

## CHAPTER 4

# Do Stories from Your Heart

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Investigative journalist in Iceland

My roots are in the western part of Iceland. Mountains and valleys surround hardworking people, mostly fishermen and farmers. For several years I labored on trawlers and farms but failed to find contentment there. I already knew I wanted to be a journalist.

In secondary school, I was the editor, reporter and layout person on my school newspaper, eventually creating a news magazine that was distributed to all secondary schools throughout Iceland. It made me feel good to see fellow students receive information that was important to them or to read interviews that they liked and that maybe inspired them.

## The first scoop

My first professional job was for a small weekly newspaper in the southern part of Iceland. I discovered the US army was secretly planning to leave the airbase in Keflavik, which would have been a major blow to the local economy. The story won me a job offer at the television station Channel 2. I quickly recognized how powerful television was in bringing a story to life, but I chafed at the meaningless tasks assigned to a junior reporter. After pestering my bosses, they allowed me to investigate the growing influence of the Hells Angels in Iceland's drug trade, as long as I did so

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on my own time. I produced five segments on the subject, prompting a debate about the establishment of organized crime in Iceland.

## Taken off air

When Channel 2 decided to launch a weekly news magazine program called “Kompás”, they offered me the position of editor. We aired over 100 episodes and did almost 300 stories. The program quickly earned a reputation for hard-hitting investigations. At “Kompás”, I learned how to use television to reveal the hidden stories of the vulnerable, as well as the immense responsibility that comes with that power.

The CEO of Channel 2 once said in a speech that “Kompás” was Channel 2’s most valuable brand. That changed quickly when we did a story on tax havens shortly after the banking crisis in Iceland. The piece implicated the owner of Channel 2. Three months after the program aired, my coworkers and I were fired. Soon after, the program was taken off the air.

## A personal investigation

In June 2010, my 17-year-old daughter died from an overdose of fentanyl, a powerful opioid. I tried to bury my pain in work, writing a book about a young Icelander imprisoned in Brazil for drug trafficking. The project failed to exorcise my demons. I found my daughter’s letters and began to piece together the final year of her life. I investigated her 29-year-old boyfriend who it appears injected her with the fatal dose of drugs but was too stoned himself to do more than watch her die. I unearthed new evidence that convinced the police to reopen the case, but it was not conclusive enough to convict the boyfriend of murder.

I was in a black hole for months after the police decision. I needed to find meaning in my daughter’s death. Through journalism I decided I could help others like her. State television in Iceland agreed to back the program project I embarked upon. I took my camera deep into the underground drug culture of Icelandic teenagers. Through hidden camera (work), Icelanders entered this netherworld with me and saw kids shoot up and live in squalor. After all of that, I could no longer simply observe.

I helped rescue one girl and get her to treatment. The core of the series was my daughter's story. I spoke on camera, played the 911 call and traced the ambulance rushing to her.

One year after my daughter's overdose, a six-part series was aired on the daily news magazine program on RUV, the state television. It shook Iceland, forced the problem of drug abuse into the open and sparked a national debate. Afterwards, the Directorate of Health clamped down on doctors overprescribing to drug addicts.

## **The Panama Papers and cross-border journalism**

In 2015, I received a call from Marina Walker, deputy director of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists. She told me about a massive leak of offshore information. Many Icelanders were involved, including the prime minister and his wife, who held a secret offshore company called Wintris. The Icelandic public was unaware of Wintris. I knew the information would be explosive.

For almost a year, I worked alone in my apartment on what would become the Panama Papers. It was a hard time for me and my family since I had no income and was working on stories involving the most powerful people in Iceland, both in politics and business. Our filmed interview with the prime minister, in which he abruptly ended the conversation after being questioned about the company, went viral. When he resigned in response to the attention, it became one of the iconic moments of the Panama Papers worldwide.

The former prime minister has tried to degrade the journalists who worked on the story including me. In March last year he was interviewed by the Icelandic TV program "Viglinan". He was asked if it would have done more for his political career if he had not walked out of that infamous interview.

"I doubt it would have changed much, how a person reacts to one interview," Sigmundur said. "Especially in light of the fact that the interview was staged. They had written everything ahead of time, from beginning to end, had rehearsed it, which is of course without precedent, had

rehearsed how to most confuse the interview subject to make him look the worst.”

The former prime minister has attacked the reporters and Icelandic state television on several occasions, trying to taint their journalism. This is a known method that all investigative reporters are familiar with – denigrating the journalists instead of answering their legitimate questions.

The Directorate of Tax Investigations in Iceland bought information based on the Panama Papers from an unknown person for 37 million Icelandic krona. After months of investigation the Directorate of Internal Revenue has demanded almost half a billion krona in outstanding taxes from 16 individuals, based on information in the Panama Papers.

Following the Panama Papers publication, Julius Vifill Ingvarsson, a city councilor in Reykjavik, had to resign after it was revealed that he owned an offshore company and bank account. The Reykjavik district attorney has charged Mr. Ingvarsson with money laundering.

Also an Icelandic fish exporter has been implicated in a possible tax fraud. His properties and bank accounts have been seized.

