

The Otaku Journalist guide to:

Jumping from fan to pro

How to channel your interests to crack your
career opportunities wide open

By [Lauren Orsini](#)

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About the author



I'm Lauren Orsini, a professional journalist and avid student of fan culture. I love reading and writing about the geeky things that make people tick.

I've been published in CNN and Forbes, but most of my reporting can be found at the [Daily Dot](#)—all 500+ articles of it.

I created this guide because I love my job so much that I want to recruit other people to find their passion for journalism, too.

You see, ever since I first started writing about being both a geek and a reporter, I've gotten email. Lots of it. After working with one person after another, I realized I could help a LOT more people if I decided to compile my advice into a guide.

Thank you so much for putting your trust in me by purchasing this guide. I hope you get something awesome out of it.

Good luck!

P.S. Need anything? Write to: lauren@otakujournalist.com

The otaku journalist manifesto

It's the title of my blog and in a way, it's my title too. But until now, I've never explained exactly what it means.

I have been calling myself the Otaku Journalist for nearly three years. While I almost always have to explain the meaning of “otaku,” I wouldn't replace it. A borrowed Japanese word which defines a passionate hobbyist, it's the perfect descriptor for my topic—reporting on fandom in all its forms.

In the past few months, however, I've begun to see otaku journalism as a concept of its own. Here's what I mean when I use this term.

A personal beat

Many newspapers assign reporters “beats,” or regular topics to cover.

Beats sometimes make up the sections of a standard newspaper: Cops and Courts, Politics, Business, Entertainment. This helps reporters to network with the same group of sources who will have relevant and helpful information for a variety of same-category stories.

However, if you're a blogger or independent reporter, you assign

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yourself your own beat.

With that kind of freedom, you can pick anything. But if you want your blog to interest other people, it needs to hold your own attention first. It makes the most sense to pick a topic you're already crazy about.

Fandom is what energizes me. Pick the beat that energizes you.

Authentic reporting

In journalism school, I learned that objective reporting should be my highest aspiration. I should never imply that I've ever held any sort of opinion. One of my professors even suggested that if we wanted to be good journalists, we wouldn't vote in national elections—what if somebody found out who we picked? Needless to say, I'm calling BS.

Human beings are opinionated by nature. If we try to suppress them, they might unconsciously come out even more glaring than if we'd addressed them directly. To pretend to be a robot is not only impossible, it's dishonest.

I'm not saying to take sides. But don't be a cold observer. Bring yourself, your experiences and and intuition, to the article. What drew you to this story? The things that interest you will likely interest your readers. Sate your curiosity as a human at the same time that you conduct interviews as a journalist. Readers will have the same questions.

Stories should be about people, and that includes you.

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The new journalism

Journalism jobs are dead. Journalism opportunities are everywhere.

For more than a year, nobody paid me to do what I do. But I kept reporting. Because telling true stories about fandom is the only profession that feels right to me. So I went to school or worked at a gym during the day, wrote blog posts around that and felt complete.

Reporting is not what I'm best at. It's not the skill I have that can make me the most money. It is simply the thing I am most passionate about doing.

If you're aspiring to be a journalist, you should feel the same. You don't have to feel passionate about all reporting—personally I don't jump for joy to write about politics, (but I do if I have to).

In short, Otaku Journalism is not just what I do. It's a way of life for anyone who is passionate about something and has that undeniable itch to share it. ■

Jumping from fan to pro

How to channel your interests to crack your career opportunities wide open

I owe the title of this chapter to [Steven Savage](#), the author of geek career guide [Fan to Pro](#).

I began reading Steven's geek manifesto more than a year after I started my blog, [Otaku Journalist](#), to pursue fandom journalism in my free time. It was the perfect thing to read on my hour-long train ride downtown to a job I wasn't exactly crazy about.

Even though fandom reporting wasn't my day job, I was serious about it from the beginning. I pitched myself stories, gave myself assignments, and introduced myself as a journalist at networking events. Reading Steven's book on the train, I got my first outside encouragement I got to assure me that maybe I wasn't so crazy to treat my hobby as if it were my career.

You know the rest of my story. I shared my philosophy with Forbes blogger [Susannah Breslin](#), who gave me the exposure I needed to find a paying job as a journalist.

Today I've expanded from writing for just my little blog to near-

ly a dozen online publications. The best part? I still write about fan communities—the subject I picked for myself in the beginning—most of the time.

If you read my manifesto at the beginning of this chapter, you know what I mean when I say I practice otaku journalism. I use my passion for a niche subject to give me an edge as a writer. In this chapter, I'll show you how sharing your passion can transform you from forgettable to essential.

Steven's book showed me it wasn't crazy to dream. Now, I hope my book will show you how to make it happen for yourself.

The advantages of niche

I'm not an unusually talented writer. I'm not the world's biggest fan or subculture expert. But my passion and experience for fandom gives me an expertise for the topic that few other writers have.

Recently, I was giving a lecture at my journalism school alma mater, American University, about this very subject. I was talking to a class of journalism undergraduates about building a brand for yourself by sticking to just a few subjects. My portfolio is full of articles about comics, video games, and Internet culture and not much else.

One student raised her hand to ask if I had trouble getting hired to write articles that have nothing to do with fandom, for example, D.C. politics.

The answer is probably yes, but I wouldn't know—because frankly, I don't want to write about D.C. politics!

