CHAPTER FIVE

Education Reporting

ED MADISON
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Nearly everyone has an opinion about the state of education. Whether assessed positively or negatively, the challenges schools face are a major public concern. A 2018 Pew Research study found that Americans ranked education as the second most significant issue that elected officials should address after the economy; education was ranked above terrorism in its importance.[1] However, education stories can be challenging to cover and complicated to convey. Much of school-related news is driven by policy initiatives based on dense details and dry statistics. Yet "smaller" stories centering on people and personal plights have the power to humanize issues and arouse public interest. Stories about students, teachers, and administrators who personify authentic challenges and triumphs experienced in schools can spark public interest and bring public policies to life.

This chapter looks at how journalists cover education, and how they might do so more effectively in the face of increasing public scrutiny and civic need, particularly in this "post-truth" era, when established norms are under attack. Some argue that the challenges facing our nation's youth—and therefore our country's future—have never been more critical, nor the stakes so high. Democracies thrive based on a shared sense of civility and understanding, and the sound judgment of an informed citizenry. Ideally, schools are where these values and skills are cultivated and refined.

However, a 2016 Stanford study found that the next generation of American voters are gravely ill-prepared when it comes to judging the credibility of information they encounter online. Researchers determined, "Despite their fluency with



Figure 5.1: High School instructor Ivan Miller participates in the University of Oregon's Journalistic Learning Initiative.
[Credit: Photo courtesy Ed Madison.]

social media, many students are unaware of basic conventions for indicating verified digital information."[2]

To better understand the processes of gathering, deciphering and reporting education news, we will gain insights from several established professionals. Claudio Sanchez is an award-winning education correspondent for National Public Radio. Alexander Russo is a distinguished education writer, blogger, and author who has been published or quoted by *Slate, The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *USA Today.* Bethany Barnes won a 2017 Best Education Journalist award while still in her twenties. Barnes covers Portland Public Schools at *The Oregonian.*

THE MYTH OF THE "NOBLE" BEAT

Education journalism is often considered a "noble beat," comprising stories that deserve to be covered and cared about. However, change in education comes slowly. Education news generally lacks the urgency or immediacy of breaking crime stories or routine weather reporting. For a new journalist, paying one's dues can mean covering local school board meetings where the big story may be as mundane as

approval of a motion to AstroTurf a soccer field. Resolution in education rarely arises as quickly as a definitive court decision or a sudden shift in the wind. However, the journalists interviewed for this chapter agree that their work is critical to understanding the broader dynamics of people, politics, and policy.

Immediately after finishing college, Claudio Sanchez began his career covering stories along the U.S.-Mexican border. "The more I covered schools, the more I realized it was a window to an enormous demographic shift in this country that touched on issues like economic development, the Latino community, and immigration," says Sanchez. He reported from the frontlines of unprecedented demographic changes that were redefining the makeup of America just as tensions were increasing about border policies.

Immigration issues affect children, and therefore our nation's schools. The U.S. reached a significant milestone in fall 2018. For the first time, the overall number of Latino, African-American, and Asian students in K-12 public schools surpassed the number of white students—estimated at 50.3 percent by the National Center on Education Statistics.[3]

Education influences a broad range of issues. "I think it's one of the most interesting lenses you can use on a city," says Bethany Barnes. Education is among a municipality's largest expenses, from teacher salaries and benefits to facility maintenance costs. More importantly, school policies affect loved ones who are too young to make informed choices for themselves. And the decisions adults make on their behalf can have long-term implications on the trajectory of their lives. "In nearly every story, children's fate hangs in the balance," Barnes says.

Alexander Russo writes about how education news is covered by other journalists—in a sense keeping his colleagues honest by critiquing the rigor and accuracy of their work. "I had a long and fascinating time writing about things going on in schools, and then more recently I realized that no one was writing about the quality, or lack thereof, in education journalism … and that I could help education reporters reflect about their work," Russo says. His epiphany acknowledges the complexities of covering the subject. Education news is often driven by bureaucratic policies that are difficult to explain and challenging for readers to interpret.

"I find that kind of thrilling, actually," says Barnes, "because you have to find a way to simplify it and have your readers understand as directly as possible the effects of all of those policies."

One reason people care so much about education is their familiarity with the subject. Teachers, students, parents, policy makers, and journalists who cover education-related subjects share a common bias. Each have memories—good or bad—of their own experience of school. In fact, we all do. Memories inform our perspectives about education's past failings and future potential, as well as how to best enact change.

