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Tipsheet: *How to investigate colonial injustice*

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Introduction to the Topic (2-3 sentences)

For journalists investigating colonial policies of the past, it may be helpful to combine the scrutiny of official policies with an exploration of the consequences of these policies in the colony. In this way, you can move beyond the corridors of power in your exposé and document how policies affected ordinary lives in the colony. When taking an ethnographic approach to such an investigation, you want to pay attention not only to *what* happened but also *why* it happened in order to understand the time and culture in which such policies could be justified.

List of Reporting Tips:

- Identify archives holding documents pertaining to political decision-making you wish to investigate. Parliamentary archives, international archives (e.g. at the UN), newspaper archives, personal records left behind by key decision makers – they will all help you triangulate how colonial policies came into being.
- Read the archives “ethnographically”: Try to understand the zeitgeist and motivation for the policies adopted.
- Construct a timeline that will help you keep track of political motives, lawmaking, resistance and rebellion in order to identify key events.
- Identify any living actors or relatives that can shed further light on events and motives.
- Identify key field sites where indigenous communities were impacted by the policies in question.
- Visit these sites personally to collect oral histories of survivors. Focus the oral histories on the effect colonial policies had on ordinary life and how it altered local practices, traditions and family structures.

Examples/Case Studies of investigative stories (if relevant)

In my 2021 book [Imperiets børn](#) (Children of the Empire), which is structured as narrative non-fiction, the main storyline follows Danish politicians and officials in their quest to keep control over Greenland in the wake of the 1945 UN Charter demanding that all colonial powers decolonize by giving establishing “self-rule” in their colonies. Through archival work in the UN and Denmark, it traces the coming into being of a Danish plan to 1) alter the interpretation, at the UN, of “self-rule” so that “integration into the mother country” would count as decolonization and 2) assimilate the Inuit population in Greenland to Danish culture and language in order to demonstrate to the UN that such an integration was “natural”. Throughout the book, oral histories narrated in first person puncture the main narrative. These oral histories document different consequences of the assimilation scheme: Forced eviction from native lands and small settlements and the separation of children from their parents, temporarily or permanently.

Another example of the use of oral histories to document historic injustice is Svetlana Alexievich 2006 book [Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster](#), which presents personal accounts of the 1986 meltdown of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor that contaminated large parts of Europe. Over the course of 10 years, Alexievich interviewed 500 eyewitnesses—firefighters, people task with cleaning up the disaster, people in the neighboring communities, politicians, physicians – and in the book, more than 30 of these personal, sometimes collective, accounts document of the disaster affected ordinary lives.

Further Reading/Resources

[Bird SE \(2005\) The journalist as ethnographer? How anthropology can enrich journalistic practice. In: Rothenbuhler EW, Coman M \(eds\) Media Anthropology. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, pp. 301–308.](#)

[Cramer JM, McDevitt M \(2004\) Ethnographic journalism. In: Iorio SH \(ed.\) Qualitative Research in Journalism: Taking it to the streets. New York and London: Routledge, pp. 127–143.](#)

[Hermann AK \(2016\) Ethnographic journalism. Journalism, 17\(2\), 260-278.](#)

[Hermann AK \(2024\) Ethnographic journalism: I enter an unfamiliar culture. In Moestrup S, Gaarskjær J, Luk G \(eds\) What am I doing here? A guide to first-person journalism. Copenhagen: Samfundslitteratur, pp. 139-155.](#)