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Tipsheet: Inside the Watchtower: Investigating secrecy, control and abuse within the Jehovah's Witnesses

Session: Uncovering stories connected to religious groups

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My reporting on the Jehovah's Witnesses in 2023 and 2024 involved navigating a world that did not welcome scrutiny, where victims were told to stay quiet and outsiders were viewed as enemies. My investigation showed how internal rules and culture controlled members' ability to leave the faith and allowed sex offenders to remain hidden within congregations. It required months of patient source-building, verifying stories against secret internal rules and court files, and working to protect those who risked everything to speak.

This happened while the New Zealand government's Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in State Care examined decades of abuse at the hands of state and religious institutions -the Jehovah's Witnesses was the only faith not willing to take part in the inquiry, and took its fight to get out of it all the way to the NZ Supreme Court (it failed).

Reporting Tips:

1. **Learn the language of the world you're entering.** You can't expose what you don't understand.

Every closed community speaks its own dialect — not just in words, but in worldview. To investigate the Jehovah's Witnesses, I had to learn the meaning of “disfellowshipping,” “two-witness rule,” “judicial committee.” Without that fluency, I would have misread their logic — and missed how doctrine itself functions as control. If you want people to open up, you must first show them you can speak their language.

2. Understand the organisation's structure

Who holds the power or information? Is it also a business (or run like a business?) How is it financed?

When investigating the JWs I quickly realised that every congregation is run in exactly the same way, overseen by a local branch office that reports to the headquarters in New York. Each congregation has a secretary who holds all the documents. I soon learnt that the JWs like to document everything. Files about abusers are passed between congregation elders, and letters detailing abuse investigations were all kept by the secretary.

The breakthrough for me was finding former secretaries who had left the faith but still held many of these documents and were willing to share them with me.

I also used NZ public charity filings to gather data on the Jehovah's Witnesses finances, including property ownership and donations to try and understand how it was resourced and where money flowed.

3. Understand how cults/high control groups work. Understand power, coercion and control, who it benefits and why.

Steve Hassan's BITE model of authoritarian control. Speak to academics and researchers in this area about impact on people in, and leaving cults.

4. Triangulate relentlessly. Documents, witnesses, and cultural context must all align.

In stories like these, one source is never enough. Survivors' testimony, internal policy manuals, and court judgments each told part of the truth — but only when layered together did the pattern emerge. Documents confirm facts; people give them life; context makes them intelligible.

Triangulation is what transforms a moving story into an irrefutable one.

5. Gather data

Throughout my investigation sources or documents provided names and crimes of potential sex offenders. I started collecting these in a database, which amassed dozens of alleged sex offenders still active in the church. Only through triangulation of sources was I able to accurately report on current active paedophiles within the JWs in NZ.

6. Trust is currency. Without it, no closed community opens.

Many of the ex-members I interviewed had never spoken to a journalist before, or had never told anyone about the abuse they had suffered. It started with background chats, then progressed to interviews, sometimes over weeks or months to build trust. Quote and fact checking is essential.

7. **Think systems, not villains.** The story is rarely one person—it's the structure that protects them.

It's tempting to centre a single abuser or a single leader, but the real story lies in the rules that allowed harm to continue. In the Jehovah's Witnesses, the "two-witness rule" and the secrecy of judicial committees weren't accidents — they were systems that normalised concealment. Good investigative work traces how those systems reproduce themselves, and who benefits from their silence.

International media reports and government inquiries also provided information about the faith's policies and practices.

8. **Look after yourself and your sources.** Trauma doesn't end with publication.

Many sources were still in the faith, and would have been excommunicated for speaking to me. RNZ decided to use anonymous sources, and not name their location, in order to protect them.

Use encrypted messaging, phone calls and meeting face-to-face to protect sources. The Jehovah's Witnesses tried to obtain my communications under NZ's Official Information Act (which RNZ is subject to because it's a govt funded organisation).

9. **Take a trauma informed approach.**

Nearly everyone ex-JW I interviewed had experienced physical, sexual, emotional or spiritual abuse.

Every interview with a survivor is an act of trust and re-exposure. Give control, let silence breathe, stop when emotion overwhelms.

And when the story's out, check in. The news cycle moves on — the people don't.

That applies to you too. Bearing witness to pain has a cost; make sure you have ways to decompress, debrief, and recover.

Some stories in this series:

[Something Evil: What happens when people are shunned from the Jehovah's Witnesses.](#)

[The rules and culture that keep child sex offenders hidden from followers of the Jehovah's Witness faith](#)

[RNZ investigation reveals 11 alleged paedophiles active within the Jehovah's Witnesses](#)

[Jehovah's Witness elder alleges order to destroy evidence in child sex abuse cases](#)

[Jehovah's Witness church spends 3 years fighting scrutiny of Royal Commission of Inquiry](#)

[Former Jehovah's Witnesses welcome inquiry's findings of 'credible evidence' of abuse](#)

Further Reading/Resources

<https://www.jw.org/en/>

<https://jwleaks.org/>

<https://freedomofmind.com/>

<https://www.abuseincare.org.nz/>

<https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/>

<https://decult.net/>