"I think that education stories often trigger a gut reaction," Sanchez says. "Everyone can go back and think of someone like Ms. Wadell, my third-grade

teacher who taught me the importance of learning, and say 'What a wonderful teacher. Why aren't there more like that?' Or go back to our high school years, and remember the good, the bad and the ugly." These memories can lead to very strong beliefs and positions about what is wrong with schools, and how to "fix" them. Consequently, education news is rarely viewed with fresh eyes.

"If I'm covering the cops beat, I'm not a former cop, or a former participant in the criminal justice system," Russo says. "It's one of the things that makes education journalism difficult and tricky."

If you hold a certain set of beliefs, your choice of key words in a simple Google search will likely return evidence that supports your views. There is a specific name for this tendency. *Confirmation bias* states that we are inclined to accept news and information that aligns with, and therefore confirms, our existing beliefs. If you credit your sense of work ethic to values you learned at a private parochial school, you may be convinced that public schools are too lenient, and that most children would benefit from an educational experience similar to yours.

Solid journalism doesn't necessarily tell us what we want to hear, but often tells us what we need to hear to make informed decisions as citizens in a democracy.

Given personal biases, is it even sensible to expect schools to evolve when our collective frame of reference is limited to personal experiences that are often decades old? Committed education journalist lives inside of this question, and it is the compass they rely on to guide their work.

Russo says there are additional factors that can color the ways in which journalists cover education. "An obvious downside is that I think many education journalists had a really good experience in school." If you sailed through classes and never struggled, or didn't attend schools that were well-resourced, it may be difficult to make sense of dysfunctional school settings.

Lack of diversity in reporting staffs can also adversely affect the breadth and depth of education news coverage. Russo cites Nikole Hannah-Jones, an award-winning African-American education journalist who has observed that few of her professional peers are also people of color. At a recent Education Writers Association conference, Hannah-Jones told colleagues that they were complicit in the problems of the system they cover.[4] Meaning, many journalists are highly educated, financially stable, and live lives that are far removed from the people and situations they report on. This realization can be alarming. However, it can also help education reporters find ways to approach their work with more mindfulness of inclusivity.

TRUST AND FALSE TRUTHS

Journalists are constitutionally charged and professionally obligated to seek out the truth for the public good. However, their watchdog role is complicated by a recent

surge in politicians and pundits who suggest that there are no "truths," and perpetuate notions about the existence of "alternative" facts. Faced with evidence that does not favor their respective agendas, they often appear to disregard, downplay, or spin the truth, and attack the messengers. Since the 2016 U.S. presidential election cycle, the "fake news" mantra has been in full force. Various politicians around the world have ratcheted-up rhetoric designed to vilify the news media, and have stir public sentiments that question its credibility and fairness.[5]

A 2017 Gallup and Knight Foundation poll revealed that 64 percent of Americans believed that the news they consume from television, newspapers and radio is biased.[6] That is consistent with an often-cited Gallup poll from the previous year that found only 32 percent of Americans say they have "a great deal" or "a fair amount" of trust in mainstream news organizations.[7]

"I try to honestly ignore this back and forth about 'fake news'," Sanchez says. "We're at an unfortunate point where it doesn't matter how accurate a story is. There will always be someone who won't believe it."

Barnes describes her conversations on the subject of journalistic credibility as being a "one-two punch."

"It's not just the public trust issue. I think there is also a pervasive feeling that the profession is struggling," she says. Barnes cites President Donald Trump's frequent and yet inaccurate disparaging remarks about the "failing *New York Times.*" Near the end of his second year in office, Trump had tweeted the phrase seventeen times, establishing it as a meme.[8] "I think it's dangerous to have the only narrative about our work be that," Barnes says.

Depending on how you choose to measure it, one could argue the state of journalism has actually never been more robust. While the traditional print newspaper business continues to face setbacks, the broadcast sector remains strong, and the overall news industry shift to digital has shown encouraging results. In fact, *The New York Times* enjoyed record profits following Trump's election. Revenue from digital subscriptions rose to $99 million in the second quarter of 2018, nearly 20 percent higher than the same period from the prior year.[9]

Facts about the news media's economic stability can also become distorted inside echo chambers caused by continued audience fragmentation, who now have more choices, and the prevalence of partisan media. Sanchez faults the "ideological silos" that society now finds itself in, including journalists who promote their personal political views. However, he believes those reporters work in the margins rather than within the mainstream of the profession.

