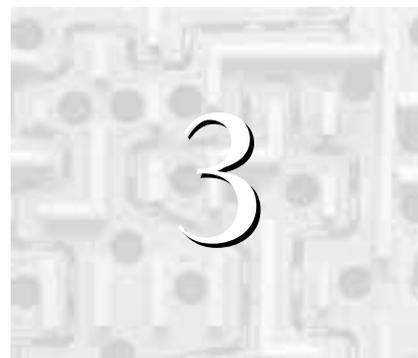


# Grabbing attention



*Joseph Hanlon*

The article on the front page of today's newspaper or the first item on the radio news were probably written by journalists in less than a day. Even the longer 'feature' articles in newspapers and magazines are often written in less than a week. Journalists have developed techniques to 'find out fast' and present the results in a way that attracts attention.

The problem of a policy investigator is often remarkably similar to that of the journalist. With limited background knowledge and little time, the investigator must find an answer and present it convincingly. As a development journalist who is also a consultant and author I am using this chapter to share some of my tips or 'tricks of a different trade'.

The methods I suggest may not always be appropriate. They involve a lot of quick 'thinking with documents' (mainly grey materials – compare O'Laughlin's Chapter 6) and 'thinking with people' (mainly contacts – people who know about the issue already, 'experts' or those already involved in the policy debate). They are useful in cases where someone commissions me to answer a policy question directly: what's the best way to provide funds for a project? How can we put pressure on government? (see Examples 3.1 and 3.2 and Section 3.6). You may need to answer a more specific field-based question: how do people make their living in a region? What is the impact of a new policy on poverty? My methods will probably be useful if you are investigating a policy question. If you are carrying out a more fundamental study, you may need some of the more formal methods of 'thinking with people' (survey or PRA/RRA) discussed in Chapters 7 and 8 or of 'thinking with data' (Chapter 10). Still, if your study is to be useful it has to link to a policy question, and the methods discussed here are probably useful as well.

## 3.1 Four steps •••

Because flexibility is central to journalistic investigations, there are no firm rules. But my investigative process commonly involves four steps. I summarise them here, with the remainder of the chapter fleshing them out:

- 1 Throw the net out wider or 'Find the woman who knows'.  
Journalists lack the time to reinvent the wheel, and our primary skill is making good use of people who have already thought about the issue. This means gathering existing reports and studies, using the internet, and talking, usually informally, to anyone who has investigated a related topic. In this phase, informal, unofficial, and 'off-the-record' contacts are key. It is essential in this phase to look more broadly than the narrow initial brief, throwing out a net to try to catch people and reports that look at the subject from different perspectives. This is essential because the journalist then must:
- 2 Redefine the question and select the key issue.  
Most investigators will admit, at least privately, that their first formulation of the question is normally wrong – often wildly so. Using the initial broader trawl of material and ideas, I decide on a priority issue as early as possible (certainly no later than the half-way point in an investigation). At this point I make a first attempt to define the outcome – the broad outlines of the story or recommendations. This is the most problematic point.  
The question needs to be redefined so that it is likely to provide both a useful answer and one that can be presented well. 'Usefulness' takes into account the assumptions, goals, and agendas of the people who commissioned the report or will read it. Both as a journalist and as a consultant, I already begin to think about presentation at this point. The best reports and articles make only one point, or at most very few. This is the time for discarding peripheral issues and selecting the one which will be the focus of the report or article.
- 3 Discard and deepen.  
Having thrown the net out wider to draw in new ideas and material, it is vital not to be smothered in too much information. At this point, I ruthlessly put aside all irrelevant material. A good journalist will discard at least two-thirds of the material initially collected. This is the opposite side of throwing out the net wider; it is selecting the relevant and discarding the irrelevant. What proves relevant is often surprising and different than what I expected at the start – the whole point of throwing the net wider.  
This phase involves actually answering the newly defined question; numerous points must be clarified. This is the time to reread good reports and talk again to the best contacts, officially and 'on the record' if possible.
- 4 Having the desired result.  
Investigators need to be clear what action they want – is the report just for the file, or does the investigator want something done? The report needs to be written with that outcome in mind. Most people only read the summary or introduction, which becomes more important than the main report, and can be angled to push the desired result. Also, if you really want action, you need not stop with this report. You can write briefings for ministers or officials with your results, or media articles. You may want to give copies of your report to campaigners or the local press.

Deadlines are the biggest difference between an academic investigation and a journalistic one. An academic doing a study for a PhD or a journal paper must cover a narrow area completely, often taking many years to complete the investigation. A journalist

always has one eye on the deadline, and investigates a broader area only to the depth that time allows; nevertheless, the result must be credible and accurate. Decision-makers, administrators and consultants are much closer to journalists than to academics, which is why the journalist's tools are useful.

### 3.2 Step 1: Find the woman who knows • • •

Other people have already thought about the problem – whatever it is. The first rule of any journalist is to find the people who know. In a sharp change from my practice a decade ago, I often start with the internet, to try to find what has been written on my problem and related issues. If I find anything really interesting, I look for other articles and papers by the same person or organisation. But the internet cannot automatically be trusted; it has a lot of false and silly material (see Box 3.1).

Next I hit the telephone, chatting to people informally. I start with friends and contacts and then quickly move on to people met at meetings. I often make 'cold' calls, telephoning an agency and asking 'Do you have someone who deals with X?'. The telephone directory remains the journalist's most important reference book, but I now often use websites to find telephone numbers.

