

May 13, 2010

Reporting from the field for ABC News 24
Some ideas for versatile story-telling while newsgathering

The standard news package is just one way to tell a story.

There are a number of story-telling devices or methods that reporting teams can incorporate into their newsgathering efforts to deliver a diverse and dynamic range of elements without a lot of additional production effort.

As ABC News 24 launches, we want the channel to be a place where you – as newsgathering teams – feel comfortable in exploring new methods of reporting and new production techniques.

This note is intended to pose a few ideas for teams in the field to keep in mind.

They're intended to prompt a greater range of content for broadcast without slowing you down as you report from location. They may also allow you to file something quickly and then get on with your main piece without any early edits or live shots commitments.

It is not a prescriptive list or any mandated instruction. It is provided simply to stoke your thoughts as you venture out on your next story.

Walk and Talk

When you are covering a story with interesting visuals or an in-situ scenario involving a number of talking points, a 'walk and talk' can set the scene and establish the ABC's presence. The objective is to not just tell the story but show and tell it.

On the scene of a flood or a fire, a major accident, a protest or a murder scene, a useful approach can be to pick three talking points within the range of a camera pan – whether the camera operator is shooting off sticks or their shoulder. By picking three key things to refer to and guiding the audience between them, you'll find it very easy to talk to the pictures in sequence without any scripting or editing required. Make the description conversational and for each of the three elements, speak for 30-40 seconds.

You'll end up producing a dynamic 1:30-2:00 television report ready to go.

Walk and talks are always more dynamic television than a static as-live 'rant' or often, even a live shot. They can work brilliantly when a scene is unfolding before you and you can capture it. If filed early in your time on location, it establishes the ABC's presence and allows the reporting team to be freed up to go and gather elements for the main edited package later in the day.

One recent example of an effective walk-and-talk:

- Phil Williams on the tarmac at Port au Price airport in Haiti. As he arrived and disembarked from his flight, Phil provided his observation of what he saw at the airport and by guiding the camera to several points of reference. He spoke of how he could see aid being delivered but no trucks to move it and it was an excellent piece of first-hand reporting from a scene that fore-told the scenario of stalled aid deliveries in Haiti that Phil was about to encounter.

The 'Rant' or as-live

On stories where the visuals or the scene are less compelling – like a court story, an inquiry or a summit – record an even simpler 'rant' whenever you have down time as you wait for the event to conclude or immediately after the crucial breaking news moment.

A rant or an 'as-live' is a recorded report delivered to camera like a live shot detailing the key points. It is a perfect substitute for a live when a link isn't available and pictures can be edited over it back at base to make it more visual. As journalists and producers, we often over-estimate the value of the 'live' in the corner of the screen. Viewers make little distinction – as long as the important information is conveyed and it is current, a rant is an excellent way to tell news quickly. Like a walk and talk, a rant often injects energy and currency into a bulletin. Once filed, it frees up the team to go and gather elements for the main piece of the day and it is always an excellent final report from a scene summarising the situation before the reporting team departs.

In at least a minute, outline the key points of the story and describe the scene. You can often include a timeline of the history of the case or event or foreshadow what might emerge over the hours to come. By restricting your thoughts to a limited number of key points, you'll find these easy to deliver without a script.

To make them a little more dynamic, refer to something that can be seen in the background of the shot or incorporate a prop – a newspaper with a headline, a key document etc.

As rants are extremely easy to file, you can continue to update the story in this fashion ... each time, taking little more than a couple of minutes.

Recent example:

- Craig McMurtrie's helicopter flight into Haiti following the earthquake. Craig used a few moments during the flight as he and the crew were approaching Port au Prince to describe the scene he could see. It was a static shot within the confined surrounds of a helicopter but it provided a compelling example of a how to include the viewer in the unfolding event as Craig was experiencing it and took no extra time to produce.

Toss to a grab

For both walk and talks and rants, an effective way to add value or context without having to edit a package on location is by tossing to a relevant grab from a related interview or a press conference.

If your talent has moved on, summarise what they've said and throw to a grab. Just leave a pause – give a brief description of what producers need to edit in – and then pick up. The production team can edit it together back on base. Keep the sequence simple so the edit is obvious and you don't have to spend any time explaining its construction.

Recent example:

- Philippa MacDonald amid the Prince William crowds. As she waited with the crowds for the arrival of Prince William to Government House in Sydney, Philippa recorded a walk and talk among the waiting people and included a couple of vox pops. It ensured coverage of the event prior to the arrival and added lovely colour and movement from the people on location.

The as-live interview

Have you ever interviewed someone for a news story and thought the person was worth more than the 15 second bite you used for the package?

If you know you are interviewing someone interesting or central to the story, shoot the interview in such a way that it can be run as a longer stand-alone cut.

An easy way to produce these is to simply address the camera for a few seconds about the topic then have your cameraman pull out to a wide as you ask a series of questions. The framing of the answers should be shot to work for the news package. Always round off with a short summary. You could do this with two guests or even a group.

ABC News 24 will almost always give these extended cuts of good interviews a run. It's a way to file some content that can sustain the coverage allowing the newsgathering team to get on and file its main piece.

Critically, it's also a way to allow a presentation of a point of view.

