

Introduction

I am a Solo Video Journalist



Figure 0.1

Credit: Luke Carter

“Where’s your photographer?”

This is the question I hear most when meeting someone I am about to interview.

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I have worked as a television journalist for nearly two decades, won several of the industry's highest honors, and covered some of the world's most momentous events. But when I show up at someone's doorstep or office with a camera in one hand, tripod in the other, and a backpack on my shoulders, I receive the same puzzled expression – the one that says, “Aren't you supposed to have someone else with you?”

I laugh it off, respond with a joke, and assure my interview subject that my role is perfectly common.

I am a solo video journalist.

And I have a great job.

Broadcast news has always appeared more glamorous on screen than in person, but perhaps no trend represents this more than the rise of the solo video journalist. The idea – at least, as a widespread concept – is still relatively new, and even my own industry cannot agree on what to call me. Many stations use the term “multimedia journalist” or “MMJ.” Others say “one-man-band,” “backpack journalist,” or “do-it-all reporter.” (You will see all these terms in this book.) On camera, I appear no different than my fellow reporters. Off camera, I juggle twice the responsibilities and apply far more physical effort, shooting and editing my own stories.

When I describe this to people outside the industry, they tend to respond with a mixture of awe and pity. They cannot believe such a job exists, where one person must possess such seemingly disparate skills. They occasionally say something like, “Well, I'm sure one day you won't have to do that anymore.”

I bristle when I hear that ... because I know two things:

First, solo video journalism is no longer a means to an end, a stepping stone until one gets that “real” reporting job. For many, it is a full-fledged career path that has led the way to groundbreaking, award-winning coverage.

Second, I have experienced opportunities, assignments, and successes in my career that I had never imagined, and I have received them largely because I do it all.

My journey in television news reflects the value of versatility. At my first job at KMEG-TV in Sioux City, Iowa, I served as a one-man sports department. I produced, shot, wrote, edited, and anchored two sportscasts a night. I then worked at WGRZ-TV in Buffalo, N.Y., starting as a sports reporter/producer and becoming a weekend sports anchor and weekday news reporter, known for long-form human-interest stories that captured people's attention. I began to reap the benefits of my solo status, winning four Regional Edward R. Murrow Awards and traveling alone to Denver to cover the 2008 Democratic National Convention. In 2009, I moved to Atlanta to work for WXIA-TV, where I achieved even greater success. In my first

decade at the station, I earned 30 Southeast Emmy Awards in a wide range of categories, almost always competing against stories from traditional two-person crews. I was named, five times, the National Press Photographers Association's Solo Video Journalist of the Year.

I have also received extraordinary assignments. In 2010, my parent company, Gannett (now called TEGNA), was planning its coverage of the Winter Olympics in Vancouver and wanted to send as many reporters as possible. The company chose to use largely solo video journalists, who could produce the same amount of content for half the price. I was among the MMJs selected, and I spent a month in a foreign country reporting from one of the most watched events of the year and supplying stories to stations across America. Since then I have covered multiple Olympic Games (Figure 0.2), three Super Bowls, the World Series, and a presidential inauguration – almost always producing stories alone.

I am hardly the exception. Solo video journalists now occupy a substantial segment of TV newsrooms. The latest study from the RTDNA found that 93% of local network affiliates use them in some capacity, including 83% of affiliates in the top 25 markets. Among new hires in broadcast news departments, MMJs ranked second among all positions, surpassing anchors and producers. The only job more requested? Digital journalists (Papper, 2018). That's another new lane. The explosion of video online, from both television and digital outlets, provides opportunities and assignments for those who can do it all.

As the number of solo video journalists rises, so does the number of those in positions of power. At TEGNA alone, two one-time MMJs at my station have since taken jobs as news directors in medium-sized markets. Others have been promoted to positions with "Chief" at the front. The NPPA just handed the reins of its prestigious Advanced Storytelling Workshop to Anne Herbst, a one-time Solo Video Journalist of the Year. Fellow soloist Sarah Blake Morgan



Figure 0.2 Solo video journalism can take you to a different continent. In 2016 it took me to the Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro.

Credit: Matt Pearl

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runs a Facebook group that launched in 2016 to empower female MMJs and now features thousands of members. One-person crews have won Peabody Awards, National Edward R. Murrow Awards, and hundreds of Emmys. We are an unstoppable force.

My message to aspiring reporters is this: Think of what you want to accomplish in your career, and understand you can likely do so as a solo video journalist. It does not need to be a stepping stone. It can be your entire path.

But it brings challenges. Becoming a talented MMJ requires learning a variety of seemingly divergent skill sets. The traits of a thorough reporter do not necessarily match those of a strong photographer. A one-person crew must also juggle numerous responsibilities and deal with a unique set of hurdles en route to producing a story.

Very few books discuss these challenges and provide a thorough overview of how to conquer them. Even fewer provide the perspective of present-day journalists, let alone MMJs themselves. The practice of solo video journalism, as popular as it has become, is still young enough that many teachers and authors do not quite know how to approach it. Aspiring reporters, too often, must figure it out on their own.

Enter this book.

Consider the next 183 pages a how-to guide for solo video journalism. I have drawn on my own experiences while picking the brains of some of the finest one-woman and one-man bands working today, and I have produced an easy-to-follow, comprehensive collection of tips and techniques for becoming a well-rounded, powerful storyteller.

The first part of the book deals with the importance of preparation. Chapter 1 focuses on planning: how to arrive at the station prepared, brainstorm a story, back-time your day, and wisely use what some might call “downtime.” Chapter 2 discusses hair, make-up, and clothing, with advice on how to dress appropriately for both shooting and reporting. Chapter 3 talks about equipment, from lights and headphones to the camera itself. Chapter 4 looks at how to develop a digital presence and balance your on-air and online responsibilities.

Part II is entitled “In the Field” and dissects the story-gathering process. Chapter 5 covers the rules and guidelines for collecting footage, or B-roll. Chapter 6 provides advice for conducting interviews. Chapter 7 dives into the seemingly tricky maneuver of shooting your own stand-ups.

Part III focuses on putting it all together. Chapter 8 offers a deep dive into logging interviews and writing your story. Chapter 9 examines editing – a critical skill for any visual storyteller. Finally, the fourth and final section consists of chapters that provide advice for thinking big in the journalistic field.

In addition, I have included chapters throughout the book called “Career Chronicles,” which focus on the various paths available to those who do it all. Some, like me, lean into their solo status and carve unique roles in the industry. Others use it as a springboard to more traditional jobs. These chapters combine with the others to provide a complete foundation for up-and-coming MMJs.

I decided to write this book because I believe in its importance. I have benefited so much from capitalizing on my role as a solo video journalist, and I wish to see others do the same. As you read these words and use their advice, I implore you to reach out to me with any questions or requests for critique. I can be reached via e-mail at mattpearlreports@gmail.com.

I wish you all the best as you begin, or continue, your journey.

Reference

Papper, B. (2018, April 16). “Research: TV News Employment Surpasses Newspapers” [Web Log Post]. Retrieved from www.rtdna.org/article/research_tv_news_employment_surpasses_newspapers