In talking to people, I find that admitting ignorance is always a good start, even when it isn't true, because people are more willing to help when they feel superior and more knowledgeable. As well as asking people to talk broadly around the subject, I always ask two things:

- if they know of any related reports, studies, articles, etc. – both published and confidential – and
- who else has written about the subject and would it be useful to talk with them (and I make sure to get a telephone number or e-mail address, at least).

And I always take notes, even of an informal conversation.

This sets up a telephone tree, with each person suggesting two or three others. In a few hours, it is possible to talk with a wide range of people about the issue.

In parallel, I use e-mail, sending notes to friends and contacts asking if they know any people or articles linked to my problem. For busy people who are hard to contact on the telephone, it is sometimes easier to use e-mail to set up a time to talk on the phone. If someone has written an interesting article which I find on the web or by recommendation, and I cannot find anything else on the subject by the person, I will often e-mail them to ask if they have other unpublished reports on the subject or can suggest others who have written.

And I go back to the internet. First, I look up people and organisations that have come up in e-mails and telephone chats. One problem with the internet is finding the right keywords and search terms, so when I am talking to people I am always on the lookout for words or phrases that might be useful for internet searches, and I try these in later searches.

Often, there already exists a whole string of reports on the same subject or related ones, frequently commissioned from consultants and academics. In Chapter 6, Bridget

O’Laughlin talks of ‘grey material’; these are reports that are not published but which are often not secret either – or if they are officially confidential, they are still widely circulated. People are often pleased to share them – it is just that no-one asks and there is no central archive. Remember how few people will ever see your report, and how easy it would be for someone else to do the same thing again, without knowing what you did. For example, for a book I was writing, I found 15 different studies of poverty in Mozambique.

Journalists are never ‘experts’ in anything; rather, our skill is in searching out the experts and in drawing on that expertise. At this stage, I give equal time and weight to people and paper. Hiding in an office and simply searching the web and reading reports will never give an adequate picture. I want at least to skim as much as possible that has been written on the subject, but I also want to talk to as many people as possible who have already thought about the issue.

There is the danger that particular views get repeated and gain credence that way with no-one ever checking to see if they are correct. However, reinventing the wheel is hard work and time consuming. The journalist’s key to ‘finding out fast’ is finding people who have already done the hard work.

### Box 3.1 Internet – gold mine and junk shop

The internet transformed research by making available a wealth of information. The relative lack of censorship and ease of posting information is both the boon and bane of the internet.

On one hand, reports and grey literature are increasingly posted on the web, both because it costs nothing to do so, and because of pressure for increased transparency and openness. Also, many people are posting eye-witness accounts, reports and opinions which might otherwise have been censored or simply never been written.

But, on the other hand, conventional publication imposes at least a slight filter – someone must read the item and agree to publish it. The internet has no such restriction. An item on the web can be complete lies or total fantasy. Total nonsense can be dressed up in scientific jargon. Conspiracy theories abound – for example, that the moon landings were faked and that no human has ever been to the moon. Bizarre religious sects and weird political groups have highly professional websites. Equally dangerous has been the growth of false websites, for example those which pretend to be pressure groups but are really funded by cigarette or pharmaceutical companies.

This is not the world of the library, where librarians have chosen the books and journals. This is the world of the junk shop, of buyer beware. There may be treasures there, but there is also a lot of dross. And yet, the good and useful material makes the internet much too useful to avoid.

So that means the internet must be used with much more care than many other sources of information. One key test is to assess the source or writer. There is no such

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thing as absolute truth and no guarantee of perfect accuracy. But we are instinctively more likely to trust the science correspondent of a major newspaper than we are to trust the flat earth association. Similarly, we are more cautious about listening to someone outside their area of expertise – a Nobel Peace Prize winner deserves to be listened to on war and peace, but speaks with less credibility on science.

Here are my three levels of credibility:

- 1 Known source. A person or institution which I already know and might already be part of my telephone tree, or which is directly referred to by a known source. This also applies to websites I already use regularly and consider credible and trustworthy. I have a list of bookmarked sites, like the BBC, which I use and trust.
- 2 Official or semi-official source. A website from a government, a government agency, a well known international NGO, a journal or newspaper known to be reputable, a person widely cited in the literature, a known university, etc. In other words, a website from a person or organisation you feel is trustworthy.
- 3 Verifiable source. You may never have heard of me (Joseph Hanlon), but if you do a web search you will find a range of articles I have written, and you can make a judgement on my credibility. Look for articles that touch on something where you already have some slight knowledge and ask if the article seems credible. And don't just look at my articles – look at what people have had to say about me, in other articles, book reviews, etc. But, also, I automatically have some credibility because I am writing for the Open University. At this point, if I cannot easily establish a writer's credibility, I tend not to use the article – I don't have time to waste. But, once in a while, someone I have never heard of says something new, interesting, or intriguing. Then I do more searches to see if I can find any references to the writer, and send e-mails to friends, saying 'Have you ever heard of X?' Often I get a reply from someone I trust with a thumbs up or down.

Once you know the source, you can move on to consider biases. No one is unbiased. Governments and pressure groups all have positions they wish to promote. All will be selective in their use of evidence. Elsewhere in this chapter we talk about agendas and biased sources. In this, websites are no different from other sources of information. A useable source will be both known and biased.

There are other kinds of trade-offs. A person who you do not know but who has actually been on the ground, interviewing peasants, may have written a more accurate report than a senior government official who has not stepped outside her office. More reports and grey literature are now posted on the web. And an important use of the web is to find a range of articles covering your subject area, which you can then compare and contrast.