It is a climate that can make it difficult for civics teachers who are engaged in supporting students in contextualizing the meaning of shifting political trends and social norms.

"My colleagues have done stories about social studies teachers who have to navigate this really poisonous environment," Sanchez says. "I think it's unhealthy."

Attacks aside, the journalism profession must also look inward and accept some level of responsibility for the current state of public distrust.

"Often it's journalists who have contributed to it by not being more diligent in reporting the facts, and making sure that we are accountable for what we publish," says Sanchez.

"Journalists need to make an intensive effort to engage with their communities," Barnes says. "We need to let them know how we're adding value, and what we're accomplishing … I think good work does win people over and can make a difference."

By several indicators, the news media would receive poor grades for their coverage of education stories. In fact, reporting on education topics is consistently sparse. A 2018 study analyzed 35 years of education coverage in television news, and found that with the exception of a few spikes, coverage was "strikingly limited," and largely "invisible."[10] When it is covered, violence dominates education news narratives, followed by matters pertaining to school quality, funding, race and ethnicity, and workforce issues.

Research also indicates that when education stories make the news, they follow predictable themes. Heroic teachers who make great gains in otherwise dire circumstances often make headlines. Conversely, teachers at-large and their unions have been characterized as noble but ineffective professionals who resist reforms, and who are overly concerned with their personal benefits. The decades change, but the narratives stay the same, which can lead to disinterest and distrust of the media.

Columbia School of Journalism professor Nicholas Lemann observes that "Most reporters do not seem to be familiar with the large quantity of first-rate education research that is readily available to them, and many reporters are unable to engage with anything that uses, let's say, correlation coefficients."[11] The term is defined as a numerical measure of some type of correlation, meaning a statistical relationship between two variables.

In fairness, statistical distinctions can be difficult to distill for general audiences. Today's journalists also face higher demands with fewer resources. Gone are the days of filing one's story and calling it a night. Cutbacks have increased workloads, while staff sizes have dwindled. Time, or lack of it, is also a challenge. Social media and round-the-clock news cycles have increased the demand for information, and the ease with which it can be disseminated. Yet many newsrooms are under-resourced with smaller teams of reporters who are stretched ever thinner. Correspondents can be expected to draft several versions of their stories for an array of social media platforms, while setting aside time to converse with audiences.

Another factor is increased competition. A greater number of news outlets compete for a finite number of consumers, leading some to sensationalize in order

to gain ground. This can lead to an overemphasis on breaking stories, prompting news organizations to publish stories before adequately checking their facts.

Against this backdrop, it is easy to cast villains and victims rather than to tackle nuance and help readers and viewers make sense of public policy issues. Journalism's "tendency to overemphasize 'personalities, anecdotes, and narratives' also distract reporters and readers,"[12] says Lemann.

SCHOOL 'CHOICE' AND POLARIZING PUBLIC FIGURES

An example of personality-driven reporting is media coverage of the issue of *school choice* and the role of one its most prominent advocates, President Trump's Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos. Making sense of the topic and DeVos' positions requires more than a single 140-character tweet. The public can be better served by deeper analysis.

Proponents of school choice argue that parents should not have to subject their children to attending failing neighborhood schools. Choice strategies provide them with government-funded placements in private, charter, or religious-affiliated schools. Opponents argue that every child is entitled to a quality education, and that school choice policies divert public funds that could be used to improve neighborhood schools. Consequently, troubled schools fall further behind. Harsher critics view the choice movement as a veiled attempt to privatize schools to benefit corporations.

"On the question of whether charter schools are doing better, that is one of the most mysterious things as far as I'm concerned," Sanchez says. He cites conflicting data from various university studies and think tanks. Opponents and proponents have been known to cherry pick data to support their respective agendas. "Stanford did a study that everybody picked from to say different things. Someone can embark on a so called comprehensive, neutral or objective study of charter schools, and ultimately people will say that the good thing found was a lie, or, if the conclusion is that charter schools aren't doing that great a job and are hurting public education, someone will say *that's* a lie."

