

Chapter Three: Professional Analysis

Factors that make journalists change hypotheses during investigations

Journalists usually go into investigative stories with initial working ideas, or hypotheses. However, many of them did not stick to the same hypotheses all along the investigative process. After 14 in-depth interviews with journalists with more than 13 publications (or independent journalists), based in or coming from the U.S., Canada and Russia, this research found that journalists usually changed their hypotheses in investigative reporting because they gathered more information from human sources, data, and documents. Also, the original hypotheses usually came from wrong or unprovable tips, previous news stories on the same topic, editors' guidance, social movement, previous reporting experience, personal experience, and journalists' passion in revealing the hidden truth.

Human sources lead to new reporting angles

The research found that almost all journalists interviewed had changed their hypotheses totally or partly based on the additional information gathered from human sources. These sources included people directly involved in the stories and experts with knowledge about the reporting topics.

When Brad Hamilton, the editor-in-chief at the Hatch Institute worked on [a story about the erotic massage parlors](#) for the New York Post, Hamilton and Hamilton's reporting partner thought human trafficking was involved. But after spending four months talking with people in the industry, customers and experts, they realized that most people they spoke to got into this industry voluntarily and employees weren't required to provide sexual services. In the end, an investigative story idea turned to an explanatory story about the erotic massage industry.

In Hamilton's words, "We set out to expose something, and we wound up chronicling something."

Hamilton's change of the story idea was totally based on interviews with sources: "The fundamental element of any investigative story is talking to the people who are involved, the people from all sides of it. ... And so, the more we talk to people, the more we realize, this isn't at all what we thought it was."

Hamilton also said, "You can look at data and you can look at reports, and that's the best way to find answers to things? It's not. It's just not. It's helpful. It always can be helpful to look at data, and reports. ... I highly recommend it. But when you want to find out what's really happening, hey, there's a bunch of people gathering on the corner over there. What's going on there? Well, the only way to find out is to go over and talk to them. What are you guys doing here? Right? How you find out the real deal about things is you talk to people. Now sometimes they lie to you. But the more people you talk to, the better you get a sense of what's real."

Similarly, when working for *the Los Angeles Times*, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist David Cay Johnston, now the editor-in-chief of DCReport.org was tipped that a young man was the killer for a crime. But when Johnston talked with the young man face-to-face, that young man cried. Through the talks with the young man and other witnesses, Johnston realized he did not commit the crime at all because he was proved to be in a house which was not the crime scene when the crime happened. And Johnston found the real killers later.

USA TODAY journalist Kenny Jacoby worked on a [story](#) about how Louisiana State University was mishandling sexual misconduct cases. "It was from a tip from a father of a female athlete there who said that his daughter was being beaten up by a football player and LSU was covering it up. And he thought that LSU was covering up other incidences." So, at first,

Jacoby thought that he would focus on cases among athletes. But after he talked with sources from social media, he realized LSU covered up the sexual misconduct cases not only for athletes, but for all students.

Kaiser Health News journalist Laura Ungar once worked on [how lead tainted drinking water in hundreds of schools and daycares across the U.S.](#) for USA TODAY. In that story Ungar did not expect that many places were not required to test lead. It was through talking with experts and residents did Ungar find this perspective of the story.

“It was talking to a whole lot of experts, and just going to some of these places and talking to them,” Ungar said in the interview.

Also, Canada-based journalist Chloe Rose is writing about a policy in which the federal prisons in Canada reduced dental care for all inmates from one dental checkup every year to one dental checkup every five years. Rose thought dentists would have been sympathetic about inmates but through interviews with dentists Rose found that most dentists interviewed did not care about their health.

“In the story, I've interviewed a couple of dentists who really went fully on the record saying, you know, inmates are animals, and they never took care of their teeth before they entered prison. So why are we doing it? These are people who have taken an oath to take care of people. And they're just going on the record saying that they don't think these people deserve care,” Rose said in the interview.

