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Investigative Science Journalism

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Katherine Eban, an investigative journalist, is a contributing editor at Vanity Fair *magazine, an Andrew Carnegie fellow, and author of the* New York Times *bestseller* Bottle of Lies: The Inside Story of the Generic Drug Boom. *Among her many assignments, she investigated the 9/11 hijackers for* The New York Times*' investigative unit and exposed massive data fraud at India's largest generic drug manufacturer for Fortune magazine. At* Vanity Fair*, she identified the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) psychologists who designed the Bush administration's coercive interrogation methods during the war on terror. That article,* "Rorschach & Awe," *was later made into the film* The Report. *Her work has won numerous awards, including from Investigative Reporters and Editors, the Association of Health Care Journalists, and the Overseas Press Club*.

What exactly is investigative journalism? In its most basic form, it exposes stories or information that powerful interests or individuals want to keep hidden, disclosures that can benefit the public good. Pretty exciting, huh? But the best investigative journalism must go further, not only exposing injustice and malfeasance but also analyzing the systems that give rise to it and the historical patterns that allow it - determinedly tracking who benefits and who suffers.

So how does that work in science journalism? To some extent, it works the same as it does with any other beat. Investigative journalists reveal how malign influences—such as money, power, or the prospect of self-gain—warp the rules, tilt the playing field, and lead to harm.

That scrutiny can become turbocharged in the worlds of science, medicine, and public health, where regulations and oversight are critical, and the stakes can be life and death. You will rarely find yourself thinking that your work doesn't matter. As Dan Diamond, an investigative health journalist formerly at Politico and now at the *Washington Post*, says of covering the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, "All of society is being remade by the story on your beat."

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Almost every investigative science journalist on the planet, including me, reported on Covid-19. But you don't need to wait for a pandemic to start digging. Wherever there is the prospect of big money or power, there will be rich terrain.

The best stories, however, don't come with a sign that says, "Dig here." There are no eager publicists promoting them. So how do you even know there *is* a story, rather than a dry well that will devour your time and erode your editor's confidence? Believe it or not, the answers lie mostly with some basic tools: your own curiosity, thinking, and dot connecting; well-deployed interpersonal skills; and a refusal to give up.

Identifying the Landscape

So you're at the start of a new story, feeling lost and sweaty-palmed, hoping that a reporting map will drop from your ceiling. When it doesn't, you will need to turn being lost into a virtue. I try to approach each new story as an unfamiliar landscape. My first question is usually, "Where am I?" I try to observe the topography, look around for inhabitants (who can serve as sources), find the watering holes where they might congregate, and note if trails diverge. Your ability to understand *where you are* will impact what kinds of questions you'll ask and to whom you'll ask them.

Here's an example. In 2008, I got a tip from a pharmacologist with a popular radio show: His listeners kept calling in to complain that their generic drugs didn't work. When he relayed these complaints to the Food and Drug Administration, regulators there claimed the reactions were likely psychosomatic, with the patients imagining harm due to a change in pill size or color. But the radio show host didn't believe that and called me instead, posing a question: "What is wrong with the drugs?"

I began reporting from a consumer safety landscape. I found patients suffering from troublesome side effects and doctors puzzled to find that patients they had stabilized became unstable after being switched from a brand name to a generic drug or between different generic versions. My first story was competent enough. I documented the existence of a possible problem. But I was no closer to answering what was *actually wrong*—largely because I was reporting from the wrong landscape.

Over the next 10 years (remember the part about never giving up?), I came to understand that the answers lay in a different landscape entirely. Yes, doctors and patients were the victims. But essentially, they were

onlookers. It was whistleblowers inside the generic drug industry who actually had the answers: Companies were faking their quality data in order to get their drugs approved. At its heart, this was a corporate corruption story. Once I figured out the right landscape and started reporting on decisions made by company officials, I nailed the story.

Mapping the Landscape

So you've found the landscape where you need to report. But do you know your way around? Do you understand who the locals are and how they operate? Do you know the history and the rules of the place?

If the idea of a landscape doesn't work for you, think of learning a language. It might be a scientific one, or a language of bureaucracy, but you need to try to become fluent. Why? This is for two key reasons. How can you possibly know if something is amiss unless you understand what things are supposed to look like when everything is going right? And why should sources with a lot to lose risk giving you information if they have to educate you from the ground up?

