



HOW TO PUBLISH SHORT FILMS WITH TV AND MEDIA OUTLETS

PITCHING METHODS FOR FILMMAKERS AND CINEMATOGRAPHERS

Spike Johnson

HOW WE TELL STORIES

I'm a documentary journalist. I find a narrative that intrigues me and set out to explore the topic in as much depth as I can. I try to spend time with a group of people who're doing something abnormal, or around an extraordinary geographical phenomenon, then articulate what I've witnessed. But the goal is always to build a bridge of empathy between my subjects and my chosen audience, to help the viewer feel the perspective of the story.

When I began as a journalist my aims were simple. I wanted to work on my own projects, with the freedom to explore my own ideas, travel the world as I wished, and make sure I didn't have to sit in an office. I wanted to connect with characters, to live their experiences, and learn about the world firsthand. I wanted adventure. But I needed a way of making money for my work.

Over the years I've embedded in stories about the genocide of the Rohingya in Western Myanmar, cultural responses to school shootings in Texas, Ukrainian frontline combat tactics, COVID in northern Mexico, warming ocean temperatures in the North Sea, illegal mining in Malaysia, and the list goes on...

I've been lucky enough to contribute to outlets including The Washington Post, The New York Times, Outside Magazine, NBC, PBS, The Guardian, Harper's, The BBC, WIRED, Vice Magazine, Newsweek, Bloomberg Businessweek, The New Yorker, plus a ton more.

When I return home from work trips, people ask about my experiences, the places I've been and the people I've met, but the most common questions involve the mechanics of the industry. "How do you sell your work?" "How do you find access?" "Was it dangerous?"

This text is an attempt to help with some of those questions, specifically pitching and publishing journalistic projects with media outlets. We're assuming that you've already made your project, and that it's of good quality. This information is relevant regardless of medium and topic - photo, video, writing, breaking news, environmental issues, social justice, travel, sports, or lifestyle. The fundamentals of publishing and selling work to media outlets are always uniform.

METHODS OF PUBLISHING

So let's start at the beginning. How do we get our projects into media outlets? There are three methods of selling work and receiving assignments. But you'll need to conquer the first before the last two are possible. And the toughest part? The first method is entirely up to you!

Self-directed projects.

These are funded by the creator themselves, made independently without any client interest or direction. Once the project is complete, it's offered to relevant contacts in the hope that one or two will buy.

Pros:

You have artistic freedom and can work where you choose. You're also emotionally and financially invested - it's your baby, and you'll pour energy into it.

Cons:

The gamble is that once complete the work might not sell.

Pre-pitched projects.

Pre-pitched projects are similar to self-directed projects - they're self-funded and you're working on your own vision. But once relationships have developed with some editors and clients, project ideas can be pitched upfront to gauge outlet interest and budget.

Pros:

You maintain artistic control, freedom of location, and perhaps find a buyer before gambling time on the work.

Cons:

If there are no positive responses it can be discouraging, even if the idea is solid. For me it takes the wind out of my sails and gives the client an opportunity to limit the scope of the work.

Offered assignments.

Clients come to you with their own narratives and budgets. Once established, editors and content buyers might reach out with ideas for their own projects that they'd like you to collaborate on.

Pros:

Offered assignments don't require research, pitching, or access negotiation, plus they come with solid money offers.

Cons:

These narratives often lack depth, the element of adventure, and artistic freedom. You'll also have to abandon rights to the ownership of the work.

Even now, with the option to pitch ideas upfront, or accept assignments, working on self-directed stories is still my favorite way to produce. There is no pressure to deliver on a timeline, and I can get lost in pure creation without the distraction of external motives. And the work is stronger for it!

SUPPLY, DEMAND, AND FRAMING

The sale of work depends on narrative framing. Are you offering something that no one else has? Is your project unique?

The media industry is much like any other, it follows the rules of supply and demand - if many people are offering similar work, there's little demand for it over time. But if you have something interesting, that no one else has, editors will be chewing your hand off for it. You can even end up in a bidding war.

Our goal is to make a project that nobody else has made. We're trying to make something, say something, show something that nobody else has. We're aiming for a new angle, a new take, perhaps a new process for articulating our chosen narrative. And by carefully choosing a "frame" for our work, it allows us to offer something different from the rest, and set our work apart from the pack. The framing of our project, our "hook," allows us to narrow our story idea, to niche it down to something that's very specific, very particular within a larger theme.

