Note to teachers: This file was created by Professor Banaszynski for college students and journalism professionals. It's provided here for your information. The shorter version is more appropriate as a handout for high school students. This, however, provides explanation of how the Reader Wheel works. A pdf sample Reader Wheel based on this file is also provided.

THE HUB OF ALL STORY IDEAS: READERS

~ Jacqui Banaszynski ~
Knight Chair Professor, *The Missouri School of Journalism*
Editing Fellow, *The Poynter Institute*

THE READER WHEEL

One way to discover good enterprise stories, or approaches to stories, is by focusing on "stakeholders" – people who are invested in or affected by events. The typical list of stakeholders includes people who have a direct involvement or interest in some news event or issue.

But if you think more broadly as you're brainstorming, the list of stakeholders becomes much longer and more interesting. Almost any issue or event sparks some curiosity or interest or frustration on the part of a broad array of people. Plugging into that curiosity presents creative story possibilities, and helps you think about the myriad questions readers might have about subject.

Building a Reader Wheel is a way for reporters to quickly plug into the curiosity and interest of readers. It can help identify:

- the range of interest in a story subject
- stories that might otherwise be overlooked
- fresh approaches to evergreen stories
- story angles that are best suited to a targeted audience or niche publication
- more and better sources for a story or a beat
- more and better questions

A reader wheel is best built with a small group of people, or an editor and reporter working together. It is ideal for use by a full production team – editor, reporter, graphics reporter, designer, photographer, Web producer. It can be used as a solo brainstorming tool.

It works like this:

Draw a circle in the middle of a piece of paper or on a whiteboard. Write the event or issue you are covering in the circle. Now as quickly as you can, create "spokes" radiating from that hub: list all the people or groups who might be involved in, interested in, affected by or curious about the event or subject. Try to list as many spokes as you can, even if their connection to the central topic seems pretty remote.

NOTE: Don't edit your thinking at this stage; let your curiosity and connections run wild. The most creative stories come from a combination of a disciplined brainstorming structure and unfettered (unedited) ideas. So try to separate the brainstorming process from the production process.

A sample Reader Wheel is attached.

SAMPLE READER WHEEL

You can use a Reader Wheel to brainstorm any story you're exploring. It's especially helpful with "perennials" – events that come around year after year and demand to be covered, but often leave reporters struggling to find a fresh approach. It's also useful as a way to identify story angles for a particular section or niche publication. And it can help in beat development.

Example: You're an education reporter assigned to cover the first day of elementary school. It is such a common annual event that it seems to defy fresh, interesting reporting. And it seems to have limited audience appeal. Sure, it's a big deal for the 6-year-old headed off to first grade, or to the misty-eyed parents trying to wear a brave face as they watch their baby march into the classroom, or to the teachers who face yet another year of chaos and possibility. So the first run at a Stakeholder Wheel might look like this:

> HUB of READER WHEEL: 1st day of school
> INITIAL SPOKES:
> - Students
> - Parents
> - Teachers

But further thinking begs the question: Why is first day of school interesting or noteworthy story for the rest of us? If you keep thinking about those spokes, you'll identify many more people affected by the first day of school than the obvious:

> ADDITIONAL SPOKES:
> - School bus drivers
> - Crossing guards
> - Cafeteria workers
> - School administrators
> - Janitors
> - School nurses
> - Guidance counselors
> - Truant officers

Now you have a richer list of interested readers. And each group has it's own questions that might help deepen your reporting or suggest a story. But look back at that list for a moment: All those stakeholders are insiders in the school system. Push your thinking even further, outside the predictable boundaries of the school system:

> ADDITIONAL SPOKES:
> - Siblings
> - Grandparents
> - Teachers' unions (lobbying for higher pay and smaller classrooms)
> - Legislators (who set school budgets, determine standardized testing, etc.)
> - School boards (who set school policy and curriculum)
> - Commuters (who drive past schools on their way to work)
> - Day-care and after-care operators (who either lose or gain clients)
> - Retailers (who sell school supplies and children's clothing)
> - Companies that design children's clothing and gear
> - Employers (whose parent-workers will be juggling new schedules)
> - Universities (who are concerned about the skills of future students)
> - Researchers (who study education and childhood development)
> - Private and charter school advocates

