

Chapter Two

Patrick O'Driscoll: Covering the News

As a youngster in a large Irish-Catholic household, Patrick O'Driscoll learned that whining was futile. He had to be decisive if he wanted second helpings or his mother's attention. When he complained, she told him to offer up his trials for "the poor souls in purgatory." Her message came through. "Take care of yourself," says O'Driscoll.

Pat O'Driscoll's father, a B-17 bomber crewman in World War II, taught him a similar lesson. As a boy growing up in Los Angeles and, much later, in Reno, Nevada, O'Driscoll was a reader and an introvert. He lived an exciting life in his mind, daydreaming as he built plastic-and-glue replicas like the Flying Fortress airplane.

Eventually, he discovered his life would consist of reporting news, not making it, and he's written for four decades now. O'Driscoll is a journalist and bureau chief in the Denver, Colorado, offices of *USA Today*, a widely read national newspaper.

Patrick O'Driscoll, a six-footer with a husky voice to match his frame, says he has four directives on the job: Be accurate, be thorough, beat or meet all deadlines, and scoop the compe-

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Profession: Newspaper reporter

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Career accomplishments: Works as bureau chief for *USA Today's* Denver, Colorado, office

What they say about him: "Pat O'Driscoll has the determination, the spirit, and the get-up-and-go that every journalist should have."—Mindy Fetterman, *USA Today* deputy managing editor



Patrick O'Driscoll writes for USA Today, the largest-circulation newspaper in the United States.



tion. “Everything’s so . . . polite today,” he complains. “It’s good to get a little messy raking the muck.”

He regards each journalist as an “often uninvited, reluctant outsider” who must gather inside information efficiently and fast. Notebook in hand, he collects the “who, what, why, when, where, and how” information as well as the images, details, and quotes.

On the job, O’Driscoll asks hard questions and interviews everyone, including the occasional criminal not yet caught by the police. Not surprisingly, another hero for him is Don Bolles. In 1976, mobsters killed the *Arizona Republic* investigative reporter in a car-bomb blast because they believed that it would kill his story. Instead, in a display of journalistic collegiality, a small army of Bolles’s competitors at other newspapers finished researching and writing the exposé that cost the reporter his life.

“Even though the day-to-day work I do doesn’t come close to that kind of big-time investigative project, the principles of dogged and determined news gathering and unflinching reportage are still the same,” says O’Driscoll.

O’Driscoll is proud of his thick portfolio of clippings. The portfolio includes his stories on an unsolved murder on the Pine Ridge (S.D.) Indian Reservation, the murder of a then little-known child pageant entertainer named JonBenet Ramsey, neglect charges against a wilderness-expedition outfit, and countless environmental stories.

Tips for Young Reporters

Early on, O’Driscoll learned that writing well means keeping things simple. “Why make complex what will be old news tomorrow and forgotten by so many readers?” he asks. “Get to the point, say it with freshness and grace, and move on.”

He has learned to control his emotions when facing a tight deadline. “S-l-o-w d-o-w-n,” he tells himself. “Yes, it’s deadline and, yes, you’ve got 25 inches [64 cm] to write and you’ve only written ten. But step back, reflect, consider, organize, and move deliberately, not speedily.”

O'Driscoll also advises young writers to read their work aloud. Reading aloud exposes the chinks in a story's foundation. "You'd be surprised how many words and phrases can use a conversational tune-up," he says.

One thing too many reporters forget is the importance of a smile, O'Driscoll says. Few reporters get sources to cooperate by flexing their egos. "It's so easy to get lost in the seriousness and solemnity and the image of the reporter going out to do an important job," says O'Driscoll. "Stop and reflect, and change that sour countenance. It'll result in many more 'yeses' when seeking an interview with a reluctant news-maker."

Sometimes his main competitor—the *New York Times*—beats O'Driscoll on a story. At these times, he can get discouraged. But in the world of daily news deadlines, such gloomy moments pass. He usually regains his bruised dignity by getting back to work. "There are always dozens of 'pegs' around any topic," he says. Reporters must think critically to find new angles to draw readers into reading their stories.

"Dare to be different," says O'Driscoll. "Take a new approach to the subject. Strive always to keep it fresh. . . . Ask readers, and ask the subjects of our stories, what their opinions are." He also faults reporters who don't interview subjects face-to-face, instead writing stories devoid of color, detail, and nuance without ever leaving their desks.

