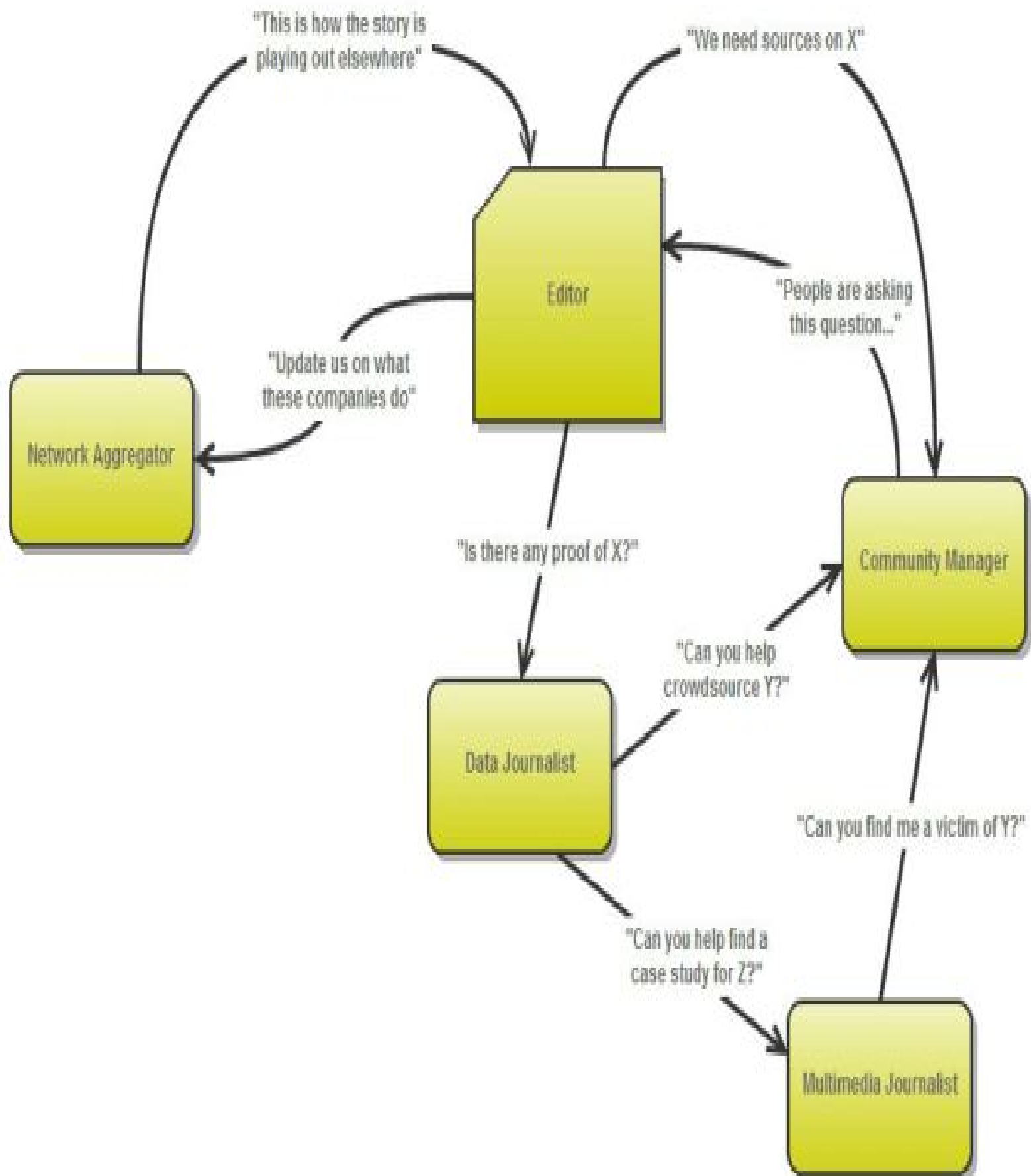


The online investigation team



Organising an Online Investigation Team

How to work collaboratively in a multi-platform,
multimedia world

Paul Bradshaw

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1. Introduction

Everything you thought you knew about gathering and reporting news is wrong.

OK, perhaps not *everything*, but at the very least journalism is changing enormously. The investigation teams explained in this mini ebook are all about adapting to that change - and challenging everything you thought you knew.

