SEVEN PATHS and an 8th Way to STORY (plus a few side roads)

Any event, idea, issue, press release, calendar listing, trend, agenda item, dinner conversation, billboard, church bulletin … has potential beyond the obvious or traditional. After you post your Web-burst but before you move on to the next assignment, or before you dismiss an idea as tired or predictable, use this brainstorming process to identify fresh, creative enterprise stories: ***

1. ISSUE OR TREND. Does the event of the day tie into something bigger and ongoing? Is it a window of opportunity to revisit an issue readers need to know about, or to reveal how that issue plays out in specific ways? What is the bigger backdrop or context for the idea of the moment?

2. EXPLANATORY. Can you show readers why something happened or how something works? Is this event, issue or trend worth a microscopic examination that helps readers understand how their world works?

3. PROFILE. Is there a relatable character at the center of an event or issue, or affected by it? Is there a "tour guide" to help readers see/understand an issue? (NOTE: Profiles don't have to be about people; they have to be about character. You can profile a place or an event, as long as you bring its character to life.)

4. VOICES. Are there people who can speak to this idea or event in a way that illuminates it for readers, that provides deeper or more expert layers of understanding, or that connects readers to each other? If you could eavesdrop on a passionate and enlightening dinner debate, whom would you want at the table?

5. DESCRIPTIVE. Is there somewhere you can take the reader to *show* an event or idea or issue? Can you be the readers' surrogate to show them some relevant place or happening they would not have easy access to?

6. INVESTIGATIVE. Who has power and/or money and how are they using it? Is there a public interest at stake? Do records, reports or data bases reveal a pattern or problem?

7. NARRATIVE. Does an event or idea lend itself to a beginning-middle-end story that follows a central character through plot, action and forward motion, tension or conflict and resolution? Is there a universal or macro theme you can reveal with an individual or micro story?

The 8th Way. VISUAL. Does a story need to be *seen* to be best understood? Is there an emotional or physical center to a story that makes it best told primarily through photos, graphics, illustrations, video or audio, with words as supporting material?

*** Some notes on brainstorming stories:
- The best creative thinking on deadline comes from a disciplined structure. Rather than throwing spaghetti at the wall, use focused, purposeful questions to drive deeper ideas.
- Good questions are the key to good ideas, and to good stories. Each of the above story approaches or genres is driven by a central question. Actual stories will overlap genres – an explanatory piece will contain elements of a profile or background of an issue. But for brainstorming, try to stay with the one question and dive deep instead of broad until you are ready to move on to the next.
- Separate brainstorming from production. Separate the blue-sky mind from the editor mind. Once you collect the best and wildest ideas, you can bring them back to reality. Do not – repeat, DO NOT – edit ideas.
- Depending on your publication, you may want to create your own list of brainstorming questions or genres. Consider this a basic, but not exhaustive, template.
- The VISUAL step is not an afterthought but a thinking tool. It can be it's own story genre, or can encompass all the other genres. Multi-media thinking can be a boost to brainstorming, and a story destination.

~ Jacqui Banaszynski ~
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STORY VIABILITY ~ A quick thinking guide to determining if a story is gettable and worthy ©

Maximum/minimum brainstorm

Envision the ideal (maximum)l: No obstacles of time, resources, access, talent or support.

What would that story look like?

What impact might it have (or do you want it to have)?

Envision the likely (minimum): Layer in practicalities and obstacles.

What would that story look like?

What impact might it have?

Necessity checklist:

- Is the story timely and/or time-sensitive?
  - Does the story have to be done now (if so, how fast?) or does it have shelf-life?
  - Has the story been done before?
  - If not timely in terms of immediacy, or exclusive, do you have a fresh approach or hook?
- Is the story relevant (of use or interest) to your audience or publication?
  - Consider proximity and scope: Is it local, regional, national, specialized?
- Does the story have tension (not to be confused w/ conflict)?
  - Are there central stake-holders readers will relate to?
- Does the story have a clear, central focus? Can you state it in one word, sentence or headline?
  - Is there a driving question that moves the story forward?
  - Can the question be answered? Is it concrete rather than speculative?)
- Is the story doable?
  - Do you have adequate time to report & write?
  - Do you have money for needed travel or documents?
  - Do you have the needed talent or skills, or can you partner w/ someone who does?
- Do you have access to needed sources and information? ***
  - Consider people, place & paper.
  - Are the paper sources adequate and/or complete?
  - Are the people sources credible?
  - Have you or can you resolve any problematic source conditions?
- Do you have access to a publication or outlet that will consider the story?

*** TIP on timeliness & relevance:

If your story is based on an event, can you connect it to a bigger and less time-sensitive issue?

If you story is based on an idea or concept, can you ground it in the here & now?

*** TIP on sourcing: Ask yourself two sets of questions

1. What do you NEED to know? (Minimum)
   How will you find out?
2. What do you WANT to know? (Maximum)
   How will you find out?

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Archer City Story Center Workshop ~ July 2016

FIVE-STEP STORY COACHING

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Good story caching works in partnership with the creative process. All writers, photographers, designers, etc., in their own fashion, go through key steps in developing a story:
- Conceive (the idea or assignment)
- Collect (report)
- Rehears/select (focus: determine center of story purpose, audience, tone and then lede & nut)
- Organize (sketch or outline story format or order of information)
- Draft (fast)
- Revise (tighten, polish, edit)

An effective story editor or coach gets involved with a storyteller at each stage of a story's development, with the most time and energy spent where a writer or a story needs the most help.
Step-by-step story coaching
- Requires the editor to know each storytellers's process
- Identifies potential and problems early (heads off bad surprises)
- Keeps the editor informed and able to communicate with others in production
- Helps the editor and storyteller adjust as the story changes
- Gives the editor an effective tool for managing work flow
- Helps an editor develop a storyteller over time

Each stage of the coaching process is two-fold:
  1. An open-ended coaching conversation in which the editor leads with questions. The goal is the gather information about possibilities and challenges, and to brainstorm a story's greatest potential.
  2. Action steps. Communicate expectations about what needs to happen next.

THE FIVE STEPS
1. COACH THE IDEA (pre-reporting)
> Brainstorm the story with the reporter
> Don't pre-determine, but do pre-imagine possibilities
> Agree on the story's primary purpose or hope
> Agree on next steps (time investment, next check-in, Web report, etc)

2. COACH THE INFORMATION (post-reporting/pre-writing)
> Re-interview the reporter, listening for patterns, themes, sourcing, holes
> Help synthesize the story point (summary nut) and key elements
> Discuss lede possibilities, likely tone and structure
> Agree on next steps (Web posting, visuals, length, deadline, etc)

3. COACH THE STRUCTURE (early drafts)
> Respond to the *story*, not the commas; read for substance, not syntax
> Write or talk through a story edit memo that:
>> Summarizes the story (what core story did you read)
>> Summarizes the story's strengths (what's working and why)
>> Summarizes the key problems (primary work to be done)

4. COACH THE COPY (final draft)
> Side-by-side, line-by-line editing

5. COACH THE PERSON and the PROCESS (post-publication)
> Debriefs and future game-plans