



How to research companies

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Introduction

If you're campaigning against a company, the success or failure of your campaign will crucially depend on the information at your disposal. Whether you want to visit their office, target their directors or shareholders, or produce hard-hitting leaflets or reports, you will need to know your way around a few basic resources.

This is actually easier than most people think. For example, people often phone Corporate Watch asking for the addresses of a company's sites in their area, but they hadn't thought of looking in their phone book! So this basic guide on how to research a company is an attempt to break down the mystique surrounding research. Anyone can find out about a company, with just a little time and imagination. And it's extremely satisfying to feel you've stitched up a company just by getting to know it better.

This guide relates to researching UK companies. The directories, media and libraries are all British. Some of the techniques however may be transferable to other countries, and of course the web is international.

We assume the reader has access to the world-wide web. Many of the sources here are available by traditional means (and we give those too), but in this age of technological apartheid, the web makes research both easier and more comprehensive. Even if you don't have a terminal, you probably know someone who does, or can use one in a library or cyber-café. We also assume that the reader knows basically how to use the web (if not, there are countless people, companies and books who'd love to tell you!), so only explain how to apply this to research.

Obviously, it's easier to find out about a large company than a small one, and a local company than a distant one. The smaller and further they get, the more you will have to use your imagination!

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

How to find out some of the most common types of information we get asked for is explained on pages 10-12: such as where a **company's sites** are, details of **directors, shareholders, public relations** etc. These explanations refer back to some of the earlier sections of this guide.

The guide begins with some basic tips on how to research, then is mostly structured around types of information source (asking friendly people, libraries, web, media, directories, interviews, deeper methods). **There's no need to read the whole thing** – dip in and out of the bits that are relevant to you.

If you want to look into a company's wrongdoings, see the 'corporate criticism' section under the web on pages 4-5, and the 'alternative media' section on pages 6-7.

Golden rules of research

There are 4 things we suggest you keep in mind while doing your research. They will all save you time and frustration in the long-run:

- 1) **know what you want** – before you start, be very clear about what kind of information you need for your campaign. Beware of information addiction – if you don't know exactly what you want, you can spend hours picking up reams of "information", which is all very interesting, but in the end no real use.
- 2) **ask someone else** (see below) – at the start of your research, you should scope what other researchers and campaigners have already done that could be helpful, to avoid duplication of work. Always ask your contacts whether they can produce or suggest written sources, or other people to speak to.
- 3) **look for leads** – throughout your research, look not just for information itself but also for potential further sources, whether publications, websites, contacts etc. So ask interviewees for any contacts they've got; follow all links from useful websites; always look through bibliographies and reference lists in publications. Look at the source of all your information and follow it (eg if the source was a newspaper or magazine article, talk to the journalists, find out where they got their information.) A lot of good stories begin with a rumour - "Have you heard that ____ plc does this?". Always follow these rumours - "Where did you hear that?".
- 4) **note all references** – this really is essential, however much of a drag it may seem. This means that if later in your investigations you come to doubt some of your information (eg if you get conflicting facts), you can check out its reliability. Also, being able to go back to your sources may give you new leads. I go so far as to log everything I do during a research project, including all names, phone numbers, and details of where I get each piece of information. And I've frequently been very glad I do. I also keep photocopies of all useful paper sources, and printouts of web pages.

Structuring your research

It is good to get as far as you can with research before letting your target company know that you're looking into it – that way you know you're asking the most effective questions, you have a good idea of how to extract information, and you can tell when your subject is lying. In other words, aim to **interview the company last**.

Start by setting out exactly what you want to know. List all the **possible sources** you can think of. At this stage, search library catalogues and the web, and ask any contacts you've got. Brainstorm research approaches with your colleagues. When you've got a good list of sources, then **prioritise**, and decide how much time you're prepared to spend on each. Throughout your research, you must **evaluate** how effective you're being, and be prepared to be flexible.

The first stage should be to try easily available sources – such as the company's annual report and website.

Getting a basic picture of the company

First of all, get the **phone number** of your target company: from directory enquiries if you know where it's based - London's always a good guess - or from a business directory, or from the company's website.

If you're researching a plc, that usually (not quite always) means the company's listed on the Stock Exchange – in other words you could buy shares in it if you wanted to. In that case, it's obliged to produce an **annual report** for investors and potential investors (ie you!), a glossy report on all its activities over the previous year, plus its accounts, a list of directors, political and charitable donations etc. It will probably tell you, for example, where its major projects and facilities are and what they do, what its biggest brands are, and give you some idea of its culture. It will often tell you how much the directors get paid, and how many employees there are

etc. A one-sided view of course, but a useful start, and often an easy way of answering some questions about the company.

