

3 Access

3.1 Geography on TV

Nicholas Crane

At various moments in the last five years, I've found myself explaining to millions of TV viewers the principles of fractal dimensions by attempting to measure the coast of Scotland using a one-metre wooden ruler, and the basics of isostasy using an air-bed and a rucksack. I've abseiled cliffs to explore the source of chalk and been battered by a sub-zero blizzard while performing a mountain-top 'show-and-tell' on freeze-thaw. It was all great fun, and that is the point. Geography is very tactile and visible. It's exciting, and you can see it happening around you wherever you are, and whatever you are doing.

I am biased, of course. My geography degree opened the door to journalism, initially travel articles and book authorship and then TV documentaries. Geography is a world view ('discipline' sounds too narrow a term for something so encompassing) which has informed and amused me ever since a gifted school-teacher called Mr Noble showed me why the river I canoed had bends and why the men in the centre of the local city all seemed to wear suits - a story, as it turned out, that went back to the Middle Ages.

In virtually all of my work, I've relied on 'geographical narratives': the ordering of geographical information into a story. Human beings are conditioned to absorb information through story-telling. It sounds simplistic, but explanations with a 'beginning', a 'middle' and an 'end' are the easiest to engage with.

My geographical narratives have two self-imposed rules. Acronyms and geographical jargon are out and I tread lightly on the middle ground, preferring to mix very elementary explanations with material which is challenging and mysterious. The reassurance of the familiar gets everybody on board, and then you take them on a heck of a journey.

Before I got involved in making television programmes, I took a 10,000 km walk across Europe. I'd always been interested in the cultural and physical role played by the Rocky Mountains as North America's dividing watershed and it occurred to me that Europe had a mountain watershed which ran from Spain to Turkey. So I walked across the continent, taking notes and photographs. Superficially, the book I wrote is the story of a 17-month mountain yomp over sierras, glaciers and Carpathian wolds, but beneath that dusting of snow and summer pollen is an attempt to describe how a mountain watershed divides and unites people and landscapes. I don't mind if *Clear Waters Rising* is described as a 'travel book'. To me, it's geography.

Nicholas Crane has presented over 60 'geographical' films for the BBC. His books, include *Mercator: the Man Who Mapped the Planet* and *Clear Water Rising: A Mountain Walk Across Europe*. He is currently working on *Coast*, a book to mark the fifth BBC series of the same name.

Dorling, D. (2010) Do's and don't in working with the press, R. Gardner, K. Dodds, C. Souch, and F. McConnell (Eds.), *Communicating Geographical Research Beyond the Academy*, London: Royal Geographical Society, pp.19-20.

3.2 Talking to the press

Danny Dorling

Do's: Do talk to the press. If you are dithering over whether it might be worthwhile, whether the effort might be too great for the effect, all you need do is compare the numbers of people who read a newspaper or listen to the radio to the numbers who read academic journals or might listen to you give a lecture. For academics, it is far harder to place a story in a national newspaper than it is to have a paper accepted in a top academic journal. Again the arithmetic is simple. There are tens of thousands of pages printed in top journals every month; hundreds of thousands in other journals; millions of other pages printed in the most obscure of pamphlets and books. In contrast, the number of pages in national newspapers on issues concerning the findings of academic research is miniscule, as are the number of minutes given on radio and television.

The best way to reach even other academics is through national media. Academics read more pages of newspapers and listen to more national radio than they read the thoughts of their colleagues in learned journals and listen to them in seminars. At the same time, talk and write through these channels more and you will have to talk and write in a language that is not so cryptic that only a tiny number of your peers think they can understand you. Journals and seminars are enormously important. How else do you share the ideas you have with others and check them for plausibility? How else could you get to read and hear so much on the subjects that are of great interest to you but not to most? However, to do just that but dismiss talking to and through and with the press as somehow 'cheap' is both elitist and short-sighted.

Don't: Don't talk about things you have not studied if you are talking under the label of an academic expert. You can always talk as a 'commentator' on any topic, but you are more likely than usual to embarrass yourself and waste the time of others if, when being asked about an aspect of a subject you have not looked into, you speculate. Suggest other people the journalist can talk to, even do this on air if you have to. Say that there is no monopoly on knowledge and even people with fancy titles don't know much about most things.

