

# **Broadcast Journalism** **A critical introduction**

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## On the road

### Gathering raw material

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## Introduction

The stuff of broadcast news is actuality: pictures that show the viewer what's happening and audio that paints pictures in listeners' minds. Whatever the situation, the broadcast journalist is looking to bring a story to life. You want the right pictures, the eyewitness interviews and the atmosphere. Whether you are working in radio, television or online, gathering the raw material for a story is at the heart of the job. This applies whether you are a correspondent covering events that will become part of history or standing outside the local magistrates' court on a wet Wednesday.

It's not just the professional who gathers the raw material: it can come from viewers and listeners. The memorable mobile phone images of passengers walking down a tube tunnel during the terrorist attacks of July 2005 were one of the first uses of such material by mainstream broadcasters. And BBC 5 Live ran a recording from a listener's Dictaphone when police raided terrorist suspects after the bombings.

Technological literacy is more important than ever. Radio journalists are used to being responsible for the technical quality of their recording and editing but, increasingly, television journalists are being given a similar responsibility to film and edit their own material. Familiarity and trust in your equipment is crucial – make it your slave, not your master.

Online journalism has leavened the mix still further. It makes it possible to tell stories in a non-linear way, using a mix of text, audio, video and still pictures that allow the audience to choose how much or how little of a story they want to know. Each of these elements needs to earn its place in the story.

This chapter will look at the practice of gathering raw material on location for use in radio, television and online, and will pay special attention to videojournalism, where journalists are responsible for the pictures and the sound as well as the words.

## Preparation

Whether you are covering a long-planned set-piece event or dashing out on a breaking story, organisation is crucial. It is always better to have more information about a story than you are going to need, so planning and research are essential; as is keeping up to date. News editors expect all their journalists to be aware of what's happening in the area. Reporters are expected to 'read themselves in' by browsing newspapers, looking through previous output and knowing what the opposition is doing. In small newsrooms, reporters do their own research, while in larger ones, particularly in television, there may be journalists whose job it is to set up interviews and provide briefings. But do not count on it! While the ideal briefing sheet might consist of details of where you are going, who you are interviewing, some suggested questions and a pile of cuttings, it is more likely to be a hurried conversation with details jotted down in your notebook, and you work out the rest on the way or when you arrive.

All newsrooms will have a diary and at least one daily meeting, usually in the morning. These meetings will consider a list of stories that might be covered, known as 'prospects', that will include diary items, follow-ups on previous stories and breaking stories. A local radio station will typically concentrate on hourly bulletins, with perhaps a news magazine programme requiring longer items. A half-hour regional television news programme will be looking for a mix of hard news stories and lighter items. There may be live guests, live location reports and pre-recorded packages. Some larger newsrooms, particularly in television, will have a planning desk that sets up coverage of stories in advance, and compiles the daily prospects sheet. These items are never set in stone. As new stories break, reporters may be diverted from one to another. So when the news editor says the managing director of a local company is available for interview in half an hour about a round of redundancies, the reporter will be expected to know that job losses were expected and what the company does.

Whatever the newsroom, ideas for stories and features and ways of covering them must be in synch with the programme or station's understanding of its target audience. It would be pointless suggesting a story on young people's voting habits to a station targeting an audience of over fifties. The more original the idea, the better. No news editor likes to think they are following up stories that have appeared in newspapers or on rival stations or programmes. Find a new approach, a new angle; or, better still, unearth your own story from your own contacts.

Contacts are the lifeblood of journalism and every journalist will keep an address book – electronic or paper – full of the names, home phone numbers and mobile numbers of practically everyone they have ever met. Every person you interview, and every story you cover, will yield someone you might want to talk to again. Calling round your contacts regularly, particularly on slow news days when not much is happening, just might turn up a great story.

## Finding interviewees

It can be the most time-consuming and frustrating aspect of the job, but setting up interviews in advance is usually essential. Most organisations have press offices, which can be useful for background information, but press officers are last resorts as interviewees. They have their own interests at heart, not yours. It's far better to start as high in the organisation as you can and to settle for the press office only if there is absolutely no alternative. There usually is.

