

Jason Huffman & Amber Healy, Food Chemical News

Michael O'Connell, producer, It's All Journalism

Welcome to It's All Journalism. My name is Michael O'Connell. I'm here today with Megan Cloherty and today we're going to be talking about covering the federal government, in particular, covering food issues around the USDA [Department of Agriculture]. Today we've got Jason Huffman and Amber Healy of the [Food Chemical News](#). Welcome.

Amber Healy, reporter/editor, Food Chemical News

Thank you.

Jason Huffman, editor in chief, Food Chemical News

Thanks for having us.

Michael O'Connell

So, tell us about the Food Chemical News. What does it do? Who's your audience and what information are you trying to get out there?

Jason Huffman

Well, Food Chemical News has been around for almost 55 years now and we cover food regulation. Our audience is a fairly mixed bag of different types of professionals. A lot of our readers are in the food industry, food company executives. We also have government officials who read our publication and consumer advocates, attorneys, consultants who serve the food industry. Some of them sue the food industry as well. It's anybody who's concerned with food regulation and that's a large number of people.

Michael O'Connell

How do you approach that as a journalist? Does it present any special challenges for you?

Jason Huffman

Oh yeah, because there's a lot of information on the food industry out there. We're a subscriber based product, so we have to deliver a high level, down in the weeds type of content and we do that by really getting to understand the regulations and then getting into the sort of nuances of the regulations. What does it mean? Also, we've got to be kind of inside the Beltway. What's happening before it actually gets to [The Federal Register](#). What's being worked on. And then there are all these things that happen in and around Washington that don't necessarily make it into The Federal Register and we have to be on top of all that.

You know, the food industry is the largest industry in the world, a \$4.6 trillion industry. And there's a lot of focus and emphasis on it and there's a lot of content being provided in this area, so we have to do something beyond what people can normally find.

Michael O'Connell

Is there a concern, the tone of what you're writing, is it strictly, you know, you're talking to people inside the Beltway, to the people who understand the jargon and what you're doing here or do you try to present your stuff in a way that the average citizen can understand the importance of and weight of it?

Jason Huffman

We're not really writing to the average citizen so much as the professional. Our primary focus is the person who is kind of familiar with the food industry and usually has a general familiarity with the regulations that are out there. We're really trying to satisfy the professionals, the people who are actually doing something in their occupation that relates to this.

Michael O'Connell

This is probably the best point for me to offer a little inside information. Actually, I worked with Amber Healy for about five years at the [Connection Newspapers](#) in Northern Virginia. She was a reporter who worked for me, writing some very —

Jason Huffman

You were blessed.

Michael O'Connell

I was blessed. She's an excellent, excellent writer/reporter.

Amber Healy

Thanks guys.

Michael O'Connell

Very good at writing features and I don't mean that in light sense, you know, "Oh, these are flowery stories." But really good identifying the people aspect of it. Amber, did you find it a challenge to write this type of ...

Amber Healy

It was a lot harder at first when I got there, because I was used to writing to a community. I was writing about schools. I was writing about in one case, in one legendary case, groundwater pollution.

Michael O'Connell

Which was a scientific story.

Amber Healy

Which was, it was a very nerdy story. I had to call the CDC [Centers for Disease Control], different agencies, DEQ [Virginia Department of Environmental Quality], to find out what was the problem with finding this stuff in the water behind a brand new townhouse development where there was a nice shiny playground on top of it and little kids were playing there. How big a problem was this really?

Transitioning to government writing, where you're dealing with people who are fully invested in what you are writing about, whether it's regulation or policy or new testing methods for pathogens, it's a whole different world. And it was a little challenging at first to get rid of my newspaper feature voice, to transition into more of a business voice. It's a whole different language. It's a whole different world. It's a whole different list of acronyms that makes sense to nobody unless you're in that world. But I think in some ways it helped too, because I understand how to break down the science of something to make it easier for people to understand if they're interested, but they might not know it as well. I think being at The Connection as long as I was there, I think that helped.

Michael O'Connell

And I run into that challenge sometimes too, when you're covering the government, sometimes you get into it and you're like, a., you have to figure out how it makes sense to you, and then it's like, OK, how am I going to present this in a way to my readers so that they can understand its importance. It's challenging to recognize the fact that you've got an audience who knows a lot of stuff.