So phone up the head office and ask them to send you copies of their latest annual report and interim report. They will do this for free. Some companies which you can't buy shares in also produce annual reports, especially publicly-owned companies. Alternatively, the *Financial Times* runs an annual reports service, where you tick which companies you want and they send them to you free (it covers many, though not all, large British companies) – call 0181 770 0770 for an order form, or go to www.icbinc.com/cgi-bin/ft.pl on the web.

You might find back issues of annual reports in a library, especially a business library.

The company's **website** will also give you much of this information, and often more. Generally the larger and more publicly visible companies tend to have more sophisticated websites.

Ask someone else

A look in *Housman's Peace Directory* (Housman's, 0171 837 4473), or the *PMS Guide to Pressure Groups* (£14.50 from PMS Publications, 19 Douglas Street, Westminster, London SW1P 4PA, tel. 0171 233 8283) will give you some potentially useful NGOs; the *Directory of Associations & Professional Bodies in the UK* (in a library) will also give you academic research groups. A search of the web (see below) is also well worth doing at this stage. Once you've found some promising organisations, look at their **websites** or at their **publications lists** (which they will generally send on request) to check what work they've done before you take up anyone's time.

How much time someone wants to spend with you of course depends on how useful they see what you're doing, and how closely it reflects their interests. There's no substitute for face-to-face meeting, but you should be well prepared, so as to use your time with them well, and not have to go back to them. Keep good notes of your conversation, and you can always go back with a phone call or e-mail later on if you need more clarification.

Libraries

Most major local libraries have a **business section**, which will contain business directories, annual reports of large companies (including foreign ones), and loads of other useful stuff. Also, in the reference section, you'll find the *Register of Members' Interests*, *Who's Who*, the *Directory of Associations and Professional Bodies in the UK* (see directories section, below). And in the periodicals section, back issues of newspapers and magazines (including trade journals) and indices to them. If your target company is based locally, local history books and local papers may be useful. Start by asking **library assistants** which book is best for your purposes. Or search the **catalogue** – using subject keywords or publisher (for example, a company or trade association may publish many useful reports). There may be books about the company, or its industry.

If your public library doesn't have what you need, try a **university library**, especially the business studies section, or other relevant sections (eg for a chemicals company, look in the chemistry section).

If you can't find a publication elsewhere, you should use a **copyright library**. There are 5 of these:

Library	address	phone no.	catalogue on web
British Library	96 Euston Road, London NW1 2DB	0171 412 7000	http://opac97.bl.uk/
Bodleian Library (Oxford University)	Broad Street, Oxford OX1	01865 277 000	www.lib.ox.ac.uk:8000
Cambridge University Library	West Road, Cambridge CB3 9DR.	01223 333 000	www.lib.cam.ac.uk/Catalogues/OPAC/
National Library of Scotland	George IV Bridge Edinburgh EH1 1EW.	0131 226 4531 enquiries@nls.uk	www.nls.ac.uk/catframe.htm
National Library of Wales	Aberystwyth Ceredigion SY23 3BU	01970 632 800 holi@llgc.org.uk	http://geacweb.llgc.org.uk:8000/
Trinity College, Dublin	College Street Dublin 2	00 353 1 677 2941	www.tcd.ie/Library/online.htm

These libraries are all by law entitled to receive a copy of every publication published in the UK. The best is the British Library, which is obliged to take a copy of everything – some are missed, but this is the best you're likely to get. They also obviously have extensive foreign collections. They are reference libraries rather than lending libraries. To use them, you will need to be registered as a reader – to do this you need to fill in a form and convince them that you need their resources to do work that you can't do elsewhere. A letter of recommendation from an academic definitely helps. The Bodleian and British Library (and possibly the others) keep most of their collections in stack storage. This means you need to go beforehand to order them up from the stack, and then come back when they've arrived; in the case of the British Library this takes a couple of days.

As for specialist libraries, **City Business Library**, at 1 Brewers Hall Garden, London EC2V, tel. 0171 638 8215 (nearest tube Moorgate) is excellent, with a wide range of trade journals, business directories and other interesting sources. Its periodicals are catalogues on the web at www.earl.org.uk/magnet

The web

An excellent activists' resource on corporations, according to our impartial researchers, can be found at **www.corporatewatch.org**. If you go to the <resources> section, you can search for information by company, by industry, by issue (eg pollution, influence over government) etc. There are also guidelines and links for further research and campaigning, including an updated version of this guide.

