

PJ Marcellino

- 1. Everybody talks about storytelling nowadays and the importance of crafting and drafting a good story. Would you say to these young reporters today, that journalism is storytelling?**

**PJM:** *Absolutely. Journalism is the ultimate form of storytelling! In this case, the kind of storytelling that tells us about life as it is. It is perhaps a rather technical medium, insofar as storytelling goes, but in reality that's no much different from any other genre in which you must tell a story — academic, narrative, documentary, etc. Each has its own set of rules and formats, and while you can sometimes bend a rule or two, go too far and your story becomes unrecognizable within the genre it should fit into. This applies to journalism. Your technical elements would be the 5Ws [who, what, where, when, why] +H [how], and your lead construction, and interview integration, etc.... but the storytelling part of that comes in where you create a pace, set a mood and a tone, and reveal details as you move along the story.*

- 2. YRE promotes journalism/storytelling through several media, photography, video and writing. Do you agree with the expression: Facts tell, emotions sell? If yes, how would you explain and describe in a few steps this communication strategy?**

**PJM:** *I do. Journalism is journalism. You MUST tell the story as it is, and you MUST never modify details that change reality. But you can indeed modify perception, by playing with mood/tone/rhythm and characters, and those all play into emotion-building. Telling stories from a personal POV is always more efficient than simply reporting. Of course, you want to make sure you have different POVs, and the way you weave them in and out of each other is where your craft comes in. At the end of the day, the journalist is the editor of a narrative, adding connectors to first-person lines and concise descriptors. What makes the story pop is not just that efficiency, but the emotion you can bring in my raising the stakes, detecting the conflict, looking at the personal.*

- 3. How do you make sure when preparing a story that there is no influence of your personal opinion? Can you work on facts without being biased?**

**PJM:** *You cannot **not** influence a story. We are all human beings and all have thoughts and feelings. Admitting this is the first step. Then, as journalists, we need to operate from a place of professionalism and ethical behaviour. We must always question our motivation, find the contrary opinions, and explore the elements of the story that do not sit well with our belief systems. The more uncomfortable we are on that journey, the more likely we are to be doing our job appropriately. Journalism is tough and requires a certain sense of righteousness and an above-reproach attitude... which includes questioning ourselves and our own explicit and implicit biases, constantly. Be alert.*

**4. What criteria do you use to select a good story and start working on it?**

*PJM: I don't think there's criteria. I look for stories that are interesting. Have I read about this before? No? Well, is it interesting, important, relevant? To me? To the general public? To a small minority? To social responsibility? Yes? So, what have I read about it? Can I add something? What can I add? What angle? What untold element? What bias can I undo? What POV can I insert? Are there engaging characters? High stakes? Will this stand out? Also, trust your gut — if something immediately strikes you as fascinating, that's a good sign.*

**5. Could you tell us in a few words how YRE changed your way of seeing things and approaching people and life?**

*PJM: My first YRE mission, in the Arctic, set me on a specific path for most of my life. I often call it my foundational moment. Until COVID-19 started, and for the previous 22-24 years, I have been travelling almost constantly, professionally and personally. That insatiable hunger for the understanding of what goes on in other places comes from the little seed planted when I was a YRE student. The way I relate openly with people from all over the place was also aided by that experience. Finally, the intense awareness I have about our environment and sustainability is tied directly to my experience in the Arctic. That passion is what makes me continue to be an advocate and activist to this day. The intensity of the feelings and memories remain vivid, so I am a deep believer in the power of catalyst events to shape one's life and future.*

**6. YRE programme requires a local and global perspective. What suggestions do you have for our young reporters working on local issues while adding a global context to their journalistic works?**

*PJM: It's actually quite simple. The word is "glocal". Global is nothing more than a collection of interconnected locals. The more I age the more I realize that it all starts locally. It all starts with tiny, insignificant, individual actions. In our home. In our community. In our city. Focus on what you are seeing in your immediate surroundings, but inform yourself about what's happening internationally. What common points do you find? How can your local experience add to that international perspective? Is it a good example? A bad example? A different or alternative perspective? Your local story told with a global lens and framed by an international context will have universal appeal.*

