USING PUBLIC RECORDS

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

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]