But remember that the web is a basically dishonest place – people can lie and cheat, invent names and credentials, and dress up the most bizarre claims in scientific or literary jargon. In the internet era, photos can be faked, so seeing is no longer believing. Knowing your source is the first step.

## Keep it unofficial

In talking to people, there are three reasons to avoid official channels – it takes too long to get clearance, you are often forced to speak to the wrong person who does not actually know anything about the subject, and people are more cautious when they are speaking officially. If I want to use the material, I go back later officially. Informal chats on the telephone, or over lunch or a coffee, are always more productive in the initial stages of an investigation, because they show how people are thinking on the subject. Like you, they will not commit to paper or official statements material about which they are unsure, or which goes against official policy, but they will be interested to discuss it informally.

Confidentiality is essential. If I promise not to say you talked with me, I keep that promise at all cost. A record of keeping confidences helps in the future, because I can return to useful and talkative sources time and again. Recently, a government official referred an inquirer to one of my books, saying it was an accurate reflection of his views – even though he was never named in the book!

Be sure of the rules. Journalists use the phrase ‘off the record’ to mean that what you are told can be printed, but you cannot say who told you. By contrast, ‘background’ means that you cannot use the material or identify the source – unless you can find someone else to tell you (which I can often do – once I know the basic story). Again, there are dangers here. Compare my suggestions with Bridget O’Laughlin’s more considered academic approach in Chapter 6. In my opinion, although you should give references wherever possible in your final report, there is nothing to stop you using journalists’ pet phrases like ‘ministry sources say’ or ‘it is reported that’ if you need to protect a source.

Sometimes possibly useful grey material is confidential or secret, often because reports are critical or came up with the ‘wrong’ answer. More commonly, a person is afraid to release a report because they are not sure of its status. At this early stage, an investigator is more interested in the information and analysis, rather than quoting from the report or saying you have it. I use three techniques:

- Ask for a copy in confidence, and respect that confidence.
- Find out who else might have copies; someone more sympathetic may let me see it.
- Ask to read the report. Often an official will let me sit in their office and read a report, even if they won’t release a copy.

Finally, reciprocity is essential. If I ask people to talk with me unofficially, I must do the same with them when they need it.

## Using biased sources

Openly biased people and groups can often be useful sources of background information. Pressure groups, trade unions, and others with an interest in the outcome may have done extensive research to bolster their case, and that material can prove useful for background and for further sources. Groups with a strong agenda are also useful in obtaining questions to challenge their opponents.

In the study on land in Mozambique (Section 3.6 below), a key issue was whether land should be leasehold or freehold. Talking to strong proponents of both sides made clearer the implications of the differences in tenure, particularly with respect to loans and mortgages. Advocates of freehold argued that the only way peasants could obtain credit was through a mortgage, and this had forced the leasehold advocates to do research on alternative credit systems – saving me substantial work.

Clearly, care must be taken when using biased sources. But as I note later, and as Bridget O’Laughlin notes in Chapter 6, all sources have some bias and the researcher must take this into account. The danger in ‘finding out fast’ is that the researcher will be fooled; every journalist has examples of apparently bona fide reports being false, with numbers changed or conclusions distorted. I often cite the case of the World Bank claiming in several widely distributed reports that a study of vegetable marketing showed that price deregulation had improved vegetable supply in Maputo – when the study itself said no such thing.

Equally serious is the problem set out both by Chris Blackmore and Ray Ison in Chapter 2 and by Linda Mayoux and Hazel Johnson in Chapter 8, as well as by O’Laughlin – power relations bias investigations. Outside investigators often misinterpret what relatively powerless people say – because they do not hear, or because people are telling them what they want to hear. This is linked to the issue set out by Sue Mayer in Chapter 11 – that ‘expert knowledge’ often excludes key elements of ‘local knowledge’ because of the way the outside ‘experts’ codify and interpret. Participatory research techniques have been developed (see Chapters 7 and 8), but journalists do not have time to use them – we are dependent on studies already done by others.

In assessing the validity of other’s people’s work, I am guided by two things – my own sense of what seems reasonable, and the hope that I talk to enough people and see enough reports that some will challenge other dishonest or distorted reports. In the end, though, we all make mistakes and misjudgements; the best I can ever do is keep them to a minimum. Step 3 includes further attempts to reduce errors.

## Widening the net

Telephone and e-mail trees, the internet and collecting existing reports are all ways of throwing the net out further. In the terms of Blackmore and Ison’s Chapter 2, this can be seen as extending the ‘boundaries’ which define thinking on the subject. Often people have approached the same question from a different angle, and this will come up in informal discussions. For example, to draw together evaluations of hand pumps, it is not sufficient to look just to the rural water sector of government, but also to other development agencies that may have done project evaluations which, in passing, touched on problems or successes with hand pumps. Informal chats on the telephone direct you to relevant reports.

Widening the net is also about related questions. Starting out with a question of which hand pump is easiest to maintain leads to issues of spare parts supply and maintenance arrangements – is someone hired? is it done by an agency? is it done by a volunteer water committee? etc. Successful maintenance may prove to have more to do with organisation and less to do with the pump itself.

In a 1987 investigation of tightening sanctions against the then apartheid-ruled South Africa, a Commonwealth study team I headed obtained a study of United States sanctions against Cuba. This presented a different perspective on the issue – the United States was trying to make sanctions work against Cuba when most countries were looking for mere token sanctions against South Africa. Thus it introduced alternative ways of thinking about what was possible and what was effective.