Take an example from Dan Diamond's terrific reporting at Politico. In September 2020, he broke a big story: Inside the federal government's Health and Human Services (HHS) agency, a Trump political appointee, Michael Caputo, had sought to alter scientific guidance put out by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (*MMWR*), which had long been free of political interference.

How did Diamond know to look for possible changes to the *MMWR*? He didn't, specifically. Instead, he'd been on high alert when 5 months earlier, Caputo, a political operative, had been installed inside HHS. "In normal times that's an eye opener," Diamond says. But, he also says that "in a pandemic to put a political communications expert in the middle of a crisis where his impulse is all political, I knew from that first day" how unusual it was. In other words, Diamond knew what normal looked like. And so to him, Caputo's installation was a red-flag event, a divergent trail that he followed.

The lesson is to spend time learning the landscape. When I'm stuck, or no one's returning my calls, I return to remedial landscape studies. I've watched promotional videos of generic drug manufacturing plants on YouTube and cracked open the Food and Drug Administration Title 21 *Code of Federal Regulations*. Nothing you learn will be wasted in the end.

Tracking the Information Flow

When the pandemic struck, you'd think I'd be well prepared to cover it, having reported around medicine, pharmaceuticals, and the federal health bureaucracy for a long while. But as I jumped into the biggest disease story of a century, I was thoroughly lost. *PPE*—What was that? *The wild-type virus*—Huh? What, exactly, does an epidemiologist do?

I was in a foreign world without a clue. How was I going to cultivate high-level government sources who were not supposed to speak with me, and almost certainly wouldn't, if they thought (a) I had no information and (b) they were going to have to educate me.

This is the part of the reporting that I think of as crawling across the floor in a house that's on fire. There's smoke everywhere. You can't see more than an inch ahead. Instead of panicking, stay low. Go back to the absolute basics. What do you know, and how can you leverage it? In my case, I took out a very old Rolodex with yellowing business cards and started tracking down sources from long ago.

In this painstaking manner, I began to hunt for ambassadors—people who could introduce me, and vouch for me, to crucial experts. It was a moment when everyone wanted to help, so some of my old acquaintances made a real project of it. They introduced me to people who, over time, became indispensable sources.

I also threw myself into learning everything I could about this new world. I began hunting for organizational charts of federal government agencies, each of which had some role to play in the response to the pandemic. What was each one responsible for? What were all those different divisions of HHS? Who were the past employees who might have mobile numbers for the current ones?

You can't climb Mount Everest by trying to lasso the summit. As hundreds of news outlets trained their sights on the top few sources like Dr. Anthony Fauci, I was busy studying the lower base camps and the pathways between them. In short, there are numerous different ways to ascend, each with hundreds of different footholds. I was studying the organization charts to figure out where the information was and who had it.

That effort left me sleepless at night, as I tried to map out the flow of information and documents. I envisioned a wheel with spokes. In the center was the information I wanted. Each spoke was the agency or person who might have it.

Finding and Keeping Sources

So, you're no longer totally lost, and you've educated yourself. You know the landscape, you can speak the language. But how can you find and recruit sources to lead you to relevant stories?

I always look for what I think of as spirit guides: topic area experts who are natural teachers and motivated to help. During my reporting for *Bottle of Lies*, I leaned heavily on the input of several corporate whistleblowers. Of course, I still had to learn how to analyze things myself, but when someone with real knowledge says, "Hey, look over here," that can be critically important.

Once you've figured out who has actual information, you might assume: "They'll never talk to me." But you won't know unless you try.

First, you'll want to try approaching them in their favorite medium. If someone has a dormant Facebook page, a message there is unlikely to work. But if they're posting night and day on LinkedIn, or you learn that they live on Signal, that's the best approach. Whenever possible, I try to get input on their communication habits from their colleagues. I was recently told that a potential source would likely not respond on Signal unless I set the "disappearing messages" bar to 12 hours. Boy, was that good information. Once he did respond, he set his messages to disappear within 5 seconds (I almost crashed my car trying to read one of his messages before it vanished).

