

North American Street Newspaper Association (NASNA)

Session #6

Adding a fresh spin on hard news

Notes

Presenters: Steve Franklin, Community Media Workshop, Columbia College, former war correspondent, worked many years with the Chicago Tribune
Kari Lyderson, freelancer, former Washington Post reporter, worked at StreetWise
Paraphrased notes by: Cydney Gillis, Real Change

Kari: In terms of keeping news fresh, I work for all kinds of media. Everyone is dealing with keeping news fresh and keeping up the quality in the Internet age.

Papers that come out once a week or once a month have less stress on them when other papers have non-stop news being updated.

The schizophrenia in the media world now offers the opportunity to fill a need for people who feel they aren't getting what they used to in newspapers.

At StreetWise, we would cover topics that largely affected vendors – racism, police brutality, housing. For so long before the Internet media crisis, those things had a lack of thoughtful, big-picture stories because it's hard to do that in a daily news cycle.

The key thing is not to feel pressure to compete with daily newspapers or the constant stream of the Internet and to include stories with policy angles that include shelf life – legislation that's coming down or court cases that will drag on, things that won't be outdated before the story hits the printer.

The bigger thing is just getting, one, the personal stories. I worked at the Washington Post 10 years. The longest story we'd get in was a 1,000 words, if that, so the actual people affected by a story would be the sources cut first from the story.

Having the real people and being able to go in depth to show who someone is and let a character shine through whether it's immigration reform or foreclosure and how the person is being affected and giving the larger analysis.

I did a freelance piece for the Post on Native American farmers who have been discriminated against by the government and they're suing. The bigger picture to me is that, with the Native Americans, this discrimination by the Farm Home Program has allowed white farmers to take over Native American land – something that was too complicated to get into in the Washington Post story, but something that a street newspaper or magazine could go into. That story isn't going away any time soon. That's just one example.

Having the big picture and policy or historical background – about the city or other information relevant to the story you're covering. But you don't want to get bogged down in that.

Steve: Give me a scene – something you’ve written about recently.

Margo: a story on hate crimes in North America.

Steve: Did you have scenes? [Yes.] Give me your nut graph, your “why you’re here, where you’re taking me” paragraph.

Margo: It was pretty much about homeless people are dying because of hate crime.

Steve: OK, violence. Ironically, this morning, there’s a wonderful piece on a poor man in Northern Jersey that kids descended on and killed – there’s been a whole rash of attacks on Latinos.

I want to create a story and I’m going to give you some options. [My analogy is] building a house. We have to do some things first. Some writers like to put in a foundation.

[He begins outlining “houses” of various story structures on the chalkboard.]

In my head, I’m asking where’s the beginning and what’s the ending? I always look for the ending and I sometimes write it first. I like the ending. Your ending should be your goodbye, your handshake [that refers back to the nut graph that said where you were going], such as using a source asking, “What’s wrong with Americans killing these people?” It should be tightly packed to refer to the nut graph.

Think of your ending and write it down, then write everything else.

How many of you arrange your notes before you write? Good. I number and color them so when I’m in a hurry I can see it [the order of composition].

We’re building a house. Its needs electrical wiring. Those are your words. I like to paint with words.

I like write a long paragraph. Then a short one. Then a long one. You have to drag the reader through the story. You’re trying to change the rhythm. You’re walking people into your story – that’s your house and their eyes are moving around.

You can begin with a complex paragraph or something very tight.

I try to break every rule in journalism. My theory is with anything to catch people’s eyes [to get them looking around the house]. I snuck into Afghanistan right after the war started. I was in the desert. One lead I wrote went something like:

Mud. More mud. Dark mud.

That was the beginning of the story. Or for the attacks on the Latinos:

They were disheveled, their clothes torn apart, missing shoes.
Every one of the men police found beaten up were left without clothes ...

Think about what are the words that capture this scene. You want words that are active. You want words that take you right into the scene.

You can also lead off with a conversation. For example:

Five days after six men were found dead in Los Angeles, police began looking at records they found. They came across three men.

Officer: What are you doing?

Man: I'm looking to save myself.

Officer: What do you mean?

Man: I'm scared to death.

Story. Conversation. The reader sees a conversation in the story. We're letting people hear what's happening. You take the reader somewhere and take them to a conversation. Has anyone ever done that? We tend to edit them out in favor of using only the best quotes.

We have to capture readers. We have to make them read. [Another variation on this idea:]

The social workers asked the men to come to the center.

Man: I don't want to go there.

Social worker: What do you mean?

Man: I'm an afraid I'll wind up dead like my friends.

Then you go back into the story.

I'm going to try a new house. Typically, you tell everything at the top of stories and it evolves. I like to start with a little detail that grows and grows. Kari and I write for In These Times. Two weeks ago, the United Farm Workers started a campaign called "Take My Job" – [the idea being] you want to kick me out of your country? Go ahead, take my job.

[An example of starting a story on this subject:]

Alberto Obregon is a small man whose hand shakes when he talks. It's from years of working in he fields, years of pesticide exposure. How many years? Maybe 40. Maybe 27. He can't remember.

Force yourself to think about it and describe people. He's a short man. Give him context – his hand shook standing on the corner of the south Los Angeles street. You can use short sentences that don't complete a thought: He had been there too many years.