**7. A participant asked "could you expand on shocking images vs positive images for reporting about plastics and getting people engaged/take action"?**

*PJM: This is a very difficult question to ask, and an evolving answer which professional photojournalists, editors, and agencies struggle with everyday. The main thing is not to editorialize. Don't play up people's emotions for nothing. Tell the truth. And if the truth is shocking, perhaps conveying that shock is important.*

*Think about the picture of the dead turtle entangled in fishing nets, which died in agony, drowned. The Canadian photographer who took that photo said in an interview that he was crying underwater, and that he was so angry at that. But he needed to take the photo and needed to share it so people would understand what these catch-all nets are doing to the oceans.*

*(Other recent example, with more of an ethical burden, includes the photo of the little Syrian boy found drowned on a beach in Europe, after his family attempted to cross the Mediterranean.)*

*These images are always complex to evaluate. Ask yourself: are doing it for the shock value and the attention? Are you exploiting what is a traumatic situation for some? Are you re-traumatizing others? Or are you genuinely exposing a shocking situation that people need to hear about, and most importantly, **see**...? Nothing is inherently negative or positive. It's all about context and framework. Pictures of dying animals captured in fishnets, polar bears scavenging in dump yards and eating out of plastic bags, or a bird choked in plastic, or a whale's stomach full of plastic... all of these are shocking but important pictures that create the intensity of feelings to drive change. So, make sure that's what you are going for.*

**8. What have you found to be the best way to convince businesses to make a change in relation to single use plastics?**

***PJM:** Money, money, money! Businesses change their tack when their bottom line is hit. And their bottom line is hit when people stop supporting them unless they do something. If you are going to stop shopping somewhere in protest for their environmental attitudes, don't just stop going there. Write to management and ask what are their plans to change. Or tell them why you are leaving. Blast it on social media, tag them. We are coming to a time when public opinion has an almost immediate effect on everything, and this is something that can be used for better or worse. For the better is when you manage to convince businesses that it is in their best interest (financially) and also that of their community to, for example, ban plastic bags. If they perceive that the cost of their stubbornness (in loss of clients) is higher than the cost of doing something, you can be sure they will do something. So, your role could really be to make that connection clear, factually.*

**9. If we make changes at home and school will that really have an impact on a wider scale both locally and globally?**

***PJM:** Yes, of course it will. But that shouldn't be your primary goal. The thing is, global is sometimes too much for us to comprehend. So, focus on what is more manageable — make changes locally (in your school, house, club, church, etc.) because you will see the changes locally. For example, if you shop differently and consume less plastic, you will take less garbage out, so the garbage dumps will be slower to fill. You will see less garbage on the streets. And if you remember all of that lives in a cycle, then you know that less plastic is also ending in the oceans, and therefore you are having a global impact. It is all of us acting locally that will have a cumulative global impact.*

**10. There's a lot of noise about single use plastic; how can I make my voice heard above the noise – with my school, with businesses, with local newspapers?**

***PJM:** Just make a business case and an environmental case. One thing that Greta Thunberg has taught us all is that kids can have a huge impact with their tiny voices. Use them to pinpoint things you know are important, and pick your battles. Be systematic in your approach. Again, start in your community. Start in your school and then work outwards. The best way to do this is not by yelling, but by gaining community buy-in and support. So do that. But yes, roar like a lion if you need to!*

**11. What can I do now while studying at home to make an impact to reduce plastics in my school when I return to class as a YRE?**

***PJM:** Use your time to research, learn, see what others have been doing, and how it has worked, and when you go back, go in with specific proposals. That's all we can do with our downtime: learn and prepare. Use it well!*

*PJ Marcellino hosted the free webinar 'YRE: Tackling Pointless Plastic Packaging' with colleague Erika Reyes on Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> June 2020. This webinar was organised by Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful as part of a series of online events on plastic pollution.*