"Get off your duff and go out and *talk* to people," O'Driscoll urges. "Don't just interview them by phone. It's the biggest crutch in our business, the telephone. There's something invigorating for both interviewer and subject when you have to sit and look each other in the eye."

And, in spite of doomsday predictions, O'Driscoll believes that good writers will always have good newspapers to employ them. "Even if the printed paper copy goes away, we'll still be needed in some form or other. Perhaps on the Internet, perhaps some hitherto unknown format," he says. "There will always be a need for reporters and editors."



With pen and notebook at hand, Patrick O'Driscoll interviews environmentalists in the Superstition Wilderness near Phoenix, Arizona.

The Thrill of Reporting

Patrick O'Driscoll considers himself a storyteller. He gets the same thrill chasing down big stories today as he got as a University of Nevada-Reno journalism copyediting intern on August 9, 1974, when President Richard M. Nixon resigned.

Nixon's disgrace came about after award-winning journalism by *Washington Post* reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward. O'Driscoll's heroes went after sources with a dogged ferocity captured in the 1976 movie *All the President's Men*.

"I remember working on the copy desk of the *Salt Lake Tribune* in the summer of my junior year of college when Nixon resigned. Although I was 2,000 miles from [Washington,] D.C., I was *right there*," he says. "Exciting? You bet."

Given the large number of reporters in various media, getting a scoop sometimes seems next to impossible. When a major story breaks, O'Driscoll is apt to get off a plane and race for a rental car with shirttail flapping and other reporters stepping on his running shoes. Pack journalism is a fact of the business. Only the most persevering reporters get the meat of the story, leaving colleagues with the bones.

O'Driscoll once covered a thirteen-day papal trip across the United States with two planeloads of international press corps reporters. Covering such stories can be tiring, but what other job puts you little more than a church pew away from a world-revered leader? "What an opportunity," says O'Driscoll. "And it's been much the same on many stories I've covered, from the sublime to the ridiculous."

Among the sublime was the time he covered a tractor-trailer accident in the Nebraska Sand Hills. Its cargo, according to experts, was a nuclear bomb. Less memorably, he once interviewed a famous advocate of natural foods named Euell Gibbons who gave him a wild hickory nut—autographed!

The Calling

As a teenager, O'Driscoll, believing he was called to the priesthood, attended a junior seminary for five years instead of going to a traditional high school. Unsure of what he wanted to do with his life, he haphazardly selected a journalism class to fill out course offerings at Nevada-Reno. O'Driscoll recalls:

I'll never forget sitting there in Social Sciences, Room 9, one day, during a discussion about newspapers and reporters.

And it just plain flashed across my mind, like Saul being struck on the road to Tarsus: “I can do this—I could be a newspaperman.”

I was a month short of nineteen, with an absolutely blank slate in front of me. The more I thought about it, and the more I followed up by looking into the history and role of journalism, the more excited I got. I can’t emphasize enough how strong and what a rush that feeling was. I’ve never been as sure about anything in my life, before or since.

Writing for Student Publications

While a student at Nevada-Reno, O’Driscoll picked up experience and savvy working as a reporter for the student newspaper, *Sagebrush*. Later he worked as an editor for a conservative journalism department paper.