Amber Healy

Right.

Michael O'Connell

A lot of the shortcuts in information, so not making it too dumb for them, but also making it interesting for them.

Jason Huffman

I think you guys are hitting on the biggest anxiety that I've run into with new reporters in the newsletter area, and that is that they're used to writing for people who are like them. If they come from the newspaper world, they can kind of relate to. And then they get into this area where they're writing to these professionals and they think, "How am I going to give these people something they don't know? How am I going to present this in a way that I'll be speaking their language?" That's a difficult transition that you have to make.

I had a journalist one time who came up to me after two years on the job and she said, "You know Jason, I feel like a poser, like I'm faking it here." You always have that insecurity when you get into this stuff. But Amber actually does an outstanding job of presenting the information in that way. She's really good at getting sort of inside the subject and then understanding herself, and then turning around and saying, "OK, how do I present this now to these readers who are at a different level?"

Michael O'Connell

You've actually been out in the field in this. You were telling me once, was it you went out to Nebraska?

Amber Healy

Oh yeah, that was shortly after I started at Food Chem News. I had an opportunity to go to Omaha with the then undersecretary of food safety and the secretary of agriculture on like a 2 1/2 day trip. It was really interesting. I got a lot of really close one-on-one time, more with the undersecretary, a gentleman by the name of Richard Raymond, who is still a source. He's out in Colorado. Now he's retired. But it was a really interesting way to see, not just how the government worked but the industry worked as well. We visited a couple of slaughter facilities. You don't learn your job better when you're talking about food safety than going into a slaughter facility. And no, I'm not a vegetarian. People ask me that all the time.

Michael O'Connell

That it didn't change your outlook.

Amber Healy

When you grow up on a farm, you kind of always know the cow in the pasture is going to be your dinner someday.

Michael O'Connell

Just looking around, saying "I could eat that if I need to."

Amber Healy

Yeah, you know.

Megan Cloherty, producer, It's All Journalism

It brings up the question of sources, though. Because when you work inside an industry and you're writing to that industry, do you guys find it easier to get sources, because they know who your audience is, or do you find it sort of like a little more difficult because they all know each other?

Amber Healy

Sometimes.

Jason Huffman

It kind of cuts both ways.

Amber Healy

Yeah, it does.

Jason Huffman

There are sources that love us because when we call them they can immediately jump into the conversation and know that we understand what they're talking about. Then there are some organizations that would rather talk to The Washington Post.

Amber Healy

And you're always going to have that.

Jason Huffman

They perceive The Washington Post as being more high profile. So, they'll take that call ahead of us.

Michael O'Connell

This has been an ongoing sort of subtext to this podcast is that every once in a while, we talk about the fact that when you're in Washington, you're a working journalist and then there's The Washington Post.

Megan Cloherty

But that's like that in any, I'm sure in New York they have that problem too.

Michael O'Connell

Yeah, The New York Times.

Amber Healy

I can't imagine who The New York Times says, "Oh, man, I can't believe they're talking to whatever. They're not talking to us."

Michael O'Connell

What's your name again? Amber and I had an incident where we were covering this arts facility in Lorton, Va. And we had done all this wonderful, they were building it. It was this huge thing. We followed it through the development, through the county structure.

Amber Healy

From a prison to —

Michael O'Connell

From a prison.

Amber Healy

A beautiful place.

Michael O'Connell

It was a huge story for our newspaper. And then they were going to have this big reception with [Mikhail Baryshnikov] there and we weren't invited. And yet, The Washington Post was.

Amber Healy

We were told that we weren't allowed.

Michael O'Connell

So we raised a little stink about it.

Megan Cloherty

So bitter.

Michael O'Connell

Oh yeah. We were big babies about it.

Jason Huffman

How long ago was this?

Michael O'Connell

This was a few years ago.

Jason Huffman

I'm glad you're not holding onto anything.

Michael O'Connell

No, no, no, and so, I called up and was the indignant editor and we ended up getting Amber at the event. Every once in a while, you have to stand up and say, "Look, we're in the trenches here. We're covering you day in and day out. Give us the opportunity to do our jobs."

Amber Healy

Yeah.

Megan Cloherty

Tell us about your website. Obviously, you told us who your audience was, but if I'm a journalist coming to your website wanting to find specific information about something that's coming up, either legislatively or whatever, is it easy to navigate? Is it easy to figure out what's what?