SEARCH ENGINES

The web is becoming an increasingly powerful source, as more and more information is uploaded onto it. But beware that it is not a static resource – just because you got information from it doesn't mean it will stay there. For this reason, you should print off useful pages, or save them onto your hard drive, making sure you record the URL (site address).

Key to good use of the web is of course search engines. Note that search engines all use search terms slightly differently, and you should always read the search tips / help page before using them. We recommend the following:

- **www.google.com** – this is one of the most 'intelligent' in how it ranks pages for usefulness;
- **www.metacrawler.com** and **www.dogpile.com** – these are both useful because they allow searching for phrases (eg "Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry") rather than just words;
- **www.metasearch.com** – this can sometimes be of use, as it uses the common search engines, but with more intelligent search terms than they allow;
- **www.cyber411.com** – this one turns up no end of junk, but if you can't find something elsewhere, it's worth a try;
- **www.hotbot.com** – using the pull-down menu, this has an option of searching using Boolean operators (and, or, not) – allowing intelligent search phrases.

Bear in mind that different search engines think differently, and so rank pages in different orders, and search in different ways – eg some by directly looking for the search text and some by pre-classifying web pages into their own categories of information. Also, they mostly search pages that have been registered with then by the site producer, and different pages omit registration with different sites. So it's often worth trying more than one.

All of the search engines above except google and hotbot are meta-search engines, meaning they search lots of popular search engines at the same time (yahoo, altavista, hotbot etc).

And there are many many more search engines available. Look for example at **www.albany.net/allinone/all1www.html**, a page of web-users' comments on their favourite search engines. And many search engines contain lists of other search engines.

CORPORATE CRITICISM

(See also media, below).

For info on a company's wrongdoings, there are various campaign organisations' websites. A good start is to search web super-sites such as **www.essential.org** (a website hosting about 30 US anti-corporate NGOs – especially the Multinational Monitor at **www.essential.org/monitor**) and **www.oneworld.net** (which includes over 500 organisations from around the world, both North and South, focused on development, environment and human rights). OneWorld also functions as a magazine, and provides profiles on particular issues, plus campaigning guides.

There are critical websites on individual companies, such as:

- www.mcspotlight.org – everything you could ever want to know about McDonald's, plus basic info on a few other companies too;
- www.essentialaction.org/shell/ - on Shell;
- www.saigon.com/~nike – on Nike;
- www.sprawl-busters.com and www.walmartsucks.com – on WalMart;

on industries:

- www.moles.org (Project Underground) – on oil and mining;
- www.prwatch.org – on public relations;
- www.ran.org - on logging and other rainforest industries;
- www.irn.org (International Rivers Network) – on dam building and other river industries;
- www.foe.co.uk/camps/foodbio/index.htm and www.genewatch.org/ , on genetic engineering;
- www.infact.org/helpstop.html – on tobacco;
- www.gn.apc.org/pesticidestrust/ - on pesticides;

on corporations and corporate power generally:

- www.corpwatch.org – Corporate Watch USA (unrelated to Corporate Watch UK)
- www.irrc.org/ - Investor Research & Responsibility Centre (USA)
- www.citizen.org – Public Citizen (USA)
- www.xs4all.nl/~ceo – Corporate Europe Observatory

COMPANY PROFILES

There are various business-based sites, which function like quite broad business directories (see below). They will give you financial information such as turnover and profit, number of employees, names of directors, areas of business, share price variation etc. Obviously, bigger companies are more often covered than small ones. Try:

- www.hemscott.co.uk/EQUITIES/EQBODY.HTM
- www.hoovers.co.uk

INDUSTRY SITES

Obviously companies' own sites are often extremely useful. There are also broader industry sites which give plenty of information on an industry sector. One of the best is the Institute of Petroleum's site, at www.petroleum.co.uk , which has a detailed archive industry news section, links to companies and to various information pages, and plenty more.

OTHER INFORMATION

All kinds of useful background information can be found on the web. From explanations of financial terms (try www.askjeeves.com) to maps (www.multimap.com), for anything you want, just have a surf. For statistics on world trade etc, try international bodies such as UNCTAD (www.unctad.org), UNDP (www.undp.org) or the World Bank (www.worldbank.org).

Finally, worth a mention is the Free Range Activism site, at www.gn.apc.org/pmhp , which has guides to various campaigning resources, including lots of campaign-relevant government legislation.

Media

If you've got a factual question to answer, often the best source is the media. Do bear in mind that the media is not totally reliable, and if you need to be completely watertight with your facts, you should back up all media sources. However, it does provide a fantastically wide resource of information.

