

There are few jobs more desirable - and demanding - than working as a television news reporter. In this insightful and practical book, award-winning journalist Peter Robbins shares the insights he's gained and the experiences he's had after more than a decade as a television news reporter. Whether you're an aspiring journalist or a reporter with years of experience, this book is sure to give you battle-tested tips to help you succeed in television.

Breaking News: Surviving and Thriving in the Fast-Paced World of Television News

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BREAKING NEWS:

*Surviving and Thriving
in the Fast-Paced World of
Television News*



PETER ROBBINS

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Introduction

Right off the bat let me say this: before you decide to do this, make sure you're doing it for the right reasons. You should only get into reporting if the following things sound appealing: getting woke up at two o'clock in the morning by a phone call from someone in the newsroom telling you a train wreck has spilled chlorine causing a dangerous chemical cloud to descend on a local city, and you are being sent into the middle of it; asking people who would rather not see you questions they would rather not answer about a situation that makes everyone in the room uncomfortable; and going house to house, knocking on doors, asking people who were just sitting down to dinner how they feel about the fact that, unbeknownst to them, a man just up the street was using his home as a methamphetamine lab until just a few minutes ago when the police shot him while raiding his drug den.

I could add countless scenarios and situations to that list. My point is that many people get into television because they think they'll make a lot of money, get to be semi-famous and have what amounts to a fairly glamorous job. I don't want to scare you away from the profession before we get past the first page of this book, but you should know up front that the world of television news can be a bit of a grind. The days can be long, the stories you cover can be unpleasant, the people you deal with can be a bit on the crazy side and the situations you find yourself in can be very stressful. And as Hunter Thompson famously said, there's also a negative side.

To do this job well and enjoy it, you have to have a passion for news and information. You have to be able to get people to open up on your terms and on your schedule so you can meet

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your deadline. You have to be a problem solver, a positive thinker and a bit of a manipulator. More than anything, you have to truly love the job, or you will certainly end up miserable.

Working in television news as a reporter will deliver to you one unforgettable experience after another. Having this job means that some people will very much want to talk with you at dinner parties and other people will very much want to avoid you. It will mean that at times you will feel a strange disconnect from the rest of the world around you, as you cope with covering tragedy by finding ways to distract yourself and not thinking about things too much. It will mean that, for better or worse, tens of thousands of people will see the work you produce every single day. It will mean that at the end of each day, you will have nothing physical or measurable to show for your efforts. All you have is the feeling you get when you look at your reflection in the mirror, and perhaps an email from a viewer telling you not that the tax reform story you covered was important, but that he liked your shirt.

I spent more than a decade in television news. I was a news reporter, a news anchor, a news producer, a sports producer, a live truck operator, a photographer, a weather anchor, a fill-in sports anchor, a part-time sports reporter, a video editor, a studio camera operator and more. I once flew in a Navy plane and once rode on an Air Force boat. I interviewed governors, covered presidential candidates, and once went to interview a small-town mayor, only to be told by the receptionist at city hall that the mayor held down a day job as a logger and was unavailable for an interview because he was “in the woods.” I’ve been to death row (as a guest of the warden, not of the state) and covered babies being born. I covered a swarm of flies

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taking over a small town, fallout from 9-11, Y2K, high-speed car chases, floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, droughts, heat waves, cold spells, ice storms, blizzards and earthquakes. I was fortunate enough to win some awards, be a part of some great news teams and learn from some truly talented individuals.

What will come over the next ten chapters is, in short, my advice to you as you get started in this wonderful line of work. We'll cover everything from creating your résumé to developing sources. You'll get my expert advice on interviewing. We'll talk about dealing with the politics of working in a newsroom and we'll go over tips for polishing your on-camera presence.

It took me four years of college and ten years of jobs in four different cities to acquire all this knowledge. I'm going to share it all with you. I'm going to make it a point to share all the tips in as practical a format as I can. Some things about reporting can be done correctly in a variety of ways. Some other things TV are simply best done a certain way. We'll discuss things in both categories, but I will always tell you how I did things and why it worked.

I wholeheartedly believe that you will find this book useful and will come away with a long list of tips that will help you be a successful journalist. However, if you ask one hundred different reporters what the most important element of storytelling is, you'd probably get one hundred different answers. So as you read this, use your head. Think about yourself as an individual and try to analyze your own strengths and weaknesses as you read my advice. Inevitably, some things will apply to you more than others. Bring a little common sense with you on this trip

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and understand there are no maxims in television, except perhaps that the camera never blinks.

(Do you know what the problem with that last paragraph was? I got a little too verbose. Most people think of maxim as a magazine, not a truth or rule of conduct. Had this been a script for TV, my producer would have changed that sentence and reminded me that the majority of our viewers do not have a college degree.)

So let's get started. The first step in this great adventure is getting your foot in the door and landing that first TV job. Working in this profession is a bit like getting a backstage pass to a rock concert. At first, you'll feel a bit like you don't belong and you'll keep waiting for someone to tap you on the shoulder and ask you to leave. But trust me: everything's going to be fine.

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