

NEWS LIBRARIANS: DETECTIVES OF THE NEWSROOM

BY JOYCE GRANT

In 2018, a building in Scarborough caught fire. Two reporters at the *Toronto Star*, Fatima Syed and Vjosa Isai, were assigned to cover it. It was a “breaking story,” which means facts about the fire were still emerging as the reporters were writing about it.

“One minute we thought it was a house fire, the next minute we were hearing the owners (of the building) had multiple houses in the area,” says Fatima Syed.

The reporters needed to find out where those other houses were so they could interview people who lived in them. And they needed the information right away.

“A lot of what we do is like what a private eye would do,” says Lange, “except we do it from our desktops.”

They turned to the paper’s news librarians. Astrid Lange has worked in the *Star*’s library for nearly 20 years. Lange and Rick Sznajder, a *Star* librarian since 1988, help journalists find information quickly.

“They know where to look, whereas we sometimes have to go through several attempts before we find the gold mine (of information),” says Syed. News



librarians also have access to databases of information that journalists may not have.

“Not everything is on Google,” says Lange. Unlike the way it may seem on some TV dramas, she says, when police detectives put in a person’s name and get a whole list of information about them, “(in reality) there’s no one large database where we can just plunk someone’s name in and get all the information.”

The *Star*’s library has subscriptions to lots of different databases. When reporters want to know something, Lange says she first thinks about the type of information being requested. “Do they need a property record? Financial information? (Information on someone’s) family members? Then we have to go to different resources to retrieve that information.”

“Especially on the breaking news desk, you’re always racing the clock to make the print deadline or get stuff up on the web as fast as possible,” says Vjosa Isai. She works at the *Globe and Mail* now, and says the *Globe*’s news librarians are also “amazing.”

News librarians often have to get very creative, to find the answers the reporters need. They have to follow the trail of information and see where it leads.

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Not every newspaper has a news librarian, but several Canadian papers do. Besides the *Toronto Star*, there are news librarians at the *Globe and Mail*, the *CBC*, the *Hamilton Spectator* and the *Vancouver Province*.



JOURNALISM 101

FINDING FACTS

There are three main ways reporters gather facts for their articles: observing it themselves, interviewing experts and people who experienced the event, or reading information about a subject (doing research).

The Internet is a vast network of information about so many things, but often it's difficult to find the specific information a reporter needs. To make it easier to find, information is sorted into topics and put into databases. A database is a collection of information about a particular subject, that can be easily searched and updated.

Many databases are free, but lots of them require a "subscription." In other words, it costs money to use them. Librarians subscribe to many databases, so they have lots of high-quality, up-to-date information at their fingertips.

One example of a database is the "Architectural Index for Ontario," which contains information about Canadian architects, buildings and parks. So, if a reporter is writing a story about a particular building in Toronto and wants to know more about who built it, she could use this database for facts.



DIG DEEPER

LINKS TO LEARN MORE

- In this one-minute video, Astrid Lange talks about how she helps reporters find information. (Video: Kelsey Wilson, Photos: Steve Russell.)

[LEARN MORE](#)

- The 2018 house-fire story written by Fatima Syed and Vjosi Isai (may not be suitable for all young readers).

[LEARN MORE](#)



DID YOU KNOW?

LIBRARIES ARE AWESOME!

The *Toronto Star* library can only be used by *Star* journalists, but your own local library has lots of resources as well as librarians who can help you find the information you need. For instance, with a Toronto Public Library card, you can access newspaper articles back to the 1800s, use databases, borrow musical instruments from some branches, read free comics on your phone or tablet and, of course, borrow great books.



EDUCATION CONNECTION

RESEARCH AND NEWS GATHERING

Discuss!

If you were one of the reporters assigned to cover the house fire, what information would you need from a librarian? How would you use that information in your article?

Investigate!

In 2018, Fatima Syed and Vjosa Isai worked at the *Star* as interns. They have since moved to other news organizations. Where are they now and what kinds of stories do they write?

Check it out! Use Google to find a list of databases. Which ones look most interesting to you?