Probably the most useful is the *Financial Times*, for keeping broadly up to date, it's worth reading daily if you have time. *Private Eye*'s good for picking up leads, but probably not for quoting (because of libel risk).

WEB

These days many newspapers and other media are available on the web, in searchable form. Follow the links to the archive page, and always read the search hints or help page before starting. Our favourites are:

www.newsunlimited.co.uk – the *Guardian*, going back to Sept '98. Obviously, it contains some of the more critical information on companies. It will be made more extensive in early 2000, but when that happens you will probably have to pay for some of the information;

http://news.bbc.co.uk - taken from the BBC's World Service, so has good international coverage, and generally quite good depth. Goes back to Nov '97;

www.ft.com - usually you can get references (dates of papers and titles of articles) for free, but have to pay \$1.50 to download the articles themselves. They keep running free trials though – long may this continue! Alternatively, if you're broke, you can get the reference for free, then look up the article in a library on paper. The news database covers numerous other media too, but the searches are less intelligent than others.

And there's www.telegraph.co.uk etc. The *Independent* unfortunately does not have an archive on the web. The *Times* (www.the-times.co.uk) has back issues online, but they're not searchable. Electronic Telegraph has some useful external links. Note that major stories on the *Telegraph* and *Guardian* sites are updated through the day as news breaks, so don't rely on the web report to be the same as the one in the paper.

There is a good link page to media sites at www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/users/gac/newspap.htm

CD-ROMS and INDICES

Many libraries (eg city libraries and university libraries) now have CD-ROMs of various media sources. If you're based near such a library, these may be better than the web, as you can search several publications at once. One of the best is called **FT McCarthy**, which contains around 40 titles, including all the UK broadsheets, the main newspaper from several important countries, a couple of large trade journals and two UK local papers (*Birmingham Post* and *Yorkshire Times*). This is held in City Business Library (see libraries, above).

Another good one, though less common, is **dialog@carl**, which contains many local US papers, plus various others from around the world.

You can also get some magazines on CD-ROM – such as ***New Scientist*** and ***Times Higher Education Supplement***.

If you really can't find a CD-ROM, you can use an index. One of the best is the **Research Index**, published monthly by Business Surveys Ltd., which is amalgamated at the end of the year into a companies index and an industries index. It covers most major newspapers and magazines, including some trade journals. Alternatively, try the 6-monthly **Clover Newspaper Index**, which covers the four broadsheets, plus the *FT*, the *European* and the *Economist*; it also has a company data supplement. Although these are broad, especially the *Research Index*, they aren't particularly deep - they won't contain ALL the entries from individual papers' own indices. The *Times*, the *FT* and the *Guardian* all produce monthly indices, which are amalgamated at the end of each year.

Local papers generally don't tend to produce indices or CD-ROMs or websites etc. You could try asking a journalist or the editor. If you have good contacts there, they might look through their own records for you.

ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

If you want the "dirt" on a company, the alternative media may be of use. In particular the **Ecologist** (tel. 0171 351 3578, ecologist@gn.apc.org) and the **ENDS Report** (tel. 0171 814 5300, post@ends.co.uk) both contain useful criticism of companies and produce an annual index. **EC** (ethical consumer, tel. 0161 226 2929, ethicon@mcr1.poptel.org.uk) is also useful. Look at the company index at www.ethicalconsumer.org/companie.htm Then get the most recent issue that features the company you're after in the research supplement – in here you'll find every way of slagging off the company that the guys at EC can think of. **Corporate Watch** magazine covers various topics of corporate power and its social and environmental impacts – plus campaigns against corporations. All back issues of the magazine are on the website, www.corporatewatch.org which can be explored either by issue of the magazine or by country, industry or subject.

From the USA, there's **Multinational Monitor** (see under web – corporate criticism, above) and **Corporate Crime Reporter**.

If you have the money, Ethical Consumer's online database, **Corporate Critic**, is very useful – see www.ethicalconsumer.org/corporat.htm EC monitors a huge range of alternative media, and records references and abstracts of articles critical of companies on this database. It costs £70 to get set up, then 25p for each reference you download. You still need to get the article itself after that.

TRADE JOURNALS

If you are following a particular company or industry, you should certainly be monitoring the relevant trade journals. The best bit tends to be the news section, though there may be some decent feature articles. If you're doing quite major research, it may be worth flicking through the last year or two's back issues. Some have an index.