In the examples above, journalists got more information from human sources by talking with them. The example below will show how a journalist got more information through the on-the-scene experience provided by human sources.

In [another story](#) by Rose she wrote that after the legalization of marijuana in Canada, many people grew cannabis in rental apartments, which caused troubles for landlords. Rose “didn't want that story to seem like it was sympathetic towards the landlords.” After she started her interviews, she changed her approach. She understood how landlords had to deal with cannabis grown in the basement of their apartment buildings.

“That's such a powerful scene of her (the landlord that Rose interviewed) walking downstairs and sort of seeing the light, the rows of pot and like the destroyed building that she's been owning for years and years,” Rose said.

Sometimes, it was also important to talk with human sources even with enough data. Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Matt Carroll once worked on a story about how many pounds of waste was recycled in each house and found that the data in two towns stood out because they were about ten times higher than the average. So, Carroll expected that there were mistakes in the data. This was the case for one of the towns: people mistakenly added a zero after the real number. In another town, however, after talking with the residents, Carroll found that the town was flooded, which destroyed the washers and dryers in their houses. And the heavy washers and dryers were all recyclable so the total pounds of recyclables in this town went way higher than other towns.

A reporter that Carroll worked with on another story realized she misunderstood the data by talking with people who gave her the data. She worked on a dataset about complaints towards police officers and saw that certain police officers had lots of complaints. But after talking with the police, she realized that, every time there was a hearing, the police would put another checkmark in the dataset and it looked like it was another complaint, but it just meant there was one more hearing against this officer.

So, we can see that human sources influenced journalists' changes of hypotheses in investigative reporting in three ways: talks between human sources and journalists gave journalists more information to make journalists change their hypotheses; human sources created on-the-scene experience for journalists which gave journalists more information on changing their hypotheses; human sources helped journalists have better understanding of the data which made journalists change their hypotheses.

Data and documents cause reporters to change course

Jacoby and his colleagues worked on [a story](#) co-published with ProPublica about how the police misused the Marsy's Law. Marsy's law was designed to protect victims so that they could be protected from harassment by their attackers. For example, victims should be notified about release or escape of the accused under Marsy's Law. But the police sometimes used it as a shield law to hide their identities from using force, which means that when the police used force sometimes, the police cited Marsy's Law to hide their identities. In this story, Jacoby and his colleagues changed their hypotheses because of the use of data and documents.

The first hypothesis was that they thought the misuse of Marsy's Law as a shield law for police using force was a problem in all states enforcing the Marsy's Law, but by requesting copies of police reports where officers had killed private citizens in all states that have Marsy's Law, they found that the misuse only happened in specific states, Florida, South and North Dakotas. Then, after they had a close reading of each law in these states, they found out the reason why the misuse only happened in these states: they found the particular provision that allows the police to use Marsy's Law as a shield law in Florida, South Dakota and North Dakota's laws. The second hypothesis was that they expected that this kind of misuse happened

only in fatal shootings. However, by reading the police reports, they found that the police invoked Marsy's Law as a shield law also in cases where the shootings were not fatal. The third hypothesis they had was that the police invoked the Marsy's Law on their own when they were embarrassed. But it turned out that it was usually the police department that invoked the Marsy's Law on behalf of the police officers. They found this out through the data that they collected by a survey to different police agencies.

Independent journalist Brandon Roberts once [reported](#) that most people killed by the local police in Vancouver, Washington were those with unaddressed mental health needs. At first Roberts wanted to look at the racial disparity in the dataset and noticed that police officers often shot unarmed black men. But with a closer look to the dataset and the over-1000-page long police records, Roberts realized that the police shot but did not kill any of them. Instead, "People that they killed were purely people with behavioral health issues, most of whom were having a crisis in that moment when the police showed up or gotten involved in some way." So, the story was pivoted from a racial disparity angle to a behavioral health angle.

