



*Spike Johnson*

**BUILD A FREELANCE  
CAREER IN  
DOCUMENTARY MEDIA**



# CONTENTS

**04. THIS IS NOT THEORY**

**05. PUBLISHING**

**06. MOTIVATION**

**07. GET UNCOMFORTABLE**

**08. EXCUSES**

**09. SUPPLY AND DEMAND**

**10. PITCH PREPARATION**

**11. BUILDING CONTACTS**

**12. SYMBIOSIS**

**13. PITCHING**

**14. CONCLUSION**

**15. WARNING**

**16. CONTACT**

**17. COPYRIGHT**





# THIS IS NOT THEORY

I'm a documentary journalist. I find a narrative that intrigues me and set out to explore the topic in as much depth as I can, whether it's the genocide of the Rohingya in Western Myanmar, cultural responses to school shootings in Texas, or paramilitary summer camps for children in Ukraine. When I return home, people ask about my experiences, the places I've been and the people I've met, but the most common questions involve the mechanics of the industry.

"How do you sell your work?"

"How do you get assignments?"

"How do you find access?"

This is a guide for those starting out, an overview and a roadmap. It's for anyone hoping to find a way into documentary media, for those wanting to find profit in an evening side-hustle, or anyone wanting to transition from a nine-to-five career to the excitement of full-time freelancing.

This advice is relevant regardless of medium and topic - photo, video, writing, breaking news, environmental issues, social justice, travel, sports, or lifestyle. The methods of publishing and selling work to media outlets are uniform.

These are practical processes that I've used over the last decade (and still use today) to sell work to the largest national platforms. We'll cover the paths to paid publication, self motivation, embedding, excuses, framing narratives, building contact lists, and pitching.

When I began as a photographer my aims were simple. I wanted to work on my own projects, with the freedom to explore my own ideas, travel the world as I wished, and make sure I didn't have to sit in an office. I wanted to connect with characters, to live their experiences, and learn about the world first hand. I wanted adventure. But I needed a way of making money for my work.

Over the years I've been lucky enough to contribute to outlets including The Washington Post, The New York Times, Outside Magazine, NBC, PBS, The History Channel, The Guardian, Harper's, The BBC, WIRED, Vice Magazine, Human Rights Watch, Foreign Policy, Newsweek, Bloomberg Businessweek, and The New Yorker, and have won funding and awards from The Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, The National Press Photographers Association, The International Photography Awards, The Society of Environmental Journalists, and The Associated Press.





# PUBLISHING

There are three methods of selling work and receiving assignments. But you'll need to conquer the first before the last two are possible. And the toughest part? The first method is entirely up to you!

## SELF-DIRECTED PROJECTS.

These are funded by the creator themselves, made independently without any client interest or direction. Once the project is complete, it's offered to relevant contacts in the hope that one or two will buy.

### PROS:

You have artistic freedom and can work where you choose. You're also emotionally and financially invested - it's your baby, and you'll pour energy into it.

### CONS:

The gamble is that once complete the work might not sell.

## PRE-PITCHED PROJECTS.

Pre-pitched projects are similar to self-directed projects - they're self-funded and you're working on your own vision. But once relationships have developed with some editors and clients, project ideas can be pitched upfront to gauge outlet interest and budget.

### PROS:

You maintain artistic control, freedom of location, and perhaps find a buyer before gambling time on the work.

### CONS:

If there are no positive responses it can be discouraging, even if the idea is solid. For me it takes the wind out of my sails and gives the client an opportunity to limit the scope of the work.

## OFFERED ASSIGNMENTS.

Clients come to you with their own narratives and budgets. Once established, editors and content buyers might reach out with ideas for their own projects that they'd like you to collaborate on.

### PROS:

Offered assignments don't require research, pitching, or access negotiation, plus they come with solid money offers.

### CONS:

These narratives often lack depth, the element of adventure, and artistic freedom. You'll also have to abandon rights to the ownership of the work.

