



Mastering Beat Reporting for Impactful Journalism

Essential tactics for beat reporting – building proficiency to reveal captivating stories.

Patrick Boehler, Jan. 2024

- 1 | My silliest story (off-the-record)
- 2 | How to find and build your subject matter expertise
- 3 | How to use your subject matter knowledge to improve general news reporting
- 4 | How to use your subject matter knowledge to make a difference
- 5 | Examples from my reporting days

My Silliest Story

TIME

BIZARRE

Unicorns' Existence Proven, Says North Korea

You can be forgiven for thinking that unicorns only existed in medieval fables and cartoons. North Korean scientists say you are wrong.

By Patrick Boenier Nov 30, 2012

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You can be forgiven for thinking that unicorns only exist in medieval fables and modern-day cartoons. North Korean scientists say you are wrong.

On Thursday, the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), the North Korea's government mouthpiece, said scientists "reconfirmed" the location of the burial site of the unicorn ridden by King Dongmyeong, the founding father of the ancient Korean kingdom of Goguryeo (37 BC-668 AD).

The unicorn's grave was rediscovered near a temple in the capital Pyongyang, with a rectangular rock engraved with the words "Unicorn Lair" at its entrance, according to the report. The report did not elaborate on what further evidence of the royal unicorn's existence was discovered.

(WATCH: Kim Jong Un Has a New Theme Song)








Like most news reports from North Korea, even unicorns are used to



Discard

TIME.com

- 10th most visited news site in the U.S. (2013)
- Hong Kong overnight newsroom
- One pick-up / rewrite per day from Asia
- No subject remit beyond generic Asia news
- Objective: high traffic














	Domain (5,323)	Traffic S
1	 yahoo.com	19.90%
2	 nytimes.com	4.92%
3	 cnn.com	3.97%
4	 foxnews.com	2.78%
5	 msn.com	2.75%
6	 people.com	1.55%
7	 usatoday.com	1.49%
8	 news.google....	1.42%
9	 nypost.com	1.35%
10	 dailymail.co....	1.23%

Generic never stands out.

SEO: Invest in EEAT (Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, and Trustworthiness)

More fragmented social media increasingly favors expertise.

From 10th to 58th most-accessed news site

	Domain (5,323)	Traffic Share ↓
41	 naver.com	0.25%
42	 thedailybeast...	0.24%
43	 newsmax.com	0.24%
44	 timesofisrael...	0.23%
45	 bbc.co.uk	0.22%
46	 theepochtim...	0.22%
47	 theyeshivaw...	0.22%
48	 cosmopolita...	0.21%
49	 zerohedge.co...	0.21%
50	 ksl.com	0.21%
51	 usmagazine....	0.21%
52	 time.com	0.20%
53	 independent....	0.20%

Silly unicorn stories happen when aspirations are unstrategic.

How do you really add value:



Habituation

Daily news routine



Identity

Aspiration / a sense of belonging



Unique reporting

Wow! That's surprising.



A combination of the three

Ask yourself:

What are the biggest trends of our time?

- in matters of warfare
- regarding the climate
- in labor markets
- in cybersurveillance
- in global trade
- in medicine
- in music, religion, elderly care, corruption...
etc. etc.

What is happening on your beat? Map the big trends

E.g. women's rights (scenario)

1

Trend of a positive change

Women are taking more leadership positions in xyz industry in country X

2

A change in newsmakers

The key advocates pushing for...

3

Trend of a negative change or stagnation

Why has the push for more maternity leave stalled in Country x

4

Beat angles to major news stories

Celebrity X is in the news for other reasons, here's what they did on this issue

Pick key trends and commit to covering them.

E.g. women's rights (scenario)

1

Trend of a positive change

Women are taking more leadership positions in xyz industry in country X

2

A change in newsmakers

The key advocates pushing for...