Simply put, your frame is the current cultural context of your project. It answers the question: why should your audience care? And it addresses those questions through the simplest emotional truths. So, where's the conflict? Who are the players? What are the stakes? Why does this matter for the audience? What's the worst-case scenario? Your frame must have teeth. It cannot be tepid. It cannot be feel-good. If you're left with a lukewarm feeling, think again, revisit, reshoot, re-imagine.

For stories around environmentalism, the stakes are massive, aren't they? They're the demise of the human species. If it's a story about a business in liquidation, the stakes are maybe a billion-dollar bankruptcy, not as large as a human scale extinction event, but still large, and much more immediate.

Think about what has moved you to make the work? What keeps you coming back? What is the personal appeal to you? Before you can unleash your art on the public, your message must be locked down. So, consider what you're documenting. Who's in the frame? What is their plight? Is it positive or negative? What is the common thread that connects the characters or elements in your project?

Now distill these answers down to the simplest emotional truth. For example, a story about migration could become a story about a mother's separation from her children, a series about marathon running could become a project about the human body at the limits of its capability. Look for highly charged subthemes within your larger topic to use as frames.

Because a viewer will connect to your piece based on things that they can relate to, we need to find the kernel of the story that resonates the most, usually this is base level emotion, the point of highest drama, emotion, or conflict.

It's not necessary to have a clear frame from the outset, sometimes the idea only lands with a little exploration. But make sure you keep an eye open for that rationale as you work. Then once you find it, double-down on it – make sure every photograph, video clip, or paragraph backs it up in some way. As your project progresses it'll become stronger, more dialed in, and more succinct.

Later, if your frame is clear in your mind, if you know why you made the work, and the message it offers, pitching will be easy. Just articulate your frame into one paragraph and paste it into your pitch email – and that's the hardest piece of pitching already done. Offering fresh narrative frames through which to view your work will help you stand out in a busy marketplace.

A STRUCTURE FOR PITCHING

Pitching is always done by email, either to contacts that you already know, or to new contacts that you've never met. Don't be afraid to reach out cold, it's normal, expected, and welcomed. Just make sure you're respectful and polite.

This is the email structure I use to place finished projects with magazines, websites, TV channels, and private clients.

Subject line:

Five words maximum. Make it arresting but not untrue.

Personal introduction:

Describe your overarching themes as a creator. Explain the geographic areas you work in. Location is important, as future assignments will depend on this - most freelancers are hired in proximity to the job.

Introduction to your project:

Set the stage here. Give an introduction to the topic but keep to just a few lines of text. Tell your recipient why they should care about this work. What's different about the project, the story, or your angle? What sets this body of work apart from all the others?

Why buy now?

A topic or a project that is time sensitive will increase its scarcity, and in turn, its value. So, try to articulate why now is a good time to buy this work. What's happening in the world that makes this work timely? Try to reference current events.

Links.

Provide links to the work in your portfolio. One is enough, maximum two. When you link to the work, whether it's text, photo, or video, simply include a hyperlink in your email text. This link should land on a web portfolio. Don't attach files to your pitch email, no PDFs, and do not send recipients to Google Drive folders or Dropbox. This is bad form.

Previous publication.

Has this work published before? Does it have awards or exhibitions attached? Work that is unpublished is valuable, and with awards, grants, or exhibitions attached it's even more valuable.

Offer the work.

Just a simple "would you be interested in publishing?"

Keep it short. Spellcheck thoroughly. Be polite. Follow-up after a week.

Here's how our structure looks when applied to a real project pitch. This was a successful pitch to The Washington Post and The Guardian, resulting in web and print publication.

Subject: Pitch – Texas Teachers Train with Pistols

Dear [First Name],

I'm an English documentary photographer, based in Texas, covering humanitarian narratives.

For a couple of years, I've been covering the topic of active shooter incidents in the U.S. Recently I've been spending time with teachers, students, and schools who're arming themselves, undergoing defense training in response to the threat of attack.

In rural school districts, where police response times are slow, schools can't afford to hire security staff, and are searching hard for solutions. With growing frequency teachers are carrying handguns into the classroom, under new laws like the Guardian Plan, as a means of defense against attacks like Sandy Hook and the Parkland school shooting. Private training companies are offering live-fire tuition to teachers, and defense tactics to students, as they ready for a return to campus in the fall semester.