While advising toward self-directed projects might seem like weak advice, it is the only way to build a portfolio, contacts, and notoriety, and over my career there has been no substitute for the motivation that imbues these journeys. Even now, with the option to pitch ideas upfront, or accept assignments, working on self-directed stories is still my favorite way to produce. There is no pressure to deliver on a timeline, and I can get lost in pure creation without the distraction of external motives.

The first story I developed was self-directed and embedded with a Texas-based survivalist group. They'd meet every weekend in suburban backyards or desert shooting galleries to practice weapons exercises. They'd make escape plans - routes out of the cities to rural camps in case of societal collapse. They'd stockpile food, ammunition, and medical supplies.

I spent a year going backwards and forwards from downtown Dallas, where I was living, to Plano, Texas to spend time with them. Every weekend I'd visit. They'd let me photograph as long as I participated. I'd do some weapons drills, build survival kits, and was given a nickname. Slowly they began to invite me into their homes and trusted me to share their vulnerabilities.

A body of work developed, a photo series and a written article. It was a nice story about the sensitivities of the members, the camaraderie they found in their group, and individual motives for their alternative lifestyle.

Soon after I finished the story, I left America for a while. The survivalists threw a leaving party for me. They took me out for sushi and gave me gifts - shot glasses, camouflage print underwear, and a combat knife.

I entered the project into a competition for young photographers, it did pretty well, and resulted in a follow-up publication in The New Yorker.

# MOTIVATION

Treading the path toward a freelance career requires nothing but self-motivation. You can cut the ties to your office job, or make some cash on the side through your craft, but how badly do you want it?

In the beginning there'll be no one inviting you to make photographs or produce feature-length documentary films. You'll have to work hard to find stories that are fresh, and even harder to find access long enough to make deep work.

I had a mentor in the early stage of my journalism career, George Getschow, a Pulitzer Prize finalist and ex-Wall Street Journal writer famous for covering labor camps

After a story critique session, I remember asking Getschow how to progress as a journalist.

His advice stuck with me and is relevant to so many endeavors. He said that journalism, publishing, and creative pursuits are "self-invite," - if you want in, you're the only one who can open that door.

I've tested this theory again and again and found it true. There are no gatekeepers, you don't need formal qualifications, and you don't need to be a member of a club. Did we see Hunter S. Thompson asking permission? The only thing you need is solid work.



# GET UNCOMFORTABLE

## THE AIM IS TO MAKE WORK THAT NO ONE ELSE IS CAPABLE OF MAKING, EITHER BECAUSE THEY LACK ACCESS, TIME, EFFORT, OR VISION.

A first project is an investment in time and energy, but it will pay off. It'll inform your future style and pave the way for introductions to clients.

Looking for topics close to home is a good idea, they're possible to pursue around normal life without the expense and time-drain of long-distance travel. You'll also have the benefit of knowing the local area.

A subject with national scope is important, and new angles on existing stories are valuable. Is there a group of people in your hometown who're doing something radically different? Make friends with them and return over long periods of time to document.

Perhaps there's a landscape that's exhibiting faster than normal climate change? Or an athlete training for a record attempt? Visit once a week, photograph through the seasons, make it your story.

This is the part of journalism that is romanticized - spending time inside a story, living with your story's characters, eating with them, traveling with them. Enjoy this part if you can, it's why you're here!

In the beginning these experiences can be uncomfortable. There is skepticism toward outsiders, journalists particularly, of motive, and character. But gradually familiarity develops, people relax, and barriers are lowered.

Throughout my career I've spent time with people at both ends of the political and economic spectrum. With shared experiences differences dissolve, not that we suddenly agree on issues, but there's an understanding of intent. It's an empathy that can be passed on to an audience, a way to explain and interpret the hurdles that we face as a society.

After I left America and the Texas survivalists I went back home to England. There was a push by a local council to evict a group of migrant travelers, who self-identify as "gypsies", from land that they had purchased in a rural community north of London.