Jason Huffman

If you're a subscriber, yes.

Megan Cloherty

OK.

Jason Huffman

It's a couple of thousand dollars to subscribe to our publication.

Megan Cloherty

So it's more like a newsroom would be.

Jason Huffman

We're a subscriber based model. We don't take advertising. That requires that we put up walls around our website and the content is not readily available. You can see the headlines and the first paragraph of every story. If you wanted more content and you were a journalist covering a beat, I would say, "Shoot me an email or contact me using the information on the website," and I'll probably want to help you because, like we were talking earlier about the story that broke this past week —

Megan Cloherty

Right.

Jason Huffman

Where some newspapers picked up our article, gave us credit and that's good publicity for us. So we don't mind occasionally having a story kind of get out to the mainstream press.

Michael O'Connell

So, this is an interesting topic to talk about. You are subscriber based. There are a lot of subscriber-based publications, certainly industry, whether you've got a particular target audience, you're providing a level of expertise coverage that these people in the industry and the experts want to get. How does that function? Are you looking for more readers to come in? Or do you feel you reach a certain level of interest?

Jason Huffman

I think the focus on a lot of the mainstream press is to find advertising. They always have to worry about, "Will we get enough advertising to pay for things?" In our world, we have to worry about subscribers. We have to have constant marketing efforts to attract new readers. That's how we pay for things. As journalists, you try not to think about that too much, but basically, at the end of the day, to have a job you need to have subscribers.

Michael O'Connell

Do you find it difficult to have your content walled off from average readers, who might be casual readers? Does that present any particular difficulties for you in getting new subscribers?

Jason Huffman

We're all egotistical basically as journalists. We like having our byline and reading.

Amber Healy

I like competitive better.

Jason Huffman

OK, competitive

Amber Healy

I'm competitive.

Jason Huffman

We would love to have more people reading our copy. Ideally, that would be great for us. But the reality is, if we did that, obviously, we wouldn't have subscribers.

Michael O'Connell

It's sort of that odd thing and I think it sort of hinges on what you were saying before about places like The New York Times or The Washington Post putting up walls, that they're having to deal with a model where they're coming off of making all their money off of advertising. Then you guys ...

Megan Cloherty

It's also interesting because they're an industry publication. So if they have advertisers, they'd have likely covered their advertisers or might cover their advertisers.

Jason Huffman

There are publications that are in the industry that are more industry oriented that are advertising based. They have struggled, though, in terms of, I think every business model, that's one of the things I like about your show. Because journalism is going through this kind of weird period where it's trying to figure itself out and the business model's a big part of that. How do you pay for journalism? The subscription based model has suffered as well. We haven't had great years recently. I got into this back in the '90s on a couple of other beats, and hey, times were good, when this model was kind of fresh and new. But we're struggling just like everybody else. But I don't think the advertising based world's doing that much better.

Megan Cloherty

So neither one of them's the right answer.

Michael O'Connell

Yeah.

Jason Huffman

I think they'll sort this out soon, though.

Megan Cloherty

Yeah, absolutely.

Amber Healy

I'd like to stay working in this profession, you know.

Michael O'Connell

And you know, that's one of the, it's funny that you say that Amber, because actually all the people that we've talked to, I think, have generally been optimistic about sort of the future of journalism. They all recognize the business model issue is something that's being hammered out. It's been being hammered out for the last 10 years or so. And, people are optimistic that journalism is not going to go away. There's just this need for it. It's just, how is it going to happen.

Jason Huffman

I keep telling myself that to get to sleep at night. There's a need for content and will that need ever go away? I can't see that. And there will be a need for people who are specialists in content, who understand a particular topic and can deliver that content. It's just a matter of how we're going to pay for it. I just don't see, I mean, the food industry, as I mentioned earlier is huge.

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Jason Huffman

So there are people in the food industry who need this information like their life depended on it.

Michael O'Connell

Yeah, and that's actually, I don't necessarily want to call it a luxury, that's something nice to know that you're writing stuff that is clearly valued by a certain section of the audience. And that's the way you turn the whole business model on anything. You create some of value that your audience is willing to pay for or at least to seek you out for.