There really are more trade journals available than you could shake several sticks at. Try looking for relevant titles in **Ulrich's** directory of periodicals around the world (in the reference section of your local library). You could also contact some of the main **publishers** of trade journals to ask them: Reed Business Publishing (tel. 0181 652 3500, www.reedbusiness.com/), Haymarket Group (tel. 0181 943 5000), EMAP Business Communications (tel. 0171 833 7311, www.emap.com), FT Business (tel. 0171 896 2525), Hemming Group (tel. 0171 973 6400), William Reed Publishing (tel. 01293 613 400). If you're still stuck, try calling the Periodical Publishers' Association (on 0171 404 4166), or the relevant trade or professional association for the industry you're interested in (see under lobbying, below), and ask what they recommend. Some good journals are:

NAME	FREQ.	NOTES
<i>Building</i>	weekly	index in 1st issue of year; annual review in last
<i>Construction News</i>	weekly	annual review at end of year - not very detailed
<i>Contract Journal</i>	weekly	annual review at end of year - not very detailed
<i>Mining Journal</i>	weekly	lots of news) index every 6 months
<i>Mining</i>	monthly	good coal news at back)
<i>Mining Annual Review</i>	annual	index in each issue
<i>The Engineer</i>	weekly	lots of news; contracts awarded etc.
<i>Control & Instrumentation</i>	monthly	
<i>Jane's Defence Weekly</i>	weekly	also produces defence review, plus journals on fighting ships, aircraft, mines, missiles etc. - THE info source on the defence industry
<i>Chemistry in Britain</i>	monthly	the chemical industry
<i>Process Engineering</i>	monthly	chemical engineering
<i>Farmers Weekly</i>	weekly	occasional interesting bits
<i>Grocer</i>	weekly	info on food suppliers as well as retailers
<i>Publishers Weekly</i>	weekly	
<i>Campaign</i>	weekly	advertising

Also well worth getting if you can are the companies' **internal newsletters**: eg BP's *Horizon*, *GEC Review* etc. They go out to all employees of the relevant company; buried in lots of useless info, they say what major contracts the company has recently been awarded or completed, give profiles of divisions of the company, describe new management / training / computer systems in the group, announce opening of new offices etc, and give a good idea of the corporate culture. To get hold of them you'll have to apply persuasion (on the Group Communications Department at the relevant head office) - perhaps you could say you're a student looking for a job next year and want to know about the company; or you could try asking an employee. Or just turn up at the head office, where they're often left lying around. Internal newsletters are kept in some university careers services, and good libraries.

Business directories

In the reference section of most city libraries, and certainly in any business library, you can find various directories giving facts and figures on companies. (NB Many directories and specialist publications start with a guide to using them - reading this guide can save a lot of time).

The most important ones are:

Who Owns Whom – this tells you how a company is legally structured, as corporate family trees. The first volume gives a parent company and its address and registration number etc, then its direct subsidiaries (the companies it owns completely), then the subsidiaries of each of those, and which country each subsidiary is registered in. This will tell you whether a company has operations in a particular country. The second volume is an index of all the subsidiary companies, and tells you what their parent is. Unfortunately, the directory is not comprehensive. As well as the two volumes covering UK & Ireland, there are ones covering each of other continents, organised alphabetically by country.

Kompass – for each country, this comes in four volumes. Vol. II – Company Information – is organised geographically, with a company index in the front. For each site listed for a company, it gives broad ranges within which turnover, profit, number of employees etc fall within. Sometimes this refers to the whole company and sometimes just to that specific site. Most usefully, it lists product codes which refer to vol. I, Products & Services. Look up a major category number, and the index at the start of it will tell you which sub-categories the company comes in. In each of those, it tells you the precise (ish) products and services the company supplies. Vol. III gives financial information. Vol. IV lists brand names. *Kompass* is not at all comprehensive in its coverage of companies.

Key British Enterprises – this has similar information to *Kompass*, sometimes with more detail and sometimes with less.

FT Major Companies Guide, FT Smaller Companies Guide, MacMillan's Stock Exchange Yearbook, HemScott Company Guide – between these four directories, you can get summary financial data (turnover, profit, employees etc), names of bankers, lawyers, brokers and financial advisers.

Directory of Directors – in two parts, organised by director's name and by company name. Lists directors and some cases their role.

Directory of Multinationals – 2-3 pages on each of the biggest multinationals, taken largely from annual reports. Useful if you can't get the annual report.

If you want more, have a look round the business section of your library, to see what's available, or ask a librarian's advice. There are also some **industry-specific** directories, which give more detailed information, such as:

- *The UK Biotechnology Handbook* (pub. Biocommerce Data / Bioindustry Association)
- *FT Oil & Gas International Yearbook* (pub. Longman)
- *Energy Industries Council Catalogue* (pub. EIC)
- *FT Mining International* (pub. Longman)
- *Chemical Industry Directory and Who's Who* (pub. Benn Business Information)
- *Major Chemical & Petrochemical Companies of Europe* (pub. Graham & Trotman)
- *Construction News Financial Review* (pub. Building Trades Journal)

There are many more!