Spotlight PA journalist Joseph Darius Jaafari made a wrong hypothesis when writing about how different county jails in Pennsylvania tracked the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I didn't expect two things. One, the counties that I didn't expect to do well, were doing very well. And the counties that were doing very poorly, I expected to be doing very well," Jaafari said in the interview.

Jaafari figured this out by filing a Right-to-know request, a local version of Freedom of Information Act request. And Jaafari then ranked the performance of different counties with the data and found out the result.

Johnston mentioned many rules suggested to other journalists in the interview. One of them is, get the document. Johnston quoted another journalist and government administrator, Wallace Turner, who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1957 while working for The Oregonian in Oregon, “If it's important enough for you to write about, somebody already wrote it down. Your job is to mine that great mountain of bureaucratic paperwork to find the golden nugget, which will get your byline onto the front page of the newspaper.”

Sometimes, journalists said that all three -- human sources, documents and data – pushed them to change course.

For example, when Kaiser Health News journalist Lauren Weber worked on the story co-published with the Associated Press, [hollowed out public health system faces more cuts amid the virus](#), Weber and the reporting team at first just expected that public health in general had been neglected, but they did not know the extent of it. The reporting hypothesis started to evolve after they got to look at the data and talked with about 150 sources. So, the evolution of hypothesis in this story was from the combination of data and human sources.

Sometimes, journalists got an alert that some hypotheses might be wrong by checking the data or documents, then they validated the alert by talking with human sources, such as insiders or experts.

When still a student, Midwest Center for Investigative Reporting journalist Madison McVan once thought that university staff overspent in travelling. But after obtaining the travelling expense data through open-record requests, McVan realized that there was no outrageous spending. Then, McVan talked with those that had higher expenses and it turned out that their spending all made sense.

Other times, journalists got tips from human sources which made them start to think twice about the original hypotheses. Then they used data or documents to challenge the hypotheses even further.

When Matt Carroll and the Spotlight team of *the Boston Globe* covered the Catholic Church sexual abuses, they at first just realized that it was a cover-up story for certain priests but did not expect the scale. It was the tipster, former priest Richard Sipe who tipped them that there were much more priests than they thought who abused children. Sipe suggested the Spotlight team paying attention to all the priests who had a pattern of always having sick leave.

“He (Sipe) was the guy that sort of gave us the big picture,” Carroll said in the interview.

Then, via checking the church records and court documents, the Spotlight team managed to prove that those with a pattern of sick leave were indeed those who sexually abused children.

So, in this case, one important human source made journalists realized the potential problem of their hypothesis and documents that journalists found proved what the sources suggested.

One journalist mentioned they seldom changed their hypotheses during the investigative process, but they usually did a good job testing hypotheses early in the pre-reporting process. Center for Public Integrity journalist Joe Yerardi mentioned in the interview that they usually perform extensive pre-reporting, which combined story search, data search and talks with experts.

“I mean, you do your research. You do your research beforehand. You do a story search-- Has there been previous reporting about this topic that they think that something might be going on?” Yerardi said.

Where journalists' original hypotheses in investigative reporting came from

This research found that journalists' original hypotheses that got changed later usually came from: wrong or unprovable tips, previous news stories on the same topics, editors' guidance, social movement, previous reporting experience, personal experience, and journalists' passion in revealing the hidden truth.

Wrong or unprovable tips

In David Cay Johnston's crime story mentioned above, Johnston got the wrong tip. Broadcast journalist Shay McAlister who is with WHAS11, dropped a story about community judges because the tip that the judges were corrupt could not be proved. Similarly, Madison McVan was tipped that religion group Project Blitz was responsible for introducing a legal bill in Missouri. But McVan could not prove what the source said despite of doing the research and reporting with due diligence. In the end, McVan had to change the original reporting hypothesis.

But McVan also mentioned that in many cases the information from human sources was reliable. McVan pointed out that sources with insider information are more likely to provide accurate tips than outsiders.

"Because when the information comes to you from inside, it usually turns out to be true," McVan said.