Concentrate on what you think you know about and you will be able to talk or write more easily with more conviction and eventually authority. In the end, on aggregate, much more good than bad usually comes of discussing your work and ideas more widely and openly. If you are successful you will find you are ridiculed at various points. The world would be a far more boring place without ridicule, also you can protect yourself from excess ridicule by sticking to what you think you know about.

Finally, be aware that some subjects are far harder to discuss at certain times than others. In 2009, to my knowledge, no British academic succeeded in publishing estimates of the numbers of children being killed by foreign troops in countries in which the British army is currently at war. Because none succeeded you cannot easily

find out if any estimates were made. During the Vietnam war protestors used to chant to their president “hey hey LBJ how many kids have you killed today?” In many ways we are now less free to talk than we were then.

Above all: Don’t keep quiet.

Danny Dorling is Professor of Human Geography at the University of Sheffield.

For a selection of features in the press see:

http://sasi.group.shef.ac.uk/publications/in_the_news.htm

3.3 Getting into the mainstream press

John Williams

So is what you have to say interesting?

To fight your way into this information jungle you must say something which is new, compelling and interesting to people who know nothing of your speciality. And it must be easily comprehensible.

Try summarising your findings into one sentence and apply a simple test as in: “Did you know that the earth is getting flatter?” Is the claim interesting? Will others think so?

Attracting attention

Targeting your material is much more likely to get a result than firing it off randomly to a news editor.

See if your outlet has a science/environment- type correspondent. Call them or send them an email briefly outlining your research and pointing out that it’s new and exciting.

If there’s a peg to hang it on – such as an upcoming conference or a notable anniversary – so much the better.

If your institution has a press office, take advice from them and let them present your findings; the media like pre-digested information because it’s less hassle.

Doing it yourself

Follow these writing rules in a press release:

- Use one idea per sentence and one sentence per paragraph
- Keep sentences short and simple – no more than 20 words
- Avoid using long words and technical terms, an intelligent but non-specialist reader would not understand
- Prioritise the information - make an impact with the main point in the first sentence: *The earth is getting flatter and cooling faster than expected, according to new research*
- Put your name and institution in the second or third paragraph

- Try a quote in the next paragraph: “We were astonished by these results...”
- Don’t write more than one sheet of A4 – if they want more information they will ask for it
- Have you answered the five basic questions journalists ask: *who, why, what, where, when?*

Following up

Papers have news editors, broadcasters have news-gathering departments. You may have to call these if there is no specialist correspondent. Contact details can be found on their websites. If they are interested they will ask you to email more information.

If nothing comes of the initial approach, make only one follow-up call. Journalists hate being hounded.

Good luck!

John Williams is a media consultant and former Managing Editor BBC Radio News.

3.4 Writing for the wider public

Simon Reid-Henry

Writing for a ‘mass’ audience can be exciting, important and satisfying. It does not, as some assume, begin with style and end with content. But there are two basic rules of thumb that are worth bearing in mind.

First, everything you write must be of the leanest possible meat. There is flabbiness to cut from all writing, without precluding nuance, and you will encounter fewer problems if you know where to take the knife yourself. Learning to self-edit is an invaluable skill.

Second, unless you are a Paul Krugman or a Susan Sontag, you can expect less than full control over how the finished product appears. Not only must language, timeliness and colour be taken into account, but there are other professionals – editors and sub-editors if you are writing journalism; publishers, marketers and perhaps even agents if you are writing a book for a wider audience – who will want to have a say in how your ideas ultimately reach their audience. Often their ideas are extremely helpful, but it does mean that the first rule of thumb above becomes doubly important: the tighter something is, the less you will be asked to modify it.

Even so, there have been times I have failed to win over an editor about something I felt was important (using HIV/AIDS instead of ‘Aids’, as is media convention, for example). And the speed at which one can be asked to deliver can be a little frightening at times. In writing a news story, or an issues piece to run alongside one, I have had as little as an hour to turn round 800 proofed and polished words. This is certainly worth bearing in mind before you pitch an idea. But even an article that has sat pre-prepared on the shelf for weeks may need updating or developing it at the very last minute.