

# THE TACTICAL UNDERCOVER OPERATION

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# INTERVIEWING WITNESSES IN THE AGE OF TIKTOK AND DEEPPAKES: How Modern Investigators Navigate Memory Contamination, Viral Narratives, and AI-Modified Reality

BY **JODY O'GUINN**, CEO/FOUNDER  
INVESTIGATOR CALABASH INVESTIGATIVE CONSULTANTS, LLC

The private investigator's job has always been to uncover facts, separate truth from fiction, and document evidence that can withstand scrutiny. While those fundamentals remain unchanged, the environment in which investigations occur has transformed dramatically.

Today's witnesses live in a world dominated by social media, viral content, artificial intelligence, and instant access to information. Within minutes of a major incident, thousands of opinions, videos, theories, and accusations can circulate online. By the time an investigator conducts an interview, a witness may have consumed hours of content related to the event.

The result is a growing challenge for investigators: determining whether a witness remembers what they actually observed, or what they later learned online.

## THE SOCIAL MEDIA CONTAMINATION PROBLEM

Human memory has never functioned like a video recorder. Research has consistently demonstrated that memory is reconstructive, meaning that individuals rebuild memories each time they recall them, making recollections vulnerable to suggestion and outside influence. Social media has amplified this vulnerability.

A witness to a vehicle accident, workplace incident, or criminal event may immediately begin searching online for information. They may watch TikTok videos, read Facebook comments, participate in Reddit discussions, or view YouTube analyses. As they consume information, their original observations can become intertwined with details obtained from others.

Investigators increasingly encounter witnesses who confidently report facts they never personally observed. They are not intentionally deceptive; rather, they have unknowingly blended firsthand observations with information acquired after the

event. The challenge for investigators is identifying where observation ends and influence begins.

## THE TIKTOK EFFECT

Few platforms shape public perception faster than TikTok. The platform's algorithm rewards engagement, often pushing users toward increasingly similar content. Once a user views one video related to an incident, dozens more may follow, frequently promoting the same theories or conclusions. This creates what investigators might call "narrative convergence."

Multiple witnesses may begin describing events using identical language, repeating the same theories, or reaching the same conclusions despite having viewed the event from completely different perspectives. While consistency among witnesses traditionally suggests reliability, today's investigator must consider another possibility: everyone may simply be repeating the same viral narrative.

In today's world of instant access to news through social media, agreement does not always indicate accuracy. Sometimes it indicates exposure to the same online content.

## CROWDSOURCED INVESTIGATIONS AND FALSE CONFIDENCE

Online communities routinely attempt to solve crimes, identify suspects, and analyze incidents. While these efforts occasionally generate useful leads, they also create opportunities for misinformation.

Witnesses who participate in these discussions often become exposed to assumptions presented as facts. Over time, repeated exposure can increase confidence in detail that originated from online speculation rather than personal observation.

One of the most dangerous aspects of memory contamination is that it often increases witness confidence. The more frequently a person hears a particular version of events, the more familiar, and therefore believable, it becomes. As a result, investigators should never equate confidence with accuracy.

## DEEPPAKES AND AI-GENERATED EVIDENCE

The rise of artificial intelligence presents an even greater chal-

lenge. Modern AI tools can create convincing photographs, videos, voice recordings, text messages, and social media posts. Deepfake technology has advanced to the point where many fabricated recordings can deceive ordinary viewers and listeners.

Witnesses exposed to manipulated content may unknowingly incorporate false information into their recollections. A witness who originally observed only part of an incident may later believe they witnessed additional details after repeatedly viewing an AI-generated video or hearing a fabricated audio recording.

For investigators, verification has become essential. Every digital artifact must be treated with healthy skepticism until its authenticity can be established.

The question is no longer whether evidence can be manipulated. The question is how investigators can identify manipulation before it influences witness testimony.