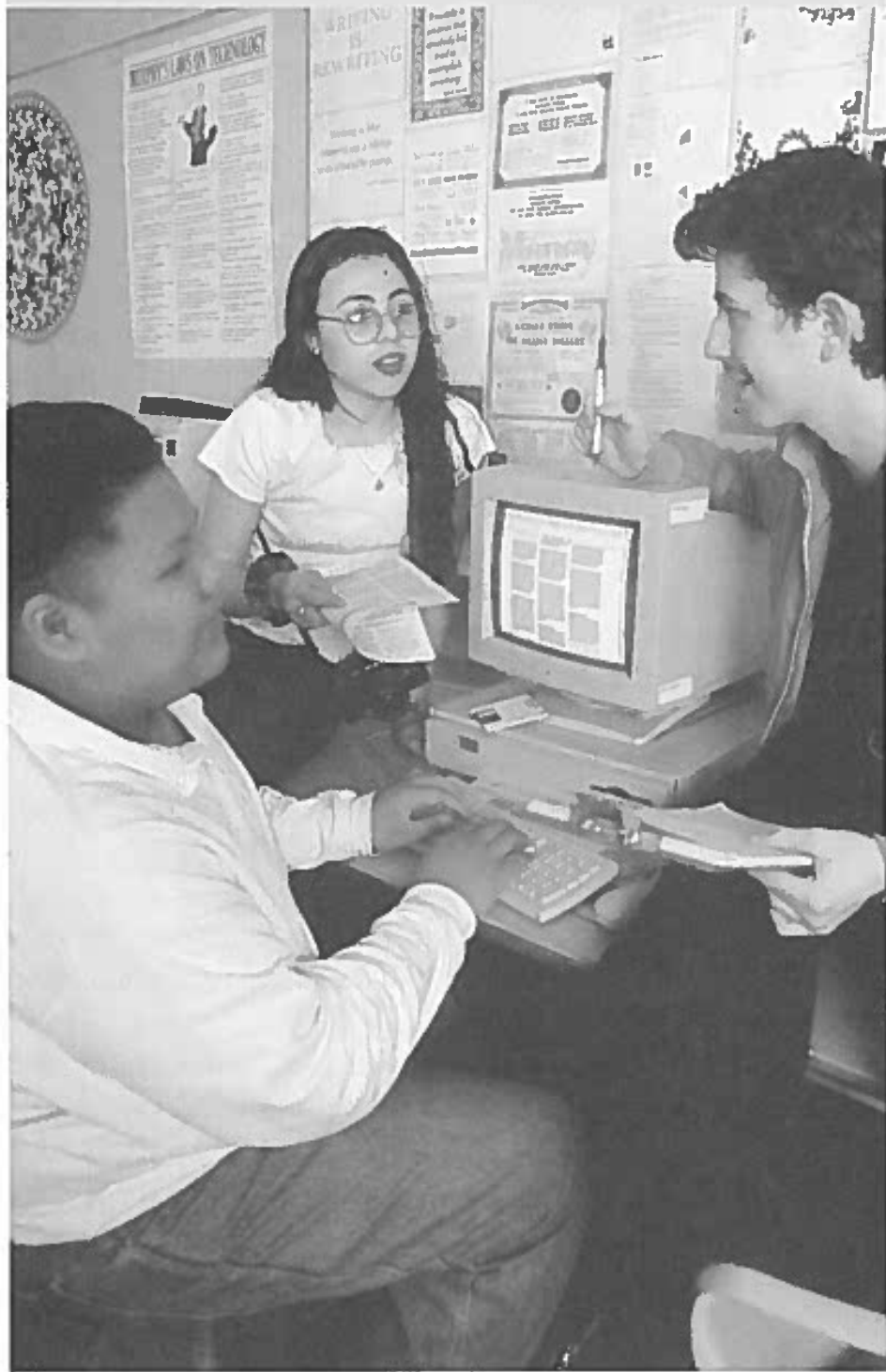
In time, O’Driscoll clipped his stories and inserted them into a professional-looking portfolio like those sold in large office supply stores. To get a job at a newspaper or apply for work as a stringer—a freelance newspaper journalist—applicants must show clippings.

High-school papers or a local charity newsletter supplies that experience and gets your work in print. “Work for your school paper, too, however bad or good it is,” advises O’Driscoll. “Nothing gives you experience like—experience. Write, write, and write some more.”

Be aware that something magical occurs when you read your work in a newspaper or any other publication. Sure, you’re justifiably proud to see your name—your byline—stare back at you. But, just as surely, any spelling or grammatical errors will also leap out at you. You must edit and proofread your stories carefully.

Don’t be discouraged if you approach the student editor or newspaper adviser and they don’t seem thrilled to give you an assignment. O’Driscoll says student journalism can be an unfair world.

Working for a school newspaper is a valuable opportunity to learn about journalism.



“Offer to help deliver the papers around campus,” suggests O’Driscoll. “It helps to be seen as someone willing to pitch in and do the scutwork as well as the glamour-puss stuff in print.”

Don’t get discouraged if the editors seem to be ignoring you. In that case, with a computer and a little technical know-how, you can put out your own print or online newspaper for other activities or groups.

“Suggest story ideas to the editors,” says O’Driscoll. Be prepared to sell your idea in person, with a half-page formal story proposal for the editor or newspaper adviser.

