A day in the life of Charlotte
CD’s day involves a lot of shouting across a room. ‘Imagine’, she says, ‘that you see your mate in the crowded pub and have a great story. What’s the first thing you shout? That will be your main story for the day’.

CD’s day starts at 10.15am. At around 10.30am her colleagues will be sitting at their desks. The main editorial meeting of the day, which looks at yesterday’s and today’s news, begins at 10.30am and is open to everyone. CD often misses this however, as she prefers to prepare for the ‘City’ Office meeting. At this meeting she is told the headlines and the main message of their stories for the day. In one sentence she has to explain to the editor what is happening with her story and what her brief is.

By 12.30pm the second main editorial meeting of the day with the section heads takes place. Here stories are refined and sorted and the shape of the newspaper starts to emerge. The front three pages will have been decided at this stage and if a story is not already on the agenda, it won’t be taken on now. If you hope to break a story after that, it would have to be a real scoop.

Although always busy, the best time to ring her is between 10.30am and 12.30pm. Early afternoon might be OK too, if she is not at lunch. *More about lunch later*. By 4pm the office is deathly quiet and it’s the worst time to call - that is when they are writing; she won’t answer the phone.

CD generally prefers to be contacted by email, but with around 100 per day she can’t guarantee that yours will get read. Forget faxing.

Don’t be boring
CD and Larry Elliott* write particularly about Trade, with anti-globalisation, for example, fast moving up the news agenda. This would seem very relevant to ODI. However, it’s important to make a research-based story relevant to the newspaper’s style and readership. CD gave the example of the (nameless) head of an NGO who bored her to death with the technicalities of CAP reform and, like many others, did not realise (s)he was up against very fast-moving opposition. Aid agencies come out with very simplistic messages and are not afraid to be ‘media tarts’, which gets results in media coverage. We need to find more effective ways of getting our research-based messages across.
You need to be fast and simple in getting your news pitch across to a journalist as they are juggling lots of different things. Look at The Guardian’s news agenda to get an idea of what sort of pitch they might be interested in. Extract yourself from what you want to say and think about what they want to hear, if you want them to listen and respond effectively.

Keeping up with the news is vitally important. This will help you know what debates The Guardian is interested in and what’s going to be on the agenda on any given day.

The message we give must be tailored. News is often dictated by the drama of, say, disasters, emergency relief, etc. However, The Guardian has a lot to say about the effectiveness of aid, trade and policy, the question of whether opening up markets is good for the poor - generally pitting anti-globalisation against the established order, etc., which is good for us.

**When to send a press release**

Think about the rhythm of the week from a journalist’s perspective. Sunday is a good day to pitch a story for Monday’s newspaper as there is usually not much news around on that day. Sending out an ‘eyecatching’ press release with an embargo for Monday’s Guardian could therefore be ideal for us, she said. News items are around 400-500 words; features: 750 words. And remember Larry’s slogan, ‘Don’t forget it’s showbiz’. CD reiterated that no one has to read The Guardian. The pieces that make it to the debate pages have to be interesting, opinionated and direct – they have to make the subject ‘come alive’.

**Pegs**

Possible forthcoming ‘pegs’ include the spring and annual meetings of the financial institutions, and the topics coming out of that - education for all, HIPC debt relief, the question of whether rolling world trade meetings work for the poor, etc. These issues make up a ‘crowded field’; ask yourself ‘what are the current debates exercising newspapers?’

**Targeting**

Expend the most effort on particular journalists – ones you have got to know, and who are interested in your topics. Get a feel for if the journalist is interested in your story. If not, move to the next. Keep an up-to-date contacts database. Nothing is more annoying than a journalist’s colleague receiving the same press release - they like ‘exclusives’. Make your pitch ‘pithy and to the point’ and work out which section of the newspaper to target.

**Soundbites**

CD also mentioned soundbites. Andrew Simpson of Christian Aid is apparently brilliant at using vivid soundbites, though they most often involve furry animals …. Anyway. Get your pitch across in a single sentence. A print journalist is effectively ‘auditioning’ you by this, in a similar way to the way (but less intensely of course) a radio journalist will ‘audition’ you on the ‘phone to see if you are going to be interesting on air. A print journalist has more time to play with what you say. By the way, if a journalist says to you, ‘do you mean …’, and you say ‘yes’, be aware that this is a green light for them to quote you. Do feel free to say ‘no’, and they will respect that.
In summary
(1) work out the news agenda;
(2) prepare with good embargoes (Sunday for Monday in our case);
(3) make contact with the journalists that are writing about our types of topics.

