

OFF THE RECORD



About the Author

Media consultant Jim Cameron has worked almost 40 years training executives and celebrities for media interviews. A former broadcast reporter for NBC News and local radio stations, Jim also authors a popular weekly newspaper column on transportation, "Getting There," for the eight daily and 14 weekly newspapers published by Hearst CT Media across Connecticut.

You think memorable soundbites just come naturally?

Get the inside scoop on how media consultant Jim Cameron prepares spokespersons to match wits with skeptical reporters on television, radio, newspapers and online. Jim's amusing stories offer a healthy portion of sage media advice along with tasty tidbits of backroom drama, hardball negotiations, creative slight-of-hand, and a little humble pie.

Praise for Jim Cameron's OFF THE RECORD

Madeline Devries—Founder, DeVries Global:

Jim is the best media trainer I have ever met. I made sure that every client spent time with him before a major interview.

Catherine Day—Public Affairs & Investor Relations Executive and former journalist:

This pithy memoir is brimming with strategic communications advice at every turn, beneficial for any public speaking. I highly recommend Jim's humorous tales and valuable lessons.

Frani Chung—Senior Vice President, MBooth Public Relations:

Jim is my go-to for executive media training. He provides on-point techniques for navigating the toughest media questions, helping my clients to deliver the right messages.

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COMMUNICATIONS, INC.



"Jim understands how the media works."

Joe Connolly, WCBS Newsradio

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***Confessions of a
Media Consultant***

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Confessions of a Media Consultant

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ISBN: 9798646144363

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my wife Mimi Griffith
and our daughter Kathleen Cameron,
whom I love very much.

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THE EARLY YEARS IN BROADCASTING

My Journey

Since my childhood growing up in Canada, I've always been fascinated with radio and communications. I built one of those crude crystal radio sets in my bedroom and even strung an audio speaker to an outside tree, hooked to an amplifier, so I could make the neighborhood kids think my voice was that of "Mr. Tree."

But it was in high school, the summer of 1967, while attending American Legion Boys State on an upstate NY college campus that I got my first taste of being on the air, just as a fill-in newsman on the campus station.

Attending Lehigh University, the campus radio station there became my real passion and I became Program Director late in my freshman year, converting the format from Classical to "Underground" rock.

Upon graduation in 1972 I went to work at the infamous FM rock station WLIR on Long Island, followed by WQIV / NYC, WHCN / Hartford and WCOZ / Boston. In 1979 I was hired by NBC News as founding News Director of “The Source”, their young adult radio network for FM rock stations. I helped hire the staff, develop the format, anchored afternoon drive time newscasts and hosted a weekly newsmagazine show.



J. Cameron, WLVR Program Director.

My start in radio: WLVR, the campus station at Lehigh University, 1969



On the air at WLIR-FM, 1973



On the air at WQIV-FM, 1975



On the air at NBC, 1979



Staff of NBC's The Source Radio Network, 1979:

*(Left to right) Carl Cramer, Bob Madigan, George Taylor
Morris, Dara Welles, CD Jaco, Bill Crowley, Dave
Schreiber and Jim Cameron*



*Armstrong Award, 1980: (Left to right) Wendy Maxwell,
Jim Cameron and Sheri Freeman*

With a George Foster Peabody and Major Armstrong Award for my work at NBC, one under each arm, I left 30 Rock in 1982, convinced that the radio network had peaked.

I formed my one-man consultancy, Cameron Communications Inc. But what to do next at age 31?

It was clear to me that since FCC deregulation, radio news and public affairs was doomed. But television was expanding rapidly, adding new channels that had a voracious appetite for “content,” including interview shows.

Having done hundreds of interviews in my radio days, I knew that some guests were better than others...usually the ones finishing a long road-tour. By

then they'd learned the difference between broadcast and print interviews, long-form talk shows and spot-news interviews.

I wondered if those giving interviews could be trained before heading out “on the road” so they could make the most of every interview for whoever was paying their way. Talking with some friends in public relations I learned that such a training practice already existed and was called “media training.”

“Gee. I can do that,” I thought. And in 1982 I did.

What follows is a collection of true stories from my almost 40 years in this business.