3

Trend of a negative change or stagnation

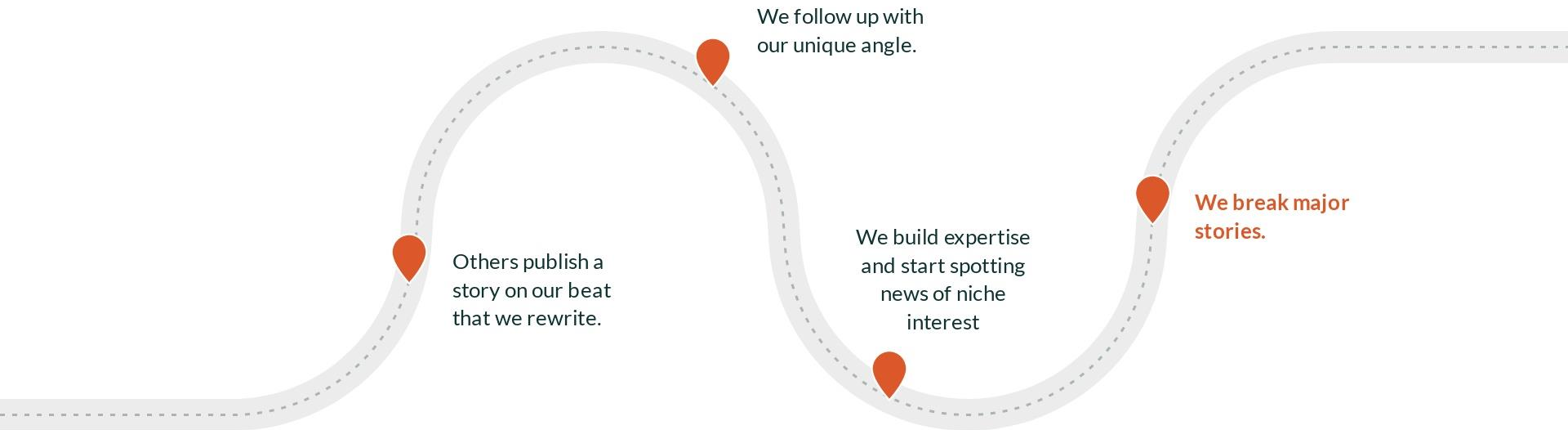
Why has the push for more maternity leave stalled in Country x

4

Beat angles to major news stories

Celebrity X is in the news for other reasons, here's what they did on this issue

Journey to Impactful Beat Reporting



e.g. Weinstein reporting at the NYT



How do I get started?

Start with a **beat note**

A resource for you

A contract with your editor

An investment in future scoops

Elements of a Beat Note



Key Trends

What are the 2-4 biggest changes happening right now here that we need to document?



Key newsmakers

Who is driving these changes?



Key observers and sources

Who can talk about these changes with competence?



Background information

What is the key background info needed? Where can I find more background info?



Key dates for planning

What are the key upcoming events to watch?

Why invest in a beat note

- Helps you **structurally think** about your beat, stay in focus
- Contract with editors: what is our focus, **what is not important**
- Shared contact list: **who can we talk to?**
- **Hive mind:** Group-sourced info is more/better/more timely info
- News routine, planning ahead
- Pass it on to new colleagues, colleagues filling in during absences

