David Sirota's

The Daily Poster

"Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom to post"

A Citizens' Guide to Following the Money and Holding the Powerful Accountable

Exclusive for Subscribers

The Daily Poster *is a grassroots-funded investigative news outlet run by journalist David Sirota and a team of reporters. They designed this citizens' guide as a resource for their supporting subscribers. If you received this guide from a friend or colleague and find it useful, please consider becoming a* supporting subscriber*.*

Table of Contents

A Message From David Sirota

Friends:

Thank you for supporting *The Daily Poster*. As a token of our gratitude, our team has designed this citizens guide to help you follow the money and hold the powerful accountable. Within these pages, you will find the tools we use to scrutinize authority.

But please don't think of this guide as simply a gimmick. Creating this volume and providing it to you to use is a core part of our mission.

It may seem like those in power have insurmountable resources that they can use to get away with anything they want and quash all attempts to stop them. But in truth, thanks to open records laws, Internet tools, and the power of citizen journalism, it has never been easier to expose potential wrongdoing, if you know where to look.

We believe everyone should have access to the right investigative tools and processes — starting with you, our most loyal subscribers. Please use them with diligence.

And remember, don't give up when the work gets hard, or when those in power try to stop you. As the great George Orwell once said: "Journalism is printing what someone else does not want printed; everything else is public relations."

Rock The Boat,

Sirota

How To Begin

The hardest part of any investigation is figuring out how to begin. How do you come up with an idea? How do you determine who or what deserves scrutiny? And once you have an idea, what do you do with it? What sort of documents should you be looking for, and who should you contact?

There is no fool-proof way to begin an investigation project, but here are some steps we take to determine our next big scoop:

- Ask questions about the world around you. Wonder openly about why things are a certain way: Why did a local lawmaker seemingly resign for no reason? Why did the factory down the road suddenly put up fencing all around its property? And as soon as you come up with such a question, start thinking about who — or what materials — could help you to answer it. The first step to being a successful investigator is to notice and scrutinize the stuff that everyone else takes for granted.
- Talk to people. Find the folks invested in your community or area of interest, and arrange to meet with them or talk with them over the phone. Ask them about what is going on: the latest developments, challenges, victories, and controversies. Most importantly, ask them who else you should be talking to. When it comes to finding stories, human sources are often more valuable than simply poking around online.
- Keep a notebook handy at all times. As soon as you come up with an idea — or notice something fishy — you need to be able to jot it down before you forget. Keep a small notebook in your pocket, bag, or purse to capture your notes. Or use a free note-taking app on your phone, like Evernote, Simplenote, Apple Notes, or Google Keep, which automatically sync your notes with your computer.
- Think about motives. If something unusual appears to be happening, figure out who stands to benefit from it. If someone well known or powerful is doing something that seems odd, consider why they might be doing so, or who they could be trying to help. Once you identify suspicious activity and a motive for it, it becomes far easier to track down the necessary paper or money trail.
- If you still aren't sure where to begin, glance through the databases and websites listed in this guide. They should provide you with ideas for projects you can undertake in your own community.

How To File Public Records Requests

Every state and the federal government has laws which classify certain government documents as "public records." While the classifications vary by jurisdiction, these laws tend to cover a wide array of documents, including communications with certain public officials, government contracts or public-private partnership agreements, and records of government data, to name a few examples.

Under the federal Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) or state public records laws, you can request these documents for little to no charge. Here's how you do it:

1) Determine which agency or government entity holds the records you seek. For example, local police departments maintain arrest reports and body camera footage, while a state board of elections or secretary of state office maintains contracts with voting machine companies.

2) If you don't have a certain document or record in mind, but instead have a question, figure out what records might contain the answers. For example, instead of asking the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) "How many people were injured at Amazon warehouses last year," you would instead have to request the injury logs that Amazon is required to file with OSHA. If you have a question, but aren't sure what records might contain the answer, you can request the agency's records retention schedule, which is essentially the agency's internal guide to what records it keeps and how they are organized. You can also call the agency directly to get some more information about their recordkeeping practices.

3) Submit a request directly to the agency, stating that you are filing a request under that jurisdiction's public records law, and detailing as specifically as possible the records you are seeking. For example: If you are seeking communications such as emails, specify a time frame. (Ie, "Any and all emails sent to or from janedoe@dailyposter.com between March 1 2020 and March 31 2020 that contain the phrase 'Daily Poster.'") If you are asking for data mentioned in a press release or statement from an official, include a link to where you saw the data. The more specific you can be about the records you are seeking, the better your chances of getting what you want.

