

Creativity in finding alternative sources

Skill Sheet A6 listed the most important secondary and primary resources available to you for research projects. But there are many other sources that you could also use. This Skill Sheet helps you to be creative in finding alternative sources that can contain surprisingly relevant information.

- **Use advertisements from companies and organisations** – Companies, organisations and even individuals often release public statements in order to influence their environment. Sometimes they do this via advertisements in the media, which can include both information and opinions. Reading these advertisements could give you insight into the external priorities of the subject of your research. Remember that an advertisement has to be paid for.
- **Collect quotes from public figures** – Ask the department of Public Affairs at the relevant company, institute or ministry for a transcript of the speech you read about in a newspaper or heard about elsewhere. This type of data is often given away readily by these departments, as their existence depends upon providing such information. You will be surprised at the additional information you may receive from the actual source, as the journalist's selection criteria may not be the same as yours (⊕D3). Having acquired a transcript, you can quote it directly as a primary source, unless stated otherwise on the transcript. Usually, it can be very useful to establish personal contacts with people in such a department. Once they know your name, it will be easier to get information.
- **Collect annual reports** – Not only companies release annual reports. Government organisations, trade unions and universities also publish annual reports. There are numerous examples of solid research that is based, primarily, on a creative analysis of annual reports. Researchers do not usually read annual reports thoroughly. There are very interesting qualitative statements in the first part of the annual reports of companies, for example. The first part often gives a clear picture of the management ideology, because this is one of the few parts that they may have written themselves. It is often more informative if you can get hold of more than one annual report. Collect them yourself, or ask for reports from the past five or ten years. If you study a series of annual reports you may find additional important information such as trends in management views or inconsistencies that might lead you to additional research questions. Furthermore, if you interview people in a particular organisation it is highly advisable – and relatively easy – to read the annual report (and any other publicly available information) beforehand.
- **Collect cartoons** – Cartoons can sometimes present you with the essentials of a specific topic or problem area. A good cartoon can operate at various levels of analyses, and give a concrete example of an abstract problem, something which is not always easy to do in written analysis. You can also use cartoons in presentations to catch the attention of the audience. Tasteful cartoons can also be put in your research report. However, respect the author's rights.
- **Find out whether press clipping services exist** – In most companies, ministries and large organisations press clipping services exist. They are primarily for internal use. These services take essential information from a number of sources. Clippings are the type of information CEOs or ministers have on their desks every morning or once a week. You can sometimes gain access to these services. They can complement your own clippings, and can give

you an idea about the kind of information that people in larger organisations select. Some internal clipping services have even become commercial. A number of international organisations have these clipping services, and as long as you make a sound application (together with your tutor or the librarian) you may get yourself on their mailing list.

- **Use autobiographies** – In all relevant areas of social sciences, retired CEOs (Chief Executive Officers), ex-ministers and the like write memoirs or autobiographies. Increasingly, officials who are still active write autobiographies in order to influence their environment, or to earn extra money. Autobiographies are often fun reading, and can complement your knowledge on the particular company or organisation. You should take them seriously, but also remember that memoirs are often written as a means to rationalise, or find excuses for, past behaviour. You should be aware of the fact that many decision-making processes are based on non-rational behaviour. A rationalisation *ex post* therefore never sticks. Additional information is necessary for you to ascertain the circumstances of the decision-making process. The reliability of the memory of the person involved is also a factor you should take into consideration. Also, bear in mind whether the author has been aided by a ghost-writer or not (⊕D1).
- **Make use of national differences** – In some areas of research you will find better sources abroad. This can be due to stricter rules on information. For example, the information that companies need to divulge, when they want to have their shares traded on the New York Stock Exchange, is far more detailed than in the same situation in Europe or Japan. This information is available upon request in the United States. Ask your librarian.
- **Use archives** - Archives are a primary source of information. They are not only relevant for historians. Most research questions addressed by social scientists have deep historical roots, and for this reason no researcher should abstain from using available archive sources at face value. Many governments realise the importance of historical studies, and require public institutes to make their archives public after a couple of decades. In some countries, like the Netherlands, you can consult the (secret) minutes of cabinet meetings after only twenty years. If you think that the effects of most strategic decisions last much longer than two decades, the relevance of the source becomes obvious. In some cases a researcher can gain access to more recent sources by making use of other laws that require these institutions to supply information upon explicit request. Ask journalists or researchers working in the area of public security. They often know the way in this regulatory labyrinth. Gaining access to the archives of private institutes and companies is much more difficult. But it is always worthwhile to ask. A surprisingly large number of institutes, companies and even individual decision makers allow researchers to go through their archives.
- **Additional sources of information** – Many other strategies (often not considered) can be used to collect information. Think about the following suggestions:
 - Organise a small conference or a workshop, and invite the person(s) who you were not able to get a personal interview with.
 - Write a short (newspaper) article, and try to organise feedback from people involved.
 - Ask another player/firm to check the information.