Investigative journalism: how’s that work?

JULY’S LONDON Freelance Branch meeting featured Tom Randall, a TV investigative journalist with Wiretap Productions; and Mark Watts, editor-in-chief of investigative website Exaro – www.exaronom.com – which commissions (and pays) freelances.

Tom got his first job by pitching a story. That's unusual in TV – production companies have departments dedicated to coming up with ideas, and others to commissioning people to make them. "All that the people who run these companies do all day," he says, "is have meetings and talk about stories... so talk to them.

He's done six pieces for Channel 4's Dispatches – one undercover as a debt collector, and last year exposing a landlord who while running "a so-called charity" talked about how he enjoyed threatening people with baseball bats.

Tom finds the Channel 4 Indy Desk and Newsnight approachable – as are Brown Envelope films, run by former Guardian journalist David Hencke. He mentioned as a recent success the story of the man running the Student Loan Company – "I've always had a slight problem with the label 'Investigative Journalist'," he said, "and would hope that all journalists would try to find out what's really going on rather than take the huff and guff..."

Now there's an appetite for investigating all centres of power". There's been a backlash against the accountants: "They are the enemy, not lawyers".

Don't invest in a subject and spend a lot of time and money before you know there's a market, warns Mark. You need to find someone to fund development. In UK TV, there is some scope at C4 and Newsnight where you don't have to do be a big production house to get used. New models are arriving – such as www.fairpie.com which asks for a minimum £2 per watch.

Exaro has investment funding for three years. The site's aimed at city professionals: a broadsheet readership doesn't want to pay for information online, but actuaries and lawyers are used to paying for information for example from the FT and the Lexis-Nexis databases.

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