4) If the agency responds with a denial of the records you are seeking, either citing an exemption or claiming that the records do not exist, file an appeal! Instructions on how to appeal will likely be included in the agency's response, but if not, you can ask the records officer who handled your request how to file an appeal. Be as clear as possible about why you believe the records should be released to you. Or, if you are told the records do not exist but you believe they do, ask the agency to conduct the search again.

Public record requests hints and tips:

● Make a note to yourself about how long the agency has to respond to your request. You can figure this out from looking at the public records law in the jurisdiction where you are filing. If the agency misses the deadline, send a reminder! You might need to follow up more than once to get the records you are seeking.
● Remember that you are requesting records and documents, not information. If you are trying to answer a specific question, brainstorm all the ways in which an agency or government body might have written down the answer to that question or how it might be contained in document form.
● Try to make your requests as specific as possible. Ask for specific documents, or records containing specific keywords.
● Check out the Reporters Committee's Open Governments Guide, which details the idiosyncrasies of different state public records laws.
● For inspiration, peruse MuckRock's listing of public records requests that people are filing across the country.
● While you're on MuckRock's site, sign up for an account, which will let you have access to request templates and assistance on your efforts.

How To Contact Your Lawmakers

Contacting your local lawmakers is an incredibly useful way to keep abreast of important issues and to hold them accountable.

The office numbers for congressional representatives and senators can be found through online searches.

To email a congressional representative or staffer, the standard House email address is: firstname.lastname@mail.house.gov.

To email a senator or senate staffer, the standard senate email address is firstname_lastname@[senator last name].senate.gov. If that doesn't work, you can also try senator@[senator last name].senate.gov, or senator_[lastname]@[senator last name].senate.gov.

Not every federal lawmakers' email address will follow these formats. If your attempts don't work, look up the office number for the lawmaker you are trying to contact, and ask the person who answers to provide you with the correct information.

Similarly, local officials, such as city council members, mayors, and state legislators, should also have their office numbers and/or email addresses readily available online.

Whenever you call a lawmaker's office, be sure to give your name, email, and phone number. Be as specific as you possible with your inquiry: "I am looking into X and would like to know Y."

If you don't hear back within two weeks, reach out again!

How To Scrutinize The Media

One of the biggest issues facing media consumers today is identifying good stories from bad. While some outlets are certainly more reliable than others, it is important to verify all the information being presented to you in a given story.

This fact is especially true if the story involves foreign policy. Many U.S. news outlets no longer have a foreign correspondents bureau, and those that do often have limited staff and resources, so you need to be extra diligent reading articles with foreign datelines.

As often as possible, seek out a story's source material. If the piece is about an academic paper or study, track down the study online, or at least the abstract. If the story is about a political figure saying something, find exactly what was said and in what context it was delivered.

Even established and reputable publications get things wrong. For example, this past election cycle, the Associated Press reported that Bernie Sanders had called for "adjustments" to Social Security in an op-ed from 1996. "Sanders' Social Security 'adjustments' undercut Biden attack," the AP's headline read, since the Vermont Senator had spent weeks calling out the fact that his opponent, Joe Biden, had called for cuts to the program in 2018 using the same word. "Adjustments" meant cuts, Sanders' team had insisted.

But an examination of the source material revealed that the AP had erred in its reporting. As it turned out, Sanders had not penned an op-ed calling for cuts to Social Security. He had answered a reader question about the program and his call for adjustments, which had nothing to do with cuts, followed a paragraph denouncing attempts to slash entitlement programs.

Another important practice is to find three different news sources corroborating a claim before considering a statement to be accurate. Sometimes, however, stories are exclusive to a particular publication. In those instances, it is best to keep an eye out for subsequent reporting before judging an assertion to be verified. These days, it is all too common for stories to be published, only to then be rescinded hours or days later.

Above all, stay vigilant!

How To Follow The Money

The secret to good investigative reporting is following the money: Who's shelling out cash, who's receiving it, and why.

You can follow money going to political campaigns and outside groups like super PACs by going through financial records from the Federal Election Commission. You can also use the website to track independent expenditures made by nonprofit groups. And here's a good trick: You can use FEC Notify to sign up to receive copies of all new filings from a specific committee or committees as soon as they are filed.