Key Newsmakers

Google Alerts

LinkedIn Pro

Visualping.io

Telegram
channels

Dataminr alerts

Leaders Seek To
Rebuild Trust in Lashio

Khin Myo Chit in
Centenary Book

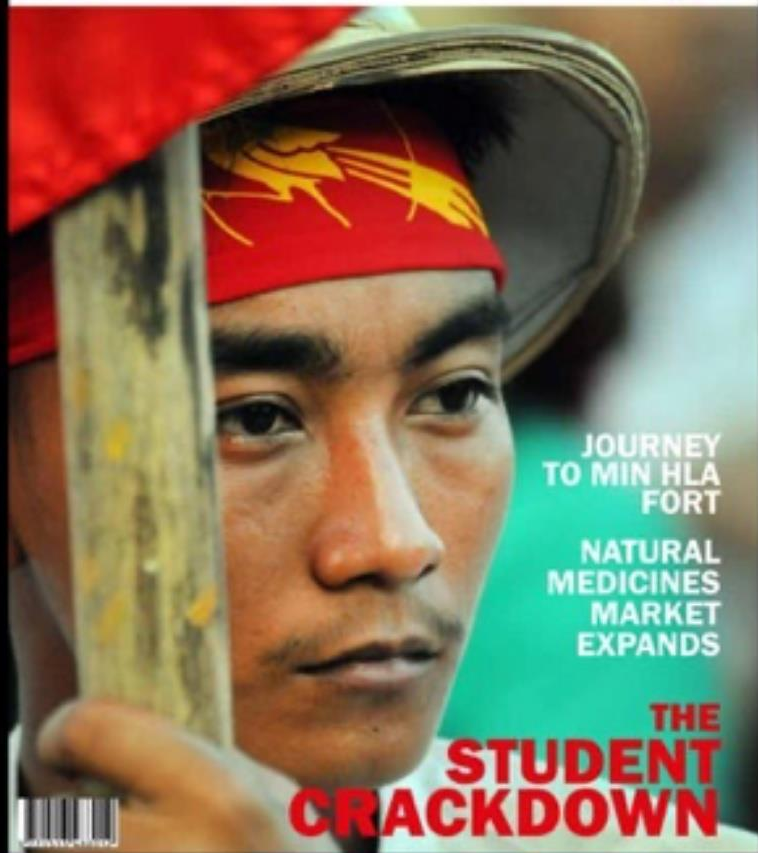
Faded Glory: At Home
in Heritage Buildings

Mandalay Marionettes:
A New Generation

The Irrawaddy

www.irrawaddy.org

April 2015

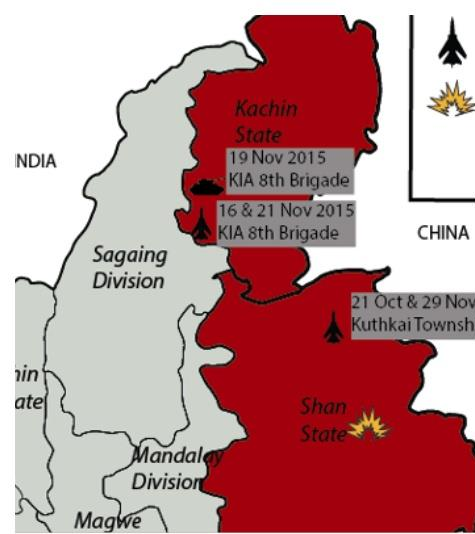


Example 1

China/Myanmar Border

Key Observers and Sources





Step 1:

history, geography,
economy, politics



Step 2: Agree on key trends with your editor

This doesn't mean the other stories are not important. It's about making choices on how to be competitive.