Jason Huffman

Any type of business model, any type of journalist needs to figure out who their readers are and what they want. And then you try to write for that particular reader and you try to deliver high value content, because let's be honest, even if your content's free, you still have to struggle against other publications that are delivering content that's also free and you're going to have to make your story as attractive or as desirable as anybody else's?

Michael O'Connell

Are you concerned at all about industry and the government, do you have any concerns at all about keeping your independence in your voice and your coverage?

Jason Huffman

You know, actually, one of the things about being subscriber driven, it does give us a certain amount of freedom. We don't have to worry too much about a major advertiser pulling out. We have enough readers and enough subscribers, that if someone didn't like what we wrote, because, as long as, I just care that it's fair and balanced. You know, I hate to quote the Fox Network.

Megan Cloherty

It's a good tagline for a reason, I guess.

Jason Huffman

As long as it's got those bases covered, we're going to present the content. We don't have to worry too much about it.

Michael O'Connell

Now, you've sort of got a side project going that's kind of interesting. You launched a YouTube TV show, [The Knife and Fork Show](#).

Jason Huffman

Yeah, yeah.

Michael O'Connell

So tell us about that. Is that just you can't stop talking about food that you need to do it?

Jason Huffman

I'm so excited I wanted to find other ways to talk about food. Yeah, I guess it's been about a year almost, when I started working on this. And, I was kind of interested in a couple of things. I wanted to expand my own areas of sort of journalism skills. Wanted to get into different places. And, simultaneously I felt like being a subscription based product, we needed a venue where we could kind of provide content that didn't have walls around it. So, there wasn't anything like what I was thinking about in terms of sort of a videotaped or recorded talk show on food regulation and I thought I would create it.

Michael O'Connell

And that's the way a lot of these things get done. You recognized that there's a need and say, "Well, hell, I'll just go ahead and do it." Is it just you and Amber and other reporters or do you bring people in to interview?

Jason Huffman

Well, once every month we rent a studio in Arlington [Va.]. That's made available by Arlington Independent Media, which is the local cable company. We bring in all of our typical sources, some of really well recognized names in the food industry. You may not know their names, but the food industry knows who they are.

Michael O'Connell

They're rock stars of the food industry.

Jason Huffman

They're rock stars of the food industry.

Amber Healy

They are.

Jason Huffman

They are. And they're usually in the Washington, D.C., area. There's a lot of these folks in the Washington, D.C., area. And we get them to stop by the studio, and we film a couple interviews. And then, over the course of a month, I put these interviews out on YouTube and our website and whoever else wants to run those videos.

Megan Cloherty

And how are the numbers doing comparatively? Have the numbers grown? Are people responding to it a pretty well?

Jason Huffman

Yeah, we're starting to get a little traction. One of the things that I did was I started using social media, LinkedIn in particular, to kind of let people know about the videos. And we're starting to get, you know, a couple hundred viewers at a time. And you know, that's small potatoes when you're in a consumer based broadcast or print media. But in the world of subscription based products, that's not a bad number.

Amber Healy

It's still new. I mean, who knows where this is going to be in six months or a year. This could take off.

Michael O'Connell

You're talking to podcasters.

Amber Healy

Right.

Michael O'Connell

So, we know this is is all fake.

Amber Healy

We're optimistic it's going to work out really well.

Jason Huffman

I actually started, I was on a different beat. I was covering telecom a couple of years ago and I started out by doing a podcast. We didn't have all this nice equipment. But that's how I started getting interested in the other forms of media. You, Megan, you came in through broadcast.

Megan Cloherty

Yeah.

Jason Huffman

So this is all sort of complementary.

Michael O'Connell

Small potatoes for you.

Megan Cloherty

Well, it's exciting in a way because everyone is starting to sort of branch out right now and maybe, "Hey, I'm going to try some video. Or I might try a little podcasting."

Amber Healy

All of it.

Megan Cloherty

And just throw it on our websites and see if it works. That's what we've been talking about lately. It's kind of exciting that when you have to do something to change it up, people try different things and you never know what you're going to get out of it. So, I think it's a good thing.

Jason Huffman

I feel like all journalists right now should be exploring the different medias because I think there's going to be a day when we might be required to have different skill sets like this.

Megan Cloherty

Well, I think that's a good point to make, because a lot of the journalists we've spoken with recently, their jobs have changed even in the last two or three years, they've had to do more and do different mediums even than what they came in doing. Have you guys found that as well?