If you thought you could avoid this by becoming a so-called print or broadcast journalist, you can forget it. Those reporters are now *multi-platform journalists* - having to report and gather information across both their traditional medium and the website, Twitter account and other platforms. And new recruits are the ones who are expected to be able to do all of this already.

You might be able to write a traditional 'news report', for example, but that is now just *one way* of telling the story of 'what's new'. In a multiplatform media, there are both new forms of storytelling and new ways that people are consuming the news.

From the *explainer* to the *map*, the *liveblog* to the *audio slideshow*, you'll need to be more flexible than ever. Not only are those new formats now part of the job, they're also the area where many media organisations are looking to recruit .

So if you want a job as a journalist, and you want to do that job well, that experience starts *now*.

2. The investigation: pieces building towards a story

To create something which will stick out amongst the competition you will face in getting a media job, and to build unique experience, knowledge, skills and contacts along the way, you'll be pursuing investigations as part of a multi-role **investigations team**.

Don't get intimidated by the term *investigation*. An investigation simply means that you're focused on one particular question, rather than a patch or field. All of your reporting is built around that question, which will probably bring up a number of stories - initially simple ones, but becoming progressively deeper - towards a longform story which brings all those elements together.

Here's an example: let's say your question was 'Has student prostitution increased in the last five years?'

How do you answer that? With interviews, research, and background, which *individually* might generate stories like these along the way:

- Explainer: is working in the sex industry legal?
- "Students think they're in control - but they're not." - interview with a student welfare officer
- Liveblog Q&A: escort work - empowering or exploitation?
- Student debt: get the data
- 'Ebay, entrepreneurship and escorts: how students are putting themselves through university'

There will be many more - you should be producing at least one piece of work every week.

Individually those are interesting, but parts of them will eventually be combined into a longer piece 'Student prostitution: education's "psychological timebomb"' (or whatever most compelling angle the facts eventually combine into).

What stories you cover, and who covers them, is covered in the next section: the investigations team.

3. Your investigation team

Here are the roles and a vast simplification of the personality types they might suit:

- Editor: “I want to organise and focus investigations that have a big impact”
- Community Manager: “I want to engage with people and meet new contacts”
- Multimedia Journalist: “I want to tell great stories in engaging ways”
- Data Journalist: “I want to uncover hidden stories and get to the truth behind the facts”
- Network Journalist: “I am curious about things and want to know everything there is to know about them”

Taking our examples from before, here’s who is most likely to end up doing each story:

- Explainer: is working in the sex industry legal? - Network Journalist
- “Students think they’re in control - but they’re not.” - interview with a student welfare officer - Multimedia Journalist
- Liveblog Q&A: escort work - empowering or exploitation? - Editor/Community Manager
- Student debt: get the data - Data Journalist
- ‘Ebay, entrepreneurship and escorts: how students are putting themselves through university’ - Community Manager
- ‘Student prostitution: education’s “psychological timebomb”’ - Editor

For more examples of typical content (remember you will be producing roughly one new item per week), see the explanations of the roles in each section of this ebook.

Please take the time to understand not only your own role but how that connects with others: **communication between members of the team is key**. How team members choose to use their time is guided by the editor, for example, who is focused on the end result - but team members should also be making a case for why they should pursue one avenue rather than another. Discussion should work both ways.

Likewise, team members should seek and suggest leads and contacts from and to each other. The multimedia journalist might ask the community manager for suggestions of good case studies to interview, or sources of media such as images by members of the community. The data journalist might have questions about their data that the network journalist can help research. And so on.

4. Outside of the team: tutors, mentors, peers and networks

Support is available not only within your group and from the tutor, but also from:

- **Members of other groups:** talk to people performing the same role in other groups. What tips and tools can they recommend?
- **The Help Me Investigate network:** this was set up specifically to help people collaborate on investigations, and includes tutors and students at a number of universities, some of which will be pursuing similar investigations. Contact paul@helpmeininvestigate.com¹ to find out if he can suggest other members of the network.
- **Other networks:** there may be networks of journalists or activists tackling similar issues or problems to you. The [NICAR mailing list](http://www.ire.org/resource-center/listservs/subscribe-nicar-l/)², for example, is for people using data journalism skills.

