

DANIEL SYNGE



THE SURVIVAL GUIDE TO JOURNALISM

The Survival Guide to Journalism

Dan Synge



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The Survival Guide to Journalism

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Introduction

Do journalists really need a survival guide: a manual to see them through the challenges of each working day? Admittedly, we're not talking about Arctic exploration, divorce or post-nuclear fall-out, but practically any profession that I have experienced requires some well-honed survival skills. Journalism is no exception.

Indeed, having worked in journalism for over a decade, I, like anyone else, have had to adapt over the years; social diary contributor, music reviewer, newspaper columnist, motoring editor, freelance feature and travel writer, editor of contract titles, antiques correspondent, illustrated book writer ... it should be evident from my various journalistic guises so far that you rarely stand still in this profession.

This book, therefore, is aimed not only at students of journalism, but also anyone from any background who has seriously thought about making a living (full- or part-time) through their writing or editing skills.

Having read it, I hope that you will be able to apply some of the following journalistic principles straight away as well as take advantage of the up-to-date information on where the best opportunities are. My advice is deliberately hands-on and straight to the point, and is based on my direct experience of working for newspapers, magazines and online publications.

For added authenticity, I have included tips and testimonials from a range of top working professionals, all of whom, incidentally, are highly-adapted survivors.

In our exciting but often uncertain industry, it really does pay to have the right survival skills. There are exercises for you to try out, easy-to-follow checklists and short **Q&A** sessions (**Ask Dan**) to help clear up

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any uncertainties you may have about the subject of each chapter. Where possible, I have included useful links and contacts to organizations that specialize in helping aspiring journalists to survive through those difficult first months and years.

I have tried to sum up the state of the industry today whilst including practical guidelines on news and feature writing. We examine the ins and outs of freelance journalism and specialist areas such as reviewing, sub-editing and travel writing, plus some of the exciting opportunities created by new media.

I hope, at the very least, that *The Survival Guide to Journalism* inspires you to pick up your pen and notepad and find inspiring and important new things to write about. I also hope it serves as an essential desk-side reference book for many years to come.

So you want to be a journalist?

'Journalism itself is a talent. It makes you very judgmental, very quick-witted. You can perform in front of people and work punishing hours.'

Former Daily Mirror editor Piers Morgan

When I set out on a career in journalism back in 1994, the media landscape set out in front of me was a relatively simple one to chart.

There were local and national newspapers, most of which recorded healthy circulation figures that looked set in stone for years to come. Then, of course, there were magazines: consumer, contract or trade.

Most young journalists started off by working for a local newspaper or a trade weekly. Having done their training in this hands-on arena, the more talented ones would end up on Fleet Street: *The Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Daily Express*, *The Sun* and other esteemed titles.

Although some of these publications were, and still are, competing for the same readers, they had yet to contend with 24-hour news channels, text and online messaging, free sheets, podcasts, digital platforms or anything else that is loosely described as 'new media'.

The more traditional forms of media appear to be suffering something of a setback in the wake of these exciting new developments, and yet paradoxically, there appear also to be increased opportunities for journalists,

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provided that they are prepared to adopt new skills to survive in this highly dynamic and ultra-competitive environment.

So while fledgling reporters were once expected to learn shorthand and type double-spaced hard copy on sheets of A4, tomorrow's media stars are filing exclusive film clips or interviewing Hollywood A-listers via social networking or messaging service sites. As one national newspaper insider told me: 'We're no longer just a newspaper, we're a media organization.'

Like any professional group, journalists have always had to respond to social and technological changes. As ever, those who embrace change best will have the greatest chance of survival.

The essential qualities

Needless to say, you are talented and hard-working with superb social skills and a CV that will impress anyone sitting in an editor's chair.

However, if you lack any of the five essential qualities below, a career in journalism is unlikely to get beyond the preliminary stage.

1 Curious

Do you know or care what your neighbours get up to? What's that exciting new building development all about? Why have the letter boxes in your street been painted yellow? Why is there a police officer stationed outside the house up the road? A natural-born journalist always finds the answers to questions like these. Some even become front page stories.

2 Self-motivated

Unless you already have envy-inducing personal contacts in the media, making it in journalism requires enormous dedication and an ability to find and develop your own contacts and stories. You must also be disciplined enough to manage your own workload, which, as any self-employed person will tell you, is a job in itself.

3 Knowledgeable

You'll need an acute awareness of what's going on now and what is about to happen in the near future. Reading a lot (not just your favourite daily paper or news website) is essential and you should have a reasonable

knowledge of practically everything that is covered by print and digital media, whether it's the names of newly appointed cabinet ministers or the latest trends in the property market.

4 Literate

Not all successful journalists are great writers, but a more than average command of English and a love of language will give you a healthy advantage in what is an increasingly oversubscribed profession. If your skills are not up to scratch, read and study the work of reputable journalists and writers (see the **Recommended reading** list on p. 145)

5 Numerate

This doesn't only apply to trend analysts and science reporters. *All* journalists deal in facts and figures and the best ones know how to use them to their story's advantage. Numeracy also comes in handy when claiming expenses or negotiating a fee. In the long run, letting someone else do the sums for you can leave you seriously out of pocket.

How journalists work

Journalists are almost unanimously interested in breaking new stories or helping to add to both the reputation and circulation of their publication, yet they work in increasingly diverse ways.

First, there are the many different types of editorial roles on offer, be it a local news reporter, national newspaper columnist, freelance travel writer, arts reviewer or website editor.

All these people have highly contrasting working hours, salary packages, levels of influence and job satisfaction, yet all are considered journalists.