Jason Huffman

I haven't had a direct pressure applied from my company or anywhere else that sort of says, "You've got to get into this." But I've heard stories about other journalists like that. Either way, there are plenty of journalists in this market, in this area and having just another skill set is, you know, it's a competitive advantage.

Michael O'Connell

One of the other things is I'm sitting here looking at you, you've got a copy of The Food Chemical News in front of you.

Jason Huffman

Actually, our handbook.

Michael O'Connell

Your handbook. But you also publish a newsletter as well as doing your content. Is the content the same on both?

Jason Huffman

You know what I do? I kind of cheat.

Michael O'Connell

I'm getting all the secrets out.

Jason Huffman

I'm the editor of the publication so I don't have a lot of bandwidth to do a lot of reporting on myself right now. I really rely on these reporters to do that. So, when they get a good story or something that's really interesting, I'll piggyback on that and I'll grab maybe a source they may have interviewed or someone I know who can talk about the topic. And using the reporting they've already done, I can go into an interview on camera and really kill it for like 10 minutes and I'm riding off of their backs. You know, cause they've done all the initial legwork. They've done all the research.

Michael O'Connell

You're like a parasite.

Jason Huffman

I am. I'm a parasite.

Amber Healy

Not my words, by the way.

Michael O'Connell

Just your thoughts. I can so read your mind.

Amber Healy

I say nothing.

Michael O'Connell

I find what you do as kind of really interesting and really speaks to an area of journalism that people don't always think about, that it's industry based, it's business based, expertise based. How can somebody who's coming out of a journalism school, who maybe has a degree in the sciences or something like that, get into this type of industry?

Jason Huffman

I used to speak with more confidence about this than I can today because it's real interesting what's happening out there right now. You know, when I coach young journalists, what I typically tell them is, I tell them to be open to different kinds of media. But I do tell them to focus on a particular area or specialty that they're interested in, because they can take that and that can give them an advantage. If someone was coming at this from a professional background, let's say they were a food scientist.

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Jason Huffman

And they wanted to be in the journalism area. I actually think that's a more difficult climb. Some people can write, some people can report and some people can't. It's something you can get better at, but I think it's more difficult to do that than it is to learn the area of specialty, if you've already got the journalism skills.

Michael O'Connell

Yeah. And we come out of journalism schools, generally, as generalists in a way. We have a lot of these skills that reporting, interviewing, listening.

Jason Huffman

I think that's the way you and I came out of it.

Michael O'Connell

But it's changing.

Jason Huffman

But increasingly it's becoming more what I described.

Michael O'Connell

There's a struggle going on, I mean, there's a struggle going on — Thank you, Internet, for screwing up everything.

Jason Huffman

Exactly.

Michael O'Connell

It's a struggle going on in everything. The people we talked to in journalism education are recognizing that they've got to get up on their heels and try to figure out what their customers — and they are customers — need to know in order to, when they get out in four years, that they have something that's viable to maybe them getting a job or at least develop some sort of career, multimedia, definitely, picking up all these skills.

I wanted to go back to social media. You talked a little about LinkedIn. Do you guys do any other social media?

Jason Huffman

I created a Facebook page for the show, The Knife and Fork Show, and then YouTube, I guess. And LinkedIn, I think that's pretty much. I don't use Twitter. A lot of people talk about Twitter. I probably ought to get maybe more familiar with it, but my marketer actually uses Twitter. But, LinkedIn's been my sort of go-to.

Michael O'Connell

And I wouldn't mind talking about LinkedIn, because, we actually, when you found out that I was doing this show, we exchanged some emails and you had some really good advice about getting into LinkedIn that I've kind of see bear a degree of fruit.

LinkedIn is kind of a mysterious sort of social media. Because it seems like, on the one level, it's just, "OK, here's where your resume is." And, "Oh here's some people I know from my office." But how do you leverage that into getting your content out there? What are some of the things that you do?