¹<mailto:paul@helpmeininvestigate.com>

²<http://www.ire.org/resource-center/listservs/subscribe-nicar-l/>

5. Investigation ideas

The popular image of an investigation is something that starts with a secret document which is leaked to a journalist, or an inside source phoning you out of the blue. Although some stories do start this way, it is a misleading perception, not least because it suggests you should be *passive* in waiting for a lead to come and find you. That's not how it is, or should be.

You should be *active*.

Good investigation ideas come from curiosity and an awareness of your field. In fact, because the awareness can only come from curiosity, it all comes back to that: **be curious**.

Here's one way to come up with ideas for investigations: first, map out your field. Let's take education, for example. There are a number of aspects to this field:

- Type: pre-school; primary, secondary, FE, HE, training, academies, independent, private
Location: local, national, international
- People: students/pupils; parents, teachers, inspectors, civil servants, examiners, governors
- Subjects: sport, maths, english, science, IT, languages, humanities, 'new subjects'
- Related issues: employment, accommodation, applications, lifestyle, exclusion, governance, equipment, elections, suppliers, local business, events
- Power: who decides what's on the curriculum, how is pay determined, who decides someone is qualified enough, who decides if someone can no longer teach, what happens if someone doesn't go to school, who decides what to spend and where.
- Money: how do institutions get it? What do they have to do? Where is it spent and why? Who with? How is this monitored?

Once you've mapped that out, pick something interesting and think about questions you might ask, e.g.

- Student accommodation - exploitative landlords? Do students know their rights? Exploitative tenants? Room for abuse?
- Student employment - likewise: exploitation and ignorance?
- Student finance - are students taking out loans they cannot pay?
- Cuts and fees - why and where are cuts being made? How do they differ between institutions? Who's benefiting?
- Follow The Money - what happens to your fees?
- Points of conflict - who's protesting or complaining? What grounds do they have - are they being ignored?
- Canary in the coal mine - points being ignored. See meeting minutes, message boards etc.

Finally, find out what's already been reported on your question. You'll find that either:

- *It's been reported in one local area, but not yours* - see if you can repeat the same process. Even talk to the reporters involved if you can.
- *It's been reported nationally, but not locally* - likewise, you can build on that to find the local picture.
- *It's been reported, but it was some years ago* - follow it up to see what's happened since then. Did anything change? If so, did that solve the problem(s) or make things worse, or raise new ones?
- *It's been reported, locally and nationally, recently* - find another idea or angle. Not every idea works - in fact, expect most not to.
- *It's not been reported at all* - you might have something unique. Talk to people in the area you're looking at to check there is something to investigate there.

Once you've identified how you're going to tackle this, it's time to get publishing. Because leaks and sources can play a role - but they need to be able to find you first.

6. The single-issue site

The ongoing results of the investigation can be published anywhere, but are best published on a dedicated single-issue site (you can always cross-publish content elsewhere too).

This **increases the chances of people affected by your issue finding you and getting in touch**. For example, in the student prostitution example above, the students pursuing that investigation had comments on their site both from students involved in the sex industry, and people from the sex industry itself.

In order for that to happen, they had to publish early, and publishing often.

It is also important that you **name the site literally** (e.g. “Student prostitution”) rather than cryptically or with a pun. For example, “Ladies of the night” might sound clever to you, but it’s much less likely to be found by someone searching for information on “student prostitution”.

For an example of a previous student project see [The Dropout Report](http://www.dropoutreport.co.uk/)¹, which, conveniently for us (but meaninglessly for users), has categories for content produced by each role. [The final article](#)² on the site also links to those previous articles, such as interviews.

The same principle applies to your headlines: try to use words and phrases that potential sources might be searching for. This is basic *search engine optimisation (SEO)*, a skill that the news and magazine industry now expects writers to have.

The single-issue or single-story site is a new feature of online publishing. Where previously the economics of publishing dictated that publications target audiences large enough to attract advertisers and lower production costs, the economics of online publishing make it possible to launch publications with much smaller audiences, often on topical issues (such as the Wall Street protests) or fashions.