In the internet era, widening the net also shows new search terms – jargon and catch phrases I had not seen before, alternative technical terms, more experts' names, or simply different ways of looking at the issue. At this point I often do another web search, using the new key words. This almost always produces new articles and often new ways of thinking about issues.

The final point about throwing the net wider is time and speed. If someone is away on holiday or won't talk to me, I stop and try someone else. If, with a bit of effort, you can't get to see a report, forget it. You do need to be aware if there appears to be a whole area where people don't want you to find out. Still, widening the net means drawing in more people and reports, which makes it easier to ignore those which are difficult to get access to.

### 3.3 Step 2: Redefine the question • • •

Having thrown the net wider, the investigator then returns to rethink the question – and to look at those asking the question. It is essential to consider three issues: assumptions, agendas, and goals. As Examples 3.1 and 3.2 show, these may only become clear during the investigation.

The initial question is usually formulated on the basis of an implicit set of assumptions. Some are encapsulated in slogans such as 'small is beautiful'. Others relate to the assumption that your employer – be it a government department, a bilateral donor, an NGO or a private company – is necessarily the best for the job. Some relate to skills and capacity – that foreigners or consultants are needed, or that peasants are too stupid. Key ones relate to the root of the problem, and whether it is technical, financial or organisational. It is worth listing as many of these assumptions as possible; by making them explicit, they can be tested against the information drawn in through the earlier trawl. Note should be made of any assumptions which do not obviously hold up. Example 3.1 shows a case of how this was done in a study of co-operatives in Zimbabwe.

### Example 3.1 Zimbabwe co-ops: changing the question

Several hundred producer co-operatives were formed in Zimbabwe in the first years after independence in 1980. Demobilised guerrillas and released political prisoners played an active role, and the government gave the movement political backing. Many co-operatives received technical and financial support from government and international NGOs. But by 1986 it was clear that many of the new co-ops were in trouble, and I was commissioned by a European NGO to do a study. I was to look at:

- (a) tensions between the government and the co-op movement; and
- (b) ways in which NGOs might provide further funding to co-ops 'without increasing the tensions with the government institutions'.

The underlying and stated assumption of the study was that the co-ops were in trouble because the government bureaucracy had turned hostile to them, despite political rhetoric, and that the solution was further funding by foreign NGOs, in some way bypassing the government.

In Zimbabwe, I talked informally to a wide range of people in the co-operative movement, in government, in the university, and in agencies supporting co-ops. I visited a number of co-ops – some successful, some struggling, and some failing.

Informal chats and personal contacts confirmed two key assumptions:

- most producer co-ops were, in fact, facing serious problems; and
- there were sharp divisions within government and the civil service with respect to co-ops, and, indeed, key people who were supposed to be helping were in fact hostile to producer co-operatives.

But I also found that government hostility was not the heart of the problem, and that in some cases the assumed solution – foreign NGO help – had actually been harmful to co-ops by creating dependency. Throwing the net wider made it clear that the question had to be redefined if my answer was to be useful to the co-ops. Further thinking showed that the core problem was attitudinal – foreign NGOs, government officials, and many members of the less successful co-ops all treated co-ops as political, charitable and social organisations. On the other hand, the successful co-ops saw themselves as small businesses which eventually had to be commercially viable. I decided that this had to be the key point of my report.

Throwing the net wider also produced two surprises, even to me:

- I discovered that, in the six years of independence, some sectors of the largely white business community had significantly shifted their attitudes toward the largely black co-operative movement. At least some commercial finance was now available, which my commissioning agency – and, indeed, many co-ops – did not realise.

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- I also found that the white colonial government had provided substantial agricultural extension and other support to inexperienced new white farmers in the 1950s and 1960s, and that the new majority rule government was expecting farming co-ops with a similar lack of experience to thrive with much less support.

My problem was that spreading the net wider challenged the core assumptions of many co-op members and – most importantly – of many international NGOs working in Zimbabwe. It became clear that two further unstated underlying assumptions were that co-ops were passive recipients of charity, and government and business were hostile. These, in turn, masked an agenda of many NGOs to continue to provide direct support to particular partner co-operatives, and not to encourage self-sufficiency or to build the co-op movement in general. Others wanted to build the co-op movement, but make it dependent on foreign funding rather than local business or government.

Keeping in mind the sensibilities of all concerned, I reformulated the question to be:

How can foreign NGOs help co-ops to become more politically and commercially independent and make the best use of government and private resources?

Thus, my proposals were to call for foreign NGOs to:

- use their funds not to finance co-ops directly, as in the past, but to guarantee and support private commercial loans – thus setting up a sustainable system and routing more money to the co-ops;
- support co-ops in political lobbying and pressure on the government to provide more agricultural extension and other technical support, and help co-ops create their own technical support units.

For some co-ops and NGOs who enjoyed the cosy direct relationship involved in cash handouts, these proposals were unacceptable; NGO workers would lose the power that comes from direct funding, while co-ops would have to be productive and profitable.

But others found it useful. The report was one of many inputs that led to the establishment of a co-operative loan fund which had both commercial and NGO money.