Chase more than one angle and never rely on anyone to phone you back. You could be waiting for days. For example, you are covering a story about train delays: engineering works have overrun, leaving thousands of commuters delayed or stranded. You decide to call the company responsible for the work to find out why, but the managing director is on another call. Say you will hold on. Or you are told he is out. Ask for his mobile phone number. If your request is refused, despite your best efforts and politest manner, ask if there's someone else you can talk to. If you are still stuck, try another angle. In this case, you could try the train operators for their reaction and a rail passengers' lobby group. If all of this fails and you are staring at the phone in despair, do not waste time but explain your situation to the news editor, who will decide whether you should continue trying or cut your losses.



## Leaving the newsroom

Do not leave the newsroom without doing some basic research into the story you are covering, and arrange as much as you can beforehand. Read the newspapers and any briefing material, check the Internet and your news archive. If you are responsible for your own equipment, make sure it all works and that you have spare batteries. There is nothing more embarrassing and unprofessional than returning from a story without the material you thought you had. It happens, but do not let it happen to you.

You should also make sure you know what the newsroom wants. Is it a twenty-second clip of audio for the next bulletin? A three-minute interview for the drive-time programme? A two-minute package for the breakfast show? Or all three? There is no point in getting back to the newsroom with enough material for a lengthy documentary and even less point if it all arrives too late. However, there will be times – for example on breaking stories – when details are scarce. You may know only that there's been a fire at the local hospital or a pile-up on the motorway. Do not hang about – check your kit and go, then establish the facts when you get there and file as quickly as you can. And it may sound simple, but check the map, even if you have a satellite navigation device. Many a reporter has been caught out by assuming they know where, say, Regent Street is, only to discover they should have gone to Regent Road.

## Getting permission

Filming or recording on a public highway is rarely a problem, unless you are causing an obstruction, but for almost anywhere else you will need permission. You do not have the authority to enter private premises without permission, and this includes schools, hospitals and other public buildings, railway stations and shopping centres. For example, if you are considering reporting from a shopping mall, you must have permission from the centre management, usually in writing or via email. In the case of railway stations, it's usually the station manager; for hospitals, the chief executive or press office.

You should take particular care when reporting on stories that involve children. Usually, the permission of the headteacher is enough to allow you to record or film on school premises, but you may also have to obtain the permission of individual parents, depending on the story. This is often impractical and you may have to agree that individual children will not be identifiable. Both the BBC's editorial guidelines and the Ofcom code have detailed sections about how to handle stories that involve children.

## Health and safety

Journalists sent abroad to war zones are required to undergo hazardous-environment training, while training in health and safety for general field reporting is a legal requirement for all journalists. Cables snaking across a pavement could be a risk to the public if someone trips over them. A radio car or satellite truck parked in the wrong place might cause an obstruction. You might bump into someone while

walking backwards trying to grab an interview. In all these cases the broadcaster might be liable if someone decides to sue.

Some situations are more obviously hazardous than others – covering a violent demonstration, terrorist attack, firearms incidents, sieges or bomb threats – and best practice is to find a place of safety from which to film or commentate. Your employer also has a duty of care to you.

Before you leave the newsroom, you must assess the safety of a location and update the assessment as circumstances change. All well-organised newsrooms will have a generic risk-assessment form, usually a combination of boxes to tick identifying the hazard and a brief explanation of any action you will take to minimise the risk. While the Health and Safety at Work Act (1974) does not require that all risk is eliminated, every effort should be made to reduce it 'so far as is reasonably practicable'.

## On location

### Radio

The beauty of radio may be its relative technical simplicity and intimacy, but the art of radio is sound. The best radio journalism is vibrant, descriptive and takes the listener into the story. It has strong interviews from eyewitnesses and people at the centre of the story, whether that's a party political conference or a murder. Most importantly, it has atmosphere and creates a sense of location. A story about school meals, for example, would include the chatter of children's voices, the clatter of plates and cutlery, the sizzle of the kitchen.