One example is [Syria Deeply](http://beta.syriadeeply.org/)³, profiled in [this piece on Nieman Reports](#)⁴. For more examples, albeit mostly humorous, see the bookmarks at <https://delicious.com/paulb/nicheblog>⁵

Setting up your site

Wordpress.com is a good free service to use to create your single-issue site, but you might also want to consider Blogger, Posterous (whose post by email features are particularly useful if you expect to do a lot of live or multimedia publishing), Tumblr (which combines the social network qualities of Twitter with a blogging platform - particularly good for heavily image- quote- or video-based material), the location-focused n0tice or even the Q&A site Quora. Also try out new services such as Medium, from the creators of Twitter.

¹<http://www.dropoutreport.co.uk/>

²<http://www.dropoutreport.co.uk/are-west-midland-universities-doing-enough-to-prevent-students-dropping-out/>

³<http://beta.syriadeeply.org/>

⁴<http://www.niemanlab.org/2013/01/lara-setrakian-single-story-sites-like-syria-deeply-have-lessons-to-offer-the-rest-of-the-news-business/>

⁵<https://delicious.com/paulb/nicheblog>

When setting up your site make sure you have **separate user accounts for each member** (you can do this under *Users* in Wordpress and similar sections on other services). Do *not* give the main username and password to all members of the group - if one person changes the password you're all blocked out, and it'll also be harder to distinguish between content by different people (depending on the theme design, you will be able to click on an author name and get all their reports at a URL like yoursite.wordpress.com/author/Jane).

Use **categories and tags** effectively on your site too. It's a good idea to have a category for each type of content, e.g.:

- Data
- Documents
- Community
- Background
- Explainers
- Links
- Tips and how-tos
- Multimedia
- Interviews
- The story so far

These correlate closely to your roles and make it easier to find both for you and your users. Assign posts to a category when you write them on your site.

Tags are also added to a post when you write it, but are more specific. They tend to specify:

- People mentioned or interviewed in the post - e.g. "Jane Jones"
- Organisations mentioned - e.g. "BBC"
- Key terms, phrases, policies or ideas - e.g. "free school meals", "Welfare Act 2012"
- Types of content - e.g. "report", "video"

Also consider creating accounts on media-specific services such as YouTube (videoblog your investigation), Flickr (images), Audioboo and Soundcloud (audio). And of course you'll need a Twitter account. These are all ways that people discover content - and you can always automate cross-publishing using a site like IFTTT.com (although that loses the personal touch which increases the chances someone will contact you).

You could also publish *within* an existing community site, such as on a forum, Facebook page (there's a useful [list of tips on managing a Facebook page here](http://www.journalism.co.uk/news/14-tips-on-managing-a-news-outlet-s-facebook-page/s2/a551891/)⁶), or LinkedIn group (ask your community manager to identify the most active). More likely is that you'll end up publishing across multiple platforms depending on the content and its intended audience.

Now, go and find out more about each role...

⁶<http://www.journalism.co.uk/news/14-tips-on-managing-a-news-outlet-s-facebook-page/s2/a551891/>

7. Roles in the team - the short version

The following chapters explain each role in more depth, with a detailed guide to getting started. However, for the purposes of brevity here's a short version:

The Editor (Ed)

The Editor is the only member of the team focused on 'the story'.

What do I do?

- Identify what exactly the story is that the team is pursuing,
- Plan how the resources of the team should be best employed in pursuing that
- You will also hold team members back from getting distracted by unrelated stories (the temptations of 'easy win' churnalism!)
- Support your team where needed - seeking expertise, building contacts, solving problems, editing their work

It will help if you form the story as a hypothesis to be tested by the team gathering evidence - following Mark Lee Hunter's story based inquiry method (Google it).

What do I produce?

- 'The story so far' - regular updates on your investigation and how it's going, including what you still need to know, with links to the work of team members
- A long-form narrative of the whole story, at the end. This will take some planning.
- A diary of events - not just for your team but for users too
- Related stories - as long as they feed into the main investigation
- Interviews as part of the larger investigation - coordinate with others to ensure you're not interviewing the same person

Qualities needed and developed by the editor:

- A nose for a story
- Project management skills
- Newswriting - the ability to communicate a story effectively

The Community Manager (CM)

The community manager's focus is on the communities affected by the story being pursued. For example, on a story about student accommodation the communities might be: Students using such accommodation; Landlords, letting agents, even those building accommodation for the future; Lawyers handling cases between the other two.

On a story about parents protesting against a school being changed to an academy you have: Parents; Pupils (hard to reach, due to privacy considerations with under-18s); Teachers; Heads and governors; Local authority staff; DfE staff

What do I do?