The gypsy's land was a ten-acre square, with trailers and small buildings. They'd bought the plot a decade before in a move to settle down, grow roots, and live a less transient life. But there was tension between the gypsies and local residents, and politicians began inventing narratives to evict the gypsy community.

The gypsies fortified their land with concrete walls, scaffold balustrades, and barbed wire. Activists moved in to help, creating barricades of burning tires, and locking themselves to gates to stop police dozers forcing inside.

Over months I'd visit. Initially one of the gypsies met me at a nearby train station and smuggled me past police checkpoints into the camp, hiding me in the back of his Transit van under an old mattress.

The first days were uncomfortable, physically and socially. I slept outside for a few nights, it was cold, and I was alone. No one trusted me enough to allow me an interview or a photograph. Eventually I was offered a vacant trailer to use while I was there. The gypsies showed me a secret way in, through a tunnel under the wall, and out across the fields, so I could come and go as I pleased.

In the end riot police raided the land, bricks were thrown, trailers were burned, and activists arrested. It was a sad ending, and a sensitive issue handled terribly by the government.

I hadn't pitched the story ahead of time. But after the community was evicted, I packaged up the best photos and wrote an article. Vice was interested, and published images and text across a few pages in their printed magazine.

The key is finding enough time to make that really special piece of work. Finding enough time, finding enough energy, and hanging out around your topic through that uncomfortable first period, until you're accepted. It's about laying the foundation for the type of work that you want to make in the future.

Drink a lot of coffee, get inspired, and fall in love with your project for some time.





## EXCUSES

This is not a time for excuses. If you have an existing job, it's a blessing. While creating that first project, a steady income is a fantastic thing. There is a freedom in being able to explore, create, and consider without the pressure of needing to sell a photo or a video to put a meal on the table. That can wait until later.

Consider your blocks of free time. If you're working in a bar, choose a topic that you can visit in the daytime. If you work in an office, find something that you can explore at night.

As freelance income increases, it'll be possible to scale back bar shifts, or reduce office hours, until the balance is where you want it. This is not all or nothing.

I didn't start young. I was 28 when I published my first piece and will turn 39 this year. I don't have a trust fund or alternative income that keeps me afloat, it all comes from photo, video, and writing.



## SUPPLY AND DEMAND

### THE SALE OF WORK DEPENDS ON NARRATIVE FRAMING. ARE YOU OFFERING SOMETHING THAT NO ONE ELSE HAS?

The media industry is much like any other, it follows the rules of supply and demand - if many producers are offering similar work, there's little demand for it over time. But if you have something interesting, that no one else has, editors will be chewing your hand off for it. You can even end up in a bidding war.

I've spent a long time documenting cultural reactions to active shooter events in America. It's a hard topic that's widely covered in breaking news. But the conventional narrative is always similar - there's a school shooting, the media descends for some interviews with survivors, then presents some details of the attack. Everyone has the same story, produced in a time-crunch scramble.

But what happens between these events? Where are the interesting angles? It's stories about changes in police training, how schools are evolving security measures, how teachers are training with firearms, and how private companies are manufacturing bullet-proof backpacks for kids. Dig deep beneath the headlines.

Skillset diversification can also help. An unpublished project made up of photos and video is valuable. As is a photo gallery accompanied by a written article, photos with extended captions, social media posts, VR, and illustration. The more range you can offer in one project, the more value the package you're offering will hold.



# PITCH PREPARATION

Pitching work requires a simple website with pages for work examples, contact details, and a short bio. That's it, nothing complicated.

To pitch written work, upload articles so that they're easily legible. For video, embed projects via YouTube or Vimeo beneath a written paragraph that explains the narrative. For photos, make a gallery of between 20 and 25 images, each with a caption, with text that describes the work.