Jason Huffman

It's amazing. LinkedIn is kind of developing every day, I think, into something different. When I first got into it, I was finding a lot of people that I could relate to who where sources, potential contacts in my area. But now I've got like 650 contacts and I'm like in probably 30 different chat groups, actually, 50 different chat groups now. And a lot of them are in the area of food regulation and there are different specialties within food regulation. These are all chat groups that have been formed over the last year or so. So what I do with the way I use those groups is I'll take my videos and I'll put them on the chat group and then kind of invite comment. People will go check the video out from the chat group. If someone says they like it, it hangs out on the top of the page and gets more hits. So, it's created a buzz around what we're doing.

I think there are people who know my newsletter now from, it's kind of a three-step process. We have the newsletter, then the video and then LinkedIn and I think they kind of channel back in from LinkedIn to the newsletter.

Megan Cloherty

it may seem a little obvious, but can you tell us a little bit about how you'd find a source, maybe you're not connected with yet, but you may know someone who knows someone. That seems to me like how LinkedIn would be beneficial for journalists.

Jason Huffman

Using LinkedIn, typically, I have about, like I said, I have about 650 contacts. Now it's to the point where I can't even manage. I don't know all the names who are my contacts. These are people who've just kind of recognized me or something like that and offered to be a contact. But, they have different titles and they're with different organizations.

LinkedIn will allow you to, for example, Pepsi will have it's own sort of group within, where it will identify executives who work at Pepsi. The FDA [Food and Drug Administration] has officials who are on LinkedIn. The reality is we've been around, the newsletter's been around for 55 years, so we know a lot of the top officials in the food industry at both the large companies and the regulatory agencies.

Michael O'Connell

And they may not even be the people you want to use as sources.

Jason Huffman

Sometimes not.

Megan Cloherty

That's ominous.

Michael O'Connell

But with LinkedIn, it's funny, because I've really been kind of enjoying using it because it is a different experience than Facebook or Twitter. It's very much sort of group oriented. In that way, it's kind of like Google+ or Facebook, to a degree, where you've got shared interests.

But because it's all sort of business oriented, you know, career oriented, the people who use it may not be in Facebook or Twitter and so this is their way to sort of organize, "Well, I wouldn't mind having a source where I can read about 'X' — whatever the topic is. You know, food regulation, so "I'll join this group and that stuff will pull up on LinkedIn and I'll be able to read it there." But those same people wouldn't even conceive of going on Twitter or Facebook. So it's sort of reaching a different sort of strata.

Jason Huffman

Yeah, I think there are a lot of people who will go on LinkedIn that won't touch Facebook Or, if they do, they're like two separate worlds.

Michael O'Connell

Yeah, that's where their family pictures are and their vacations shots.

Jason Huffman

I'm bragging about my football team on Facebook, but I won't do that on LinkedIn.

Michael O'Connell

No, no. It's sort of a different sort of room.

Megan Cloherty

Well, it seems to be different industries too. I know finance is big on LinkedIn and, obviously, government is big on LinkedIn. I don't know, it's just interesting thing to me as a journalist to, if I need a source in this specific industry that I'd use LinkedIn versus Twitter.

Michael O'Connell

I've been, coincidentally, tasked at [Federal News Radio](#) for our website that we've been sort of talking about ... well, we know that there are a lot of government officials, a lot of people in our industry who are on LinkedIn, how can we use that to sort of show some more of our content. So, I've actually been tasked over the next couple of months to lead the effort to enter into that realm. I've already created a LinkedIn page for us. That's about as far as I've gotten at this point.

Megan Cloherty

A little share button?

Michael O'Connell

Yes, a little share button. One of these mid-afternoon shows who's like a crazy LinkedIn guy who's like, "You've got to get on LinkedIn. It's the best thing." He does lectures about it.

Megan Cloherty

Jason, you're the first person who we've had as a guest who I think has mentioned LinkedIn as something they used. I just think that's interesting, cause I think a lot of people, especially when they have a more general audience, they'll go for Facebook or Twitter.

Michael O'Connell

I think that's the exact right thing in general, because it's set up so different than Facebook, but can be used in many of the same ways as Facebook, just sort of in the way you interact with people and talk about shared interests.

Jason Huffman

You know, it's funny. Year's ago I was the editor of a newsletter that covered home-health issues and we had a listserv. And we had like a thousand people.

Michael O'Connell

Yeah, it's a lot like a listserv.

Jason Huffman

You know, sent emails to this listserv. This was before LinkedIn. In a way, LinkedIn is like a high-powered listserv. You know, it's like a listserv with a lot of bells and whistles.