Next is the question of agendas. Everyone involved in any project has personal goals and agendas. When you do a study, you want to keep your job, or earn a promotion, or gain future contracts. I originally wrote this chapter not only to help you learn, but also to earn money and in the hope of winning more contracts from the Open University. Agendas are

sometimes seen as shameful and illegitimate and thus to be kept hidden, because development agencies and charities are supposed to be altruistic and concerned only with the poor. But decision-making is easier when agendas are recognised and made explicit.

In particular, this means making clear those agendas which may work against the long term development goals. Agendas of this type can be loosely grouped into four categories:

- 1 Something to show. Development agencies need quick results to show to their paymasters – parliaments, national or international development agencies, or the general public making donations. This often involves photos of white women helping black children.
- 2 Corporate stability. Many development agencies are large businesses with headquarters' staffs and overheads to support; this is as true of non-government organisations as of ministries of health or agriculture. The agenda may be how to win a contract over another agency, in order to protect jobs or to expand.
- 3 Power and importance. Everyone needs to feel that their role is important; every agency wants to believe that recipients of aid are better off for it. Individuals, departments and agencies often simply want to increase their power base.
- 4 Other benefits. For example, at one time, the highest priority for the Irish aid programme was 'to increase the number of Irish people working in developing countries' (Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, 1993).

Finally, questions are often muddled because of lack of quantifiable objectives. Too often, goals are vague, such as 'empowerment' or 'helping the poorest'. In their study *Non-Governmental Organizations and Rural Poverty Alleviation* Riddell and Robinson (1995) noted that in the projects they studied objectives were 'imprecise' and frequently altered. This was both because NGOs wished to remain flexible, and because they didn't want quantifiable goals because 'northern NGOs tend to exaggerate the potential impact they can make'.

But for rapid decision-making, it becomes essential to define a clear goal, even if one does not exist for the overall programme. Example 3.2 looks at the issue of goal definition. Goals must take into account both assumptions and agendas.

### **Example 3.2 Matching a new question to the agenda**

Peasants in Namialo in northern Mozambique are poor and malnourished, so you are asked to propose an improved extension service. Throwing the net wider means looking not only at extension models, but also at peasant poverty. That immediately points to an assumption: that extension is the answer to peasant poverty. Namialo is a cotton producing area, and poverty and malnutrition are common in cotton out-grower schemes. This leads to three very different choices:

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- 1 increase food production (perhaps at the expense of cotton), for which extension is probably most appropriate; or
- 2 raise the price paid to peasants for cotton, which may be an issue of state setting of minimum prices or negotiating different contracts with officially recognised cotton buyers, or it could be an issue of campaigning against cotton subsidies in the United States which are depressing world prices; or
- 3 improve the marketing structure to ensure that peasants can buy food at the lowest possible price, which may require state support for the private trading sector including loans and road building.

Other more radical options range from promoting marketing co-operatives to providing better water supplies so that women spend less time collecting water and more time growing food.

But assume your analysis of the agenda of the commissioning agency (an NGO, the Ministry of Agriculture, or a UN agency) is that it needs a rural extension scheme even if that is not the most productive, so your immediate goal is to work out the best extension scheme. But 'best' for what? There are a range of possible goals:

- reduce chronic malnutrition levels;
- reduce acute malnutrition levels;
- increase cash incomes of the poorest 20% of families;
- increase women's income;
- increase total marketed production;
- raise food production of the poorest in the village;
- raise total food production in the village;
- richer farmers providing more jobs to the poorest;
- total production up;
- productivity up.

And so on. Which extension system is chosen depends strongly on which goal is chosen. Throwing the net wider also raises questions about the immediate objectives of extension itself. Is it to introduce better food crop varieties, to encourage best practice relating to existing crops and techniques, to introduce new forms of pest control, or to introduce entirely new forms of cash crops (in Namialo this might include oil seeds or tobacco)?

This last point raises another agenda issue – is cotton production to be defended or can cotton production be allowed to fall? Assume that because of the need to support private cotton companies and to encourage exports, peasants must continue to grow cotton.

With all of this in mind, the question might be redefined as follows: what would be the best form of agricultural extension to bring chronic malnutrition below 5% of children and to increase the food production of the poorest peasants without reducing cotton production?

When goals do exist, they are too often short-term, such as number of wells dug rather than number still in use in three years, or number of health centres built rather than number of people using health facilities. A standard measure for the success of cancer treatments is five year survival rates – what percentage of those treated are still alive five years later. Similar longer term goals are needed for development projects, but are rarely used.

### The new question

New information almost always convinces me that the original question is not the best one. Initial research also makes clear the assumptions, goals and agendas that underlie the initial question. With these in mind, the question is redefined in a way to provide a useful answer and which can be presented well.

Often it is worth making explicit more than one goal – a corporate goal and a development goal. Thus a simple question about the best hand pump might be turned into a new one: what is the best combination of pump and maintenance system which will give the donor short term publicity pictures and have the best chance of surviving for five years? Agendas are important too, so a question which started out being about rural health care might end up being one about making the best use of foreign volunteers in rural health posts.

It is not too early to think about presentation. If I expect people to take notice (not always the case, see step 4), I make sure that my article or report makes only one central point, and perhaps a small number of subsidiary ones. Thus it becomes essential to define one key issue, and one or two points to be made about that issue. All the examples in this chapter show how this can be done.

Having key points is not the same as having answers. For me, key points are usually clearly defined questions to answer. It is important to note that the new question may not be harder to answer than the original one – but the answer surely will be more useful and easier to present.