Engage regularly with those communities - meeting them, contributing to forums, having conversations with members on Twitter; following updates on Facebook; attending events; commenting on blogs or photo/video sharing sites, and so on.

You are the two-way channel between that community and the news team: feeding leads from the community to the editor, and taking leads from the editor in finding contacts (experts, case studies, witnesses).

What do I produce?

- Guides to the key issues in each community
- A space for guest posts by community members (and direct invitations to individuals to contribute)
- Roundups of online and offline discussions
- Posts that build relationships with the community by answering a question posed there, e.g. 'What are my rights?'; 'How do I..?'; 'What does this mean?'
- Showcases of the most interesting work by community members - galleries of photos; key quotes; facts uncovered, etc.

Qualities needed and developed by the community manager:

- Interpersonal skills - the ability to listen to and communicate with different people
- A nose for a story
- Contacts in the community
- Social network research skills - the ability to find sources and communities online

Examples of content produced by a community manager:

- Celebrating a community event or engaging on a community platform
- Highlighting a community or responding to its questions
- Using a blog post and spreadsheet to initiate and coordinate a discussion

The Data Journalist (DJ)

While the community manager is focused on people, the data journalist is focused on documentation: datasets, reports, documents, regulations, and anything that frames the story being pursued.

What do I do?

Find that documentation and data - and make sense of it. This is a key role because stories often come from signs being ignored (data) or regulations being ignored (documents).

What do I produce?

- Explorations of datasets that you've found - generally this means making sense of them for other people through translating jargon, visualising data to make it clearer, telling the story behind the stats or the dense passages of a report.
- The data or documents will often only be a starting point - you may need to speak to experts to find out more about what they mean, so interviews will also be part of your coverage
- See The Guardian's Data Blog for examples

Qualities needed and developed by the data journalist:

- Research skills - advanced online search and use of libraries
- Analysis skills - such as using spreadsheets
- Ability to decipher jargon - often by accessing experts (the CM can help)

Examples of data journalism content:

- Providing raw data and the context to it
- Sharing your experiments in visualising data
- Annotating documents to explain them

The Multimedia Journalist (MM)

The multimedia journalist is focused on the sights, sounds and people that bring a story to life.

What do I do?

You will film interviews with case studies; organise podcasts where various parties play the story out; collect galleries of images to illustrate the reality behind the words.

You will work closely with the CM as your roles can overlap, especially when accessing sources. The difference is that the CM is concerned with quantity of interactions and information; the MM is concerned with quality: much fewer interactions and richer detail.

What do I produce?

- Parts of the final product: individual interviews, raw footage, audio of interviews, etc. Edited work
- Text interviews that you have compiled as preparation for recorded interviews (coordinate with the rest of your team to avoid duplication)
- Backgrounders and other research conducted in preparation
- Posts about your process: how you researched, interviewed and edited. What you'd change.

Qualities needed and developed by the MM:

- Ability to find sources: experts, witnesses, case studies
- Technical skills: composition; filming or recording; editing
- Planning: pre-interviewing, research, booking kit

The Network Aggregator (NA)

The NA is the person who keeps the site ticking over while the rest of the team is working on the bigger story.

What do I do?

You publish regular links to related stories around the country. You are also the person who provides the wider context of that story: what else is happening in that field or around that issue; are similar issues arising in other places around the country. This is the least demanding of the roles, so you should also be available to support other members of the team when required, following up minor leads on related stories. You should not be 'just linking', but getting original stories too.

What do I produce?

- Linkblogging: links to the latest stories around the web related to your investigation
- Backgrounders: the story behind your story - what's happened before? And what's happened elsewhere?
- Explainers: explaining concepts or issues that users may not be familiar with, e.g. changes in the educational system, how landlords are regulated, why this is important etc.
- Profiles: who are the key players, and how are they connected to the story? (Avoid defamatory statements that imply)
- Interviews as part of the larger investigation - coordinate with others to ensure you're not interviewing the same person

Qualities needed and developed by the NA:

- Information management - following as many feeds, newsletters and other relevant sources of information
- Wide range of contacts - speaking to the usual suspects regularly to get a feel for the pulse of the issue/sector
- Ability to turn around copy quickly