Discussion
• Asked by JC if she felt she changed policy, CD said generally ‘no’. She felt the media campaign had helped shift Clare Short on debt, but conceded that media coverage was just part of the story.
• Experts’ directories had limited impact, in her view. She agreed with FS that the LSE web-based list resource did get used by journalists, but not if they were uncontactable at a crucial moment.
• There followed some debate as to the mechanics of getting your organisation nearer the top of a search engine’s listings (FS). It may depend on the number of links on your website.
• Categorising everything we have under a topic-heading (much cross-referencing) with a short summary and links, as necessary, (on our website) was considered to be a very useful resource to develop.
• CD confirmed for DB that she generally has good relationships with civil servants.
• SM said that Panos is a very good channel for news stories, too.
• Bear in mind that the journalist will always have the final say on what the message of a news item will be. It may be the opposite of what you are trying to say. However, SM confirmed that his experience of writing a series of pieces, over the years, for John Vidal, has shown him that his message and words weren’t distorted.
• CD uses the web (including Google, increasingly) as a v. useful means of research. Our Briefing Papers can be useful.
• CD recommended the Outlook section of the Guardian Weekly as possibly being a good outlet for our work. Though it only has a readership of 50,000, it is worldwide, and could be the specialist constituency we are looking for. The stories in this section are a mix of stories from the field (features, etc.) and policy-orientated stories. They are separate from the stuff that’s culled from The Guardian.

*Lunch*
Lunch can be lengthy for a journalist and it must be borne in mind that journalists are, like MPs, not averse to being taken out for it. While CD can be lunching sometimes for up to three hours, often this is where she gets to the bottom of – no, not just a large knickerbocker glory – a more technical or complex story. This could be useful for ODI to know.

Diana Evans
14th February 2003

*Larry is the Economics Editor and is also on ODI Council*
MEDIA TRAINING

Notes from meeting with Gordon Corera of *BBC Radio 4’s The Today Programme*

25th July 2002

Present:
Simon Maxwell, Frances Stevenson, Roger Blench, James Darcy, Tim Conway, Andy McKay, Sophie Evitt, David Sunderland, Karin Christiansen, Diana Evans

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Audience

Who do we see as our audience? (Fellow practitioners/public/policymakers/other?). As an independent think-tank on international development and humanitarian issues, our audiences are varied: **policymakers** directly (meetings, publications, IDC submissions and presentations, APGOOD participation, etc.); **journalists** who can create a forum for discussion and influence the **general public** (who in turn influence government policy through raised awareness and subsequent pressure). Politicians closely monitor public opinion. I would argue that **NGOs** could benefit from ODI’s research too.

Planning

GC highlighted the need to simplify complex messages. The media is often crisis-led and the long-term focus is often ignored in place of short-term news. Proactive ‘placing’ of stories (using forward-planning development diaries and looking for ‘pegs’, for example, along with possible background briefing papers to a well-selected journalist), is a way round this. We will try and get our name(s) on the BBC’s various Desk Diaries.

A good opportunity to be proactive is when there is a summit/global meeting (G8/UN/other), or when a foreseeable date such as September 11th 2002 will provide pegs for related stories, such as trends in the developing world. The BBC will often look for reports, analyses and discussion – and will have between one week and two months to plan and prepare for big stories like these. Need to find the reporter(s) assigned to the event.

The planning process usually has a much faster turnaround than this. Final decisions as to what lead is followed often takes place on the day, or the day before. Broadcast (and print) journalists scan all the newspapers for topical and strong stories, as well as investigating initiatives of their own when time allows. Half the possible stories on the planning list don’t get used. However, a story that looks accessible, is easily explainable to the editor by the journalist championing it, and which can stand up to the sometimes aggressive culture of fellow journalists vying for their story to be used in the planning meetings of the *Today* programme, has the best chance.

Roughly, the editorial process involves story selection as follows: 80% of news is pre-planned and in a newsgathering diary; 10% is dedicated to breaking news and 10% is original, investigative journalism. It is worth spending some time working out which of these avenues might best be used.
Newsgathering teams are composed of correspondents who work on the TV programmes (1pm, 6pm and 10pm News, plus the Today programme), and some of the producers. The Today programme is slightly different in that it has its own correspondents. NB. SM recently met David Loyn, who is the newly-appointed Developing World Correspondent for BBC News, and I will be inviting him to come and have an informal chat with anyone he feels may be useful to him in his story research, if they would like to meet him.

