prioritise where and when to allocate time, skills, money and other resources.

Risk Matrix:

![Risk Matrix Image](image-source)

*Image source: presentation by Leopold Salzenstein.*

Risk perception
Risk assessment is more than considering the likelihood and consequences of scenarios. Risk perception is subjective, influenced by people’s values, culture, knowledge, experience, fears, and biases. While you may be aware of certain threats there are also threats you might neglect to recognise or fail to take into account because of how you perceive the world. The human brain tricks us into thinking that something is more or less risky than it actually is.

An effective risk mitigation strategy encompasses steps you can undertake in order to reduce, eliminate, or modify certain scenarios you may encounter during an investigation. You may even consider not pursuing an investigation based on your risk assessment.

Example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Threats</th>
<th>Potential Mitigation strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visa restrictions</td>
<td>Obtain visa in advance, prior to departure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting location with interviewee has not been vetted</td>
<td>Research locations that are secure for interviewee, reach out to interviewee for verification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Border patrol at security checkpoint seize equipment</td>
<td>Carry encrypted equipment, Backup materials elsewhere, Avoid confrontation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Image source: presentation by Leopold Salzenstein.*
Risk and collaboration
An investigation often includes other individuals such as sources, collaborators, subjects of the investigation, bystanders, etc. Remember that you are not dealing with risks in a vacuum and by yourself. Even if there are no leaks, simply including other people in the process require you to consider how your own risk level increases the risk of someone else, and vice-versa. This means that risk is inherited- namely, if you and your collaborators carry little to no risk (e.g., living and working in a safe area), but you are interviewing a person experiencing high risk (e.g., living in a dangerous area or working on controversial issues), you inherit that risk. Your risk level will be higher for a period of time before and after the interview. (Read more about this in the Safety First article of the Exposing the Invisible Kit.

A group of collaborating investigators should carry out a risk assessment together, not individually. Including others in your risk assessment helps to widen your (and the others’) risk perception, and helps you develop a stronger risk mitigation plan. Doing this exercise with other individuals is a good way to identify blind spots and find new ideas to mitigate risks. During collaborations perceptions of risk include more points of view and open communication with your team is essential to risk management.

Planning and questioning what you have planned as well as questioning what you haven’t thought of is essential to addressing risks that may come your way. Questioning your plan is part of an iterative mindset, this mindset will help when encountering risks you haven’t prepared for.

Resources
- Holistic Security is a strategy manual to help human rights defenders maintain their well-being in action. The holistic approach integrates self-care, well-being, digital security, and information security into traditional security management practices.
- Security in a box covers basic digital safety methods, principles and tools. It offers step-by-step instructions to help you install, configure and use essential digital-security software and services. Security in a Box is jointly developed by Front Line Defenders and Tactical Tech, along with a global network of activists, trainers and digital security experts.
- Electronic Frontier Front (EFF) defends civil liberties in the digital world since 1990 with a focus on online privacy, free expression, and innovation through impact litigation, policy analysis, grassroots activism, and technology development. Check out Surveillance Self-Defense, EFF’s basics on how surveillance works, tips, tools and tutorials for safer online communications.
- Front Line Defenders aims to protect human rights defenders and other civil society groups at risk (HRDs). Check its Guide to Secure Group Chat and Conferencing Tools, among other resources.
- Committee to Protect Journalists is an independent, nonprofit organization that promotes press freedom worldwide and defends the right of journalists to report safely. Check CPJ’s safety resources.
- Rory Peck Trust is dedicated to the support, safety and welfare of freelance news gatherers around the world. See their resources.

*Léopold Salzenstein is a freelance investigative journalist focusing on climate change and societal safety. His work has been published in various online media, such as Mongabay, Carbon Tracker and The Local. He is currently working with The New Humanitarian. Leopold graduated from the University of Lund in 2021 with a Master’s degree in Disaster Risk Management and Climate Change Adaptation. He is also a fellow with the Solutions Journalism Network, where he is learning to use data in solution reporting.
The Investigative Commons was launched as a collaboration between the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), Forensic Architecture and FORENSIS in response to an era, in which facts and truth have become battlefields, and racist and nationalist tendencies occupy our discourse spaces.
Litigation against human rights violations is not always pursued by lawyers and human rights defenders because a case is likely to win in court. Sometimes it is about raising awareness, informing the public and giving people and communities a platform to bring issues forward. Legal cases of human rights violations are brought forward because victims and survivors deserve the same opportunity to present their case on equal grounds as their perpetrators in court.