I can begin with him and then I go right to the testimony he gave at a Congressional hearing last year. I put in three paragraphs of him talking at this hearing. Then at the very end, I say think about Alberto Obregon, would you take a job from this man?

I've taken a serious, complex story and made it personal. The introduction was only 600 words. I inverted it. You're supposed to give you all the information at the top, but don't do that. Begin with a person and slowly let the story change. It grows and grows.

I like to use one person to tell big stories. [For example:]

Cleaning up after police had left the South Los Angeles building, Omar Gomez wondered where they had all gone.

Omar is your telescope into the story. You don't need anybody else. Other suggestions of how to build the house?

Mary Faith: Have you ever battled with an editor who didn't want to paint the picture up front without telling the whole story?

Steve: Every editor is a child molester. ... You fake a heart attack ... It's a negotiation.

Suzanne (Mary Faith's editor): I still might let you die.

Steve: I worked on a series for the Tribune on the immigration of women around the world. I had the part of the series going through Latin America. I traveled with people. I went to places where women were kidnapped and sold, where they got stuck at the border and ended up in brothels.

I wanted to write a story about a woman I came across who was going to leave her children. She was 17 and had 2 youngsters. She was going from Honduras with a coyote. One had raped her before. I started the story like a play:

She wakes up, looks around, washes her face and thinks what am I going to tell my mother? In two hours, I'm going away.

I gave it to the editor and he said what is this? I said I'm channeling the thoughts of the person. The editor said it was crazy and tried to change it. I put up a fight, but [editors are] all criminals. Every single one of them are criminals. [Wry humor.]

Kari: With street papers, it should be easier. They can be innovative.

Steve: here's another approach. We tell everything at the top. [For example:]

From Los Angeles to New Jersey, homeless people have been killed.

Start strong and powerful, then introduce the characters:

In Detroit, Robert Johnson, 36, is one of the people who died last year.

Then, at the end:

After two days without food and no place to go, Jose Garcia was jumped and killed by two men. Just like the other 130 men who died last year.

Very big. We worked to the bottom.

In Afghanistan, I was driving along with a photographer and a truck was taking food out and grain was falling out. Little girls would pick up every grain from the sand and put it in their aprons. The photographer said stop the car, I'm getting out -- this is a story, you go find out what it is.

The story was hunger, horrible hunger. That's another rule to think of in writing: Always let your body and your soul rule. Too often, we have these ideas and notes on what we're going to do. But what is unique and different about the story? It turns out [in the rash of Hispanics killed] that five of the people were Indians who didn't speak Spanish. The story is about the indigenous coming up from Mexico. My rule is always think differently. My lead was:

Hungry they came, hungry they left.
Alone they died, alone they're forgotten.

Another story structure is "camping in the woods in different tents." I introduce the story with a feature lead, a quotation. Then in every part I come back to a common theme.

For the last five years, 150 people have died in South Los Angeles.
[Italics:] *Ernesto Gomez never thought he would wind up ...*

All of a sudden I'm jarringly introducing the reader to Ernesto Gomez. Then the shelter operator can tell us what he knew about Gomez when he showed up at the shelter.

Let yourself try some things and fail. Experiment. I've written some things that didn't work out. Some editors have asked me are you high? That's the joy of it. But if you want people to read, you have to do different things.

Kari: If you're editor says you have to have an inverted pyramid, ask them why, given that people aren't coming to the paper for news.

Bruce: In these different formats, it would seem the story and/or the character is directing you to a particular format. With that woman, how could anyone understand what that woman is going through? It lends itself to that existential presentation.

Steve: Context is always important [too]. Always tell your reader the context.

Andrew: This could almost be a fiction-writing workshop. That affirms for me that people writing news stories need to be readers of fiction.

Steve: Yes and no. Fiction is movies. You can't just say the news – it's dead. It's been everywhere. You have to find new techniques.

And, something I do -- say the words out loud. Does it sound good? [Does it have rhythm. For example:]

She will work without water, where she knows there's no bathroom, where she will stoop all day long.

For 1.8 million immigrants, the situation hasn't changed ...

I've had a terrible time at many newspapers I've worked at. Editors all belong in jail. It's not easy. I would introduce [these techniques] slowly to find out what works for you. Show your editors your beginning and ask them what they think.

I read my stories aloud to people and ask does that work for you?

Kari: For making the case for more experimental/literary approaches, ease into it with your editor and make sure it's treated differently so hopefully it will get good feedback.

Delegate: How do you find people in the scene?

Steve: Always look around. That's what I do. Try to find scenes of people that are different that add to the story. That gets back to listening to people.

I was in Baghdad during the invasion. I went to a hospital and asked the doctor if people were having emotional problems. He said no. People aren't having emotional problems – they can't feel anymore. We're like the walking dead. We're like Holocaust survivors.

He told me a story about a bomb that went off near a school. The kids walked by the bodies and went home. That's a story.

I use the term writing with an informed heart. You have to know what to pick and how to put it all together.

At a rally in Pittsburgh once, I saw a little kid watching the rally. Your head is a camera. What you see is what you have to project. What are you looking at? What are you picking up? The richer the information in your notebook or on your tape recorder, the better. You catch the vernacular.

When you get to a scene, be free to let the scene come to you, but look for something different that you hadn't expected.

I also study writers. Look at how they tell the story.

Kari: The people become the angles.

Steve: The goal is to humanize people, respect people. Make sure you listen to the people you're writing about and you carry their words.