Darting Down the Records Trail
How to gather records fast, when news breaks
Ken Armstrong, The Marshall Project
karmstrong@themarshallproject.org; @bykenarmstrong

**Chasing paper by courting people:** To get to documents and data, you've got to go through people (usually). And in times of crisis, you need the records posthaste. So: No surprise here, but … try to get the records from friendly folks who just happen to have what you need, and happen not to be constrained by public employment. Failing that, don't just fire off a public-records request by email. Call first. Treat public-records officers as allies, not adversaries. Ask for help. Ask for suggestions. Establish a relationship. Explain, politely as you can, why you need the records as fast as you do. And afterwards, call to say thank you.

**Avoid all-or-nothing:** If you file one public-records request asking for everything, what you'll probably get is nothing, or maybe what you'll get is everything many months later, when this story is yesteryear's news. So: Unbundle. Figure out what you want most, and ask for that first. What you want next most? Ask for that second. (And later, when the storm has passed, go ahead and file that I-would-like-everything FOIA.)

**Avoid Washington D.C.:** Sadly, Washington D.C. may be unavoidable. But: If you can get federal records through your local feds (e.g., the Seattle District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers) try that first. Less bureaucracy equals more speed. Plus, the D.C. culture does things to people, rarely pleasant.

**Don't Bogart your records:** The way it works: One document refers to another document (which you've just got to have), which refers to another document (got to have that one, too), which refers to another document, which … So: Share. Let other people in your newsroom see what you're collecting, and let them join the chase. Besides, other people on the story might know something you don't, and might make connections you won't. And you're all in it together.

**Coordinate:** Use shared files. Also, create a public folder that details what records have been requested from which agencies. By avoiding overlap you make it easier on the agencies (and remember, they're stressing out, too), and you make it easier on yourself.

**FTP (For The Public):** A lot of times, agencies send records to the media via FTP. What this often means is that whatever you're collecting, other people can see, too. You could moan about this. But it's more productive to accept and capitalize, by making sure you're seeing what everybody else is collecting.

**The Sound and the Fury:** With breaking news, don't limit your records requests – or your thinking – to documents and data. Gather sound. Gather images. Some of the best stories off of breaking news have come not from what some reporter read, but from what some reporter spied in a video or heard on an audio track.