McVan said that the tip on [the religion bill story](#) "wasn't a tip from like someone who worked at Project Blitz and had inside knowledge, it was just an outside observer." However, when McVan worked on [another story about meatpacking](#) in which McVan did not change the story hypothesis, the sources were insider sources such as workers themselves, labor advocates, or immigrant rights advocates who have connections with workers.

Brad Hamilton said in the interview, “During my time at *the New York Post*, there are many stories where you get a tip, you think it's interesting, you feel like it's going to work out. And then, you know, most of the stories don't work out, because you just can't get the information, you can't answer the question, you're lacking an understanding of it, or there is an assumption that you made, you know, that doesn't turn out to be true.”

To avoid believing in the wrong tipsters, Matt Carroll advised, “You have to be prepared to abandon your hypothesis, if the facts don't support it.”

Previous news stories on the same topics

It's common for journalists to get ideas from other stories they read or watched, but these story ideas might not work out in their own experience.

McVan in the end did not go with the hypothesis that university staff overspent because this could not be proved. But how did McVan get into this idea in the first place? McVan came up with the story idea because other journalists in other places did the same story.

Brad Hamilton's hypothesis that human trafficking happened in erotic massage parlors came from another journalist Nicholas Kristof's reporting on violation of human rights overseas. But it turned out that Kristof's experience did not fit into Hamilton's story.

Editors' guidance

Sometimes, editors' guidance was also one of the factors that formed journalists' hypotheses.

Southern California News Group journalist Beau Yarbrough said their editor once learnt that some people in the Los Angeles County waited for the leftover COVID-19 vaccines prepared for people eligible to make appointments but there was leftover because those people did not show up for the appointments. The editor suggested Yarbrough checking other counties

for similar stories but through the investigation Yarbrough just could not prove that the same thing happened in other counties.

“So that was an example of the editors came in with an idea that this must be happening based on the fact that it's happening in one place, they want to extrapolate it out to be multiple counties with this,” Yarbrough said

Social movement

Social movement influenced some journalists' hypotheses as well.

As mentioned above, Brandon Roberts wanted to focus on social disparity when looking at the police shooting data. Roberts mentioned the reason why: “The whole reason I started even looking into this police stuff is because the Black Lives Matter.” So, we can see that social movement influenced how Roberts made initial hypothesis when checking a dataset in investigative reporting.

But Roberts also mentioned, “But if you have a data set, and it doesn't fit in with the obvious question that you're going to ask, the data shouldn't be useless, you know, maybe for a specific story, but it shouldn't be totally useless.”

Previous reporting experience

Previous reporting experience can often give journalists great story ideas, but it may also lead to wrong hypotheses.

Yarbrough worked on another story in which the hypothesis was that the suicide rate would not change dramatically, but it turned out that the adults suicide rates turned down dramatically. Yarbrough mentioned they originally expected the suicide rate would not change much because of their familiarity with the community.

“We're used to getting the police blotters coming in and the press releases from the police department and hearing the phone calls from family members of victims or of the accused of stuff. So, we have a pretty good sense of how often crimes happen in the community,” Yarbrough said.

Also, Yarbrough once worked on a one-year project about four suicide deaths that made a large impact in the community. “If suicide rates had really spiked up dramatically, it would have had a much bigger rip, I was expecting to have the same sort of effect,” Yarbrough said.

So, it was previous reporting experience that made Yarbrough have the original hypothesis.

Personal experience

Personal experience played an important role in some cases.

Chloe Rose and Joseph Darius Jaafari said that they had biases coming from personal experience in making hypotheses in their stories.

When working on the dental care in prison story, Rose thought dentists would be sympathetic towards inmates because Rose has a very good dentist.

“I guess, just because I've lived a very privileged life. And I've always assumed that, like, my dentist has my best interests at heart, you know.”

Again, when writing about how cannabis planting hurt the interest of landlords, Rose did not want to sympathize with landlords at first: “I don't have a lot of sympathy for landlords personally in my life.”

In another case, Jaafari does not trust the police, personally.

“And not just because like, we should be skeptical of any American government official, but just because my own bias is like, I've had experience with police, but I can't trust them,” Jaafari said.

Facing this, what Jaafari usually does is to still give a voice to the police: “But I still gave them enough due diligence where I can say I gave you a shot, right? Because at the end of the day, I still feel uneasy about trusting police spokespeople or trusting police officials, because I don't think I'm getting the truth all the time, if at all. However, the only way that you can combat that bias and understand that bias comes from also my past experience reporting on police for so many years, is that you give them so much time that you would give any of your sympathetic sources. So, I spend days with my sources, and I offer to spend days with police, like it seems to be only fair, that if I'm going to spend four days with the person who says they were beaten by police, I should be spending four days with the police.”

Journalists' passion in revealing the hidden truth

The research also found that journalists' hypotheses sometimes simply came from their willingness to reveal the hidden truth.

McVan said, “When people talk about bias in journalism, like you think about like politics, or, you know, like left versus right. And it wasn't even a bias like that. I think it was just that like I as an investigative reporter wanted to have a really cool investigative story. And so I really wanted like, I really wanted to uncover this like hidden thing.”

McVan also said, “It's just inherent to the job of an investigative journalist that you're looking for wrongdoing. And that kind of comes with an assumption. But I think a good investigative journalist can go in with that assumption, but it can change based on the evidence. I think, when you're unwilling to let it go, or unwilling to like change your hypothesis, you know,

that's where you end up making accusations left and right that don't really have evidence, and that's not what I ever want to do.”

Conclusion

Journalists normally start their stories with hypotheses, or working ideas, that shape their initial reporting. This research shows how it's typical for these to change during an investigation, as the reporter discovers new facts from people, documents and data. It's important for investigative journalists to constantly check whether their hypotheses hold up as they report, or whether they need to pivot to another story.

Essentially, it was the additional facts that journalists gathered during their investigative process that made them change their original hypotheses. The additional facts did not necessarily mean opposite or conflicting information. Journalists just pivoted to a better story with a bigger picture of what they were investigating. The additional information came from human sources, data and documents.

These investigative reporters said they get their initial ideas from a variety of sources: wrong or unprovable tips, previous news stories on the same topics, editors' guidance, social movement, previous reporting experience, personal experience, and journalists' passion in revealing the hidden truth.

Where the original hypotheses came from can be grouped into different categories: previous experience, others' influence and social and professional conventions. Previous experience includes previous news stories on the same topics, journalists' previous reporting experience, and journalists' personal experience. Others' influence includes wrong or unprovable

tips and editors' guidance. Social and professional conventions include social movement and journalists' passion in revealing the hidden truth.

So, to avoid having the wrong or unprovable hypotheses, this research gives journalists four major suggestions.

One, journalists should be very cautious when trying to apply past experience to new story ideas. Past experience might be useful in pitching story ideas, but it can also lead journalists to the wrong hypotheses that would only be suitable to the past rather than current stories. However, it is encouraged for journalists to check stories reported in the past as part of the pre-reporting, which may stop journalists from adopting the wrong hypotheses.

Two, journalists should treat editors' guidance and tips carefully, especially tips coming from outsiders. Usually, it is the tips from outsiders that give journalists the wrong or unprovable hypotheses. However, the tips can become much more trustworthy when they come from insiders such as people directly involved in the incidents.

Three, journalists should be reserved when trying to apply the social and journalistic conventions. Social and journalistic conventions might provide valuable angles for journalists to examine specific social problems. However, social problems are so complicated that the fixed conventions might not fit into the narratives that best expose or explain the problems.

Four, journalists can also minimize the possibility of unnecessary hypotheses changes by doing a better pre-reporting, which is doing story search and data search and talking with experts before officially starting an investigative project.