### Trying not to get it wrong

This phase is the most problematic and riskiest, because it requires choices. There is no single right choice, no single key issue or single right question. But there are wrong choices. In part, decision-making is intuitive and comes from experience. Usually a key issue will jump out at me during the initial investigation; the problem comes when there is more than one issue competing for attention, and I know I must choose one.

A chat with a friend or colleague is useful at this point; even with a very tight magazine deadline that may only leave me a couple of hours, I find it useful to take two minutes to discuss the topic with someone. Indeed, being forced to spell out the issue quickly often makes the decision for me – if I cannot explain it in a few words, then I probably cannot find out fast either.

Expected outcome (step 4) is an important criterion. There is no point in a report which so contradicts agendas and assumptions that it is ignored. My Zimbabwe redefinition (Example 3.1) came very close to being wrong because the new question was unacceptable to many donor NGOs. On the other hand my Mozambique redefinition, in the example in Section 3.6 below, actually fitted better with the needs of all parties than the original question.

A good journalist must be prepared to take risks. If I do not improve on the initial question, my articles will be too boring to be published. Any failures or mistakes will be outweighed by the successes. For a government official, the rewards for success may be lower and the penalties for failure higher. Each investigator must make their own choice. But I remain convinced that good investigation always involves some risk of failure – if you can be sure in advance, then there is no need for research.

### 3.4 Step 3: Discard and deepen • • •

Having redefined the question, you are now faced with a pile of reports and notes which are no longer relevant. Get rid of them. Now.

It is hard to force yourself to think more broadly as you cast the net, but even harder to narrow down again and throw away what you do not need. At this point an unusual degree of ruthlessness is required – to exclude all issues not relevant to the main story. Since redefining the question is an iterative process, and you may redefine again, it's as well to keep notes and reports you think you don't need somewhere where you can retrieve them, at least until this particular job is finished. Some will then be filed away for future use; others will be forgotten. But no matter how interesting, 'finding out fast' means keeping an eye on the deadline and only following the most important issues.

I find this one of the most difficult steps. It hurts to discard reports or interviews that took hours of hard work or a long trip to obtain. I have to admit that I cheat. Sometimes discarded reports sit in piles on my office floor for months, because I cannot bear to throw them away. And on a longer project, if my initial investigations generate something that I find interesting but which is not directly relevant to the key issue, I sometimes put it into the report as an appendix; I know no one will read it, but I gain pleasure writing it up.

But, as I have already noted, a journalist always keeps one eye on the deadline, whether it is minutes or days away. When half of the available time is used, if I have not passed through steps one and two and moved on to defining the key issue and revised question, and being reasonably sure of the story, I am in trouble because I won't meet my deadline.

In part, this step revolves around answering a personal question: Why am I writing this report or article? It is essential to select the key point to be made, and structure the report – and the remainder of the investigation – around that. If you listen to a good radio news item or read a good news article, you will see they rarely make more than one key point and the rest of the article is to support that point. The best reports make

only one point; never make more than a handful. Even if the report has dozens of conclusions, some must be more important than others, and need to be prioritised.

## Deepening understanding

The task is now to answer the revised and much narrowed question. I never find the material already gathered and interviews already done to be sufficient.

By this step, the deadline is in sight; time is precious and cannot be wasted following up all issues. Articles are written and decisions taken based on limited information; not even historians have all the facts. The goal is to collect as much as possible of the most relevant information. I make a list of remaining issues in order of importance to the final report, and start with the most important. Another journalist's trick is simply to leave out unanswered questions or doubtful material that cannot be verified. Reports and articles are never 'complete' and my personal rule is: when in doubt, leave it out.

This is where I go back to the most interesting reports and most useful contacts, to ask this very limited set of new questions. Having put the issue in context, clarified agendas and goals, and revised the question, I usually have new things to ask my most productive contacts. There is no harm in going back two or three times to the same person, when new research throws up new topics. Indeed, I find that when I go back a second or third time to people who have previously looked at these issues, they find my new information interesting and there is a useful exchange of ideas.

Having started out broadly and then chosen a narrow focus, this is the phase of deepening understanding. Unresolved issues need to be followed up. Conflicting opinions which were simply recorded in step 1 now need to be clarified and either resolved or spelled out clearly. Quick internet searches on new key issues and to clarify details and disputed points are useful here. This is also the time to go back to pressure groups and others with overt biases, and put to them the arguments of the other side.

This is also the final chance to prevent mistakes. If my conclusion rests on one or two key items, I try to verify their accuracy further – by looking in more detail at research methods, by talking to others who were there, or by talking again to people who disagree with the conclusions. Many of the other chapters in this book outline warning signals to watch for – is it possible, for example, that 'experts' have missed a key point or that the received wisdom is wrong? Do the spokespeople of the intended beneficiaries of a project really speak for them? Even at this late stage, it is better to have second thoughts and delay than to go ahead with something if you have strong doubts. For a journalist, there is an intangible sense of 'feel' that comes from experience (and from having got things wrong before) – if the story 'feels right' I go ahead, but if nagging doubts make it 'feel wrong', it's back to step 2.

This is also the time to confirm sources and check facts. I was recently writing an article on economic development in Manica province, Mozambique, and I had a hand-out from a PowerPoint presentation claiming that 2000 jobs had been lost in two years.

But the governor said no jobs had been lost. The presentation had no source, so I telephoned the person who gave it to me, and she sheepishly admitted she did not know the source either. So we both hit the e-mail, to ask people we knew. The next day a message came from someone I did not even know, but who had been sent a copy of my e-mail query, giving me the source (a Manica business association) and the date and place of the lecture. Without e-mail, I never would have found the source and would not have been able to use or trust the information.