## INTERVIEWING FOR INFORMATION EXPOSURE

Modern witness interviews should include questions designed to identify potential contamination sources. Some examples are:

- Have you viewed any videos related to this event?
- Have you discussed the incident on social media?
- Have you participated in online forums or discussions?
- Have you seen photographs or recordings connected to the event?
- Have you watched news reports or interviews with other witnesses?

These questions can help establish what information the witness may have consumed after the event and allow investigators to better assess the reliability of specific details.

## SEPARATING OBSERVATION FROM INTERPRETATION

One of the most effective interviewing techniques remains separating direct observation from interpretation.

Investigators should continually ask: “What did you personally observe?” rather than, “What do you think happened?”

Witnesses frequently combine observations with assumptions. A statement such as “He intentionally drove through the red light” contains both factual observations and personal conclusions.

By focusing on observable facts, investigators can better distinguish genuine memories from opinions, theories, and information acquired from outside sources.

## WHERE DVSA FITS INTO MODERN INVESTIGATION

As AI-generated audio becomes more common, investigators face an additional challenge: determining whether a recording represents an authentic human voice.

Digital Voice Stress Analysis (DVSA) is not a tool designed to authenticate recordings or conclusively identify AI-generated speech. However, by using proprietary software and algorithms, experienced DVSA examiners have observed that synthetic voices often lack many of the subtle physiological characteristics present in natural human speech.

Human speech contains micro-muscle tremors in the laryngeal muscles, influenced by breathing patterns, emotional responses, cognitive processing, and physiological stress, that dampen under stress. This creates a frequency variation that displays absolute



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stress at the exact time of utterance. AI-generated voices are created through algorithms that attempt to replicate these characteristics but may not consistently reproduce the complexity found in authentic human communication.

When evaluating recordings, investigators using DVSA may identify anomalies, unnatural consistency, or atypical voice patterns that warrant additional scrutiny. Such findings should never be viewed as proof of AI manipulation but rather as indicators that further forensic examination may be necessary.

In the future, investigative interviewers may increasingly use DVSA alongside digital forensic analysis, metadata examination, and source verification to assess the credibility of audio evidence.

However, as synthetic media becomes more sophisticated, investigators will need multiple tools and methodologies to evaluate authenticity.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CORROBORATION

The digital age has reinforced one timeless investigative principle: no single source of information should stand alone.

Witness statements remain important, but they should be corroborated whenever possible through:

- Physical evidence
- Surveillance footage
- Digital records
- Electronic data
- Independent witness accounts
- Verified timelines

As such, modern investigators must recognize that even sincere witnesses can provide inaccurate information when exposed to viral narratives, manipulated media, and online speculation.

## CONCLUSION

The time-tested fundamentals of interviewing have not changed. Successful investigators still rely on rapport, observation, active listening, and strategic questioning. What has changed is the environment in which witnesses form memories and consume information.

Social media platforms, crowdsourced investigations, deepfakes, and artificial intelligence now influence witness perceptions in ways that would have seemed unimaginable only a decade ago. Every witness arrives with a digital history that may shape their recollections long before the interview begins.

The modern investigator's responsibility is not simply to determine what a witness remembers. It is to determine how that memory was formed, what influences may have altered it, and whether the evidence supporting it is authentic.

In an era where artificial intelligence can generate convincing voices, videos, and narratives, the pursuit of truth requires more than skilled interviewing. It requires digital awareness, investigative skepticism, and a commitment to verifying every piece of information before accepting it as fact. **PI**



*Jody O'Guinn is a retired police chief with 34 years of law enforcement leadership, serving as Deputy Chief in Alton and Chief of Police in Carbondale and Freeman Spur, Illinois. A veteran SWAT and Regional WMD SRT Commander, he also held key roles with the DEA and MEGSI narcotics task forces. He is a certified Workplace Violence Threat Specialist and an Active Shooter Response Instructor. A graduate of the FBI National Academy and LEEDS program at Quantico, he holds an MPA from Southern Illinois University. He pioneered the world's first board-certified cryptocurrency forensic investigator course and now serves as the Director of Law Enforcement Operations at Baker Group International.*



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