Another great website you can use to track federal political donations and spending is OpenSecrets.

You should also scrutinize 527 political committees, since they are non-profit organizations created to influence political campaigns. You can track data for 527 groups on the IRS website, or search donations to specific 527 groups at politicalmoneyline.com.

You can track state-level campaign donations using applicable state websites, which are often run by the secretary of state's office. Information and disclosure level will vary by state. You can also try using the National Institute for Money in Politics website.

It can also be useful to find out who is spending money on political and issue advertising. The FCC's Public Inspection Files website allows you to search ads by specific spenders, by market, or by certain TV/radio stations. Organizations placing ad buys must disclose some basic information about who is leading their groups. Digital ad buys may appear in the Facebook political ad archive or Google's political ad transparency website.

Lobbying

If you want to know who is trying to influence your lawmakers, you need to look at who is lobbying them and for what reasons.

You can track federal lobbying records using the [House](#) or [Senate](#) lobbying databases. Both websites were updated recently, but the Senate version is currently much easier to use. Both websites allow you to search for registrations, quarterly filings, or political contributions by organizations that lobby. Lobbyists are not required to disclose whether they support or oppose a bill, so you may have to look for public statements to determine this information.

[OpenSecrets](#) also collects lobbying spending, and pairs it with donations by firms' political action committees. ProPublica has a useful [database](#) that collects new lobbying registrations and is updated daily. Tipsheets like [Politico Influence](#) will list new lobbying registrants, too.

Signing up for Politico tipsheets is a good way to find lobbying and influence stories, as their journalists are often writing for a niche audience — lobbyists and congressional staffers — and regularly highlight useful insider information.

Lobbyists for foreign government clients are required to disclose more information than lobbyists for domestic clients, and may be required to provide copies of their communications to the [Justice Department](#) under the Foreign Agent Registration Act. (If you have any trouble using the FARA website, try site searching on Google by typing a particular name or phrase into your google search bar, followed by *site:fara.gov*.)

Tracking state and local lobbying can be done using state and local lobbying portals. The level of information provided will vary widely, but some states require higher levels of disclosure than is generally mandated by federal lobbying rules.

For example, Colorado requires organizations to disclose their [grassroots lobbying](#) spending and broader efforts to influence public opinion, such as when they run television ads.

Some states, like New York, require lobbyists to specifically detail which lawmaker or state agencies they contact and disclose what bills or issues on which they're lobbying.

Other states may only require companies to report what lobbyists they've hired, without noting their reasons for doing so.

Followthemoney.org allows you to search for specific lobbyists or lobbying registrants at the state level, too.

Dark Money

The term "dark money" is used to describe political spending by nonprofits — generally 501(c)(4) social welfare organizations and sometimes 501(c)(6) trade associations — or limited liability companies (LLCs) that are not required to publicly disclose their donors. The term can also refer to money donated to super PACs by nonprofits that don't disclose their donors.

Dark money is so named because it is difficult to uncover who exactly is behind the spending — but there are ways to shed some light on such spending.

While 501(c)(4) nonprofits are not required to disclose from where they receive their money, they are required to disclose the grants and donations they disburse to other nonprofits. As such, one of the best methods for tracking dark money donations is by collecting and reviewing nonprofit tax returns.

Note that you will always be slightly behind the times when tracking dark money. Nonprofits operating on a normal tax year schedule will not have to file their 2020 tax returns until November 2021 if they have requested a filing extension from the IRS, which most of them do.

The best websites for locating tax returns are the IRS tax exempt organization search, Guidestar.org, and ProPublica's Nonprofit Explorer. The ProPublica website allows you to search for particular names and terms across much of their database, which can generate a list of potential donors to a certain organization. (You will have to manually check the filings to confirm.)

These resources are great for finding older tax returns, but if you want to get copies of returns shortly after they are filed, request 990s from the organization itself. Ask for a redacted copy of their Schedule B, too, as it can show the amount each donor gave, even if the names are blacked out.

If you request a tax return by email or over the phone, IRS rules stipulate that groups must send you the files within 30 days. If you request the filing in person at their office, groups must provide the files to you the same day.

Another great resource for tracking dark money donations is in voluntary corporate contribution disclosures. Some companies have adopted more stringent disclosure policies, often due to pressure from shareholders. The Center for Political Accountability-Zicklin Index tracks corporate disclosure policies for Fortune 500 companies.

