

Can we project a good news story in the media, and how?

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Noah is newsworthy, the flood is not

There is an truism of journalism that the founding, and very successful, executive producer of 60 Minutes, Gerald Stone loved to repeat to his staff. It is one that will have special resonance for cotton growers. It is 'no-one is interested in flood control. Everyone is interested in Noah'.

In other words, it is people and their experiences, which capture the media's interests, rather than the explication of issues. Tragedy will draw interest, but so too should good news stories, though they can often work well when you least expect it.

Several years ago I gave a talk on working with the media to some senior defence service personnel.

It was not long after the navy had rescued the stricken lone yachtsman, Tony Ballimore.

It was a good news story with braid and stars, beyond the imaginings of the most ambitious PR person. But these senior defence force personnel were bemused by the attention: as far as they were concerned the rescue just used routine tracking skills. There was nothing special about it at all.

That's what the experts thought. The media had a different view. Ballimore, for several days at least, was the media's Noah. A story on the techniques involved in ocean rescue would never make the news list. Put them into practice, and save a fellow with a hearty character and great televisual appeal, and it is 'hold the front page'.

The average journalist

What works in the media can be a mystery in many ways, even to those of us who have practiced in it for some time. Stories you expect to capture the public imagination can fall and fail to collect even a follow up, while other less worthy stories develop 'legs', and run for days.

The bottom line is there are no guarantees as to what will work. But what I can do is outline how journalism works, and how to make the best of being interviewed.

I'll begin with a portrait of the average journalist.

He, and it is more likely to be 'he' because although equal numbers of women and men enter journalism, the women have often exited within 10 years, leaving the profession, particularly at the senior levels - where the decisions are made - overwhelmingly male.

He might be a rural specialist, but if he works for a major metropolitan newspaper, that is unlikely. Instead, he will be a generalist, assigned, at short notice to write a story on anything from a wide range of subjects from a backpacker hostel fire to the cotton industry.

At its highest, one of the major roles of journalism is the defence of democracy.

Politicians might object to the scrutiny they receive, but they are accountable to the public, and the public is kept apprised of their actions through the media. The same goes for all our public institutions, and activities that impact on the public domain, on our resources.

At its worst, journalism, and I'd really rather give it another name here, is exploitative, more interested in sensationalism, in arousing the punters' ire or interest than in communicating facts.

Journalists, depending on where they work, usually fall somewhere between the two. Getting the balance right - sensational enough to get a "good run" a good position in the paper, yet with enough facts for it to be regarded as a solid, maybe even influential, read. Something that sets the agenda.

The newsroom our journalist comes from has a very strong culture.

At its head is an absolute autocrat, the editor. A journalist might argue the point, but if the editor says 'that's a story', ultimately all the journalist can respond is, 'and how many words would you like?' The same goes for the angle the editor wants.

The journalist can be rung at 5.30 in the morning, or midnight, and told to board a plane for a trip of unknown duration, and the answer can only be yes, family responsibilities not withstanding.

Early in their career the young journalist is blooded, if the organisation is large enough, by arbitrary moves, without consultation, around the country. I used to work for the ABC rural department which raised this to an art form: one of my former department heads used make boast about his experiences, like when he rang up one reporter in Tamworth on a Friday and told him to be in Port Pirie on the Monday, "and he loaded the wife and kids in the ute and was on air at 6am on the Monday". All the pleading in the world did you no good, I know because I tried. You went where he sent you, when he sent you, or you left the organisation.

Of course with seniority consultation increases, but to survive to this stage, and many do not, you must become a creature of the culture.

So the journalist who arrives on your farm is most likely a jack of all trades, and master of none, and working under considerable pressure.

Most metropolitan journalists know nothing about agriculture or science

Our journalist, like most of his contemporaries, is also likely to know next to nothing about agriculture or even science.

The media coverage of genetically modified food is indicative of that widespread ignorance. I have several times floored companions over lunch or dinner, when responding to the question, what do I think of GM food. I reply, 'well I very much want to see the amount of chemicals used in farming reduced' (and here I pause to receive sympathetic nods), 'and that's why I am in favour of research into GM foods' (here the nods turn into startled looks).

Now, you in the cotton industry know exactly what I am talking about, but it never fails to astonish me how profound the misunderstanding is about GM foods.

Last year, in frustration at the misinformation being peddled over GM foods, I wrote an opinion piece, arguing environmentalists should be in favour of GM plants which reduced chemical use.

After some soul searching, I decided to write it because I felt the media had been far too one-sided. I actually trained as a wheat breeder. I have been appalled at the standard of the debate.

GM foods have the potential for some very good news stories. But there is no doubt the introduction of GM foods has been a public relations disaster, the good news lost in the face of aggressive misinformation and community hysteria.

I wish I knew how to get these good news stories up, all I can say at this stage is that I have been bloodied in my own attempts. But I believe that, once people see there is something in it for them, and the pharmaceutical industry is an excellent example where GM products have been accepted without complaint, consumers will accept GM foods. It is just a pity the first GM food wasn't a cholesterol-lowering grain, a cancer-fighting vegetable, or a low-calorie sugar rather than a pesticide-reducing cotton variety.

So much for my hapless attempt. Back to our reporter.

He knows next to nothing about agriculture or science. What he does know is what his editor wants. The other thing he knows is that he cannot fail.

All his fears, and misgivings, his doubts and sensitivities are subsumed to the demands of the paper. And he has very little time.

If he is good he will ask the right questions, will admit his lack of knowledge and start with the basics, and build up the picture. He will take down your quotes accurately and seek other sources of information, confirming the relevant facts.

If you understand this - his peculiar combination of drive and ignorance - and offer the information in a careful structured way, you could be of good service to each other.

A warning

I should warn you at this point about a fundamental distinction between electronic and print journalists.

The former are working when their microphones are turned on. Though they will edit, without recourse to you, what they have taped.

Print journalists work all the time. Chatting with you as you stroll along, perhaps over a coffee or a drink, they are still a journalist, still searching for that elusive angle, the colourful provocative remark. We are friendly folk, its part of our professional armory, but be warned.

We are not necessarily dishonourable souls. But we are, generally speaking, overworked overpressured, people. The story is what counts.

There are distinctions of course. The journalist I have been describing is at the frontline, the one under the most immediate pressure.

In a quality paper, if it is a big story, they are likely be followed by a specialist, or a more senior journalist, who will be better informed and have more time to piece the story together. The pace might have changed, but remember they were forged in the same crucible as our hapless fellow before, and etched into his being is the belief “you are only as good as your last story”.

And his last story is only as good as his communication with you.

He doesn't want to get it wrong - any serious mistakes he makes could cost him at best the humiliation of a dressing down from his editor and a published apology, and at worst an expensive libel suit against his employer, which is not a good career move.

Our journalist has to serve the truth and satisfy his editor. To do this he has to from ignorance to expertise within hours. So much rides on his short meeting with you.

Be yourself

A large part of my advice would simply be: be yourself. As I mentioned earlier, the media loves characters, and there are plenty of them in the cotton industry.

News stories also thrive on tension. That tension doesn't just mean one politician disagreeing with another, or the tension of an unfolding tragedy. It can also mean a tension or a change in ideas, in values. For example; the use of products like envirofeast, where cotton growers encourage rather than kill insects. Or the Aboriginal employment program in Moree, where a town that had a poor history of race relations is now leading the country with a very practical method of reconciliation.

A journalist is unlikely to see the story the way you do, rather he will be looking at it through the prism of his media organisation, its resources and to some extent its values. But do be prepared to talk it through. Only you know what you have to offer.