The Directorate of Tax Investigations in Iceland and the district attorney in Reykjavik are still investigating names from the Panama Papers. Hopefully they can recover outstanding taxes.

In my opinion cross-border journalism is the most important thing for democracy. And the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists is one of the most important organizations for a better world.

I hope we will see many projects with journalists all over the world working together on important projects, where everyone leaves their ego outside the room.

## **Iceland is safe and small**

Around 350,000 inhabitants live in Iceland – fewer than in an average European city. “In Iceland you know almost everybody,” is a common joke among Icelanders. Working as an investigative reporter in Iceland is not considered a dangerous job like in some other parts of the world. It is very rare that a journalist in Iceland is attacked or is threatened because

of a story he or she is working on. The only time I have been threatened because of a story I worked on was when I did stories about the drug scene in Iceland. Some debt collectors or druglords have made threats towards me.

The Icelandic investigative reporter faces other kinds of obstacles. The small size of the population is in itself one of the main obstacles. If a journalist is snooping around word will travel fast within the company or institution under scrutiny. Someone working there probably knows the journalist or at least knows someone who knows the journalist. Maybe someone will try to call the journalist and ask about the story and what he or she is looking for. So if I get a story tip that involves a relative of mine or a friend I will not work on the story but advise the person to find another journalist.

## Working with sources

Working with a source on a sensitive story in Iceland can be a problem. Under no circumstances can the journalist meet with the source at a café, a restaurant or other public place. There is always the danger of someone knowing the journalist and the source and people will start to think, “What are they doing together?” I usually meet my sources in remote places, such as industrial areas.

## The hard ones

Some sources are easy to work with, while others are hard to get. Sometimes you can develop a really good relationship with an important source with just one phone call. But some are hard to get. When I need to get to a source that I know can give me important information I usually park outside their home, call them from there and tell them, “I am in a car outside and you do want to talk to me. Trust me!” I do not threaten them or anything. I just tell them plainly that it is important for the public to know what is going on inside the company, the ministry, the organization or the institution. This method has not been effective all the time, but sometimes. That is enough for me.

## Leaking out bits and pieces

Sometimes when I am stuck in my research and cannot get the information I need to fill out the puzzle, I deliberately leak bits and pieces of the story to someone that I know will shout it out inside the company or the institution. After some time I will get a message, an email or a phone call from a staff member who wants to give me the information I need. This has worked on several stories I have done.

## Protecting the source

I have been interrogated by the police at least a couple of times because of my sources. The police have tried to get information about my sources due to a leak from some governmental institution. My rule is simple – I do not say a word and plead to a section in the Icelandic media law. As a journalist the most important things are trust and your sources. Nobody would want to talk to a journalist who cannot protect his sources. The trust is gone. So it is extremely important to protect your sources by any means. The journalist has to find secure ways of being in contact with their source.

In my opinion, all journalists should know how to use OpenPGP encryption for emails when they are working on a story. This is important when working on a story involving sources or sensitive information. I have an add-on for my email program and I also use Hushmail when I need to be in contact with sources who do not know how to set up OpenPGP. When OpenPGP has been installed it is easy to use and according to computer security analysts, it is safe.

I use Signal for messaging and phone calls. My computer security analyst tells me it is the safest on the market. It is easy to get as an app.

## The complicated story

After the financial crisis in Iceland in 2008 every news program had stories about the banking market manipulations. Few knew what that was. Even the words are hard to understand. In 2011 I received a leak containing charges from the Financial Supervisory Authority in Iceland to the

special prosecutor. The charges included detailed information about the alleged market manipulation within the three biggest banks in Iceland during the years before the financial collapse.

I read through the pages and tried to understand these illegal acts myself. It took me some time to understand what was going on inside the banks and how they bought shares from themselves to raise the share price. I started to figure out how to explain this in a TV documentary so the public would understand. It would have been easy to use old footage of the banks over my voice explaining alleged market manipulation, but I knew I had to do something better.

I sat down with my graphic designer and we created a picture of a machine showing how the banks, the Iceland stock exchange, the traders and the buyers were involved. The machine showed how this complicated scheme worked, and all of a sudden the public in Iceland understood what market manipulation means. (The story about the alleged market manipulation of Kaupthing can be seen here: [vimeo.com/41317731](https://vimeo.com/41317731))

The story was really important for the public to understand, because the market manipulation scheme by the Icelandic banks is considered one of the main reasons for the financial meltdown in Iceland. In my work as a TV reporter I always try to present my stories so everyone understands them, and I try to engage the viewer through personal stories or by putting things in context.

When I am working on a complicated story, especially about something financial, I put my effort into making it simple. My mentor used a good phrase for this. Once when I was working on one of these stories he put an A4 paper on the wall in front of my desk with the word KISS – Keep It Simple Stupid. Today I always write this word on a piece of paper and put it somewhere near me when I am working on a story of this kind.

Journalism students often come to me for career advice. I always tell them the same thing: “Whenever possible, do your own stories from the heart – not the stories others find for you”.

With this as my guide I have been incredibly fortunate to be involved in work that has had real positive impact. People open up to me on camera because I am genuinely interested. I do not shy away from holding the powerful accountable, and I seek the truth wherever it leads me.