Anne Schroeter from the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR) says that governments and other entities with the authority and resources to collect evidence are increasingly the ones on trial for human rights violations, thus cannot be trusted to be an independent body. More needs to be done to ensure a balanced process of evidence collection as well as to increase public awareness on such issues.

While evidence of human rights violations is usually presented in court, such evidence can also be communicated and disseminated in other fora, including through public advocacy, media reports, as well as art and cultural projects. The aim is to deepen the public’s understanding and awareness of wrongdoings in the world through channels and formats that resonate with people across multiple contexts. Social change does not need to take place in a courtroom, it can take place at the ballot box, through an art exhibition, or a plethora of other avenues.

In 2021, an interdisciplinary collaborative effort to investigate and share evidence of human rights violations to wider audiences launched in Berlin as the Investigative Commons. Through collaborative investigations with like-minded journalists, investigators, reporters, artists, lawyers, activists, architects, scientists, and cultural institutions and their respective methodologies, the Investigative Commons strives towards accountability for human rights violations across multiple forums including courts, cultural institutions, citizens’ tribunals, and media platforms. Initiated by the ECCHR, Forensic Architecture and FORENSIS (a new NGO set up by Forensic Architecture in Berlin), Investigative Commons includes a range of other organizations like Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Mnemonic, Bellingcat, Laura Poitras/Praxis Films and it aims towards a growing network of individual practitioners, NGOs and cultural institutions to foster public discourse on human rights issues.

Investigative Commons is a testing ground for new methodologies. Projects are identified in areas where the partners and other collaborators overlap and could make the greatest impact when each organization’s methods are combined. Each investigation is unique by a combination of skills, creativity and expertise. For instance, inspiration was recently drawn from experts with backgrounds in machine learning, augmented reality, and gaming.

There are plans in the future for Investigative Commons to host residencies, and involve members of the human rights community for workshops and fireside talks to learn from their experiences in the field. The work carried out within this space may lead to litigation depending on the evidence collected. For now, Investigative Commons views all mediums as inherently and equally valuable in the pursuit of justice.

Over the past decade, ECCHR and Forensic Architecture have cooperated on exposing human rights crimes worldwide, such as working conditions in Pakistan, torture in Syria, and Spanish push-backs in Melilla.
ECCHR’s and Forensic Architecture’s collaborative efforts also led to another joint project together with Bellingcat and Yemeni Archive: European Arms In The Bombing Of Yemen. The platform presents information that aims to support both international and domestic prosecution authorities in investigating the criminal responsibilities of European corporations and governments in potentially enabling war crimes carried out by the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. The platform also serves as a tool for civil society to better understand the role of the European arms trade in the war in Yemen.

Investigative Commons hosted an exhibition at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin in June-August 2021 and plans a conference on 9 October 2021 at the same location.
Anne Schroeter holds a LLM in international law from Glasgow University and a BA in political science from Universität Potsdam with a minor in public law. She has worked with Case Matrix Network, Syrian Archive and other NGOs in analytical and legal positions on accountability for international crimes, evidentiary analysis and transitional justice. Between 2018 and 2019 she worked with the Syria team in the International Crimes and Accountability program of the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR). She has been the coordinator of ECCHR’s Investigative Commons project since July 2020.
Communicating with a purpose: Investigative Storytelling
by Di Luong

An exploration of multiple investigative storytelling approaches and tips for choosing an approach that works best for your investigation.
“Anyone of us could be an investigator as we are essentially people who tell people about what happens to people,” says Nuria Tesón as she describes how we are all natural communicators and storytellers. But investigations are labor intensive, and often carried out under difficult circumstances. For those reasons, and to increase their impact and reach, investigators need to aim beyond the journalistic bubble and include a wider community by involving skills and approaches specific to anthropologists, artists, technologists and other fields of practice.

Nuria Tesón outlines several practical recommendations that can help you to adopt an investigative storytelling approach that is unique to your context and to the audiences you aim to reach.

Define your goal

What do you want to achieve?

Having a goal in mind will help you select a communication and storytelling style that best aligns with the actions you need to perform in order to reach your goal.

Goal(s) could be to inform, raise awareness or expose a wrongdoing, to advocate to built a legal case or pass legislation, to raise funds for victims of wrongdoing, to raise support to continue an investigation, to make information available to other investigators, to hold wrongdoers accountable, or to counter a prevalent narrative, among many others.