I wish I could give you the real names of the people and companies involved with these stories, but my lawyer said that wouldn't be smart. So the names and some of the details have been changed to protect the guilty (and my Non-Disclosure Agreements).

But, even obfuscated as they are, each story proved, to me, to be a learning opportunity. And I hope those lessons prove useful to you, too, in your communications work.

The War Correspondent

In journalism school they teach you a lot about the glory days of radio when Edward R. Murrow was broadcasting live from London during the blitz. That was a little before my time, but in my career I had my own war hero: George Esper.

George Esper was the Bureau Chief for the Associated Press in Saigon during the Vietnam War. When Saigon was occupied by the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army in April of 1975, Esper was able to file live reports. In fact, he stayed in what became Ho Chi Minh City for several weeks after the US troops were evacuated, still filing his dispatches. I remember hearing them on WQIV in New York City where I then worked.

George Esper was my generation's Edward R. Murrow. And not only did I have a chance to meet him but I also worked alongside him covering a big story.

When Esper returned to the US, the AP took him on a national tour, showing him off to fellow journalists and admiring fans like a living hero. Working at that time in Hartford CT, I had a chance to interview him on WHCN-FM for an hour.

Despite all that he had gone through, I found him to be a very sweet and unassuming gentleman. He was obviously smart but showed no ego, only an intense curiosity about everyone he met. He reminded me of the bumbling detective Columbo, played on TV by Peter Falk, complete with the dirty trench coat and naïve questions sure to elicit more information than an in-your-face Mike Wallace.

But behind that demeanor was a very smart, competitive journalist determined to get his story.

Esper could have picked any job he wanted in the Associated Press, but he decided to be based in Boston as an enterprise reporter. That meant he was digging up his own stories, not chasing press releases or ambulances. And one such story brought us together again.

In May of 1977 I was working as News Director at WCOZ-FM in Boston. A local anti-nuclear group, the Clamshell Alliance, was protesting plans to build twin nuclear power plants in Seabrook NH and threatened to occupy the construction site.

I drove up from Boston to cover the story to find I was one of only a half-dozen local journalists

on site, including George Esper. The state police told us we needed to form a “pool” to go onto the construction site and I became the designated radio reporter.

Driven onto the construction site we found that then-Governor Meldrim Thompson, Jr. was there, warning the would-be occupiers that they would be arrested if they set foot on the property, which 2000 of them did later that afternoon. Thompson was, shall we say, a bit eccentric. But he was no nonsense when it came to his law and order attitude, even in the “Live Free or Die” state.

Returning to the press site just outside the main gate I shared my tape with the other reporters, including Esper who had already booked a nearby motel room which he had turned into an AP office. Esper allowed me to file my reports back to the station in Boston while he huddled in the bathroom, a make-shift dark room where he was developing film. As a good AP man he was filing not only written news coverage but also pictures and audio for his AP members.

The next day we walked back onto the now-occupied site to find that the Clamshell Alliance had set up a small tent city complete with streets... Karen Silkwood Drive among the names I remembered.

Again, the cops called the reporters over to the fence surrounding the most sensitive part of the

construction site. They told us that at 3 pm anyone left on the property would be arrested and indeed 1414 occupiers were, herded onto buses and driven to a nearby armory for processing. (They went on a hunger strike and were eventually released.)

Esper was the senior journalist on site, and I was eager to watch his response to the deadline warning. After all, this was the guy who'd managed to stay in Ho Chi Minh City under control of the communists for six weeks still doing his job. Returning to America he was now being read the riot act by a police officer wearing gold epaulets.

“Colonel,” he asked, “where do you want the press to stand when the arrests take place so we’re not in the way?”

But a media presence during the impending arrests was not in the Colonel’s plans.

“If you’re on the property at 3 pm you’ll be arrested, too,” he warned us.

Raising his press pass from a lanyard around his neck Esper said, “But Colonel, we have our credentials.”

The Colonel wasn’t budging. So at 2:59 pm Esper and I trekked off the property as we watched a caravan of school buses roll up the road toward the occupation site to remove those arrested. After all,

if we'd been arrested we wouldn't have been able to file our stories.

BOTTOM LINE:

A good journalist will always get the story.