But let's say you make the approach and get no response: don't give up. Another method is to try acting as if you have a relationship—until you actually do.

To one prospective source, I continued sending messages through LinkedIn, maybe 10 in total and got no response. My messages were always friendly and even keeled. Then one day, he responded, and his information enabled me to blow a story wide open. But here was the key: I didn't just ask for information, I offered it as well. The prospective source finally answered me because he felt strongly about some of the information I shared and knew I was on the right track. In short, I'd demonstrated my knowledge.

You also need to understand the role of loyalty tests in cultivating sources. There had been a source I was angling to speak with during my reporting for *Bottle of Lies*. Through an intermediary, I got a message back: He's willing to speak with you, but he'll only do it in person, in Beijing. Travel from New York to Beijing for a single conversation with a source I'd never met? That's crazy! But doing it was the best way to demonstrate my commitment to the story. I got on a plane to Beijing, a decision that dramatically improved my book.

Sometimes the challenges are explicit. One time, I'd been pursuing a prospective source inside a federal government agency. He responded by email: "I'm still not convinced that this story should be told, and I don't understand the purpose. I'm also not convinced that you are the person who is ready to tell this story. Not that it should be someone else, but you haven't demonstrated your knowledge . . . to me."

I recognized this not as a rejection, but as a challenge. Within 3 months, he handed me a thumb drive with 20,000 documents on it. He had copied his files so thoroughly that the documents included his divorce proceedings (which I deleted). That told me that I'd earned his trust.

Once you've established a relationship, you must be worthy of it. Don't just ping your sources when you need something. Check up on them. Ask how they are. Any number of times, I have recommended against publishing something that a source was willing to have me print because I thought it risked exposing them. My job is not only to publish information, but also to look around corners for my sources, candidly assess their risk of exposure, and protect them at all costs.

Getting Documents

Have you ever tried putting up a tent in a Category 5 hurricane? Probably not, but one thing is guaranteed. You'll need tent stakes, and each one makes your tent a little more secure.

Documents are those tent stakes, and to be meaningful, they don't need to just be an internal memo where the company chief executive officer admits to fraud. Calendar entries, invitations, event programs, fliers, and attendee lists—anything that helps to document people's activities and actions—help to strengthen your story.

But documents can also accelerate your reporting in less obvious ways. They can serve to cement relationships with sources. Once someone gives you a document—even if it's a public record you could have gotten off a website—that gives you an opening to return to ask follow-up questions. Documents can also act as a chisel. They increase the likelihood of a return phone call from a potential new source. Imagine the difference between the messages you can leave for someone: (a) "I am trying to find out if you were at the Century Club on August 9." or (b) "Calendar entries I obtained indicate you were at the Century Club on August 9. Would you have a minute to speak with me about that?"

In some cases, documents can serve as doorways into a completely hidden world. In reporting on Covid-19, a trusted federal government source passed along something that struck him as odd: a one-page invoice from a United Arab Emirates company for 3.5 million Covid-19 diagnostic tests for $52.5 million. The most arresting part of the document was the entity that had ordered the tests. The client name simply had two initials: W. H.—the White House.

The document was a mystery. The White House couldn't procure anything. By law, all federal government contracting took place under a rigorous system, with orders only approved by a duly authorized contracting officer.

The clues embedded in that invoice ultimately led me to uncover a far bigger story. A White House task force overseen by President Trump's son-in-law and special advisor, Jared Kushner, had drafted and then buried a comprehensive national Covid-19 testing plan, in part because of a political calculation that the pandemic was only affecting blue or Democratic states. Over weeks of back and forth with a new source, I obtained a copy of that plan. The resulting story was the most widely read in Conde Nast's history.

The Takeaway

The worlds of science and medicine—awash with money and life-and-death stakes—offer the perfect terrain for investigative journalists. There are whodunits to unfurl, regulatory breakdowns to reconstruct, and a surprising number of whistleblowers who feel compelled by conscience to speak out or leak documents. As you become more expert, you will be able to find and break stories that few others will.

It's not for the faint of heart. Sometimes, the stories are so complex, and the consequences of getting it wrong so serious, that you might feel like you're doing open heart surgery yourself. But the most rewarding part of the beat is that your stories actually have the potential to save lives or expose what took them in the first place.