Trends I decided to track

Chinese investments

Chinese control over militias

Political control by organized
crime

Trends I decided to not
actively track

Suu Kyi's statements

Western Sanctions

Arms sales and
sanctions

Activists

Jade trade

Strategically competing against other journalists



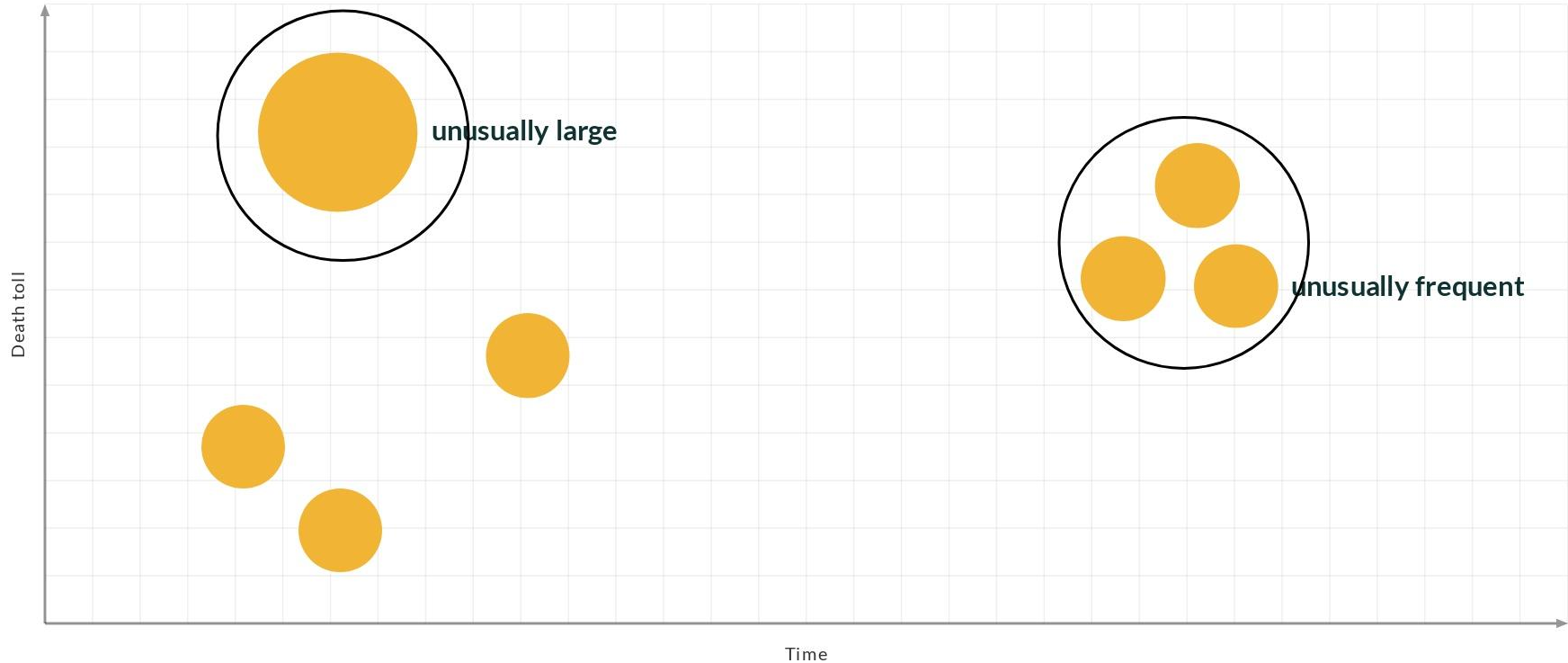
Trends: crime, human trafficking, trade trends (eg. rice), tourism, patterns of news;



Breaking news events: Attacks, arrests, ceasefires, government statements, individual news developments;

Identify Newsworthy Patterns

e.g. militia attacks





The
Irrawaddy

雲南日報 报业集

YUNNAN DAILY PRESS GRC
Bygone & Future (2008)

Bai du 百度



Google
Alerts



News Routine

Browser Bookmarks Bar
Folder



Track News Makers

Especially those no one else tracks





Build Source Network

Your rolodex of observers and local contacts is an investment in your career.



Burma

Did a Golden Triangle Leader Fall for a UN Peace Prize Hoax?



Serious doubts have been raised about the awarding of a dubious United Nations peace prize to Kachin Chairman Pui So.

By PATRICK BOEHLER AND ECHO HUI 4 January 2013



AFP/Getty Images

When Google's Executive Chairman Eric Schmidt visited Burma in late March, he lamented that only about 1 percent of Burmese are connected to the Internet, and urged the government to increase connectivity. "The answer to had speech is

BURMA DISSOLVES INTO CHINA

the Kachin borderlands

wholly involved in the political and economic life of Burma's wou
ay border state of Kachin, at both high and low levels

BY PATRICK BOEHLER

Two children played on the steep path that leads up to a temple in a sleepy Chinese border town: beyond the temple lies Burma. The children live in Burma, and go to school in China. From the temple hilltop, you can see a vast valley of fields between mountain ranges and banana plantations. There is no fence or guard, so crossing into Burma is just a leisurely walk downhill. The children said that crossing was a daily routine, as it is for thousands of others.

Report. Report. Report.

Make everyone interested see that you're covering a story, and make sure they can reach you.

大约是在1917年或1918年间，雷雨田在中国南部的云南好

那时的云南只是象征性地与年轻的中华民国有着来往。控制雷雨田童年所在的云南省，为了给自己谋利，唐继

1945年，唐的继任者龙云担任该省省长。当时年轻的雷

Example 2

Human Rights in China





Step 1:
history,
geography,
economy,
politics

Step 2: Agree on key trends with your editor

This doesn't mean the other stories are not important. It's about making choices on how to be competitive.