You might also find **Market Research Guides** and **Industry Reports** (eg *Keynote*, *Jordans*) useful. These give a basic description of an industry sector, how well it's doing, who the major players are, what issues are facing the sector etc.

Companies House

Companies House is where all companies in the UK are legally obliged to register, and record various information – including shareholders, directors (and their home addresses and other directorships) and annual accounts. It has branches in Birmingham (Central Library, Chamberlain Square, B3), Glasgow (21 Bothwell Street, G2), Leeds (25 Queen Street, LS1), London (21 Bloomsbury St, London WC1), Manchester (75 Mosley Street, M2), Cardiff (Crown Way, CF4) or Edinburgh (37 Castle Terrace, EH1). The general enquiries line is on 01222 380 301.

The staff will show you how the computer terminals work. To print out all directors and their home addresses cost £1. Other documents cost £2.50, plus 10p per sheet (or £3.50 maximum). You can get a full set of records on microfiche for £5, but you will have to wait overnight for this. Microfiche reader-machines can be found in most libraries.

Companies House has some free (and some paying) information on the web, at www.companies-house.co.uk, available Monday-Friday, 8am-8pm.

Interviews

Interviewing your target company should usually be saved until the **end of your research** – at this stage you have a much clearer idea of what you still need to know, and how to find it out. You will also have as good a case as possible, and it's harder for them to lie to you or squirm out of it.

Prepare for your interviews: brush up on your jargon and background knowledge; work out three or four different ways in which you can squeeze out the information you require, and anticipate possible responses. Decide beforehand whether you're going to leave your source friendly or hostile to you after the interview.

Bear in mind that companies contain **many people**. If one is unhelpful, you can always try someone else, possibly with a different alias. Looking at the company's website beforehand, or even talking to a receptionist, may give you an idea of how the company's structured, so who you want to speak to. Getting direct line numbers is always useful. On the other hand, if you ask two different people in a company for the same information, they might both go to the same colleague for it. So be careful here.

Always document your interviews, including time, place, who you spoke to and their position, any alias you used, major points, important quotes.

In interviews, **open-ended questions** allow the subject to tell you more - you may get something unexpected. Throw in a few dummy questions to put your subject at ease and if necessary cover your real interests. Look for leads (eg other people) as well as answers. What the subject doesn't want to talk about may provide interesting leads.

It's up to you whether you tell the company who you really are. That may lead to them seeing you as an enemy and not helping. If however, you have good credibility and the company thinks you will publicise your findings, they may help you for fear that you will publish anyway, and their non-cooperation will make that look worse.

If you tell them you're someone else, adopt an identity of someone **they actively want to talk to** (ie it's in their interests) – a potential customer, client, supplier, employee, journalist, local historian etc. It often helps to flatter the company or the person you're talking to, to make them feel good and relaxed. And give them an opportunity to boast (eg "I know your company is one of the most efficient in the sector" – "yes we've massively streamlined our workforce"; or "your company has an excellent relationship with government..." etc).

Generally it's easier to be someone of low rank – this is less threatening, and gives you an excuse for not knowing the answer to all their questions ("I'll have to ask my boss / client"). If you can throw in chatty comments, that helps too ("sorry about my voice, I've got this throat bug", "I can't find my notes, our office is just being re-decorated", "when I took my daughter to school this morning...", etc). Occasionally you might find it useful to be more authoritative and confident, and semi-intimidate your interviewee into helping you.

When using an alias, try to keep a grain of truth in it, so that you can talk about yourself if pushed. It's probably worth keeping a note of who you are somewhere - forgetting your own name, for instance, can be highly embarrassing! If you're meeting subjects in person, remember that people tend to be remembered by their most prominent features (eg "oh yeah - the guy with the red hair / round glasses / lapel badge / stammer"). You should therefore cover any memorable features of yourself, and create some that you don't usually have. If you normally smoke, don't. If you don't wear glasses, do etc etc. Consider getting a postbox (register as 'no fixed abode'); make phone calls from a callbox, and not the one just outside your house or office. You want to learn about the company, not make it easy for them to learn about you.

Respect "off the record" comments (use them only as leads) - otherwise you're damaging your and other people's chances of getting them in the future, and also your reputation! However, convention is that "off the record" must be said BEFORE the comments are made, rather than afterwards when the subject realises what he/she has said; in this case it's up to your own scruples. Don't OFFER to keep something off the record, except as a last resort. Check whether "off the record" just means "not for attribution".