Complicating efforts to compare how students perform in public versus charter schools are their incompatible enrollment practices. Students are never randomly assigned to attend a particular school. Public school enrollments are determined by the demographics of a given neighborhood, and all of a community's children must be admitted. With school choice, parents elect which school their child will attend, resulting in enrollments that are even less random.

Journalists also need to exercise caution when citing polls that appear to claim some form or sea-change in public opinion. Such pronouncements can make for great headlines, but digging deeper often reveals fallacies. An example is a 2018

poll conducted by Education Next, a research center based at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, that claims public opinion has shifted in favor of school choice, with "54 percent of respondents saying they favor universal choice policies." The findings suggested that the change was substantial, given that in the past only 45 percent said they favored school choice.[13]

The Atlantic dug deeper, observing a disconnect between what Education Next states on its website and its perception within the education community. Education Next's website claims it "partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology," while *The Atlantic* found that "many education insiders describe it as partial to 'free-market education reform ideas like charters and vouchers."[14]

Further, *The Atlantic* noted that the phrasing of the survey questions may have factored into the poll results. The 54 percent statistic was present only when people were asked whether they would support a proposal to "give all families with children in public schools wider choice, by allowing them to enroll their children in private school instead, with government helping to pay the tuition." No mention was made of "vouchers," a notably contentious word. When vouchers were specifically asked about, support dropped to 44 percent.[15] Further reporting revealed that school choice advocates have taken to avoiding use of the word voucher altogether, preferring terms that poll better, such as "opportunity scholarships," or "education savings accounts."

"It's the journalist's job to tear through the poll or study to understand what it really does or does not say," says Russo. "And frankly, it's also the advocate's job to make it look as positive or enticing as they can. I don't begrudge advocates for doing that."

Russo observes that coverage of the school choice debate fails to report key factors that are not immediately obvious. "I think journalists generally do a good job of covering explicit systems of choice, but don't do as well covering hidden systems of choice, which involve moving to a better neighborhood or leaving for the suburbs." He believes this is a blind spot for many reporters whose families may benefit from such privileges, but who may not think of those actions as a choice.

At best, the report card for charter schools versus public schools is mixed. Asked if voucher students outperform neighborhood school students, Josh Cunningham, a senior education policy specialist with the National Conference of State Legislatures, told NPR reporters in 2017 that "At the most I can say, 'Maybe, a little bit.' But there's not a lot of evidence that [students will] have any substantial academic gains."[16]

Whether the news media cover Education Secretary Betsy DeVos fairly is another contentious subject. In the lead-up to her confirmation hearings, most journalists would agree that examining DeVos's experience, financial ties, and past public statements was fair game. *The Washington Post* and *Politico* reported that over the past 20 years, the DeVos family had donated close to $100 million dollars to

political campaigns that supported school choice agendas.[17] DeVos herself spearheaded initiatives that critics say benefited her corporate and ideological allies, but did little to improve the condition of Michigan public schools. When interviewed for "60 Minutes" by correspondent Leslie Stahl, DeVos admitted that she never visited any of the Detroit schools her initiatives would have affected. "Maybe I should,"[18] she said.

Alexander Russo recalled another awkward and controversial media moment when DeVos cited an erroneous example when framing her argument in favor of school choice. "She made a reference to HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) being part of a system of choice. However, HBCUs were part of a system of lack of choice," Russo says, referring to the fact that HBCUs began operating to serve black students who by force of segregation were barred from attending "white" colleges and universities.

"Part of the problem with Betsy DeVos is that she is so inaccessible," says Sanchez. "I think that reporters want to hear her side of things, but she has so many political 'handlers' around her who have kind of kept reporters at arms-length."

Sanchez notes that many of the education stories covered at the federal level rely on sources that are second or third hand. "Some of those negative stories are 'leaks' from people within the department—and I know many of them—who are civil servants, not political appointees."

Russo wrote several stern critiques of the way DeVos was covered by the media. "I think part of it was the quantity and the tone of it that I objected to. I don't object to the fact-finding part of it." Russo says that much of the coverage was one-dimensional and followed a familiar pack-driven narrative. "I wanted someone to help me understand Betsy DeVos as a human being, in addition to her investments and her positions," Russo says. "It wasn't until almost a year after the world came to know Betsy DeVos's name that 'This American Life' aired a segment that took us to the school where she had tutored and introduced us to teachers and students she had worked with. The segment doesn't exonerate her … but it did humanize her."