Trends I decided to track

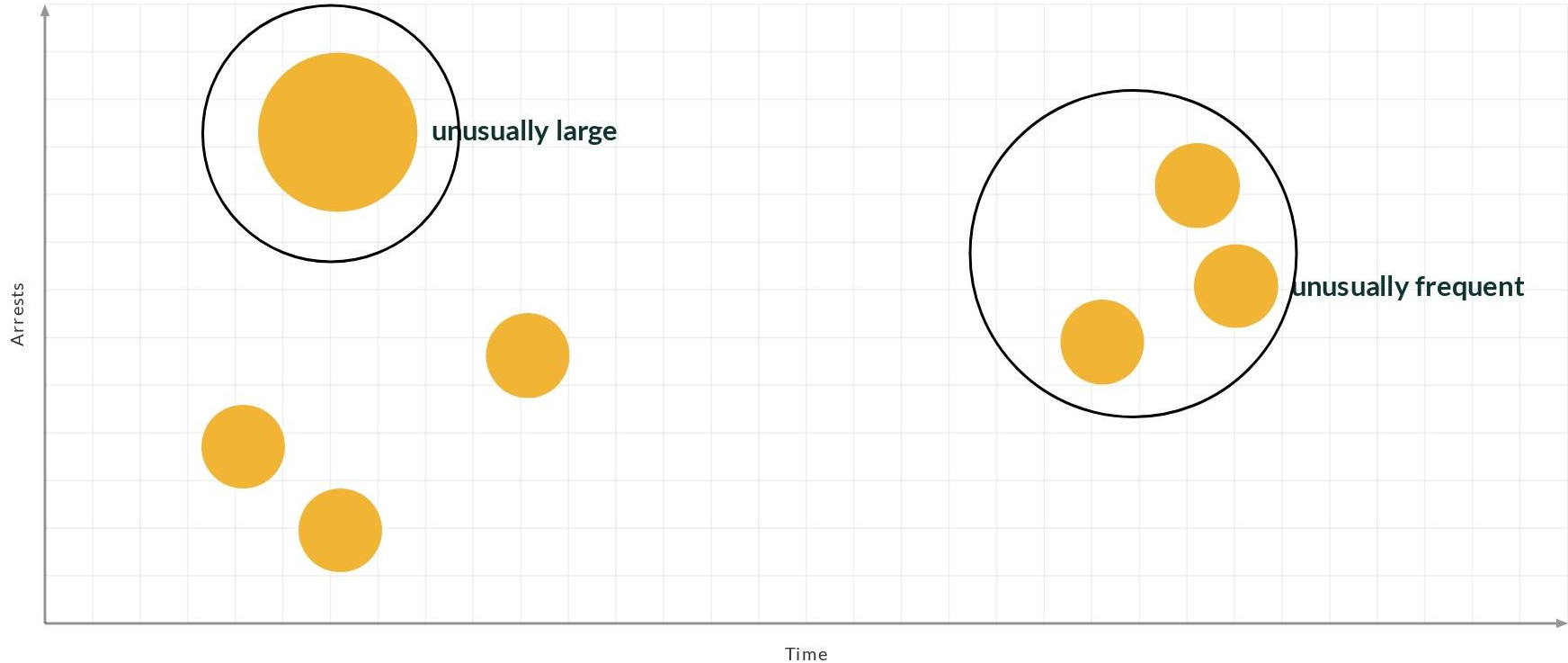


Trends I decided to not actively track



Identify Newsworthy Patterns

e.g. arrests





Track Leading Activist Groups

Especially those no one
else tracks



Key Questions For Each Group

For Both Sides! So Many Stories

What is changing? Profiles of leaders & where are they now?

Tick tock of key moments. Bring beat angle to major news

1

Objective / Message

How is their objective / message changing?

2

Organization

How is their organization changing?

3

Strategy

How is their strategy changing?

4

Background

What is their socio-demographic background? Is it changing?