Other approaches

GOVERNMENT SOURCES

If the company has any interaction with government (eg in regulation, procurement or just plain lobbying), there will be some records there. Government and public sector bodies are generally more cooperative in interview than private sector – as they are supposed, in theory at least, to exist in the public interest. There may be official or statutory records of their dealings. You can find your way into government department websites through the website **www.open.gov.uk/** The cabinet office can be useful – at www.cabinet-office.gov.uk and you can get a list of quangos (non-departmental public bodies) at www.official-documents.co.uk/document/caboff/pb98/pb98.htm

Especially useful are the Department of Trade & Industry (tel. 0171 215 5000, www.dti.gov.uk), Environment Agency (tel. 0645 333 111, www.environment-agency.gov.uk/) and Health & Safety Executive (tel. 0541 545 500 – infoline, www.open.gov.uk/hse/hsehome.htm).

If going direct to government bodies fails, you can ask your **MP** (write to _____ MP, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA, or tel. 0171 219 3000) to ask a Parliamentary Question of the relevant minister. You could also search Hansard, the daily record of all debates, discussions etc in the Houses of Parliament. It is available in book form in most libraries, or on the web at <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm/cmhansrd.htm>

The government's **code of practice on access to information** is at www.open.gov.uk/m-of-g/part-1.htm You can try quoting this at anyone who isn't cooperative: "The approach to release of information should in all cases be based on the assumption that information should be released except where disclosure would not be in the public interest" (part I, 1.), "The Code commits departments... to release, in response to specific requests, information relating to their policies, actions and decision and other matters related to their areas of responsibility" (Part I, 3.v). Note that Jack Straw's 'Freedom' of Information Bill considerably waters down the existing (voluntary) provisions, making less information available should it become law.

If that doesn't work, you can report the case to the relevant government department's **ombudsman**, or to the parliamentary ombudsman via the House of Commons. If there is serious improper behaviour in refusing information, you could go to the Neill (formerly Nolan) Committee on Standards in Public Life (c/o Cabinet Office, tel. 0171 270 1234, www.public-standards.gov.uk/).

DIRECT TO COMPANY

It may be worth visiting the company's office and being generally observant – you never know what you might see!

Talk to the company's **employees** on their way out from work, or to business partners etc. There are bound to be some people pissed off with the company, who'll be quite happy to spill the beans, or otherwise do some internal research for you. You could also interview former friends and colleagues of the directors (look at their biographies in *Who's Who* or similar).

You could even get a job with the company, but be careful with secrecy clauses in any contract.

OTHER

You might find some transcripts of court proceedings useful.

How to find out...

OFFICE / SITE ADDRESSES

In local libraries, next to all the phone books, there are also red **postal address directories**, which only contain business addresses. Each one covers a region (eg North West, Midlands, Scotland,), so to get all the addresses of a company you only have to look in 10ish of these rather than 400ish phone books.

Or better, you can now get all of the UK **phone books on a CD-ROM** – such as UK-Info or BT 1999. These are not outrageously expensive, if you might have regular use for them, but they should be in some libraries.

DIRECTORS

The **annual report** or interim report will tell you who the directors are at the time of publication (as will probably the company website) - changes since then will be in the *FT* (although not always in the online version) or the trade press. The reports will also tell you how much they get paid (they call it remuneration – be aware that packages include share options and other benefits such as company car, medical insurance etc), and for each it will give a one-paragraph biography. For directors of non-plcs (including subsidiaries of plcs), use the *Directory of Directors*.

There are versions of *Who's Who* for particular industries - look in a decent business library. These books will give a short biography - where born, parents, where educated, career, family status, club / society membership, leisure activities etc. The highest-profile directors of large companies may have full-length (ie book) biographies written of them. More information on directors may be obtained from the trade press – for example in interviews.

For home addresses go to **Companies House** (see above). Bear in mind that some directors give their work addresses (although they're not supposed to – you could try complaining). Where this happens, see whether they are also listed as directors of another (less controversial?) company, where they might have given their home address. Doing a person-based (rather than company-based) search, if addresses are different, the director will probably be listed twice, as different people. Another way of getting the home address out is to do a full search on the company, and look at an earlier record of directors, before they got too paranoid to give their home address. If they have an unusual name, you could use the phone book CD-ROM.

LIST OF SHAREHOLDERS

The largest shareholders (holding more than 3% of the company) are listed in the company's annual report, and in *FT / MacMillan's / HemScott* directories (above).