Take into account also the unstoppable growth of media empires and the increasing amount of online content over the last few years, and you have another reason for the job's diversity. Journalists today don't just take notes, file their copy then move onto the next story. They are expected more and more to record sound and video clips, respond to readers' emails, write online blogs and possess many other skills associated with our technological age.

Gone for ever is the mythological **hack** with his long Fleet Street lunches and worn out shoes. The twenty-first-century journalist is a multi-tasking,

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laptop-wielding wordsmith with an active and inquisitive mind, a finger on the pulse and the nose for a good story.

Here are some of the most sought-after editorial positions in the profession:

Publisher

Anyone from a global media magnate to a work-from-home with their DIY online newsletter can claim to be publishers. Essentially they are the people who finance and manage the publication, paying special attention to sales and advertising revenue, on which every publication's success is founded.

Although they should have more than a passing interest in what goes into the publication, essentially they are in the business of money and are always on the look out for new ways to make it.

Editor

The role varies depending on the scale and importance of the publication, but most editors will oversee and decide on the publication's editorial content (including news stories, **features**, layout, cover design, **headlines** etc.).

They should have a clear vision of where their publication is going and head regular editorial meetings with staff to generate suitable content.

Where relevant, they should also develop a good working relationship with their publisher in the drive for increased sales and advertising revenue.

Clare Gogerty on magazine editing

Clare is editor of *Coast*, the magazine for 'living by the sea'.

What are your everyday duties?

My duties vary according to where we are in the production schedule. Around press day, it is heads down, processing pages, reading proofs

and dealing with last-minute crises. During the rest of the month, I am thinking about three issues at once: the one that is about to go to press (proofs to be read, copy and lay-outs to be tweaked), the following one (copy to be edited, shoots to be discussed), and the one after that (planning and commissioning).

I try to deal with some tasks for each issue every day to keep things moving along. I also chair a variety of meetings including planning, ideas, production and picture meetings, and attend budget, managerial and human resources meetings.

In between, I attend to an enormous amount of emails, many from freelance writers pitching ideas and PRs trying to place products.

Every so often I venture out of the office either to cover a story or to attend a coastal event. It is important for me to be familiar with the British seaside and there is no better way to do this than by actually visiting it.

What are the challenges of being a magazine editor today?

The challenges for *Coast* are its small resources. We have to produce a luxury title with a staff of seven and a tiny budget.

It also means that we have to be constantly inventive and resourceful about funding features, searching for free images, writing stories in-house, and sourcing free locations for shoots. Having a team of seven also means that everyone must be firing on all cylinders all of the time. To keep everyone motivated and not exhausted I try to instil a spirit

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of enthusiasm and excitement. It can be easy to lose sight of why we all do this when time is short and you are staring into the maw of another press day.

Many magazines are beginning to recover from the slump caused during the recession. *Coast* has been largely immune from it and our sales have risen. However, I feel they could have risen more if readers had more pounds in their pockets. So that has been a challenge too.

What makes the perfect magazine story?

Unlike news stories whose prime purpose is to deliver facts, a magazine article should amuse, stimulate and inspire. This is achieved by a combination of well-written copy and breath-taking photography. A little bit of wit never goes amiss either. The most important thing is to avoid indulgent art direction and too much cleverness. The secret is to know your readership and deliver what it wants.

What skills do you think are needed to survive in the magazine world?

Talent is an obvious prerequisite (and it always rises) but as there are so many talented people looking for work at the moment, an ability to work hard and often late is becoming essential. Those journalists who go that extra yard and deliver more than is expected are the ones that are recommissioned or are offered staff jobs.

On the other hand, those who deliver copy late, overlong and don't follow the brief are soon forgotten. All they do is annoy the commissioning editor who has to wade through their copy,

cutting and rewriting it. We all want clean copy that whistles straight through to subs.

What was your first break in journalism?

I was working as an editor in book publishing when a colleague left to take a job sub-editing on Tatler. Another sub-editor position came up there and she suggested I apply. I wanted to break into magazine publishing so leapt at the chance. And, despite my state school background, they took me on! Soon afterwards, the chief sub-editor left and I was promoted into that position.

What advice would you give to anyone starting out in this business?

Never underestimate personal contacts. It is becoming increasingly tough to break into journalism, so you need to network as much as possible. Keep in touch with everyone you met at journalism school: they are the commissioning editors of the future. Join organizations such as Women in Journalism and attend industry events. If your face is known, you have a much better chance of getting work. If commissions are not forthcoming, then blog or Twitter. It is important to get your name out there.

When pitching for a story or a position, make sure you know the title thoroughly and apply to a person directly (i.e. take the trouble to find out names and positions of relevant editors). This sounds blindingly obvious but is repeatedly ignored. Grovel and flatter and say that it is your dream to contribute to the title.

Deputy editor

Working alongside the editor, the deputy has a rather more hands-on role and will work with budgets, commission articles and edit copy as well as cover for the editor's absence (editors are frequently 'in meetings').

They will have a firm grip on what has been planned for future issues and will also understand and advise on production issues such as page design and picture sourcing.

Paul Clarkson on being a deputy editor

Paul works for *The Irish Sun* and has a senior editorial role in both its Irish and Northern Irish editions.

What are your everyday duties and responsibilities?

Along with the editor, I have overall responsibility for all editorial content and management of staff and casuals in the paper. I also have control of all budgets in the paper, having assumed the managing editor role.

I also handle all dealings with the Press Ombudsman and liaise directly with advertising and marketing departments on a daily basis.

What ingredients, in your opinion, make the perfect news story?

The best stories don't need to be sensationalized - because they are just so astonishing. The perfect news story is something extraordinary happening to an ordinary person. And for it to be perfect you need the perfect photograph to accompany it and the