Finally, in this deepening process, I think much more about the final report. That means I try, where possible, to move 'on the record' so that I can quote people. It may now be useful to go through the proper channels and request formal permission to speak to people with whom I previously had an informal chat. Sometimes this is not possible and another informal chat is the only way forward. If confidence is promised, I always keep that promise.

### 3.5 Step 4: Having the desired result • • •

Presentation is one-quarter of the job. Proper presentation improves the chances that the report will have the desired effect. Goals and agendas are important here, too, and we consider three cases.

For the file

Many reports are only written for the file 'just in case' – they are to prove that something was done or that warnings were properly considered. Many are done by consultants, but civil servants trying to protect their own jobs often do such reports.

There is no harm in reports for the file, and presentation should be designed to discourage reading:

- no summary or introduction;
- use lots of jargon; and
- bury the key points.

As to be read but not acted on

Many reports are written to demonstrate good intentions, for example on gender equality, or to justify a decision already made. These reports are to be read by donors, funders, auditors, etc. in the hope that they accept the report and do not demand further action. You will have seen many such reports in your internet searches, since these are often posted on websites.

Most people only read the summary or introduction, and this should be encouraged by making the main report as dense and impenetrable as possible. The introduction

should take the form of an executive summary, which precisely follows the report section by section and simply summarises what has been written. Be careful not to highlight key points; only suggest actions that have already been agreed.

## Take action

If action is desired in response to an investigation, then the entire report should be tailored to that end. The writer of the report must decide on the desired outcome before writing the report. Such outcomes need to be clearly and simply stated – a new kind of water committee, changing the form of agricultural extensions, support for the peasant union in rewriting the land law (see example in Section 3.6 below), a campaign against the World Bank, etc. It should be possible to state the desired outcome in one short sentence.

Of course the investigation may lead to a whole series of subsidiary recommendations, but it is essential to keep the main one to the fore. In writing the report, recommendations need to be justified and key ones highlighted. Debated issues must be discussed, but irrelevant issues should be dropped – even when you worked hard to find the information. To make the report easy to read by non-experts who may need to take decisions, jargon should be excised and replaced by plain English; acronyms should be shunned.

Keep the report interesting. Journalists' tricks, like telling stories and quoting the more colourful speech of some sources, can be used in reports just as well as in articles. Concrete examples and real names and places make reports and articles feel more real. (Note how I mentioned Manica province by name and gave the actual number of job losses in my example in Section 3.4.)

If the investigator has a clear recommendation but there is a strong opposing view, then the summary should only make the case for the investigator's view, while the main report should also clearly explain the opposing line.

The introduction or summary is critical, because few will read the entire report. It should take the form of highlights and not a précis or exact summary. Instead of a formal 'executive summary', I usually write what is actually an article pinpointing the key points and the action proposed. It must be short (only one or two pages) and, like any good article, it can only make one point – the action I want taken. I may call it a 'summary', although I often try to use a different kind of heading such as 'key points', but in reality I am writing an article.

There are two good ways to begin an introduction:

- 1 Start with a strong quote or brief story that either sets the scene or backs up the course of action proposed. A few words from a government minister, a bishop, or a real peasant (with a name and village) proposing the course of action I want immediately makes the recommendation seem reasonable and broadly acceptable. The alternative is to set the scene; a report on pumps might start: 'Anna Mpofu had to

walk 10 km each day to the river for water after the Chifunde village hand pump broke and no one could fix it'; or

- 2 Start with the key conclusion or single most important recommendation, stated briefly and without caveats – I always leave the 'ifs' and 'buts' for the main report. If I start with a quote or story, I give the key conclusion immediately afterwards.

I would never start a report the way Open University books often start their chapters, with the phrase 'this chapter' – only dedicated students read on. If you want people to read what you write, make it interesting from the very first words.

The introduction/summary/highlights should never cover all points – that is the purpose of the main report. Instead, the introduction should make the case for the most important desired action. In any case, a good and provocative introduction is more likely to push people into reading the whole report.

An important point here is that, until now, we have made an implicit assumption that the outcome of your investigation is to be a report, study, article or briefing note – a single written document. But if you really want action taken, you will need to do more. First, you need to ensure that your report (or an unofficial version of it) is widely circulated – to the people you interviewed, to other interested parties, perhaps posted on a website, distributed to the press and campaign groups, and so on. If you want action, then you need to make a special effort to ensure that you get information to the people who can use it. This may mean presenting information in more than one way – a formal report to the commissioning agency can be backed up with articles in the media or the web, interviews with press and TV, seminars, public meetings, and so on. If you feel strongly that your research points to important action, then you cannot stop when you have written your first report.

## No answers

The fear of all investigators and journalists is of failing to find a clear answer. Journalists have two responses to this.

- Change the question again. Step 2 of the process is to redefine the question, and it needs to be defined in a way that has an answer. Go back and define it again.
- Admit you don't know. Journalists often use phrases like 'opinion remains divided on ...' or 'the debate continues about ...'.

The whole process of throwing the net wider encourages a reconsideration of the initial question and redefinition of the issues. If the investigator genuinely remains unsure even at the end of the study, then a recommendation for more fundamental consideration is justified. Usually, however, simply proposing more study is a way of avoiding choices and delaying decisions. If that is not the goal (see step 2) then it is better to make a choice.