- Home school advocates
- Stores near schools (that sell snacks, etc., to students)
- Athletes and coaches
- Taxpayers (who pay for schools)
- Parents of disabled children, and of gifted children (who worry about "mainstreaming" vs isolating kids with special needs and skills)
- College students (who are studying to become teachers)

You now have an impressive wheel with 30 spokes, or "stakeholder" groups. But let's push it one step farther – where the connections might seem strained but the story potential could be great.

ADDITIONAL SPOKES:
- Microsoft and Apple (or Bill Gates and Steve Jobs)
- Family pets
- Pedophiles
- The President of the United States
- Fundamentalist religious groups
- Sex researchers

This last set of stakeholders might seem outrageous, but consider:
- Microsoft and Apple compete for use of their systems in education. When was the last time you checked your school district's contracts for computers? Are parents under pressure to buy certain computers? What are the cost implications of computers in the school – who can afford them and who can't?
- Maybe you write for a features section or a pet magazine. Has someone studied the psychological impact on animals left alone all day? Is there a story to be done on how pets can be used to teach responsibility?
- It might make you cringe to think about pedophiles and the start of school. But it also might prompt you to pull the latest data-base records on registered sex offenders to see if any are housed close to elementary schools, school bus stops, etc.
- The President (and Congress) have to determine the effectiveness of "No Child Left Behind" and other policies. How does that play out in your school district, especially in the early grades?
- Fundamentalist Christian churches have an interest in the debate between evolution vs creationism, or "intelligent design," and thus in what's taught in schools.
- Similarly, some sex researchers are invested in the benefits and risks of sex education at certain ages. Are any studying or influencing how teachers handle sensitive topics?

Each of the spokes poses a host of questions that might prompt a good story, or a focused way to tell a story. The array of stakeholder spokes also suggests that a seemingly humdrum event has a huge potential audience.

So how do you choose the best story from all those possibilities? Use the "seven paths" brainstorming tool. Overlay the various stakeholder groups with various story approaches. Do some preliminary reporting to determine whether there are any current issues in the news that relate to schools. Perhaps one of the stakeholder groups gives you a good way to explore that issue as a trend piece, an explanatory story, a profile or a tight investigative piece.

For example, you know that childhood obesity is a growing public health concern. You could write a news-issues piece about efforts schools are making, starting in early elementary school, to combat obesity. Maybe you write about the new school board policy banning junk foods on campus. Maybe you profile the school lunch ladies and their attempts to develop nutritious meals that 7-year-olds will actually eat. Or maybe you request the school district's catering contracts to determine if it is more expensive to provide nutritious meals.

Another example: You know from earlier reporting that schools are having trouble hiring and retaining special-education teachers. A little more reporting tells you that schools must, by law, "mainstream" disabled children. So perhaps you spend the first day of school in a special-ed classroom, describing for readers the challenges of teaching children with behavior and mental disabilities. Or you pursue a harder-edged explanatory piece, outlining the taxpayer costs of the mainstreaming laws: How much it costs to educate a disabled child vs a "normal" child.

And if no hot news issues pop up? Use the wheel to find a creative, fresh feature. That's what the Wisconsin State Journal in Madison, Wis., did one year. Using the stakeholder wheel, the reporter and editor brainstormed story possibilities and first considered doing a "survival guide" for parents who had children starting school for the first time. They could interview experts on how to prepare their children – and themselves – for the big day. Then the reporter rotated the idea over one spoke: Instead of a survival guide for parents, he would do one for first-graders. The experts? Second-graders. The result was a delightful Page One feature interviewing eight second-graders about their best advice for making it through the first day of school.