



Tipsheet from Inside the Investigation: Katie Thornton

THE REPORTING

Katie Thornton is a print and audio journalist based in Minneapolis. She received FIJ support for both seasons of her podcast “The Divided Dial,” which she reported and released with WNYC’s On the Media. The first season (December 2022) examined how the political right came to dominate talk radio in the US — and investigated how one company was quietly launching an ultra-conservative media empire from the airwaves. This season was honored with a Peabody Award. The second season (May 2025) reveals the untold story of shortwave radio — including the surprising history of its role in building the modern anti-government militia movement, and why a group of Wall Streeters is currently trying to gain control of this often-ignored stretch of our public airwaves.

TIPS FROM KATIE

Communicate the whole time. While I recommend waiting until well into the reporting process to contact your accountability interviewees, reach out to others early on. This includes academic experts, possible characters, people whose names and numbers you find in public records/comments, acquaintances of acquaintances, everyone. Ask if you’re on the right track, or if there’s something you’re missing that needs to be explored. Build relationships from the beginning. Along the way, stay in touch with your sources; keep them informed of the story’s progress. (To me, this always feels like a psychologically large task — but it takes mere minutes. Take 15 minutes every couple of days to check in with sources.) Often, when I have consistent communication with sources, characters, experts, etc., they will send me tips that I may not have found yet.

Use all records available to you, including public records that don’t require a FOIA request. Lawsuits, federal filings (i.e. FCC, FEC, IRS), declassified documents, newspapers, industry catalogs, etc. Especially if you are doing investigative reporting that has an explanatory/historical component (as I do), this is vital context.

As always: Record everything! (And check your state's recording consent laws.)

When approaching accountability interviews, be open-minded, but intellectually honest up front. I like to conduct these interviews in the second half of the reporting process — i.e. after I have done extensive reporting via public records, other interviews, archives, etc. I never want to learn something vital after the fact (though it does happen). Come to interviews obscenely prepared, but still with an open mind. Don't miss your opportunity to ask hard questions. While interviewing, stand in for the listeners/reader: What questions will they have? Ask those questions! What questions will *you* have as you listen back through your recording? Ask them.

Remember the stakes, and who holds the power. Punch at the appropriate weight. In reporting both seasons of this podcast, my goal was to ask challenging questions and reveal the inner workings, political-economic motivations, and potentially legal violations of powerful media entities — not to punch down on the average talk radio listener.

Don't be afraid to tell a good story. There are many ways that investigative stories can have an impact. One is to be heard/read by and inform as many people as possible. *Always* adhere to journalistic ethics (no red herrings! fact-check!), but don't be afraid to use literary and narrative techniques to keep as many people listening or reading for the entire story.