

Fogg, C. (2005). *Release the hounds: A guide to research for journalists and writers*. Sydney, Australia: Allen & Unwin.

Reviewed by: [James Hollings](#)

"Hanging around in bars is OK, but there is more to the game these days, or should be. And this is a book that could help lift your performance."

A sobering admission from an Australian journalist, but this quote on the cover blurb of this handy reference text is not a bad summation of what this new addition to the journalism reference market has to offer.

The author, Christine Fogg, is a "trained" journalist who specialises in teaching information retrieval methods to journalism students at the University of Technology, Sydney. And although there's probably something in here for everyone, the bulk of it is aimed at the younger end of the market.

As you might expect from the title, there is a distinctly feral tone to the chapter headings:

In "Marking the Territory" the aspiring hack is introduced to the basics of research. Journalists, we are told, need "good general knowledge" and "interest in public affairs". Other useful tools include "imagination" and "a basic knowledge of the way the world works". Once past this simplistic stuff, however there is a solid grounding in the fundamentals of gathering and evaluating information. The chapter goes into genealogical sources, discusses how to avoid fake websites, and looks at some of the basics of critically evaluating statistical data.

In Picking up the Scent we learn many of the usual tricks of the trade; dealing with contacts, on and off the record stuff, what types of organisations there are and the kinds of information you are likely to get from them. There is a particularly useful section on how to find academic experts in various fields. Unlike many supposedly trans-Tasman books, this one DOES appear to have a genuine Kiwi factor in the listings, rather than just the usual paragraph tacked on the end of a solid chapter of Oz wisdom. Otago University, for example, has a searchable expertise database of academics; likewise Fogg has listed the National Library's Te Puna directory.

In "Digging up the Business Bones Fogg covers the usual business sources; company searches, the Commerce Commission and the Australian equivalents, as well as the usual stuff on public vs private companies.

And so it goes; "Sniffing the Legal Breeze" reveals how to make the most of the law; Tracking Down Government Resources ; Old Scents and New Trails, and "Scratching Up the Numbers and Crunching Them" all pretty much cover what you might expect; the latter had a particularly useful section on spreadsheets and how to use them to crunch raw data. Possibly self-evident; but from my experience something like this would give many journalists a sense of freedom to explore statistics in their own way rather than simply taking what they're given.

So a very solid, compact reference tool for the budding and mid-range journo. My main criticism is that some areas are a bit light. The section on developing contacts is good as far as it goes, but has clearly been written by someone who has never really done a round in any depth.

It talks about the need to occasionally "burn" contacts in the interests of journalism's "larger ethical concerns"; in other words, presumably, break a confidence or tell a lie to someone so you can expose either them or someone else. Personally I find this naive. The kinds of people who need to be exposed like that will never really be "deep" contacts anyway: they are simply too untrustworthy. Really deep contacts, the best kind, in my experience, are those with both access and a strong moral sense: they are genuinely interested in making grot public, for the right reasons, not just malicious ones.

There is precious little here on how to spot and cultivate these people. That kind of craft is something that's generally passed on from those who have done it to those who want to. In these days when there is so much about the dumbing down of newsrooms in the interest of corporate profit margins, maybe this sort of craftwork is being lost.

Perhaps there is a gap here for a sequel.

Purchase information: ISBN 1 74114322 5, RRP AU\$24.95, Available from good booksellers or direct from [Allen and Unwin](#).

About the reviewer: *James Hollings is a journalism lecturer in the Department of Communication and Journalism at Massey University, New Zealand. He has extensive experience in the industry, and has worked in many senior*

roles in newspapers and radio both in New Zealand and overseas. He has won several journalism awards, including the Jubilee Prize for investigative reporting.

James has also co-produced and directed two documentaries which featured at the New Zealand International Film Festival. One was *The Last Post*, the story of the merger of two of New Zealand's largest newspapers, the Dominion and The Evening Post. The other was *The Whirling Man*, a look at the life of one of Wellington's best-loved eccentrics, Arnold Brooker.