Last week Betsy Devos, Secretary of Education, mentioned that she wouldn't investigate the link between the gun industry and climbing rates of school shootings. And the week before Texas Governor, Greg Abbott, called for more armed teachers, in response to Santa Fe.

Here's a link to images of gun practice, and physical defense training for teachers and students, and here's a link to a portrait series of superintendents at schools already encouraging teachers to be armed in the classroom.

I wondered whether these topics would interest you? The work is available if you'd like it. This chapter is currently unpublished but is part of a larger body of work supported by the Pulitzer Center. Previous chapters have published with NBC, WIRED, and Newsweek.

Take care and I hope to hear from you soon, Spike Johnson.

REJECTION AS A SUPERPOWER

I've done a lot of weird jobs through life - sold asparagus at the side of the road, worked in a CD factory, made emergency lighting, put telephone poles in the ground, ordered prescriptions for patients, built patios, moved stone by forklift, had a paper round, look after horses, made graphics for design agencies, run bars, pulled pints, and for a long time now, a journalist.

When I was young, I'd change jobs often depending on what was happening in life. The focus was always location over career. Before I began to make money as a photographer, I was itchy, moving around a lot, looking for "the answer," adventure, trouble, freedom. Probably all of the above.

I'd work, save money, quit, adventure, come back, and hunt for work again.

My Dad worked, and still does, for a trade union. He's always trodden the line between white collar and blue collar, relying on manual labor through recessions, building our own barns on the farm at weekends, servicing tractors, and getting back into London offices for Monday morning. He is a monster of productivity.

When the time came for my next "career" my dad would say "hunt thirty rejections." It was similar when we chopped wood, he'd say "hit through the log, aim for the dirt beneath."

He was talking about laws of averages, follow-through, smashing a goal, picking a target past the one you want, and finding the needle in the haystack.

Switching our mindset to getting thirty rejections is subtle, but the change is massive. For a start it takes our eye off the boiling pot, and stops us from hoping for a result, rather than creating one. This "law of thirty" can be applied to photography or filmmaking - finding access, pitching, grants, exhibitions, in fact everything in the workflow of a producer that requires us to reach out to other people.

The number 30 is significant too, it's not unobtainable, but is high enough that we can't labor over each with perfectionism. In order to hit thirty, we need to work swiftly, getting emails out fast, or we'll never finish.

Most importantly it desensitizes us to "no." Realistically most people won't want our work. It doesn't mean our work is bad, or we're not good enough. Mostly it's because we've missed a gap in a publication window, perhaps our topic isn't relevant to their outlet at the time, or they won't have the budget. It's not personal, just finding a good fit for a story is tough.

On the way to your thirty rejections, you might begin to get some "yesses," of course reply to the "yesses" but keep hunting the rejections for another couple days too. You might reach your thirty rejections, but also bag five "yesses".

This is the position that you want to be in. Now you're in control. You can choose the best offer, try to work with all five, or use the multiple offers as leverage for higher pay or a better deal. From this perspective you've switched the dynamic, you're no longer begging an outlet to take your work, your work is being requested by multiple outlets. You have the choice, you're the driver rather than the passenger.

The idea is to split your log with one swing. But if you aim at the log itself, you'll swing, won't follow through, and your axe will get stuck. But aim into the dirt, through the log, you'll follow through, and won't even notice you've split your log.

Over the years these little mindset shifts helped me to amass a giant resume of weird jobs. But they've been so helpful in my career as a photographer. Try them out - hunt thirty rejections, and aim your axe into the dirt.

NOW GET OFF YOUR BUTT

Personally driven pieces will offer the space and the freedom to develop individual style and message. Lean into topics that you're naturally curious about, developing your path without external noise. With steady and determined follow-through on a project or two, opportunities will start to come to you.

People will remember your aesthetic, location, or narrative niche, and will hire you to make work in your own style. Be true to yourself, cover what interests you, and clients will begin to seek you for your work.

Make your project truly unique. Say something new, go somewhere unexplored, put in more time, take more risks, embed further. Frame your piece in an idea that's refreshing.

And lastly, remember that this is self-invite. No one can do this for you, you're in control. No one will ask for your photos, video, or articles, validation only comes once your work is made. So trust in your ideas, throw everything into it, and don't let anything stand in your way!



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