So you have all these communities developing on particular niche areas and, for example, with what you're doing, you might want to find those populations where you happen to have a conversation going. I've actually joined groups on LinkedIn that really aren't food regulation.

At one point or other, I joined a group that was on school administrators, because we had done a thing on school lunches. So I actually just for that one opportunity and I set up one of my videos up there when we were having this conversation and a lot of people from that group tuned in, watched the video.

Michael O'Connell

It takes a lot. I mean, you've got to put thought into how to use social media to really get the most out of it.

Megan Cloherty

I think it might be an interesting thing to ask Amber about that transition. We talked a little bit about it, the transition from a more general audience to an industry specific audience. I think a lot of, I mean, the jobs that are out there are changing obviously for journalists. And I think a lot of people have considered making that move. Can you tell us a little bit about how that transition went?

Amber Healy

Coming from a broad audience to something more specific?

Megan Cloherty

Yeah and sort of navigating into the world where you're supposed to know, like you said, all the jargon and all the people and all that stuff, how that went for you and how long that took.

Amber Healy

Well, I've been with Food Chemical News for almost five years now, and I think in some ways what I cover has changed. When I came in, I was covering USDA Food Safety Inspection Service, meat and poultry, things of that nature. Now I'm covering food additives, which is FDA. So that's a mile down the road.

Michael O'Connell

You're covering the Clark Griswolds of the world. Is that what it is?

Amber Healy

You have to know not just who you're talking to, but what they want to know about. And I think, I don't know. With community journalism, you still get to a point where you have to be specific about the places that you're covering. When you're covering government, it's a different world because the people who you're talking to, when you come into something new like this, they already know way more than you do, so you try not to make yourself look like an idiot. I think, I hope that I am still not making myself look like an idiot five years out.

Megan Cloherty

It's hard not to do as a journalist. You kind of have to be ready to embarrass yourself and ask stupid questions.

Amber Healy

But that's the thing, I think people appreciate it.

Megan Cloherty

But you can't in this world.

Jason Huffman

When you charge a couple of grand for a publication, the last thing you want to do is lose your credibility.

Amber Healy

Right.

Jason Huffman

One of the tricks that we teach journalists early on when they get into a new technical area is to have a grounding source. So you think you've got it, right? You wrote the story. You put it down. But are you sure? You have a friendly source that you call up and say, "Hey." You don't give them the whole story, but you kind of go through the basic components of the story to kind of say, "Hey, did I understand this correctly? Am I using this term correctly?" You know, it's kind of a good, you can do that throughout the reporting.

Amber Healy

Right. There's one other thing though that seems to have worked well for me and that is just saying, "Listen, this is a new subject for me. I don't know a whole lot about it. Can you explain it to me? Can you really just break it down and explain it to me?" And then, as you cover a subject, as you cover an area, you learn. And once people realize that you've learned what you're talking about, they're more willing to talk with you and they'll give you more detail. They'll give you more information. They're more likely to answer

your call or return your email, because you have built up the credibility. You've worked with them.

Jason Huffman

You were really, and you were not unusual for this, but you were anxious about that initially.

Amber Healy

Yeah.

Jason Huffman

Revealing that. Asking that kind of honest question.

Amber Healy

Right.

Jason Huffman

Saying, "Listen, I don't really get this. Can you please explain this in basic terms?"

Amber Healy

And it worked really well.

Jason Huffman

But most of the time, the sources are incredibly friendly, aren't they?

Amber Healy

Right, because the more you understand something, the better you can make them look.

Amber Healy

Right.

Megan Cloherty

And you're not coming at it an angle.

Amber Healy

Yeah.

Megan Cloherty

You're fresh. You have no idea of where you're coming, so they can kind of, not influence, but they can explain it to you.

Amber Healy

Exactly. And when you're dealing with something like the food industry, they have something they want to say. They want people to know that their product is safe. You can feed it to your kids or, in the case of something we've been covering lately, pet treats. That it's safe for your pets. We don't cover pet food a lot, but it does come up from time to time. I don't know. If you're honest with people, I think they're more willing to help you. Maybe that's naive Western New York girl talking, but I think it's true.

Michael O'Connell

No. I think that's a lesson for all journalists. To go into, obviously, you need to research a little bit what you're doing before you start interviewing people and talking to your sources, but you've got to be able to admit that you don't know something.