TRANSPARENCY VERSUS OBJECTIVITY

Some issues of fairness get to the heart of shifting professional and public beliefs about "journalistic objectivity." After all, isn't legitimate news supposed to be free from opinions? Isn't objectivity one of the core principals of journalism?

It depends on the era and who you ask. American journalism in the 1880s was anything but objective. An era of *yellow journalism* swept the nation where publishers, led by Hearst and Pulitzer, knowingly circulated false stories with fabricated headlines to sell newspapers. Congress threatened to intervene if the fledgling

industry failed to institute its own restraints. In the 1920s, Walter Lippmann, a prominent political commentator and founding editor of *The New Republic*, advocated that journalism should be approached using the scientific method.[19] He believed the practice should involve standardized methods of testing information to reveal evidence of truth. In theory, the notion that journalists should simply report facts is sensical, and in fact the ideal. It suggests that journalists are obligated to tell both sides of a story and refrain from stating personal opinions. In *The Elements of Journalism*, authors Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel assert that an important point is often missed in discussions of objectivity. They argue that the *method* is supposed to be objective, not the journalists.[20]

Some critics question whether a "balanced" approach to reporting leads to oversimplification of complex issues. The disconnect stems from the traditional view within the profession that journalists should be "dispassionate observers" rather than active participants. Their job is to report stories, not to advocate for a particular view. It is a philosophy that can make reporters resistant to drawing attention to their good deeds and significant societal contributions.

Some issues benefit from a more nuanced approach to reporting that acknowledges the multitude of variables and perspectives out there. In a *Columbia Journalism Review* article on the topic, journalist Brent Cunningham wrote that "Objectivity excuses lazy reporting. If you're on deadline and all you have is 'both sides of the story,' that's often good enough."[21] The public is not sufficiently served when complicated issues are reduced to two-sided debates.

A new breed of journalists and scholars argue that the profession's devout modesty is ill-conceived and potentially fatal. They assert that journalists need to reclaim the narrative about the value of their work and shed light on their processes and achievements.

Gabriel Kahn, a professor at USC Annenberg School of Journalism, argues that "transparency is the new objectivity."

"When @realDonaldTrump calls you the enemy, it's tough to stay neutral," says Kahn. He argues further that the public's trust can only be regained when journalists are willing to "share some of the messy sausage-making process" with them.[22] This means explaining how editorial decisions are made and the inherent fallibilities that occur in news gathering.

Other factors come into play. It must also be acknowledged that the media landscape has changed dramatically over the past two decades. The proliferation of internet access and the rising prominence of social media are among the many significant factors that have disrupted and influenced journalism, sometimes raising more questions than solutions. Should the profession be held accountable for the entirety of an ever-expanding tapestry of work-products tagged as "journalism"? We live in an era when anyone can label him or herself a journalist, and nearly everyone has the power to publish.

Not only is education policy often controversial and difficult to explain, but when long awaited policy shifts are implemented it can take years to determine whether they were effective. "Because Americans are so impatient, education reform has really been a 'flavor of the month' approach," says Sanchez. "How can you embark on a better way to educate kindergartners and not wait long enough to know whether by 5th or 10th grade these kids are doing well? That's been the story of Head Start, where we've seen the data, and yet seem reluctant to invest because we don't see results right away."

The Common Core State Standards are another example of a public policy shift that became a liability for some politicians before they were fully enacted. What began in 2009 as an earnest effort by state leaders to agree on a core set of competencies for students and teaching accountabilities for teachers was recast by opponents as an attempt to federalize education and anathema to the autonomous boundaries of state's rights.

SIDING WITH SCIENCE

The notion of "fair and balanced" reporting can become problematic when issues relate to settled science and public safety. Parents want what they perceive to be "best" for their children. However, the best of intentions can sometimes be based on false premises. Impassioned parents have at times advocated to reverse policies that privilege their beliefs above evidence-based facts.

An example is speculation about the dangers of vaccinations. As a public health effort, many states mandate that all students who enroll in public schools must be vaccinated. However, for several decades unfounded theories have gained currency via the internet, falsely linking vaccinations to autism. What began as a valid concern became a cause that placed children at risk. It is difficult to blame parents who hold sincere, albeit unsubstantiated, beliefs. However, personal convictions cannot be allowed to threaten public safety. Within the past decade, a grassroots effort to refuse vaccinations in certain communities led to an unnecessary measles outbreak in the United States.[23]

Journalists must exercise caution when presenting arguments in this kind of debate. Based on decades of available research, it is fair to say that deliberations are over on this topic. The scientific community has issued its verdict. There is no credible connection between vaccinations and the prevalence of autism. Any degree of ambiguity on the subject could cost lives.