So, on the way to a story, consider what sounds you need to record (wildtrack) to convey the atmosphere, as well as thinking about who you will be interviewing. Never be tempted to add sound effects later – it does not work and always sounds stilted. It's also fakery. If you are at an airport, make sure you record announcements and the hum of the check-in. If you are covering a terrorist alert, record police sirens and traffic noise. Even in what appears to be a quiet location there'll be something – birdsong in a park, distant traffic, footsteps (see Chapter 11 for more on this).

Technological advances have put paid to the days when material was recorded on location and edited back in the newsroom. There are more 'lives' from the radio car and material sent back via wireless links. BBC local radio reporters now use a pocket computer phone which can record broadcast-quality audio, edit a simple package and send it back to the studio without the need for lines or even a radio car. It will also take still pictures and video for the website.

### Television

If radio reporters think in terms of audio, then television reporters think in pictures: not individual shots, but sequences. If there are no pictures, nine times out of ten there is no story. Whether you are working alone or with a camera crew, an understanding of visual grammar – how moving pictures are integrated and juxtaposed to tell a story – is crucial. It is your job to make sure the camera captures



the essential action, be it a noisy protest march, a celebrity visit to your patch or thinking up clever ways of explaining a pay deal.

Say you are filming in a school which has just introduced a new healthy menu. You should have an idea of all the elements you want to film – children eating in the canteen, kitchen staff serving, interviews with staff and children. Then work out how you are going to break down each of these chunks into editable sequences and how you will structure the final piece to tell the whole story (see Chapter 11 for more on this).

On pre-planned stories you'll sometimes get a chance to 'recce' (short for 'reconnaissance') the location beforehand. This means you can have a good look around and work out the best place for the camera and pick a good position for a piece-to-camera (PTC) or stand-up. Usually, though, you'll have to think on your feet and grasp opportunities as they arise.

If you are going to include a PTC (and it is not compulsory, despite what you might think from watching most news programmes!), then it needs to be there for a reason other than personal vanity. They work well when placing the reporter at the heart of the action – the viewer can see you were there. They can be used to explain parts of the story which have no pictures: for example, when you have a statement but no interview. However, putting PTCs at either the start or the end of an item has become a cliché and is probably best avoided. Never record a PTC that is more than approximately twenty seconds and try to ad-lib around particular words or phrases rather than memorise a whole script. And, if possible, introduce movement – walk a few steps or into frame.

### News conferences and the scrum

The set-piece news conference, or 'presser', is not particularly broadcast friendly. However, in some cases – for example, police appeals for witnesses – they provide the best opportunity to get actuality from those at the heart of the story. Pictures of a row of people sitting behind a table against a corporate logo do not make good television, but a soundbite from a bereaved mother might well be worth it. On the other hand, every news organisation will get the same soundbite.

Always arrive with plenty of time to set up your equipment and find a good seat. Check with the organisers to see if there will be one-to-one interviews after it – the best way of getting your own interview. But record the conference anyway in case the plan changes. Radio journalists can steal a march on their television rivals by conducting their interviews while the TV people set up their equipment.

While there is an element of organisation with the news conference, that is not the case with the media scrum. Here, it is the person with the sharpest elbows who usually gets the best actuality. Hordes of reporters wielding cameras, microphones, flashguns and notebooks yell questions at someone at the centre of a big story. Often these scrums come after reporters have been staking out an individual, or at the end of a big court case, or outside the home of a scandal-hit celebrity or politician. For ordinary people not used to publicity, they can be intimidating and intrusive, and there are times when it is right to withdraw, as reporters did in the aftermath of the Dunblane massacre in Scotland in 1996, when sixteen primary schoolchildren and their teacher were shot dead in a school gym.