You can get a full list of shareholders from **Companies House** (above). Often the real owner of shares is 'represented' by a fund manager or "**Nominee**", but each nominee entry will have a code for the client (the person / organisation whose money it is) before the number of shares. You can look these codes up in the *Index of Nominees and Beneficial Owners*, which will tell you who each code stands for. It's published by Fulcrum Research (tel. 0171 253 0353) and costs about £300 – ask your library to order it.

It is more difficult the other way round, ie getting details of an institution's investments. The big companies usually won't tell you their investments. However, many big investment companies have unit trusts. Every three months, fund managers produce a report on their investments and if you phone an investment company and ask about one of their trusts they will send you a copy of this report. This report may give a picture of how the other trusts within that company are invested.

FINANCIAL ANALYSTS

Analysts advise investors on whether to buy or sell a company. Companies won't tend to tell you who their analysts are. From early next year, you'll be able to look in '**A citizen's guide to lobbying financial markets**' (available from Corner House, tel. 01258 473 795, cornerhouse@gn.apc.org), which will list the analysts for all the baddest oil, mining, biotech etc companies.

Alternatively, try the *Financial Times*: analysts are often quoted on the back page of the 'Companies & Markets' section. Or search for the company's name, along with 'companies report' (the name of the section) or 'analyst', on the *FT* CD-ROM at City Business Library, or on www.ft.com

Extel Survey run a competition each year (latest one was 9th July 1999) for the best analysts in the City, sector by sector. Entrants and winners are worth noting, as they tend to be the most important and influential people. The survey is expensive, but is held in the British Library (above), and is sometimes referred to in the *FT*: do a search for "Extel Survey".

POLITICAL LINKS

For info on lobbying activity, the *Directory of Employers' Associations* and the *Directory of Associations and Professional Bodies in the UK* (in the reference section of your local library) list **trade associations** relevant to an industry, most of which carry out lobbying in the interests of their members. Many of these will send an annual report / publicity material and membership list if asked. (Note the distinction between a trade association, which works for member companies, and a professional association, which works for individuals. You can generally tell by the organisation's name. Professional bodies are often called institutes).

You could try looking in *Hansard* (above - other approaches), in particular at select committees, standing committees, all party groups etc. Many corporations now have **in-house** 'government relations' staff (ie lobbyists) - contact details can be found in the classifieds section of *The House* magazine.

The other way of lobbying is through political **consultancies** (professional freelance lobbyists) - there are 30 or 40 main firms in the UK; about 15 of these register at the Association of Professional Political Consultants, at 50 Rochester Row, London SW1P 1JU, tel. 0171 828 7127. The APPC keeps a register of who their clients are, which can be bought for ~£15, or examined for free.

These days business people are involved directly in the machinery of government - as members of policy committees, advisory groups and executive agencies' boards and even as ministers. These connections may appear in biographical details in the company annual report. Corporate Watch holds a list of about 120 **quangos** (non-departmental public bodies) (out of a total of 800 in the UK) and their private sector members.

The **Register of Members' Interests** tells you (in theory, at least) which MPs are benefiting materially from which companies, although it's organised alphabetically by MP, not by company, so it's a bit of a trawl. Political parties also record all major donations, although they don't give amounts.

The company annual report (for a plc) is legally obliged to declare any political or charitable donations over £200 within that year. For more detail, try the Labour Research Department - 0171 928 0621.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

To follow a company's PR strategy, try looking in the trade journal **PR Week** (or possibly *Marketing*). You can find out which PR companies it is retaining by looking through the **Public Relations Consultancy Yearbook**, published by the PRCA.

Reliability of information

Beware of libel! Note that for example you can be sued for using something from a newspaper which was libellous if you did not take reasonable steps to ensure its reliability. Certainly any campaign literature should be checked before use.

Unless your source is either a document signed or published by the subject, or a public record (ie from the government), or something you've directly seen or heard and documented carefully, try to back it up with another source. The less reliable your sources, the more corroborating further sources you need.

Use of devices such as "according to ..." and "allegedly" help with libel-dodging, but you may still be found liable if an incorrect inference can be drawn from what you write. Another useful tactic is to surround any potentially libellous comments with very critical comments which you can definitely back up. That way, when the company states which bits of your publication it considers libellous, it is implicitly admitting the truth of those bits which it doesn't challenge.

To protect a source who might lose their job or get in other kinds of trouble for revealing information to the public, bring a witness (who can testify) to the interview, who doesn't know the source's name.

And finally...

If you know of any research techniques or sources not covered in this guide, please tell us about them.

Don't forget to use your imagination. And good luck with your researches.