### 3.6 Step-by-step: Land in Mozambique • • •

'Peasants are being pushed off their land in Mozambique and people are afraid to talk about it; tell us how to put public pressure on the government to stop this'.

That was the original request on the telephone from a British NGO one day in 1996. Finding out fast started even before accepting the job; a few telephone calls showed that some peasants were indeed being pushed off land, but others were defending their rights, and there was actually a massive public debate. With the brief rewritten to a broader one of helping to protect peasant land rights, I set off to Mozambique.

*Step 1*, throwing out the net, involved two days of intensive telephoning. As the telephone tree expanded, I found myself pursuing four different but overlapping lines:

- 1 Identifying people already working on land rights – finding the people who know. I discovered that the government had already established a National Land Commission which was working on just this issue, trying to draft revisions to the existing land law. (My commissioning NGO had not known of the existence of this commission.) Several Mozambican lawyers were also working on aspects of the problem and anxious to talk; women's land rights had been raised in the Mozambican submission to the Beijing Women's Conference in 1995. Two different groups at the local university were studying land issues. The issue had been raised by the parliamentary agriculture committee, and there had been substantial press coverage.
- 2 Locating other studies. Land turned out to be fashionable with donors, in part because of a debate about whether privatisation of land would lead to landlessness, as it had in Brazil. Thus there was a whole bookshelf of studies.
- 3 The first few telephone calls produced three Mozambican organisations already working with peasants on land issues; during the next few days, four more Mozambican groups – including the Catholic Church and the national women's organisation – and three donor agencies all working on land rights were identified. Remarkably, no single organisation knew about all the others in the field.
- 4 Looking for first hand evidence of peasant land struggles, and their success or failure. What was striking was how successful peasants had been in defending their land. I found instances where someone came and claimed (often falsely) that the land belonged to them or a 'minister' and peasants left without protest (respect for authority remains strong). But I found no case where peasants with some right to land had been pushed off if they defended those rights. Indeed, I discovered a variety of groups successfully gaining land titles for peasants.

*Step 2*, redefining the question. The original brief was based on three false assumptions – that peasants were unable to defend their land, that the government was uninterested in the problem, and that there was little public debate. I concluded that the government was sincere about getting a revised land law on the books by the end of 1996, that the National Land Commission was open to discussion and lobbying from outside

agencies (and even had peasant representatives on it), and that in most instances peasants could defend their land (although the procedures were often cumbersome and they needed assistance). The Commission had already approved a national land policy under which peasants would confirm land rights through a mix of customary law and collective titles. My commissioning NGO had two relatively open agendas – supporting its partner agency in Mozambique and gaining publicity at home – and one hidden one – keeping control in London and not yielding too much power to its Mozambican partner (which was one of those agencies already working with peasants, and which already had links with the Commission). The original vague goal had been simply defending peasant land.

Based on initial research and the constraints defined by the agendas and vague goals, I defined a new question: How should the ongoing process of revising the land law be influenced so as to defend peasant rights, and how should the partner agency play a role in the process? My personal agenda was to shift power to Mozambique, and to counter the hidden agenda of the commissioning NGO to keep control. I kept at the back of my mind the need for publicity for the commissioning NGO.

*Step 3.* First came discarding and error avoidance. Many of the studies on land tenure systems and arcane debates about Mozambican law could now be put aside. A check against an important possible error was to return to lawyers and others to confirm my view that many peasants had successfully defended their land rights.

Next my focus was on deepening my understanding of the ongoing political and legislative process and how to influence it. Further discussions with the Land Commission and its technical advisors, with peasant pressure groups already identified, and with the most interesting lawyers and researchers, highlighted two sides of the ‘how’ question – what mechanisms should be used, and which areas should be targeted.

It was clear that peasants needed a louder and clearer voice in the ongoing process, and to do this I concluded that some form of lobbying was needed. This would work directly with the Land Commission and feed into the ongoing press debate.

The other part was more complex. It seemed that the mix of customary and collective titles could be made to work, and further research highlighted key issues that needed to be dealt with in the land law. These related to how decisions were taken, transparency, rights of women, and dispute settlements.

*Step 4,* having the desired result. My agenda was that action should be taken, so my report was aimed in that way. Having two recommendations and accepting my own rule of only making one point, I concluded that the key point for my paymasters in London was that they should support peasant lobbying, and my introduction highlighted this. It also stressed ways in which original assumptions were false and how the Land Commission was doing a good job. The debates over customary law and key issues in the land law were relegated to the main report.

The second point, about key issues that the land law needed to consider, was more for Mozambican consumption, so I wrote an article for a local newspaper setting out those recommendations. To satisfy publicity demands, I also wrote two general articles for the British press, which named the commissioning NGO.

In summary, we see that the initial question, despite its false assumptions, hid a real question which could be usefully answered to the benefit of all parties.

### 3.7 Risks and benefits • • •

For a journalist, the point about 'finding out fast' is to meet the deadline and publish an article. For the investigator, the point is to make a recommendation of some sort.

Journalists are notorious for making mistakes. Pressure of time means we do get things wrong. I have written stories where I believed people who lied to me and where I quoted dishonest or inaccurate reports. Conclusions based on limited information have been wrong. I have made a bad choice, missing the main issue and following up a less important point.

But if you check press reports against your own experience, you will find the press is far more often right than wrong. These techniques do work. Perhaps most important, taking no decision at all is usually worse than making a wrong choice. Quick decision-making moves development forward.

Go ahead. Take the risk.