Amber Healy

Yeah.

Megan Cloherty

Better than assuming and then having egg on your face later.

Amber Healy

Or coming back and having to write a correction the same length as your story because you got something completely wrong.

Michael O'Connell

Those type of lessons usually come pretty early in your career. Usually. But people make mistakes, stupid mistakes.

Amber Healy

We're human. You don't want to make a mistake, but owning up to it when you do that's important.

Jason Huffman

Mike, I'm not going to ask you to reveal this, but is there a mistake that you made early in your career that you still kind of hang onto?

Michael O'Connell

I have tons of mistakes. I have a great deal of shame that I carry with me in my life.

No. I've done all types of stupid, thoughtless things. And it's you know, sloppiness is really comes down to. Is you've really got to remember that you're driving the bus. You've got to look in that mirror all the time and just realize that you don't know everything.

I always go back, every few months I think back to the Ben Franklin quote, which I don't know exactly, but basically the gist of it is "That the most important lesson to learn is

that you don't know everything." And you don't know everything. And once you start feeling arrogant or, "Oh yeah, I understand."

Don't go into a story with a preconception. Make sure that you think of yourself as a representative of the reader. That you're there to gather information for them and you better be able to understand it so that you can write it so that they can understand it.

And then also, you owe something to your source to make sure that you do it correctly. That you maybe put in a couple of extra calls to verify things so that they don't look stupid. Because in the long, that's going to negatively impact your ability to be a reporter, because that person's not going to talk to you or dismiss you because you just don't do your work professionally. Yeah, professionalism.

Megan Cloherty

We covered a lot of stuff. We covered ethics. We covered social media. LinkedIn.

We always ask this as a closing question and it's kind of a doozy, but how do you guys feel about, specifically where you're coming from, industry news, how do you feel about where journalism is going? Do you feel positive about it? Do you feel like, "Oh my gosh. Hang On?"

Jason Huffman

Do you have another half hour?

Megan Cloherty

Yeah, I know. It's hard to sum up.

Michael O'Connell

And now the tears begin.

Amber Healy

Thanks Mike.

Jason Huffman

We're at a crossroads. I feel like this is a moment in time where we're being tested and it's not the first time journalism has been through this. Every time a new technology comes along that changes the game, we all have to adjust. And right now, we're trying to figure out how to make this work and I just feel like the cream rises to the top. Eventually the people who care about, you know, you were talking before about some basic concepts of journalism. You'd be amazed that how many people who are out there blogging, who don't have that kind of in their DNA. Who don't really know to do that. They weren't educated as journalists. You need to have that.

And I think eventually what will happen is that there'll be enough catastrophes in journalism. We'll get to the point where there's going to be these organizations that are under-

funded, that are putting some kids out on the street who don't have enough experience and there'll be some disasters. And eventually, the value of the information will rise to the top. The need for people who can deliver that kind of information will rise to the top and this is what I tell myself at night to get to sleep. So ...

Michael O'Connell

I like the fact that you were able to use a food metaphor to ...

Jason Huffman

Cream?

Michael O'Connell

It's appropriate. What about you Amber? What's your hope? What's your dream?

Amber Healy

What are my hopes and dreams? Are you serious right now?

Michael O'Connell

What are your hopes for journalism at this point?

Amber Healy

Well, my hopes and dreams are that the Sabres are going to finally win a Stanley Cup, eventually.

Michael O'Connell

That's not going to happen.

Jason Huffman

Be realistic.

Amber Healy

Anyway. No, I think it's simple. I think it's people will always need information. And if people realize that you are a good solid source of good solid information, you'll be OK.

Michael O'Connell

OK. Well, I think that's a great place to end our conversation. Thank you very much Jason and Amber. How can people find out about the Food Chemical News?

Jason Huffman

Well, I'll give you two websites: FoodChemicalNews.com. That's where our newsletter is. And if you can't read the content, at least you can figure out how to get more information about that. And then two would be, if you want to check out the videos that we do: YouTube.com/TheKnifeandForkShow. Don't go to Knife and Fork Show or you'll be

watching a show about cooking. THE Knife and Fork Show will take you to the right place.

Amber Healy

Check and check.

Michael O'Connell

OK. Thanks a lot.