



TIPSHEET: Finding your story, pitch and media outlet

These training scenarios were written by former Boston Globe journalist John Donnelly for a media workshop hosted by AlertNet and InterAction in Washington DC in February 2009.

Staff from more than 30 U.S.-based NGOs attended the workshop to learn from a panel of journalists, and each other, about how to get media coverage for those “forgotten crises” that can be so hard to get onto the news agenda.

HOW TO INTEREST JOURNALISTS

Practical tips from John Donnelly and the rest of the journalist panel - Howard Goller, Reuters North America editor, and Tara Boyle, producer of The Kojo Nnamdi Show (WAMU 88.5).

- No press release should take you more than an hour to write. This should focus your thinking and help you get something down on paper you can edit later.
- For press releases that rely on studies, reports or something happening ‘today,’ write it as a news story – spare, hard-edged and focused on what’s really new.
- Be creative in how you present numbers.
- In all stories, find the tension, the edge, or whatever you want to call it...
- Cultivate relationships with individual reporters and religiously track what they cover.
- In correspondence with journalists, personalise as much as possible.
- Be chatty! But keep it short.
- Before pitching a story, be aware of the needs of different media outlets and how you’d meet them: i.e. if pitching to a radio programme, they’ll need someone available for live broadcast.

STORY SCENARIOS – PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Read the scenarios and think through your own approach before looking at the discussion points that came out of the workshop. These scenarios are part-fact, part-fiction.

There’s lots of information here, but what’s the most important? What’s the story and who’s interested?

Scenario 1: An ongoing emergency situation in townships around Cape Town, South Africa

Fifteen HIV-positive mothers and mothers-to-be, living in townships around Cape Town, were given cameras to illustrate their lives. The photographs provide a mother's view of the impact of AIDS on their community.

Many of the women chose to fight the stigma by coming out about their status and educating other pregnant women in the hope of preventing mother-to-child transmission. The NGO overseeing the project is called The House is Small But the Welcome is Big.

Documenting their lives has brought unexpected benefits to many of the women. Some received money after their photographs were sold at an art exhibition in the United States, and two women have been sponsored to attend photography school by one of the project's co-creators.

Five of the women are due to give birth in the next month. All are nervous. Three have agreed to allow a journalist to document their lives over the last weeks of pregnancy, the delivery and then the initial rapid test to see if the baby is HIV negative or positive.

How do you sell this story to outlets in the United States? Who are your targets? What outlets? What's your angle? How do you use your field staff to help you? What's the message you want to get across?

Write an email pitch to a journalist or journalists – including a subject line and three paragraphs.

For discussion...

What's your goal?

- To get a journalist to travel to Cape Town document the lives of these three women.
- To get publicity for the photo project.

What's new?

- The women are documenting themselves, telling their own story.
- This could be offered as an exclusive. Say that loud and clear!

"Find the tension"

- The HIV test and the uncertainty surrounding its results.
- The stigma of being HIV positive in the community and the fight against stigmatisation.

What's the angle and who would be interested?

- Self-empowerment of women to better their own lives and those of their children.
- Can photos help break down stigma?
 - "Fighting HIV stigma through camera lens"
- A good story for print journalism because the women's photos can be included. Possibly of interest to a woman's magazine, specialist photography publication (the importance of photography), local papers around where exhibition being held.
 - Huge potential for the story to be part of a series, following the women and their children.

When to pitch the story?

- Pitch the story around a major event, i.e. World AIDS Day, Mother's Day.

Be careful about...

- Use of normative words like brave, courageous etc.
- Being culturally prejudiced about things like stigma and not recognising how it exists in your community as well.

Scenario 2: A long-term emergency in Bangladesh with disastrous health consequences

In the northeast corner of Bangladesh live the Rohingyas, a Muslim minority from the border region between Bangladesh and Rakhine State in western Myanmar (formerly Burma). Their accounts of life in Myanmar include severe human rights abuses; restrictions on movement and on marriage; forced labour; land and assets confiscation; violence; and arbitrary arrest.

In 1992, more than a quarter of a million Rohingyas fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh. But two years later, without any clear change in the situation in Myanmar, the Bangladeshi authorities in cooperation with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) started mass repatriations. These people are considered unwelcome economic migrants in Bangladesh, but in Rakhine State they are denied the right to nationality and face continued harassment and abuses.

A researcher from your group, Andrew Clark Trust, has just finished an unpublished health study of the Rohingyas in a makeshift camp called Tal, which is home to more than 10,000 people and squeezed onto a 200-foot-wide slice of land between a river and the main road. Shelters of six by 10 feet house up to 12 people, built on a base of mud that needs to be continually replaced to prevent them collapsing into the water. River water comes into many shelters at high tide, and in the rainy season, nearly eight out of 10 are flooded. Food and clean drinking water are scarce, and about 40 people share each latrine.

The health study found 32 percent of the children under age five suffer from malnutrition; vaccine coverage was under 10 percent; diarrhoea and worms are rampant among the children; and 7 percent of all births over the last three years resulted in the death of the newborn or the mother, or both.

How do you sell this story to outlets in the United States? Who are your targets? What outlets? What's your angle? How do you use your field staff to help you? What's the message you want to get across?

Write a pitch of three paragraphs that you'll give over the phone to a reporter.

For discussion...

What's your goal?

- To stimulate action on the issue of the mistreatment of the Rohingyas.
- To publicise your health report and the deplorable statistics your research reveals.

What's the new thing?

- An unpublished (read...as of yet unpublicised!) health study is available.
- The numbers - population density and health statistics - are shocking and a creative size comparison would provide dramatic imagery.
 - To think about...do you want to use a size comparison that is culturally specific to your home country?

"Find the tension"

- A group of people stuck in-between countries without legal recognition anywhere.

What's the angle?

- Your home country's relationship with Myanmar.
 - Tie this story to other news items to do with Myanmar?
 - In the United States, will this be changing with a new administration?
- The wider issue of stateless people, especially with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the news.
- The aftermath of poor U.N. policies.

Who's interested?

- Human rights journalists or publications that do political feature stories.

Scenario 3: A neglected emergency in the Western Sahara – told from inside Algeria

For more than three decades, tens of thousands of Saharawis have been living in refugee camps in Algeria. The camps are run by the Polisario Front, which has been fighting for an independent Western Sahara for 35 years. Polisario began its struggle against Spanish colonisers before taking up arms in 1975 against Morocco, which claims the territory.

Smara camp, one of the bigger ones, is in Smara town in the Western Sahara region. Many families came to the camp in the late 1970s and have been there since. Because so many men are frequently away, women have long been the heads of the camp. The Polisario often proudly says women are freer here than almost anywhere in the Arab world.

Your organisation, Education for All, started working with the women a decade ago, providing everything from basic education to high school degrees, to courses on accounting, democratic principles and leadership training. But there's been a terrible turn of events in the last six to nine months. In Smara camp, two unmarried women who had children were killed in so-called "honour killings" by members of their own family; other women in similar situations have been put in prisons.

Your group has started working with the authorities to protect these women, including training village leaders and villagers about the rule of law, women's rights and mediation. Your two on-the-ground foreign staff are both American and both women. One is from Sioux City, Iowa, 24 years old, a recent law school graduate from Columbia University, and this is her first overseas assignment. The second is from Atlanta, aged 39, and has experience in more than a dozen foreign countries, including mediation work in Bosnia, Cambodia, and Sudan, particularly on gender and cultural issues.

How do you sell this story to outlets in the United States? Who are your targets? What outlets? What's your angle? How do you use your field staff to help you? What's the message you want to get across?

Write a headline, sub-headline and two paragraphs for a press release.

For discussion...

What's the story you want written?

- The 'most free women in the Arab world' are under threat from an increase in extremist violence.

What's the missing part of the story?

- The trigger for this violence; is it that men are returning to the camps and if so, what's the bigger story?

What's the angle?

- Connect the incidents of 'honour killings' with a local/national story of such an event.
- Contrast the lives of these women with the lives of the American women now working with them.

When to pitch?

- Peg to International Women's Day or a domestic violence campaign.

How do you use your field staff?

- Your two female staff members will have very different perspectives from one other and may provide different stories.
 - Could you target media outlets in their hometowns?