Nuria considers that the role of a journalist is not to mobilize or campaign like an activists. However, journalists have the responsibility to inform people within a society so that others could use the evidence to actively engage in the social and political process. Key questions to keep in mind for staying objective in cases where it’s difficult to find the middle ground when setting your goals are:

→ What type of evidence do I need to gather?
→ What do I need in order to communicate and share this evidence further?

Identify your audience

The goal in combination with knowing the audience you aim to reach help determine the appropriate format and method of communicating and storytelling. If the audience you are trying to reach may be illiterate or lack electricity, consider organizing a drama or theatre play to reach a wider community. If you are an artist or can collaborate with an artist, consider adapting your findings to be exhibited at a museum for a broader and more diverse audience reach.

Use many formats to tell the same story

The format does not need to be a classical, written format. As seen above, some audience may not even benefit from that at all. It could be formulated as an alternative narrative: an exhibition, a workshop, a performance in the street, or another approach that relates to how you plan to interact with the audience. Ideally, you could combine multiple formats and channels of communication for a wider impact. When you share your narrative online, someone else can use the information to develop their campaign or expand it by investigating further. Using a variety of tools and tactics would only benefit your investigation.

Create new narratives

In cases of long-term conflicts, the communities involved may potentially become forgotten by the media and fade away from public attention. It is particularly important to find new nuances to what is happening in order to keep the public attention active on those situations. Most investigations need time and huge personal investment as investigators work to imagine different pathways to communicating a story from different angles in an accessible way. When developing your own investigation and creating its narrative, look at how similar stories have been traditionally communicated, add your own questions and angles and infuse those stories with new perspectives.

→ For instance, Nuria Tesón and her collaborator, photographer Miguel Ángel Sánchez, used fine art photography to reveal issues
that nobody was looking at in the aftermath of the November 2012 confrontation between Israel and the Hamas government in Gaza: “Operation Pillar of Defense”. After covering the war, they decided to go back and portray the people they met during the conflict in order to find new ways to engage and inform far-away audiences who had been saturated with the conflict news and reporting provided by mainstream media. The resulted project - a fine art photography series accompanied by personal stories and events documented by the portrayed people themselves - emerged from their “will to portray Gaza when no one is looking at her but also an exploration on how siege and daily conflict affect human beings psychologically. The portraits are an intimate approach to the subjects that verge on the madness and obscurity that lays in the different layers of their consciousness, like a continuous nightmare that they face fearless but disturbed.”

Consider therefore how your investigation could connect, engage, or reach different audiences and collaborators. Choosing an alternative storytelling approach may help your investigation engage with a new or a wider audience, keep the public’s attention active for longer, bypass censorship more easily, and empower individuals to share their stories in their own style.

Take Nuria’s advice on this: “Whatever information we have or get involved with, any type of investigation is like a piece of wood. We can make an ashtray or a beautiful sculpture.”
*Nuria Tesón* is an independent multimedia journalist and writer, co-founder of the MásTesón collective. She is based in the Middle East where she covered the most newsworthy events of the region for the past 12 years. She has investigated among others: the trail of mercenaries in Libya during the war, the activities of fighters being trained by the Libyan militias in the following years as well as the Al Qaeda infiltration in the East of Libya; the connections between terrorist attackers of the March 2004 Madrid train bombings with Spanish foreign fighters in Syria; fracking; political corruption in Spain and Romania; the destruction of native rainforest in Brazil’s Amazon basin and its impact on the local communities. Her work has been featured in Time, CNN, Al Jazeera, AJ+, The New York Times, France 24, El País, and Le Monde among others, and exhibited on several continents. She collaborates with universities, institutions and private entities creating content for seminars, workshops, exhibitions and performances around journalism, conflict zone coverage, the use of Art and Journalism to achieve structural changes, media and conflict, coverages with a gender perspective. Since 2018 she is an ‘Aspen Young European Leaders’ Fellow.
Exposing the Invisible (ETI) is a Tactical Tech project that actively experiments with ways to promote investigation as one of the most important forms of public engagement. Through a series of films, interviews, guides and resources, ETI looks at different techniques, tools and methods along with the individual practices of those working at the new frontiers of investigation.

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Tactical Tech is an international NGO that engages with citizens and civil-society organisations to explore and mitigate the impacts of technology on society.

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