It is the World Planning Desk that puts together the BBC diaries. GC will provide us with their details shortly and advises us to get on these diaries.

**Guests for interview**

Journalists look to have experts they can call on in many fields as it gives them quick access to knowledge. While lazy/overly busy journalists get into the habit of calling the same ‘expert’ every time because they are known and reliable, diversity is the goal. Once an ODI expert has ‘broken in’, the loop will be self-perpetuating as they are more-often called upon to comment and speak. Avenues include getting quoted in the Opinion Editorial sections of newspapers. These are scanned daily by all media outlets (print and broadcast).

Pre-interview interviews are where the producer calls you up to see if you are reliable and ‘can speak’ in a live interview. This can be very irritating as you may feel it wastes time and gives you even less time to prepare, however it is likely to be continued practice. It is also used to vet your stance; many producers/reporters have a pre-conceived idea of what they are looking for and call around looking for a specific quote.

GC advises us to be more confident in asking them questions back (eg. ‘What is the angle you are taking?’; ‘who else will you be talking to?’ and ‘what are you expecting me to say?’). You may also want to ask if what you are saying is on/off the record.

Obviously, a live discussion is at its best when opinions are polarised. This is the format of Today programme discussions. GC advises you not to take on such an interview just for the sake of having media coverage. If it’s not your thing, pull out. Pulling out at the last minute is very bad; analytical forums like Newsnight might suit ODI RFs better.

Radio clips can be chopped and edited. Journalists are not allowed to change the meaning of what you say, though they may prune your lengthy explanation to the key points. You may want to ask for a written script of what they will broadcast. If they have time, they are often happy to provide this for you; you can also indicate that you would rather they didn’t edit this/that bit.
**Soundbites**

These come with practice. Politicians specialise in them. Avoid generalities and try and find the individual story/case study. Eg. if a report you have just published finds that $100 billion has been spent on something, the audience will glaze over; it’s meaningless. If you break it down to an everyday scenario, such as ‘for the price of a Starbucks coffee twice a week …’ you will get your message over much more powerfully. Individualise policy work and research for the media. Avoid clichés and remember that soundbites are best planned in advance. (Perhaps think about the different angles a question might come at you, and how you can weave in your soundbite accordingly).

**Toplines**

This is the one-line/five second soundbite that captures the journalist’s attention. Eg. With the humanitarian crisis in southern Africa, a provocative debate-inducing topline might be ‘Is globalisation and liberalisation the cause of southern Africa’s crises?’. Note that you should be able to back up your argument, especially if you are proactively seeking coverage.

**Background briefings**

JD’s experience with Oxfam was that journalists responded very positively to a background briefing for stories such as Rwanda. GC agreed that these were extremely helpful, especially if well-timed, frank, and relevant to running stories. He would particularly welcome information he didn’t already know in such a briefing.

**Brainstorming**

GC recommends it as an excellent way to come up with and share ideas. These might lead to Opinion editorial pieces which in turn might be spotted by Today newsgatherers.

GC gave the example of Tearfund who’s report was spotted by the Today programme because a correspondent was able to telescope in to the individual case study of a slum in Delhi, following the report’s cue that 200 million (figure?) were suffering from water shortages. The report was the peg.

**General Information**

There is a development correspondent for TV but most journalists only have bits of specialisms – they are not experts. It may be only once every two weeks that there is a dedicated development report on the Today programme.

The Today Programme often receives 500 faxes and 200 emails each day. While attempts are made to look at these, it’s certainly worth ringing the studio in advance, asking who would be the right person to deal with the story, and putting their name on top of the fax.

GC advises that we make a big/technical story accessible to the appropriate audience. This is vital as journalists are obviously deadline-driven and don’t have the time to do in-depth research of complex topics (that’s what we do).
Make a subject ‘media-friendly’, even ‘cut-and-pastable’ so that the journalist can confidently send something comprehensive and relevant to his editor for consideration.

Note that the media is as wary of NGOs as NGOs are of them. NGOs (advocates +/- fundraisers +/- lobbyists) have an agenda as much as the media (‘to educate, entertain and inform’) does and don’t necessarily always have correct research backing up their points. ODI doesn’t necessarily suffer the same criticism as we are known to be independent. However, our challenge is to have ‘sharp’ soundbites with confident messages that can be used topically and powerfully.

NB. Gordon Corera used to work on The World Tonight and at World Affairs Research as a newsgatherer, covering, in large part, humanitarian crises.

Diana Evans