# BUILDING CONTACTS

Building contact lists takes time and is certainly a little dull. But there are some shortcuts and best practices. Looking for a fit between projects and outlets is important. Is the work that you're offering the right style, tone, and message? Is it relevant to a particular platform? Consider smaller publications as well as the nationals. You can reach out to The New York Times and National Geographic, but are there other organizations that might fit your niche also, outlets that aren't quite so competitive to sell to, that you could contact in addition?

Research editors and producers as carefully as outlets themselves, look for the editors who'd be most interested in your story. A New York Times editor is not just a New York Times editor - one editor specializes in technology, another specializes in business, another specializes in fashion. Try to find the most relevant contact for your topic.

LinkedIn is a great resource for finding names. Search for an organization, then begin to look through their lists of employees. Press releases for film, photo, and literary festivals will often detail the names of judges and reviewers. These professionals are normally the cream of the crop at media outlets and are practiced at accepting pitches and offering feedback.

With relevant contact names identified, [Hunter.io](https://hunter.io) or [Rocketreach.co](https://rocketreach.co) can scrape email addresses from LinkedIn profiles. Or perhaps a company will use the same email structure for all employees, for example "first.name@mediacompany.com," leaving you to change the names for each contact.

If you have a little cash to spare, a paid subscription with [Agencyaccess.com](https://agencyaccess.com) will give you lists of media buyers globally, across all mediums.







## SYMBIOSIS

Don't be hesitant to send pitches to industry professionals, it's a symbiotic relationship. Strike a balance between confidence, and humility. Outlets lean on the freelance community to bring work and story ideas, especially as their budgets for full-time staff wane.

Don't fear rejection. Most people that you contact won't be interested, and only a handful will respond. But you only need one "yes". If your work is interesting to you, it'll be interesting to someone else too. The trick is finding the right home for it.





## PITCHING

### EDITORS SEE MANY MESSAGES A DAY. BE CONCISE. BE POLITE. FIRST IMPRESSIONS MATTER.

Pitch emails begin with a strong subject line, something eye-catching, but topic relevant. Then a short personal introduction, a few lines explaining the work, and a URL link back to the project on your website. Give details on where the project is set, what it's about, how it's different, and why the audience should care. Labeling the work as "unpublished" will make it more attractive - it's exclusive, which means it's valuable.

Work examples shouldn't be attached or embedded in pitch emails, linking back to a portfolio is best practice - large attachments take time to load, won't show captions, and there is a loss in control over how the work is viewed. As an added trick, using [Mailtrack.io](https://mailtrack.io) on outgoing emails will allow you to see who's opened your message, and who's clicked on your portfolio link.

Silence is normal, and most contacts won't respond to the first message. Following up after one week is crucial, this is where most of my sales come from. A very short message, sent as a reply to the first, is all that's necessary.

Cold email automation platforms like Mailchimp can be tempting, but I've found that my emails land in junk folders or they get labeled as spam.

Writing to each contact individually will allow you to tailor your message each time. It'll slow you down too, helping you catch errors without burning thousands of contacts at once. Emailing manually I achieve around 50% open rate, versus around 10% with automation.



# THERE IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR SELF-INVITATION

## CONCLUSION

Personally driven pieces will offer the space and the freedom to develop individual style and message. Lean into topics that you're naturally curious about, developing your path without external noise. With steady and determined follow-through on a project or two, opportunities will start to come to you.

People will remember your aesthetic, location, or narrative niche, and will hire you to make work in your own style. Be true to yourself, cover what interests you, and clients will begin to seek you for your work.



## WARNING

Please be careful out there, there is physical and financial risk in chasing down a freelance career in media production. Try to make sure you let someone know where you're heading, and trust your gut in places of potential threat. Don't immediately abandon regular paychecks, begin gradually and transition steadily if you can.

# *Spike Johnson*

Please feel free to reach out to me. I'd love to hear about the projects that you're working on, the parts of this guide that have been useful, and any questions you have about the content.

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