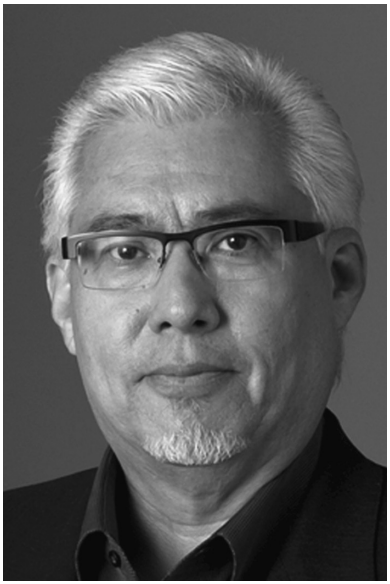
That doesn't necessarily mean dissenting views should be silenced. Barnes believes that even when an issue involves settled science, dissenters deserve to be heard. "People also read the news to understand the sentiments of other people in their community," Barnes says. "You wouldn't just write a story about vaccinations

and not include that there is this population that has very strong views that go against the science. People need to know that those people exist, too."

While the public largely relies on the media to set the record straight on such matters, heightened competition for audiences has changed the information ecosystem. The ease of finding information that favors one's biases is exacerbated by the continued fragmentation of media sources. Whereas mainstream broadcast news was once limited to three television networks—ABC, NBC, and CBS—now there are dozens of sources that cater to a variety of ideological views. Add bloggers, podcasters, and YouTube commentators to the mix, and it is no longer possible to account for the number of competing opinions weighing in on subjects ranging from vaccination safety to education reform. Making sense of developments in education news is vital to the future and prosperity of our communities and country, even when the stakeholders disagree.

Partisanship aside, Sanchez believes that conservatives and progressives are not as divided as it often seems. "What people are craving for is a sense of hope about our schools, and that crosses the ideological spectrum," Sanchez says. "Conservatives and liberals alike, with very few exceptions, want schools to succeed."

SPOTLIGHT: CLAUDIO SANCHEZ



Claudio Sanchez began his journalism career after college, covering stories along the U.S.-Mexico border. For nearly 30 years he has served as an award-winning Education Correspondent for National Public Radio,

contributing to Morning Edition, All Things Considered, and Weekend Edition. In his own words, Sanchez believes that audio is "the greatest medium" for journalistic storytelling.

"Radio allows you to conjure up images through sound so that the listener can literally feel like they were there," Sanchez says. Combined with good writing, audio storytelling demands higher levels of audience engagement than even video because listeners must imagine what they cannot see. Podcast technology and NPR distributed programs such as This American Life, Serial, and Radio Lab brought about a revival in long-form audio storytelling.

Sanchez says the essence of great audio journalism is capturing voices, as opposed to securing quotes. "When you read a quote, it's there in black-and-white, and you can read it … but when you hear a voice, the tenor, the cadence, the pauses … those make a huge difference."

Working with talented audio editors over the years, Sanchez also understands the power of silence. Broadcast time constraints can lead radio reporters to consider deleting a pause that on second thought could enhance a story's dramatic impact. "That pause can make an enormous difference when a person is saying something very emotional," says Sanchez. Whether the featured speaker has a Texas drawl or a Coney Island accent, Sanchez says their voice legitimizes the authenticity of a story.

"It tells us more about who they are," says Sanchez.

Often ambient sound can be as important to the impact of a story as interview sound bites. "My best stories were filled with rich sound that complemented [interviews]; not sound for the sake of sound, but sound that gave them a sense of urgency, a sense of place, and sense of imagery of people who were really struggling," Sanchez says.

A challenge for emerging audio journalists comes down to limitations on time and resources. Reporters are now expected to do more with less. During the "golden days" of radio, reporters were often accompanied by a sound engineer. This team approach allowed the reporters to focus on the subject and the interview rather than audio quality. More commonly today, radio journalists work alone, reducing the margin for errors. "I've lost track of the number of times I went out to do an interview and forgot to turn on my tape recorder," says Sanchez.

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