

Guardian investigations: how tech helps tackle big data ... and big lawyers

5 Our head of investigations explains how a new IT system, Giant, has the power to find needles in journalistic haystacks

10 There aren't too many places to hide at the Guardian. The offices are open-plan and most of the meeting rooms have glass walls. There is one room, however, that has a special status. In recent years, when we have been involved in big investigations, this is the place where reporters and editors have relocated for months on end.

15 Only certain people have been allowed in its general vicinity. For some reason, it gets too hot in the summer and too cold in the winter. The curtains are drawn most of the time. And because it's off limits to the cleaners, it can look like a landfill site, particularly in the run-up to a launch.

20 Our work on Snowden, the Panama Papers and the Paradise Papers all began in this room, which is a muddle of "clean" computers, run on separate networks, plugged into secure printers sitting next to oversized bins and paper shredders, one of which blew up from overuse during a panic a few years ago.

25 There is a new addition to this room now; it's a humming, blinking stack of servers called "Giant", and it will help us, and journalists from other media groups we work with, to undertake complex investigations more quickly and securely. It's a brilliant innovation – one of a number being developed in-house that, in time, we hope to share with organisations that might find it valuable.

30 Our investment in this kind of technology reflects how investigative journalism is evolving, and while reporters will always be at the core of everything, we have to give them the tools to undertake really difficult work in what is becoming an increasingly difficult environment.

35 Giant is a part of this. It allows us to search and cross-search massive databases in quick time. At some point in the years to come, artificial intelligence too may help us to find important journalistic needles in haystacks piled high with millions of documents.

40 One thing will never change. We rely on sources and whistleblowers to trust us, and to share sensitive information that we aren't supposed to know about. The Guardian's SecureDrop service allows you to anonymously share files with us by encrypting the contents.

45 Handling this information has become an increasingly important part of what we do, especially if you want to prod and probe the kind of people, businesses, and institutions the Guardian has focused on in recent years.

50 Pursuing the truth behind the murder of the journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, led by Juliette Garside, or asking questions about the safety of medical devices being put in patients' bodies, which was investigated by Hilary Osborne and Hannah Devlin in the Implant Files, can lead you to some uncomfortable truths.

It is no exaggeration to say that some people and some organisations seem untouchable – because they operate in, or exploit, grey areas where nobody seems to

55 know what is going on. It has been one of the more unnerving things in recent years for reporters to discover that the inspectors and law enforcement agencies that are supposed to be policing these environments are a long way behind us, or not there at all.

60 The official bodies are either too weak or too poorly funded, or both, to properly scrutinise, for instance, how vast amounts of money is being laundered through offshore jurisdictions – or why some people, for whatever reason, have chosen to hide their identities, and their vast wealth, behind an array of shell companies that serve no obvious purpose.

65 In the UK, there is now a tier of super-rich people that is well protected from the police, the Serious Fraud Office and the National Crime Agency. It means certain people and their businesses are actually beyond the reach of the law, and they know it. They are protected by a praetorian guard of solicitors and accountants who have got very wealthy defending clients with suspiciously earned billions.

70 Before we published stories from the Panama Papers leak – a collaboration we undertook with media partners and coordinated by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists – we sent about 150 “right of reply” letters to various individual and businesses; in return, we got an equal number of letters from London’s top law firms threatening us with all manner of indignity and humiliation if we dared to publish anything. We were told their clients had done nothing wrong and we had no right to be investigating their private affairs. In short, there was no story – and we had no right to go looking.

80 We published. In the three years since then, more than £200m in fines and back taxes have been collected in the UK, and more than £1bn worldwide. Politicians have had to quit, inquiries have been set up. It turns out there was a story – but a story of the kind that is increasingly hard to tell. Recent legal rulings in the UK have made “breach of privacy” the litigation of choice to frustrate and threaten journalists.

85 We are in a position now where we can publish stories that are factually accurate and which we believe are in the public interest, and still run the risk of having to pay damages. Being right isn’t enough any more.

90 Which brings me back to the secret projects room. The Guardian is lucky to have reporters and lawyers who know how to avoid the bear traps laid in front of them. But the last few years has shown how important the technical specialists have become too. To be able to research and tell certain stories, and to protect our sources, and the information they give us, we are having to develop new ways and methods.

95 In July, for instance, we reported how Chinese border police are secretly installing surveillance apps on the phones of visitors. To understand the story, and then to tell it, we teamed up one of our investigative reporters, Hilary Osborne, with one of our developers, Sam Cutler. It won’t be the last time our staff collaborate in this way.

100 There used to be quite a gulf between our editorial and digital departments. Giant shows that isn’t the case any more. The journalists of the next generation – some of them, anyway – will have to blend the skills of both.

105

Nick Hopkins
Fri 6 Sep 2019
Theguardian.com