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## Q&amp;A: Helen Croydon on investigative journalism and freelancing

Posted: **11/05/09** By: [Laura Oliver](#)  
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[Helen Croydon](#) is a freelance broadcast and print journalist. She worked for several years as a news producer for ITN and Current TV and more recently has ventured into investigative pieces for newspapers.

[Last month in her comment piece for Journalism.co.uk, Croydon discussed the future of investigative journalism](#) and those journalists who choose to pursue high-risk stories in a world of increasing information and restrictions, but dwindling resources.

Here Journalism.co.uk asks the freelancer how she ended up in journalism and what drives her towards investigative projects.

**How and why did you get into journalism?**

Before becoming a journalist I was a tax accountant for Arthur Andersen (now Deloitte Touche). I fell into it because I studied Japanese at university and the company was recruiting Japanese speakers. I hated it. I'd always wanted to be a journalist.

Once I got my tax qualifications I left and enrolled in a PGDip in broadcast journalism at the University of Westminster. I then got a job in local radio in Cheshire for a pitiful wage.

**What titles/outlets have you worked for?**

As a staff member: newsreader and news editor for Silk FM; newsreader and reporter for IRN; producer and presenter for ITNOn, the multimedia wing of ITN; news producer for Current TV.

As a freelancer: producer at ITN; features for The London Paper, The Mirror, The Guardian, The Mail, NW magazine and Company magazine.

Before going freelance I'd only worked in TV and radio news, where there's very little scope to specialise. Most daily broadcast platforms are limited to the main news agenda of the day. Wanting to cover stories in more depth was my main motivation for expanding into print.

I've recently developed a niche in dating, relationships and the sex industry. I did a short documentary on alternative ways to date for Current TV and am currently working on an in-depth investigation about how the recession is affecting prostitution. I find it fascinating.

**What's the attraction to working on investigative pieces?**

Excitement mainly, but also the satisfaction of working on a story I can bring an exclusive angle to.

I did a piece for The Mirror and Company magazine recently where I had to go undercover to meet a dubious escort agency Madame. A few years ago I had to infiltrate a pirate radio station as part of a radio documentary for an American network. For both, I was wired up to a hidden microphone and followed by a secret photographer. I'd be lying if I said I didn't find a thrill in that.

**Why did you decide to go freelance?**

I'd been toying with going freelance for about a year, but was never brave enough to take the plunge. Eventually I was forced to - I was working at Current TV and they axed their news service in January.




Now I would never go back to a staff job. Freelance allows me to cover the stories that I have an interest in. It's only since being freelance that I've felt like a real journalist.

Getting a story idea, researching it and following it through from pitch to print gives a huge sense of satisfaction. It stops being a job and becomes a way of life. I never stop working: I'm glued to my laptop, constantly Googling and researching story ideas. I never felt like that when working for someone else.

**What advice would you give others looking to follow a similar path?**

1. Choose stories you feel passionate about: projects eat into your week, your weekends and your evenings so there's no point taking something up if it's going to bore you.
2. Follow the news agenda on the topics that interest you: I have Google alerts set up for everything from dating trends to prostitution. Last week a story popped up about a burlesque dancing club in Camden being classed as adult entertainment by the local council. I spotted the story, thought how I could develop it, then wrote it for Guardian.co.uk two days later.
3. Develop a thick skin: editors never phone you back, interviewees drop out at the last minute, sometimes your stories get slated in the comments section online and often you have to chase money. Just remember none of that is personal.

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