5

Enemy

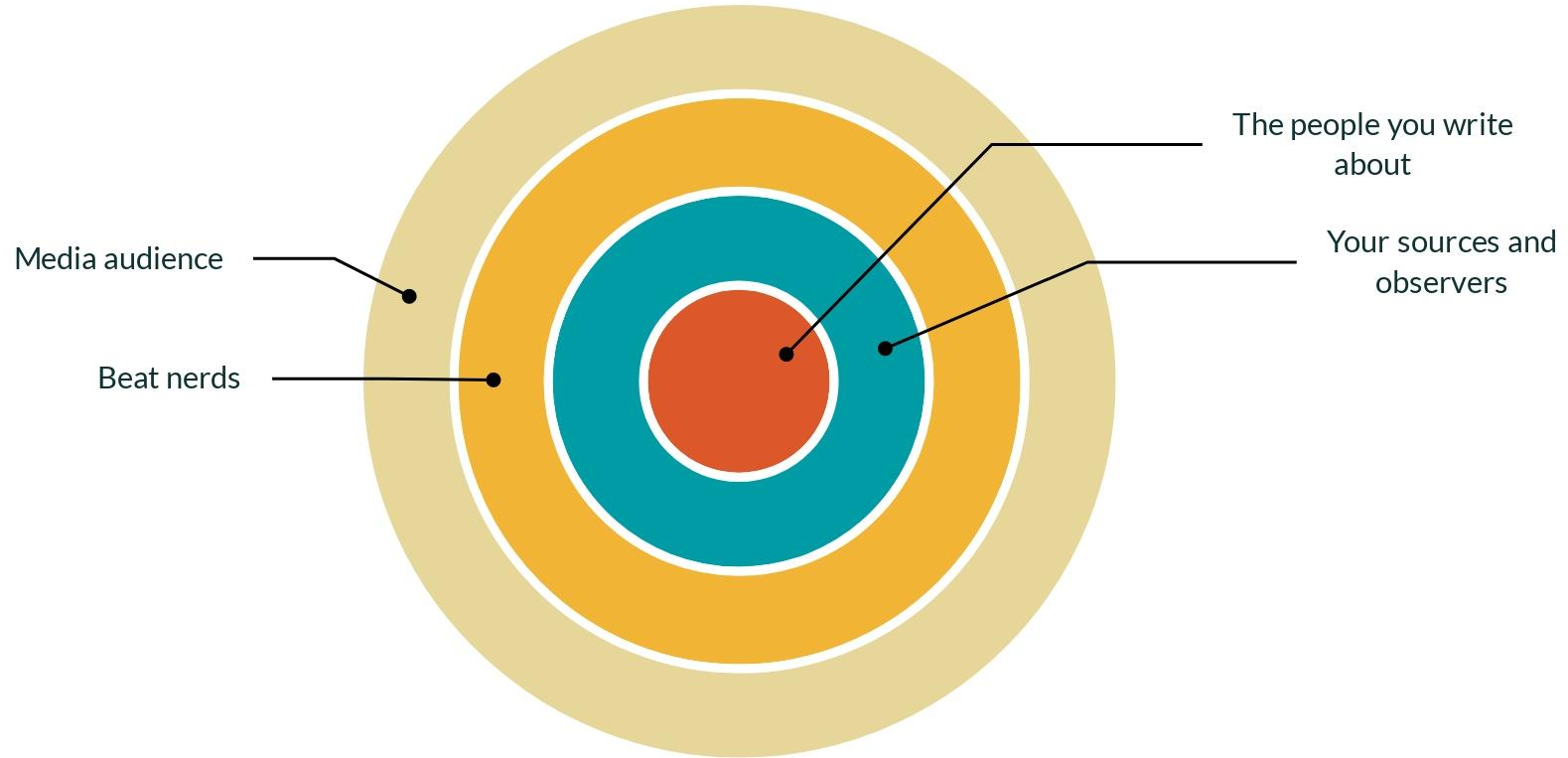
Who is their main adversary? What is preventing them from succeeding more? Is this changing?

6

Support

Where do they get support? How has this changed?

Audience Development is an investment in good future stories



Get Started Today



Elements of a Beat Note



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How you and your team benefit

— Benefits for the newsroom —

- 1 | Sharpen brand profile
- 2 | Increase search and social authority
- 3 | Unique angles to major stories

— Benefits for you —

- 4 | Scoops and great stories no one else covers
- 5 | Lasting expertise
- 6 | A rolodex of contacts

A soldier in camouflage gear is sitting on a large log in a forest. He is holding a rifle and looking off to the side. The background shows trees and foliage. The text "Go beyond generic." is overlaid on the right side of the image.

Go beyond generic.

Make a difference, invest in your career.