You can often find these reports on company websites, though they are sometimes buried or difficult to find. The Center for Political Accountability has a searchable database tool at TrackYourCompany.org, where they have compiled corporate donations between 2015-2019.

How To Scrutinize Corporations And Nonprofits

All enterprises, whether they are for-profit businesses or nonprofit organizations, are required to maintain a paper trail. Finding and examining those records can tell you a lot about who is calling the shots at these operations, and for what purpose.

Business records — for LLCs, nonprofits, and corporations — are often maintained by secretary of state's offices or state divisions of corporations.

You can research business records across the country by company name or officer using [OpenCorporates](#), and then search for specific records from the state where the company is registered.

In state-level business documents, annual reports often list directors, which is helpful if you are seeking out information about the people in charge of a particular operation. Even if a state protects LLCs from disclosing some information about who runs them, like Delaware does, you may be able to request incorporation paperwork from the secretary of state's office to try to learn who exactly registered the company.

For nonprofits, you may be able to find state charitable solicitation records. Some states, like California, Florida, New York, North Carolina, and West Virginia, require substantial levels of information.

Useful Websites and Databases

Here is a list of websites that are useful to check regularly. They contain frequently updated information on significant court cases, regulatory matters, financial developments, and important research. Many of these sites allow you to sign up for email newsletters or updates, so you can stay up to date on new developments.

Atlanta Fed — Research

Chicago Fed — Research

Cleveland Fed — Press Releases

Cleveland Fed — Working Papers

Congressional Budget Office — Reports

Congressional Research Service

Dallas Fed — Working Papers

Fed Boston — News

Fed Boston — Publications

Federal Register — Current Issue

GAO — Reports & Testimonies

Good Jobs First — Subsidy Tracker

Joint Committee on Taxation — Pubs

Kansas City Fed — Working Papers

LittleSis — Connecting the Dots

Minneapolis Fed — Research

MuckRock — All Requests

NBER — Working Papers

New York Fed — Liberty Street Econ.

New York Fed — Press Center

New York Fed — Staff Reports

OpenCorporates — Business Records

Philadelphia Fed — News

Philadelphia Fed — Working Papers

ProPublica — Lobbying Registrations

ProPublica — Nonprofit Explorer

Regulations.gov

Richmond Fed — News

Richmond Fed — Research

SEC Adviser — Investment Disclosure

SEC Edgar — Business Filings

San Francisco Fed — Research

ScotusBlog — Merits Cases

ScotusBlog — Court Petitions

SEC — Incoming No-Action Requests

SEC — No-Action Responses

St. Louis Fed — FRED Blog

St. Louis Fed — Open Vault

St. Louis Fed — Staff Picks

St. Louis Fed — Working Papers

Supreme Court — Opinions

Supreme Court — Orders of the Court

How To Publicize What You Find

If you uncover something worrisome about those in power, the public deserves to know about it. Luckily, there are more ways to disseminate important information than ever before. Here are some of the methods you can use to publicize your discoveries:

- Contact your local publication. Be sure to present them with a short, compelling overview of your discovery: what you've found, why it's important, and what evidence you have to corroborate your claims. If they assign a writer to cover the story, make sure they interview and credit you — and if they plan to quote you, don't be afraid to ask them to let you check your quotes for accuracy..
- Write the story yourself. Ask the publication you're pitching to let you write it. Even if it is your first time doing so, ask to get paid. If you don't have much journalism experience, you can ask the editor you're working with for advice and examples of similar stories. But here are some basic rules to follow:
  - Include a so-called "nut graf" near the beginning of your story explaining your main discovery, and why it's important.
  - Make sure to be as specific as possible with your language, and connect all of your claims to hard evidence (documents, legal records, financial transactions, other news articles, direct quotes).
  - Contact everyone you are writing about and give them ample opportunity to speak. Email them, call them, and then follow up if they don't respond. Only after all that can you say they could not be reached for comment.
  - Double check all your facts, including ensuring all names are spelled correctly. One tiny mistake can destroy an article's credibility.
- Start your own blog. If you want to keep uncovering dirty dealings and can't find an outlet to let you do so, start your own. There are many free or cheap platforms that let you launch your own blog, including WordPress, Blogger, and Medium.
- If the story seems big enough, let us know! Email us at editor@dailyposter.com.

And Remember: Rock The Boat!