### User-generated content

In the days after a tsunami struck large parts of South East Asia on Boxing Day 2004, broadcasters were inundated with video footage of the tragedy filmed by survivors. It was dramatic, eyewitness material and the first big example of how so-called 'citizens' journalism' was finding a place. Earlier the same year, footage of cars being swept through the flooded village of Boscastle in Cornwall was handed to broadcasters by residents, having been filmed on ordinary domestic camcorders.

It was during the terrorist attacks on London in July 2005 that the full possibilities of user-generated content were brought home to news organisations. People caught up in the attacks used mobile phones to capture the aftermath, walking to safety from a bombed tube train.

Now it is commonplace for broadcasters to seek such material in the wake of a big story. They do so by on-air requests and on-screen captions. Reporters also request CCTV footage as part of the raw material of a story. In 2006 a closed-circuit camera recorded pictures of a woman apparently being hit by a police officer at the back of a Sheffield night club, and the pictures were used widely by local and national broadcasters.

While user-generated content of this sort has a place and may be dramatic, it poses questions for journalists in terms of how to use it. Ownership of the copyright resides with the person who shot the film, so permission to use it is needed, and a fee might be demanded.

### Videojournalism

The term 'videojournalism' first came to the UK in 1994 with a cable television experiment in London, Channel 1 (Boyd, 2001; Franklin *et al.*, 2005). Its backers, among them Sir David English, immediately realised the financial implications of doing journalism with new, small, lightweight cameras and set out to make 'polished news at low cost' (Boyd, 2001: 383). One-person crews, working with a reporter, were already being used for some jobs in some regional television newsrooms, but they used conventional, large Beta cameras. Channel 1 took this process a step further by removing the specialist camera operator and giving the camera to the journalist.

Reporters in mainstream television watched sceptically as Channel 1 journalists searched London for stories. They simply did not believe that you could do good journalism *and* get good pictures and sound. Sometimes they were undoubtedly proved right, and within the industry the channel was nicknamed 'Wobblyvision'. However, the financial benefits were obvious, and sufficiently great for accountants to exert irresistible pressure on editors. Other regional television channels, including Meridian and West Country Television, experimented with videojournalists. A cable channel in Birmingham, Live TV, followed suit. By the time Channel 1 folded in the late nineties, the BBC and ITN were on board too.

Videojournalists represent a new kind of regional television journalist trained in solo camera and editing techniques, which means in theory they can take total control of their news production, from conception to screening. Many have been trained by Michael Rosenblum, an American videojournalism guru. He believes



traditional television 'sucks', that it is stilted, predictable, elitist and ill-equipped to portray real life. His mission is to democratise the medium by placing small digital cameras in the hands of anybody who has the drive and enthusiasm to make television themselves. He tells them to look for characters with stories to tell, and to film those stories simply and honestly, without the technology getting in the way.

Rosenblum is insistent that we live in a 'video-driven culture'. He describes small cameras, placed in trained hands, as 'the Gutenberg's printing presses of the twenty-first century' (Rosenblum, 2000: 140). There is an ideology here: 'I think television is the most powerful medium in the world today and I think it is an extremely dangerous medium in the hands of the very few . . . The only way to temper the power of this medium is to open it up to millions of people.' Rosenblum also has strong views on the notions of journalistic detachment and impartiality: he does not believe in them. 'When television really starts to work it's not when it only reflects the story that the journalist has captured but in some ways reflects the passion with the feeling of the journalist – the way a painting does.'<sup>1</sup>

BBC videojournalism trainer Mark Egan speaks passionately about the need to devote more time to producing better-quality, more 'real' TV news. He found the time constraints of working as a TV reporter alongside a crew hugely frustrating, and that the pressure of being sent out with a slot to fill in the lunchtime programme led to 'staged' events and artificially choreographed pictures.

