Tipsheet: Sourcing during the time of COVID

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Webinar recorded 5/19/2020
Link to this tipsheet: bit.ly/IRE_SOURCING
Link to webinar recording: bit.ly/IRE-SOURCING-RECORDING

Building rapport

- It's always best to have sources before you need them. For sources you've already made, be sure to keep in touch. Even a five minute check in to let you know that you're thinking of them and wondering how they're doing and how COVID is affecting their workplace and life.
- We can't meet in person anymore, but for people comfortable with technology, having a coffee together on Zoom will help build rapport. Remember we're all going through this, so that's a connection point with people.
- Before jumping into an interview, have a conversation with the person. Put them at ease. Walk them through your process so they understand what comes next.
- If it's a video interview, take note of their surroundings, which can help add color to your story. Let them see they're talking to a real person.
- A great interview is a conversation, so once you're about to start recording you can explain that it will be very much like the conversation you just had before you hit the record button.
- Be transparent about what "off the record" and "on background" means.
- If they're nervous about going on the record, talk through the value of having them identify themselves. Putting a face and a name to a story will help viewers and readers understand a topic better, especially when there are disputes about what is real and what is not.
- If you see a news story or item that a source might be interested in, make sure you send it to them. They'll know you are thinking of them. You don't want to only talk to sources when you want something.
- Ask open-ended questions and be sure to ask them what they are noticing in their communities. People love being a resource for a story.
- Ask people to articulate their concerns. When you get into a person's worries, the accountability angle can just spill out. And when people are frustrated, they want to tell you who is responsible.

- If you are trying to cover an area you are not familiar with, be transparent about it. Ask people to show you their communities on Facetime or Zoom.

Leveraging social media

Social media groups are a great way to find people, but not always easy to access as a journalist. Here are some ideas to reach people:

- Be transparent about who you are and why you want to join a particular group.
- If you are denied access, talk to the moderators of the group to gain trust. Try asking them to share links of stories you've already done so people can feel more comfortable with you and your reporting.
- Don't just search social media sites for groups, make sure you ask people you talk with if they are a member of any group you should know about.
- If you're having trouble getting into Facebook groups, make your own Facebook group and ask moderators of several groups to join. They can be the go-between, help with sources and help you keep your finger on the pulse of what is happening in their FB community.
- Consider tracking social media groups in a spreadsheet. It's a little bit of work upfront, but being organized always saves time in the long run.
- If you find an interesting post, comment on it, so the writer knows who you are. Direct message them if their DMs are open.
- Don't forget the Nextdoor app. There are lots of conversations going on in individual communities that might make for good stories.
- There are also groups in Whatsapp, so getting an administrator of the group to let you see inside will give you a sense of what people are talking about. (However, Laura Morel pointed out she would not quote what someone said on the app unless she first had explicit permission.
- On Instagram, you can direct message people if their profile is public or they are following you. Many people still have public accounts on Instagram.
- When you're looking at posts on Instagram, also check to see if a user has tagged their location in the photo. If they have, click on the location name to see who else is posting from the area. You can also access a list of locations here, but your best bet is starting with a post.

Other ways to reach people

- ProPublica has a form people can fill out, but Beena Raghavendran says it helps tremendously to lay out how you will use the information. Here's how ProPublica worded its privacy policy:
    - *A NOTE ABOUT OUR COMMITMENT TO YOUR PRIVACY: We appreciate you sharing your story and we take your privacy seriously. ProPublica is gathering this information for our reporting, not for publication. If you would prefer to get in touch with us another*

way, send an email to coronavirus@propublica.org, message us on Signal at (201) 701-0850, or visit propublica.org/tips.

- Opportunities for finding people to speak with you include:
    - Grocery stores
    - Food banks
    - Schools that are handing out food
    - Snail mail
    - Put up flyers on bulletin boards with your contact information.
    - If you've organized your newsroom's tipline in a searchable format, use keyword searches to find people who've reached out to you this way.

A word about "officials"

- When trying to get an official to respond or comment on a story you are working on, make sure you are clear about your deadline, and what you want them to respond to. This is especially important if there are any accusations that an official or government entity is not doing their job. Don't just say you'd "like to talk." The government isn't adding staff right now, but the demand for information has increased dramatically, so be clear about why it's important they get back to you.
- At IRE, we always have a "document state of mind", but it's important right now to also have a "digital access" state of mind. For example, Nicole Carr found out government officials who were part of a larger association met online about COVID issues. The meeting was recorded and posted on the association website. So when backgrounding officials, see what associations they belong to.

Other resources:

- ProPublica's crowdsourcing template
- Here's a write-up on using snail mail.
- Beena Raghavendran also wrote a twitter thread on reading COVID tips that include some resource guides.
- Eric Nadler's tipsheet Loosening lips: The art of the interview