No small stories

Three tips for 'sustained outrage'

Eric Eyre
Charleston Gazette-Mail

Nearly 20 years ago, I was in graduate school in Florida. I had two job offers, both newspapers. One was the Charleston Gazette in West Virginia. It offered something called "sustained outrage." The other was an Arkansas daily. It offered a lifetime of chasing after Bill Clinton's extramarital affairs.

I chose sustained outrage.

So, what exactly is sustained outrage? It was the mantra of our late publisher Ned Chilton. It's about hammering away at injustices until they're righted. It's about digging for the truth. It's about inspiring action.

As the late, firebrand columnist Molly Ivins put it: "What you need is sustained outrage. There's far too much unthinking respect given to authority."

So I took the job in Charleston and found a newsroom of reporters that proved you could do big things in small places.

There was Ken Ward Jr., exposing coal companies that sheared off the tops of mountains and dumped the waste and debris in streams. There was Paul Nyden, digging into West Virginia's corrupt workers' compensation program. And there were Scott Finn and Tara Tuckwiller, the first reporters in the nation to reveal the dangers of methadone, a drug doctors were prescribing for pain.

I had my hands full from the start. I teamed up with Finn to expose a kickback scheme orchestrated by a guy nicknamed "Pork Chop" who bilked the state out of millions of dollars after floodwaters ravaged schools in southern West Virginia. For another project, we used the Freedom of Information Act to gather every bus schedule in the state, showing that thousands of children were forced to spend hours on buses getting to school. I also dug into statehouse politics, chronicling the misdeeds of a powerful lawmaker who fabricated documents as part of a cover-up to thwart my investigation.

There also were investigative series about the state buying clunker cars from well-connected party bosses and giving the junk vehicles to welfare recipients, the role of chain pharmacies in the proliferation of meth labs and, most recently, an investigation into massive shipments of prescription painkillers into West Virginia.

Eric Eyre's desk in the basement of the West Virginia state Capitol. (Kenny Kemp/Charleston Gazette-Mail)

All the while, my colleagues and I were churning out daily stories, "feeding the beast." There's no investigative team at the Gazette-Mail (the Gazette consolidated with the Charleston Daily Mail in 2015). We don't have a data desk. We all do night cop shifts. We gripe. We scowl. We try to hide from the bosses to avoid lousy assignments gleaned from Twitter. We grimace when we pitch a blockbuster story to our editors and get this response: "Can I have that for Sunday?" No, you can't!

So what's the secret sauce? How do we juggle daily stories with in-depth projects? How can small papers like ours practice sustained outrage? It's a struggle, a damn struggle. But after 20 years as a beat reporter — 20 years of grinding it out — I've learned a few tricks.

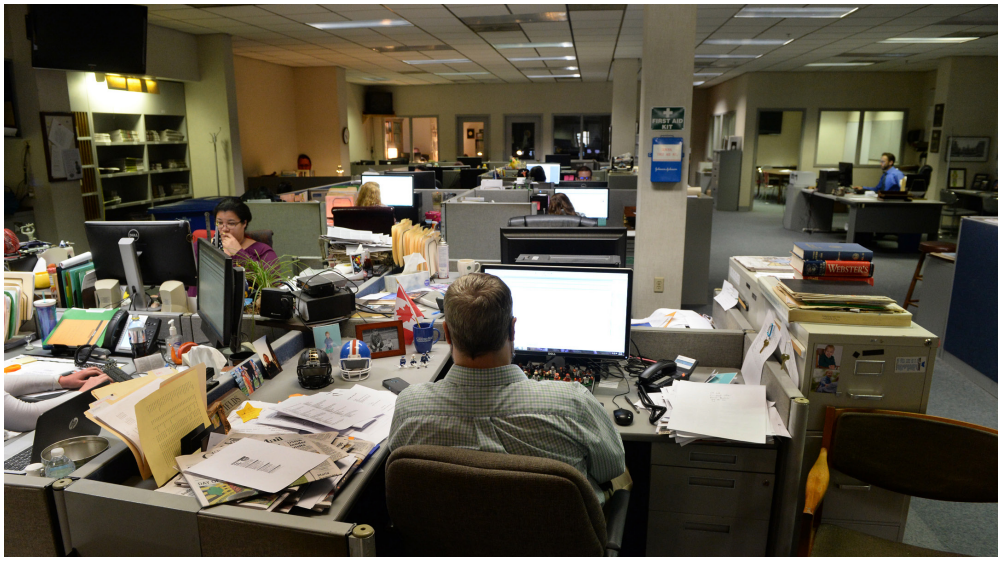
Here are three to try:

1. Get closer to a big story through a series of small ones

This tip came from an Orange County Register reporter named Natalya Shulyakovskaya, whom I heard at an IRE workshop. If you're reading this, Natalya, thank you. By doing smaller stories over time, you build up expertise. You gather string. You find connections. You build sources. You have command of the subject.

Before I wrote the two-part series about opioid drug shipments to West Virginia last December, I wrote scores of stories about drug distributors, overdose deaths, prescription drugs, rogue pain clinics, "pill mill" pharmacies and doctors who over-prescribed painkillers. I attended task force meetings, court hearings, filed FOIA after FOIA for sensitive reports, scrutinized overdose data, got to know state troopers and health statisticians and the guy who runs the state database that tracks prescription drugs. One story led to another.

