



USING PUBLIC RECORDS

Chapter 4 “Television News: A
Handbook for Reporting, Shooting,
Editing & Producing”



MINING FOR NEWS STORIES



- ◉ In our country, we have the right to get information that might be considered confidential or secret in other societies
- ◉ This unequaled access has developed because our government is run by the people
- ◉ “There are so many stories buried in public records,” said Tarah Taylor of WCYB-TV in Bristol, Va. “Reporters who know where and how to look can use them to develop fascinating and important reports.”

CARE TO “CAR”? ANYONE CAN!

- ◉ Access to public information is becoming easier through computer technology
- ◉ Many government records are now posted on website, and anyone can access information from a home computer
- ◉ Much of this information has always been available but previously required a trip to the courthouse and significant research effort
- ◉ Computer-assisted reporting (CAR) can lead to important and original news reporting
- ◉ Reporters need to be knowledgeable about their rights to records
- ◉ And they should remember that access to public information is a hard-won fight and remains a battleground

NEWS- SINK YOUR TEETH



- ◉ News departments often focus on stories that can be done in a day and fail to allocate staffing and resources for more in-depth news
- ◉ Bright, energetic reporters should not be satisfied until they can sink their teeth into serious, important stories behind the news
- ◉ Many of these important news stories require following paper trails and staring at computer monitors rather than putting microphones in front of public figures
- ◉ See story examples: pages 88-89

JOURNALISM AT ITS BEST

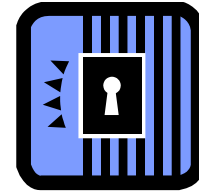


- ◉ Journalism operates at its best in careful examination of our society, and the potential for stories is unlimited
- ◉ Look in the phone book for listings of city, county and state offices
- ◉ Police and fire departments; court systems, health departments and others- you as a reporter for a news organization have a right to ask for documents and records, budget requests and figures; you may attend scheduled meetings where decisions are made
- ◉ Much of this information is now available through agency websites

ENDLESS STORY POSSIBILITIES!

- ◉ What crimes are the most common in the city (or on campus)?
- ◉ What restaurants did not pass the last health and safety inspections?
- ◉ Where is the next subdivision being built and who sold the lots and for how much?
- ◉ What are the salaries of public officials and city, state (and college) workers?
- ◉ How much tax money was used to send city officials to the tourism convention?

GETTING THE GOOD STUFF



- ◉ Knowing you have the right to access such information, doesn't mean it will always be easy to attain
- ◉ Be courteous but persistent, letting people in the pertinent offices know you have the right to their records and that you will go to the very top to get them
- ◉ When the resistance is great, reporters can file a federal Freedom of Information Act request
- ◉ The FOI Act was passed in 1966 with the intent to restrict needless government secrecy
- ◉ Recent local FOI-related use by the [media](#)
- ◉ FOI exceptions- page 93
- ◉ Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press [link](#)



SOURCES OF PUBLIC INFORMATION

PAGE 94

- ◉ Birth/Death Records
- ◉ Zoning/Planning Documents
- ◉ Building Permits
- ◉ Tax Records
- ◉ Disclosure Forms for Elected Officials
- ◉ Business and Organizational Records
- ◉ City Directory
- ◉ News Files
- ◉ Open courtrooms- p. 97
- ◉ Some exceptions: juvenile proceedings, grand jury proceedings p.97-98
- ◉ Reporters may cover stories involving federal, state, county and city courts- so need to be aware of possible different operations
- ◉ And may cover criminal and civil cases and need to understand differences



COURT AND POLICE LINGO

- Arraignment
- Preliminary hearing
- Pretrial hearing
- Sentencing hearing
- Disposition
- Subpoena
- Search warrant
- Affidavit

- Plaintiff
- Defendant
- Bond
- Magistrates
- District Attorney
- Circuit Judges
- Superior Court
- Appeals Court





C OF C SOURCES FOR NEWS

- ◉ College News Releases [link](#)
- ◉ President's Office [link](#)
- ◉ Board of Trustees [link](#)
- ◉ Public Safety [link](#)
- ◉ C of C Publications [link](#)
- ◉ Community Relations [link](#)
- ◉ Marketing and Communications [link](#)
- ◉ Website Index [link](#)
- ◉ Procurement and Supply Services [link](#)