If they're not going to be building the ship in the morning, then you don't want them to fake building the ship in the morning. You'd rather wait until the afternoon and film it for real . . . You are trying to get reality, and reality doesn't happen when it's convenient for us.<sup>2</sup>

Former head of the BBC Nations and Regions Training Centre in Newcastle, Lisa Lambden, says that more opportunities are created for much younger reporters and technical staff:

The technology is opening this to the masses and in newsrooms what you're seeing is lots of people who previously wouldn't have had the opportunity to get involved in being on screen, not in pieces to camera but actually to be out reporting. They've seen enormous opportunities for themselves to get into the front line of television reporting.<sup>3</sup>

Between March 2003 and May 2005, the BBC trained nearly 600 staff in Rosenblum's videojournalism techniques, in an atmosphere of some scepticism and concern that professional craft skills of filming and editing would be lost or diluted. A survey conducted by the authors among fifty of those attending the three-week courses showed that the training had changed attitudes to some extent. Ninety per cent of respondents agreed that stories appropriate to videojournalism were more personal, tended to tackle human interest topics and were more dramatic. But nearly half still had reservations about the professional 'look' of such items. And more than half did not think the stories were well shot or edited. Taken together, these responses seem to suggest that videojournalism does indeed have the potential to tell the sorts of stories that may be difficult for a conventional crew to shoot, but there are serious reservations about how polished they can be. One staffer said:

'I like the idea of spending a little longer on a story and delving a little deeper, but I suspect that in the end I will just be churning out on-the-day stuff.' Another admitted that it's frustrating waiting around for traditional crews and liked the thought of more technical control, 'but I'm conscious that however good I get to be I can't compete with experienced specialist cameramen and editors'. A third recognised videojournalism's potential: 'I do feel that people open up more with this style of filming. This is partly because we are able to spend longer with interviewees and partly because of the loss of paraphernalia.'

A tangle of wires and tubing spews from her tiny body as the toddler lies comatose on a life-support machine. Jemma had been suffering fits for two days before she was sedated. The medics at Southampton General Hospital have been worried about her chances of survival. They talk us through their strategy as our screen is filled with images of her unconscious face, and her tummy rising and falling ever so gently as a ventilator controls her breathing. They decide to wake her by stopping the feed of morphine and other sleep-inducing drugs. As she surfaces, we see waves of neural activity blip before us on an EEG screen. Only now will Jemma's anxious parents learn whether she has permanent brain damage.

This is powerful, moving television; the stuff of which award-winning documentaries are made. Yet it was shot not by a meticulously produced documentary team, but by a news reporter who happened to be at the paediatric intensive-care unit on another assignment when the drama began. David Fenton's four-minute film for BBC's *South Today* was shot by him single-handed as events unfolded. His lightweight, unobtrusive camera allows him to take us on the ambulance as it speeds up the motorway to collect Jemma from her local hospital in Chichester. We join the Chichester nurse as she prepares Jemma for the journey to the specialist unit in Southampton. We travel with her on that journey, seeing the nurse hold Jemma's drips steady as the ambulance weaves at speed through traffic. Then we share the concerns of the Southampton specialists as they weigh their chances of saving Jemma's life.

Fenton used his camera in much the same way as a print journalist would use a notebook. He recorded a series of events without allowing his technology or production requirements to intrude and to manipulate what was shot. Such candid, spontaneous filming might not have been possible with the traditional television crew, whose heavyweight gear and demanding sound and lighting requirements would have slowed things down and required a more stilted, 'choreographed' approach to the filming.

## Conclusion

Newsgathering is at the heart of all journalism and in the context of broadcast journalism requires sound and pictures as well as words. Working practices have changed dramatically in recent years with the demise of the traditional television crew and the advent of still-controversial videojournalism. Technological advances have made it easier than ever to edit material in the field and send it back to base. Broadcast journalists are now not the only suppliers of material: user-generated content has found a place in the newsgathering pantheon. Planning and preparation remain essential, regardless of the pressure of deadlines. But there will never be any

substitute for going there: getting out on location, talking to the people who matter and collecting the sights and sounds of the story.

### Notes

- 1 Interview with the authors, 29 November 2004.
- 2 Interview with the authors, 11 November 2005.
- 3 Interview with the authors, 11 November 2005.

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# 9

## Asking questions

Interviewing for broadcast news

*Jim Beaman and Anne Dawson*

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