I started writing on the subject four years ago.



The newsroom of the Charleston Gazette-Mail, where the goal is to practice "sustained outrage." (Kenny Kemp/Charleston Gazette-Mail)

Yes, four years of legwork. I cover the statehouse: state government agencies, the legislature and statewide elected officials. In July 2013, I received a tip that drug wholesaler Cardinal Health was paying for the newly elected attorney general's inaugural party. The head of his transition team represented Cardinal Health. And his wife, I would find out, lobbied for Cardinal Health in Washington, D.C., earning more than $1 million for her K Street firm. Why did this matter? The previous attorney general — the one who lost the election — had filed a lawsuit against Cardinal Health a year earlier. Now, the new attorney general, who also received campaign contributions from Cardinal Health executives, was overseeing the case. The attorney general insisted he had recused himself from the lawsuit, but FOIAs turned up letters showing he had met privately with Cardinal Health lawyers about the lawsuit, and court documents and emails revealed he was giving staff "specific instructions" about the case.

Those stories built a foundation. The work culminated with the release of Drug Enforcement Administration data that showed drug wholesalers had shipped 780 million doses of powerful — and potentially lethal — painkillers to the state over six years. The attorney general released the drug data in response to our FOIA request three weeks before he won reelection in a heated race last year.

Court records that the newspaper successfully lobbied to be unsealed led us to request the DEA data. I wrote daily stories about our court battle, covering hearings and various filings. The smaller stories kept nagging editors at bay. I inched closer to the bigger story.

2. The "What I Need / What I Found List" aka "The Big List"

If you came to my office in the basement of the state Capitol and saw the mess that is my desk, you would be right to ask, "Who is this guy to tell me how to keep an investigative project organized while cranking out daily copy?" And you would be right. But the key to my organizational method is its simplicity. I call it the "Big List," and it's a list that's divided into two sections: major findings to date and things that need to be done.

Now, you can get all fancy and put this into a spreadsheet. Or you can go low-tech and just put it in Notepad like I do. In the top section — I label it "Key findings so far" — I write statements culled from data and records. Here's an example from the pill shipment series: "Southern WV counties received a disproportionate number of pills." It's a simple statement.

To maintain focus, I summarize the story in seven words or less (a tip I learned at the Poynter Institute years ago). I constantly tinker with the seven-word summary as I collect more "key findings." I also use this list to keep track of what I call "killer quotes": five or six of the best quotes you've collected.

The beauty of this list is that it becomes an automatic outline of sorts. I'm not a big fan of outlines. They lost me in middle school with V and VII and XII. But by jotting down key findings — and you can shuffle them from most to least important — you wind up with an outline. The story almost writes itself. No worries about sitting down after months of work and forgetting the most important stuff. You can write with authority.

Let's turn to the second section, the "What I Need List." This is where you put your to-do list. Reports and research papers to read. Data to collect. FOIAs to file. People to interview. Dates and times of interviews. Spreadsheets to analyze. Laws and regulations to review. Things to double and triple check. Files to back up. Court documents to request. Sources to call. Smaller stories to work on before publishing the larger piece.

Here's an example from the drug series: "Get complaint filed against Larry's Drive-In Pharmacy." Put questions here, too. As time passes, you cross these off or move your answers/findings to the top section.

3. Carve out project time each day

During the meat of the day when you're reporting and writing daily stories and answering calls and emails from editors, it's next to impossible to make any progress on your investigative project. So shut down project work during those peak hours.

Set aside time early in the morning or evening (after final deadline) to work exclusively on your project. This is the time to write and file FOIAs, analyze spreadsheets (telling an editor you're analyzing a spreadsheet in the middle of the day is a sure way to draw an extra assignment), review and update your "findings" list and add to your "what I need list."

Also — and I know this won't go over well with many reporters and especially editors — shut off your cell phone. During this hour or two of project time, I try to eliminate as many distractions as possible. I strongly suggest putting your phone away while you're writing and editing an enterprise story. Emails and texts disrupt momentum, or what social scientists who study these kinds of things call "flow." You don't want to kill flow.

So, three tips for tackling a big story in a small newsroom — and maybe a big newsroom, too. You see, it doesn't matter if you work at a weekly paper or a daily with 37,000 circulation like ours or a national publication. You can do work that has impact.

At the Charleston Gazette-Mail, we're busy covering our community, writing stories that need to be told. Big projects are just gravy. Like most reporters at small news outlets, we toil in the trenches, scrapping with city councils, school boards and county commissions that want to pull the wool over the public's eyes. Our work is more valuable now than ever. We aim to keep sustained outrage alive.

Eric Eyre is a statehouse reporter for the Charleston (W.Va.) Gazette-Mail. He joined the newspaper in 1998. At the Gazette-Mail, he has also covered education, health and business. Eyre's work has won several national awards, including the Investigative Reporters & Editors Medal. In 2017, his series on prescription opioid shipments to West Virginia was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting.