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By

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There are many ways to approach this subject. The first two major considerations are:

- . who is the writer?
- . who is/are the audience?

Perhaps it should be round the other way, since everything every journalist writes should be conditioned by the fact that he or she is writing for a specific audience.

So what or who is your audience? Unless you are a university-trained specialist it will not be an audience of the environmentally cognisant, the sort of people who read academic, scientific or technical publications. Unless you are one of a skilled minority, it will not be an audience of children. Writing for children about any subject, including the environment, is a demanding task. Even though you you must write simply -- which does not mean writing down -- there is no excuse for inaccuracy or the sloppy use of words.

It will likely be a newspaper audience, which means everyone in the community who can read, or a radio audience, which is even wider since it may include many people who can't read. Such people don't understand academic, scientific or technical jargon, so you have to translate it for them, which brings us to the second problem -- the writer, you.

You may serve well as a translator of scientific jargon into understandable simple language for a non-scientific audience, but to write intelligently about anything you have to understand your subject matter, and how much do you know about the environment? Probably not much, and certainly not as much as you would like to know.

The problem is that the environment is not a subject you can grow into, like reporting the legislature, or sports, or many other journalism areas. You can become an acceptable expert in these by reporting them for long enough to increase your understanding of how they work. Not so the environment; in some aspects of it maybe, but not all, and for most reporters not much. Environment reporting requires special training, as does medical reporting or reporting on education. This means that to be a specialist environmental writer you must do some study for yourself.

This does not mean you can't write reports, even features, but you will have to be doubly careful about getting things right. It is a reporting area with many more problems than most, and accuracy is only the first of them.

Dr Peter Hunt, a producer of scientific programmes for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, is a scientist turned journalist - a true specialist. He has come up with ten rules for the environmental journalist which you may find useful. They are, with explanations:

1. Every story is connected to at least one other story.
This is self-evident to anyone who has written a story about an environment subject. They know that their story either arose from another one or led to another one, or both.
2. Your first assessment is usually wrong.
The same example serves; just think of how you first came to know about the last environmental story you wrote and you will realise that the first information you received was not right or accurate.
3. Nothing is as simple as it first seems.
Same again.
4. To believe what you are told is to be misled.
This sounds like cynical journalism, but it is especially true of environmental reporting. Believe any spokesman and you get one aspect only of the story, and that is always misleading. Without getting all sides of a story you can not get the right story, so listen to many people.
5. When in doubt, speak to a scientist, and if all else fails, ask to see the measurements.
Good journalism demands that you speak to someone who knows what's what, but in environmental reporting even these people may be committed to a point of view, which means you must learn to analyse the raw data for yourself.
6. No one person has the whole story.
It is true with all emotional subjects that people will only tell you what they want you to know. The environment is a very emotional subject. Therefore, although people are telling you what they think is the truth it is only their version of the truth. This may not be the whole truth, and if it is not it is likely nothing like the truth. You must get many points of view if you are to approach impartiality.
7. There is always someone with something to hide.
Lamentably this is true, and until you inquire it is not always obvious who it is. It may be the government official concealing a sin of omission or commission; an conservation advocate choosing not to admit that the others side has some right or reason on its side, or a polluter not telling the real reason why he has or has not taken some action. Or it may be a politician concealing his or her ignorance of the facts, or something worse.
8. An eye-witness is worth 100 press releases.
This is true, since press releases invariably are only partial truths, but eye witnesses must be reported with caution because of their unreliability. See item 6.

9. One well directed question is worth 1000 loose words.

Again, this is just good journalism. What this means is that you should think about your questions as that you ask ones which yield informative answers and leave no room for evasions or ambiguities. An good question is one which elicits information. An antagonistic question seldom achieves this purpose. Remember, you catch many more flies with honey than you do with vinegar -- coax, don't bludgeon.

10 Never ask an official a question to which you don't already know the answer.

This is borrowed from the legal profession and is useful, but only up to a point. What it means is that you should know your subject so well that you have a good idea what the answer will be. That means you will know when the person is not telling the truth or is trying to evade the question with a partial answer. Ideally, you should know the story and its background as well as the person you are interviewing, so that you can tell instantly whether the answers are genuine or not.

In spite of all this, if you still want to write about the environment, expect to meet opposition, sometimes from where you least expect it. There is always someone who does not agree with what you say and do. An example from my own past is the stand taken by BHP (Broken Hill Proprietary), an iron and steel maker, when the television station of which I was news editor decided to establish an air pollution monitoring van to prepare pollution reports as part of a regular television weather service. The company protested that our action was aimed at them, as the city's most obvious likely polluter. We went ahead with the service in association with the local university, in spite of the protests, and BHP and other companies in the city in the long run learned and benefited from the information revealed by our service.

Emotion and personal involvement are problems for anyone writing about the environment. It is very easy to sway your public immediately and effectively by appealing to emotions, but this is often first impression stuff and first impressions are often wrong. The public may clamour for action, but actions taken in haste may be the wrong ones. It is not so easy to persuade genuine decision-makers, those who can do something genuinely helpful. They need decisive facts, not emotions.

Also, it is easy to gain attention by being critical, because readers pay attention to criticism. Environmental groups are not above using a calculated "attack" to gain space in the press for their arguments. Malaysia has complained, justly or otherwise, that environmental groups around the world have planned an anti-Malaysia campaign because of what Malaysia claims are misunderstood logging policies. Certainly at least one group has spoken out against Malaysia and encouraged others to take a stand. But the Malaysian government uses the same tactics when it wants attention for itself. An example is the government's broadside attack on the Australian press for "telling deliberate lies" about Malaysia. One Australian newspaper was certainly

guilty of ill-considered reporting, not the Australian press as a whole, and the Malaysian Prime Minister is intelligent enough to understand this.

The cry with novice feature writers is "What can I write about?" There is no shortage of material about the environment.

Don't waste time and effort trying to cover universal problems like global warming, the ozone layer, decaying oceans or pollution from carbon fuels. Choose something smaller and more manageable. You can write more effectively about the effects or likely effects of one of these global problems on your town, or perhaps your country, if your country is small enough to suffer the same effect all over. It is good journalism to make your whole audience feel that they are affected by it. In fact it is a waste of time writing about the environment at all unless you can make your audience understand that the problem seriously and directly affects them.

There are dozens of possible subjects in almost every daily newspaper. The following headlines suggest a list of the subjects I found in a week's papers in Kuala Lumpur:

Fines to deter "green" offences (the legal aspect)
Let's all work harder for our ecosystem (an advocate speaks)
Death in Africa's "Lake of Plenty" (an imported feature)
Green firms on blacklist (researchers not delivering)
Summit must be useful, says PM (on the Brazil summit)
Mahathir warns against foreign influence (self-explanatory)
Chance for rich nations to help clean up the world (column)
Catchment area factories: law calls for review (legal)
Plan to act against developers defying laws on environment
\$1.6 million spent on removing wastes from beach in Perak
Cabinet may discuss Malacca plan (water supply pollution)
Speaking for the environment (columnist)
When it is just you and your 4x4 (off-road vehicle damage)
New laws put Australia's rich and unique wildlife in danger
(news report on new laws in Australia)
Recycling scheme to be extended (local government action)
Wetlands for wildlife (intended government action)
Hotel chains find going green can help business (US paper)

So you don't know much about some of those subjects. How do you find out more? Ask questions, look up references.

Who to ask:

- . environmental protection agencies; most countries now have them
- . environmental pressure groups - even if they may be one-sided
- . the companies or government agencies which pollute, if you can
- . experts - scientists who know and will talk, university specialists, industrial chemists, doctors, it depends on the subject, but find them and ask them.

Where to look:

- . what has been written before, look it up in the library
- . check earlier reports in your own newspaper/radio files
- . ask your specialists what you should check on.

- . check what the international organisations and assemblies have said or done about it - United Nations groups, there are others all over the world. Your librarian should know where to find them if you don't.

And when you have done all this write your story as if you distrust what everyone has told you, even if you agree with every word of it. This means that to remain impartial and detached you should attribute every statement -- make clear that every reader knows without doubt who said it. You are not making any of the statements. You are only reporting those who did. By this means you can approach again anyone you have reported before, since you have never expressed an opinion against them, only reported those of others. This is true feature writing. Opinion pieces are another matter, for discussion later. Unless you are deliberately intruding your own opinion, allow no one to think you are on one side or the other, even if you know you are.

Two quotes to finish. The first, relatively short, is from the Montreal Protocol (covering ozone-destroying CFCs) of the 2nd World Climate Conference (1991). It's introduction says:

It is recognised that media play a central role in focusing attention, both public and political, on issues which affect the present and future quality of life in the communities they serve. To the extent that quality of life may be seriously impaired by either global environmental degradation, or by more local problems, environmental questions have already become a strong focus of media attention. This, however, raises a number of problems, some of which are:

1. The question raised by many environmental issues, particularly global change issues, have come out of fundamental studies in the physical and environmental sciences. Solutions, likewise, are often grounded in such disciplines. With rare exceptions, working journalists do not have an "in-depth" knowledge of such areas.

2. "Quality of Life" and "environment protection" are often posed as alternatives which the community must choose between. Media often reflect this perspective in the presentation of environmental stories as basically a conflict between "environment" and "development". While such a focus is sometimes appropriate, it appears that many journalists find it difficult to move beyond what is often a simplistic assessment.

Part of the solution to both problems is the recognition that "environment" is an important and specialised area for the media. The idea that this calls for specialised attention from both reporters and their management is not new:

1. Media managers must recognise the importance of the reporting area and give it the staff it needs
2. the journalists involved must be prepared to put in some learning time if they are to do the job properly.

The second quote is from a paper by Mr Kong How Kooi, deputy

secretary general of the Malaysian Ministry of Science, delivered a paper at an AIBD seminar in KL last year. He put the point of view of the developing countries. I don't agree with all of what he says, and you may not either, but it is worth thinking about.

It is important for mass media to appreciate the position of the developing countries on specific global environmental issues. The Beijing Ministerial Declaration on Environment and Development adopted by the Ministries from 41 developing countries is certainly a good reference. This declaration was adopted after an in-depth discussion on the challenges faced by the international community in establishing norms of cooperation for the enhancement of environment and development, particularly the implications for the developing countries. The Declaration expresses deep concern about the accelerating degradation of the global environment arising from unsustainable development models and life styles. As a result, the basic elements indispensable for the human life - land, water and atmosphere - are gravely threatened.

The more serious and widespread environmental problems are air pollution, climate change, ozone layer depletion, drying up of fresh water resources, pollution of rivers, seas and marine environment, including the coastal zone, marine and coastal resources, desertification, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, acid rain, proliferation and management of toxic products, illegal traffic of toxic and dangerous products and wastes, growth of conditions in urban and rural areas, especially of sanitation resulting in epidemics and other such problems. Furthermore, poverty in the developing countries is becoming aggravated, hampering the legitimate needs and aspirations of their people are exerting greater pressures on the environment.

Environmental protection and sustainable development are matters of common concern of humankind, which require effective actions by the international community and provide an opportunity for global cooperation.

It is imperative that developing countries must continue to develop and grow so as to overcome the problems of poverty and to meet the basic needs of the population, for it is when the hungry are fed and the homeless sheltered that the importance of environmental issues can be recognised.

Developing countries should not critically emulate the path taken by the developed countries during their development process in irrationally polluting the atmosphere. Rather, developing countries should learn from such mistakes and make deliberate efforts to make a quantum leap forward from developing to developed status through the benefit of available environmentally sound technologies. Additionally, successful resource management is a key ingredient for economic growth and development in developing countries which are rich in natural and human resources.

Economic growth and sustainable development hold the key to safeguard the environment. In this regard it is important for developing countries to ensure that the right to development includes access to funding, technology and information to find solutions to the global environmental problems, economic growth and sustainable development within their own countries.

To preserve the global commons, people at all levels must be informed and educated to be proper stewards of the environment, to care for it because their lives and that of their future generations depend on it. People's attitudes and orientation with regard to the environment and development must change. In this regard, mass media assume an important and crucial role to promote and shape the minds and opinions of the public. Hence, programmes on environmental issues should be more than mere presentation of story lines and sensational news items.

Coverage of environmental issues is unlike coverage of political events, human tragedies and scandals. Production of environmental programmes implies having sufficient knowledge of the subject and a responsibility to safeguard the environment. I am given to believe that many producers think that producing a programme on environmental issues is a simple task and anyone can do it. Often any member of the staff who is available, probably a trainee, is assigned to prepare an environmental story at the time it breaks. By doing so, radio and TV stations will not serve their listeners and viewers well.

Ideally, it would be wonderful if there were staff who are fully trained in environmental issues who could cover such stories and issues in an interesting, informative and educational manner. Obviously this is not the case in just about any country. Not many mass media establishments have staff who are full-time on environmental issues. Even full-time environmental programme producers cannot be trained in all areas of environmental science. And when the issue is complex and controversial, ineffective programmes on the environment are often produced.

May I venture to suggest that in the course of dealing with environmental issues, mass media should be educated, be an educator and watchdog. To write scripts more knowledgeably you will have to spend time educating yourself on environmental issues and carry out research for environmental stories. Much of the learning and research processes will avail to you enough background information in a particular subject so that you can write effectively.

In addition to educating yourself you need to help to educate your listeners and viewers. The public must be assisted to see how one small action on their part or that of others can have a much greater effect. For instance, does the public use of an aerosol can with CFC as a propellant endanger the ozone layer? While that one squirt from the can is only a fraction of the whole problem, the

public need to understand that all the tiny fractions add up to a whole sum, and consequently usher in a potential danger for them, their children and the planet. The public need information so they can respond and act positively.

Some people might disagree that the function of creating environmental awareness is a key role for environmental reporters in the electronic media, particularly in Asia, where news can play an important educational role. It may be unconscionable not to try to do so.

Taking on an educational activity... will not obscure another function, that of being a watchdog. Here again a reporter also needs to have some knowledge of the situation if he is to perform the role of a watchdog. It means having full knowledge of the parties involved in a particular issue or event, what the policies of government are, what actions are being taken, and what others should or will be taken. He should try to find out if all that should be done is being done, and if not why not. Being a watchdog requires a great deal from a reporter. But one who wants to do an effective job is covering the environment can do no less.

It is important to take cognizance of the fact that your reporting can influence actions taken by individuals, businesses and governments. Your news items can highlight controversial development or environmental degradation issues, and bring them into public view where decision-makers and others can evaluate public sentiment. It can also call attention to efforts to preserve, maintain or improve the environment and set them up as models for others to follow. Since environmental events transcend administration, reigns and lifetimes, you can help to keep public attention focused on an issue until something gets done.

One more point is that environment stories differ from others, as there are so many people, organisations and sides involved in the issues. These often make environmental issues complex, and even technical, resulting in difficulty for a programme producer to balance the various viewpoints - whether impartial or biased. In your hands you possess a powerful weapon to mobilise positive or negative reactions and actions. It should be used as a tool to bring home the message of environmental protection and sustainable development. The critical role you play is for the well-being and better quality of life for future generations.

If Kong How Kooi's words caused you to think about the environment, that is what your writings should do for your audience. You are not necessarily telling people what they should think about the environment, only giving them the facts to think about it at all, and to reach their own conclusions.