Recent example:

- Marie Scoutas covering the Northern NSW floods. She shot an interview with a State Emergency Service co-ordinator that summarised the situation from which she was able to use a bite in her 7pm package.

Location promo PTC

If you're in a distinctive location or you have a really strong story, ABC News 24 will be keen to run a tease from you in our program banners to promote the piece. These can easily be shot at the time you shoot your package PTC or at the end of any walk and talks or as-lives.

In a nicely framed shot that preferably puts you in situ or might be shot during an unfolding event, you simply need to say something very brief like:

"And I'm Sally Sara in Kandahar, Afghanistan where the US military is stepping up efforts to contain the Taliban in its heartland."

Dynamic PTCs

The reporter piece to camera or stand-up has become a staple of the television news package ... but quite often, it can be superfluous to telling the story and indulgent.

The PTC should always offer the audience something they wouldn't otherwise get by showing the reporter on the scene of a story or at a distinctive location, covering an important line of script for which there are no alternative pictures or showing the scale of a location or something specific at the scene to which the reporter is actively referring.

By thinking about what purpose the PTC serves in the package, you can ensure you end up shooting something much more dynamic than a static shot of you reading a script line. Refer to what the viewer can see in the scene or show something specific by having the shot pull out to a wider perspective. Shoot it while an event is unfolding rather than once it's over. Use it show a key document or have a key person in the story framed in the background.

The simple rule: ensure it has a purpose and it adds to the audience's understanding of the story.

Recent example:

- Phil Williams reporting from Whitehall of the unfolding drama surrounding the new British government. He was in the middle of a large media pack and crowd waiting for the big news and the camera operator shot Phil from a distance pulling the shot out to show the larger scene.

But don't overdo it. Over-acting and walking in a PTC for the sake of it are both sins worthy of a Media Watch appearance.

Some useful tips:

- For all walk and talks, as-lives etc., assume you've been given a generic introduction. For instance: "Here's Craig McMurtrie in Haiti". Pick up with a brief explanation and offer a similarly brief summary at the end. You could be introduced by several presenters across the day so avoid presenter names or any time references.
- Don't try to be word perfect or scripted and never rehearse. A conversational, natural delivery is always more engaging. You are less likely to stop if you know your subject and can speak off the top of your head but feel free to do whatever comes naturally – glance at your notes or read a quote.
- The production team will often overlay some of these segments with current video so don't feel afraid to stop and pick up again – though too many of these can make a difficult edit. It's best to assume you're always on camera and then the edit is easy.
- Factor in the time it may take to get your segment back on station. Previewing a court story will only work if the verdict is unlikely before your piece makes it to air.
- Your segment should only ever take a few minutes of your time and will generally be a spontaneous decision to take advantage of a great shot or interview or to get something productive from time spent waiting around.

Alternative packages ideas

First Person package

These are reporter-less packages in which the main character in a story tells their own story.

They are a little more time-consuming to produce than the examples above but can often be easier than a complete news package and certainly more distinctive.

The key is having one key character who you can interview about their story. Ensure their answers are clear and pick up all the key points of the story. Then assemble the bites and edit the corresponding picture sequence.

Possible example:

- A flood or bushfire victim returning to their damaged home for the first time. By shooting them as they return, you have a clear opening sequence and then interview them about their story. By editing the vision you would have normally shot anyway over their narrative, you can create an original piece without voiceover.

The journey

Your journey to a story can often be a compelling narrative to the broader situation you're travelling to cover. It can show the difficult terrain, the traffic jams, damage to the area or the emergency services in action and can be a dramatic way to start your coverage.

These stories don't need to be perfectly crafted and structured pieces. They can simply be a sequence of quick PTCs shot along the way describing the scenes you encounter.

Recent example:

- Stephen McDonnell's Walkley winning reporting on the Sichuan earthquake provided one of the best examples of a journey piece you're likely to see. It detailed the arduous journey over the mountains to the earthquake epicentre. While the opportunities for such a compelling story are rare, it certainly showed the value of using a journey to the scene as a the narrative of a story.

Behind the Lens

Sometimes turning the camera around to show the scene the reporting team are encountering away from the focus of the lens can be revealing and fascinating.

This may show the massive media build-up around a story or the organisation being devoted to an event. It may show the build up of police or security around a demonstration or a politician nervously preparing for a speech.

It will usually require the journalist assisting the camera operator in being alert to something away from the main focus of the story or event.

Possible example:

- During the Haiti earthquake coverage, the media all set themselves up for their liveshots around one central gathering of homeless people. 24 hours a day, the lights were on and the reporting continued with the unlucky displaced providing the backdrop. It could have been an interesting story in itself.

The big shot

Sometimes a camera operator finds themselves capturing a moment that sums up a much broader story and endures in the minds of the audience.

One interesting story-telling device is to interview the camera operator afterwards about their thoughts during that moment. It is one way to personalise a story while providing an insight into the process of covering the news.

Possible example:

- Everyone remembers the iconic image from the Iraq war of the fall of the statue of Saddam in Firdos Square. It is one thing to witness it – quite another to capture it for viewers at home with the knowledge the scene is a historic moment. A camera operator talking through the sequence and what was going on around him or her or their thoughts as the event unfolded can be a compelling story.

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