

Paris, December 1, 2015. Paul Brown's ten take-home tips for journalists

1. Keep an open mind: You might come to a story with an idea of what the issues are, but it is vital that you let the evidence speak for itself. Your job is to gather all the relevant facts you can find and present them clearly. Be prepared to change your mind about what the story is, and don't make assumptions about “good guys and the bad guys” before you have done your research.

2. Use all the resources available: Draw on all sources, the web, look up archived linked stories. You might want to gather some data and stories in similar cases (maybe in another country or region) that can offer a powerful comparison. Do not believe everything you read. You can only state things as fact when you are confident of your sources and have a good background in the story. If there are any doubts in your mind check the facts or leave it out.

3. Where is the news intro, or best starting point? There might be lots of complexity to a story, and lots of interesting material - but where is the news? The hard news hook, or line, might be revealed in the last minutes of a long interview. Stay sharp through every minute of your interviews and research.

4. Talk to your editor/news editor/boss: It is likely, especially with environment-related stories that you will have to think about how to sell the story to the editor or news editor. Push the hard news content. Often your editor will not want an “environment” story, so you will want to point to the social, economic or political angles – for example the power of the fossil fuel lobby, the use of “political donations” to influence people otherwise known as corruption.

5. Balance points of view: Journalists are not campaigners. Even if trusted NGOs or an independent researcher provide the impetus for a story it is essential that you gather and present all the legitimate angles. If you've only talked to one source to write a story it is not a story, it is a press release.

6. Identify and interview various experts: Even if you know you've got one good source do not stop at that. You'll need to think about the legitimacy and authority of your sources. They might belong to an official institution, hold a qualification, or belong to a mass membership organization. Maybe you've known them a long time and know that they would not deceive you. In any case, remember that having one source is very rarely enough to make a story. Some sources may be difficult to contact, or even be reluctant to talk to you. Use lots of initiative and don't take no for an answer. When people seem to be avoiding you do not give up - go and see them at their office - its much more difficult to refuse you. Then if someone refuses to talk to you despite giving them lots of chances you can use that in your story. One phrase often used is “Nobody from the Ministry was available for comment”: it is a code for “they did not want to talk to journalists”. It would be more powerful to say: “when the Minister/ministry was asked about xyz he/they refused to discuss it.”

7. Keep questions short and simple 7.: Ask just one simple question at a time. If you ask three questions in one the respondent will only answer the easiest. Ask lots of factual (yes/no,

informative) questions first. Once you feel you've got your facts move on to gather opinion / nice quotes. For example, to get a quote, say what are your hopes, dreams about what could be achieved? What would be the perfect solution of this problem? Don't be afraid to ask what seem to be stupid questions. Sometimes it draws a valuable explanation that reveals more than the respondent intended. In any event - you must, repeat must – understand the story before you can write it.

The interview may be the only chance you get to work out the background to a story. You are asking questions for the public - in a way you represent them, so you have a right to ask both simple and “uncomfortable” questions. You may have to be persistent to a degree that might be considered rude, but sometimes that is your job. But at all times stay polite and calm and above all do not argue. Be friendly and curious - by putting your interviewee at ease you are likely to get much better material out of them. Cooperation amongst environmental journalists can also be very important. If you are in a press conference and you know the Minister or whoever does not want to tell you something be ready to work together. You may only get one question each, so plan beforehand to gang up on them and gradually advance the questioning to force out the really important answers.

8. How to present the Story? Many environment stories are complex - but they are often also photogenic, or can be illustrated with engaging human stories. Use all of the resources available to bring the story to life. Think about headlines, photos, graphs, maps, sidebars (separate boxes of information or colourful human stories). Do this as you investigate and in any event in advance of writing the story. Even if an editor decides on headlines for your story it can help to focus your writing if you have a possible headline in your head before you start writing. Be ready to draw on existing resources, e.g. maps from the internet, government departments, or local authorities, photos from NGOs etc. to illustrate it.

9. Remember that you work for your readers/ viewers/ listeners - keep them interested, inform them, entertain them. In stories about dumping of foreign wastes, for example remember you are defending their interests. Do all this and you'll have grateful readers/ viewers/ listeners that will keep coming back. You'll sell more papers/ have more hits on the internet, better viewing figures, and you will have a very happy editor, keep your job; and fulfil the central job of the journalist: to get more stories in the paper / on the web/or win more airtime.

10 Remember you can change the world. We live in strange times. Environmental issues - both local and global - are more serious and more urgent. But despite this they are not top of the news and are still not well understood by the public. Editors often don't care about or understand the issues, and the public can seem uninformed or uncaring. Environmental issues don't always fit with editors' ideas about what makes “news”. Also, the public simply don't know enough about issues that will directly affect their lives. They do not always know (or want to know) how their own lives can contribute to problems. Environmental journalists are in a position to do something about all of these problems. But they need to use all their creativity and skills. This is not a case of becoming a campaigner, but a matter of finding out what is important and/or new, and turning the issues into interesting stories which people want to read. The world's top journalists have proven that the environment is news, and you can engage and motivate the public. In other words environmental journalists can change the world for the better.