In time, you will get assignments, and you will learn how to combine facts, interviews, and colorful details into great stories. Most beginners need to remember to summarize all important information and put it up front. Don’t bury important details in the middle of your story—get them as close to the lead paragraph as you can. These skills you can learn in journalism class at school.

Just don’t be surprised if the people you interviewed don’t jump cartwheels when they read the finished stories. “When you get spotlighted by someone else, the focus often goes on things about you that you hadn’t thought were worth discussing,” he says.

Patrick O’Driscoll has two words of advice for student journalists today: “No surprises,” he advises. “Resist the urge to do those without talking it over with the bosses first,” says O’Driscoll. A display of restraint and maturity can win over school administrators when the time comes to review a divisive news story.

“That doesn’t mean roll over and play dead,” says O’Driscoll. “If a controversial topic or interview is worth fighting for, go fight for it.”

In that case he advocates lining up supporters for the cause. The paper’s adviser, parents, a supportive school-board member, or an influential local journalist may help student journalists argue their case—but always in a respectful, diplomatic way.

Writing for Professional Publications

In time, you may want to apply to a college that has a journalism program. All these campuses have newspapers that give student journalists experience and clippings. But to get a job at a professional newspaper, you need to have some professional experience.

“As for tips to get into the ‘biz,’ the simplest is to offer to string for free or peanuts for the high school sports pages of the local paper,” says O’Driscoll. “I remember when I worked for a daily paper in Reno there were several high schoolers who not only phoned stuff in but also got to come into the newsroom on Friday and Saturday afternoons and evenings to work on the sports coverage.”

Some of these students actually wrote pregame or game stories, and these had to be as accurate and cliché-free as possible. Others took phone calls from coaches with game highlights and scores and compiled sports statistics.

“Armed with a few such clippings or experiences, it’s a lot easier to approach the local paper to ask if they could use a newsroom clerk or a copy kid to just help out around the place,” says O’Driscoll, stressing that one reporter at the *Denver Post* got his first break that way. “Running to the bus station to fetch some ‘live’ film in need of processing for the next day’s paper is part of the scene too.”

Journalistic Professionalism

Journalism is one of those occupations that might look easy to the outsider. Young reporters sometimes forget to concentrate on gathering facts and instead slant stories to grind a personal ax or tell readers what to think. “We really do try to keep our opinions out of what we write,” says O’Driscoll.

In recent years, reporters at major newspapers in Washington, Indianapolis, and Boston have been fired for inserting fictional events into their stories or stealing the work of competitors—a writer’s mortal sin called plagiarism. “There’s truth and falsehood, and not much in-between,” says O’Driscoll.

The reporter adds:

I'm willing to bet a week's pay that every journalist in America, if he or she searches the soul, has at one time or another thought about making something up, or ripping something off, just because it's a little easier and infinitely more creative. I know I have. But it's one thing to have such an impulse, another to act on it. And believe me, it was only an impulse. . . . This is such an unfettered business we're in, without licenses or entry exams. We have only our reputations, nothing else.

When a journalist makes an honest albeit deplorable mistake, accountability demands that the paper print a correction and explanation. "A distressingly large part of the public thinks we're arrogant. A little humility might help," says O'Driscoll.

O'Driscoll's own bitter dose of humility came when he took the prestigious Denver bureau chief position for *USA Today* after toiling for years as a *Denver Post* writer. What he did for a living defined too much of his life. It is a danger that comes with the territory for writers.

The new job brought him prestige, a bigger paycheck, and his own office. "I was like a kid with the keys to a new car, and with few boundaries on my new life," he says, sharing a difficult time of his life.

"But with the lack of boundaries came new responsibilities, and a self-imposed obligation to work any and all hours necessary to get [the job] done," he discloses. "I threw myself into work. That means I ignored my marriage and the rest of my life."

While O'Driscoll was working long hours at the new job, his marriage ended. The lesson was painful, and he shares it openly.

"Work isn't the only purpose of my life," he says. "I've been able to put it in proper perspective—or, at least, a

better perspective than before. I'm still sorting through a lot of this . . . and trying hard to get a life. I think I'm succeeding." Of course, O'Driscoll continues to take pride in journalism's many joys: the camaraderie, the thrill of the major story, and everyone mobilizing to chase it.