I saw myself in this student because, at one point, I had the

same fears. I shied away from making all my reporting about my most passionate interests because I didn't want to seem one-dimensional. Narrowing my focus would also narrow the number of employers who would want to hire me, right?

I thought a wide, neutral portfolio would make me look like a chameleon, ready to write about any subject. Instead, it just made me bland and unmemorable. At least with my pop culture portfolio, editors remembered me. Even if I wasn't right for the job they were assigning, they remembered my brand later when there were stories a bit more up my alley.

Let's face it—news organizations aren't exactly in a hurry to hire students fresh out of journalism school as it is. Even if you're the most versatile general assignment writer in the world, you need something to make yourself stand out. Specializing in a topic can help with that.

The negative that the student saw is what I now consider niche reporting's biggest positive. You become known as an expert in one subject in particular. Your passion about one subject makes employers feel passionately about you, too—they'll either love you or hate you. And isn't that better than them not even remembering your resume?

Niche reporting does close some doors, but if you like your topic, it'll only close the doors you didn't want to open anyway. Why should you care about not being hireable for boring jobs you would rather not work in the first place?

It's like I said to that student: "The Wall Street Journal is unlikely to hire me as their health reporter no matter how many times I apply. But if they need an expert on fandom—of whom there are very few—to write or be quoted, they know exactly who to hire."

Niche vs. otaku

If you're reading this, I can guess you have a special interest, too. Maybe you're a fan of anime and manga, like me. Perhaps you geek out about something else entirely. It's when you pair your special interest with your reporting topic that you practice what I call otaku journalism.

The world is full of reporters who specialize in a niche subject. But I don't consider most of them to be otaku journalists. It's only when your interest and your job line up. I'm writing about this type of journalism, not niche journalism, because I think it's a more exciting goal.

I once worked as a webmaster for a news site about state governments. My job was to publish the articles the reporters and editors prepared, so I spent a lot of time with the newsroom staff. I began to learn that even though all the journalists wrote about the government, it wasn't usually their true passion. They liked sports, traveling, or even had cooking blogs.

Study and experience made these reporters experts on state governments. But if you ask me, had they been writing about the things they really cared about, that study and those experiences wouldn't have felt like work at all. If you're already a fan of something, building and maintaining your expertise is easy and fun.

It's fine to have a job that has nothing to do with your interests—if it still makes you happy—but it isn't what I would aspire to. If you're reading this, chances are you agree. The reporters I worked with were niche journalists, because they specialized in one topic. The difference is that they're not otaku journalists, where the chosen niche coincides with a personal passion.

The power of otaku journalism

In the beginning, when I'd sign myself up to cover fandom conventions under my blog name, I'd feel like I made it. Now that I've been paid to cover those same events, I know I have.

What made this unpaid hobby reporter any different from the professional reporter I became? Nothing but time and experience. My persistence and willingness to cover the topic eventually convinced employers to pay me to do the work—which I was already doing for free.

Sometimes people think my concept of otaku journalism is too good to be true. Combining your hobbies and your writing and getting paid just can't be done. But if that were the case, there wouldn't be so many people being paid to do exactly that.

Here are just a few examples of reporters who have become successful and made names for themselves by using their interests as their expertise. These people don't call themselves otaku journalists, but they fit my definition.

- [Aja Romano](#). A fanfiction reader and author for a decade, Aja knows who's who in the fandom and what readers and writers care about most.
- [Jill Pantozzi](#). A self-proclaimed nerd, Jill's constant involvement in the geek community keeps her on the pulse of comic book fans and creators.
- [Brigid Alverson](#). Whether she's writing for her personal blog or MTV, readers know to turn to Brigid for expertise on manga and graphic novels.
- [Leigh Alexander](#). People don't just read Leigh's video game

journalism because it's well written. Her opinion on whether a game's worth playing means a lot to many people.

I could name so, so many other journalists like these, and maybe you can already think of some of them yourself. But in describing these reporters, there's a common thread—their passions make them authorities on a subject.

What's even more interesting is that, once an otaku journalist has been covering her beat for a while, people aren't just interested in unbiased coverage. They want her expert opinion, too. That's why, as I wrote in my Otaku Journalist Manifesto, readers realize that reporters aren't robots. They hate insincerity just as much as they hate detectable bias. So reporters shouldn't put so much effort into being objective. They should instead focus on being authentic.

Otaku journalism is good news for readers. We're always hearing about the ways the media distorts the news, and a lot of the time that happens is because journalists are not experts on what they are covering. For example, maybe the public would have a better understanding of how legal proceedings worked if reporters who happened to be legal enthusiasts reported it.

This is also good news for you, aspiring otaku journalist. You're already a fan of something, with the unique experiences and perspective that come with being part of a community. The next step is pairing your passion with skills.

Q: What if I have two different interests I want to write about?

A: Put them both out there! Sometimes two specializations can make you even more invaluable than if you just have one. For example, if your twin passions are comics and the law, you can offer a unique viewpoint on current events in comics that no general lawyer or ordinary comics journalist has.

Essential Skills

As this chapter has hopefully conveyed, the most important attribute you need to pursue otaku journalism as a career is passion for your subject. You've got the drive, (and maybe some other skills too, see [Worksheet A!](#)) but you may not have the technical skills editors and employers expect reporters to have.

Here are the seven guides that will follow this one. You can read them all, or just fill in the blanks of your missing skills with whichever ones you don't know yet:

Building a personal beat

The topic you choose will shape your writing more than anything else. This guide will outline how you build and maintain a network of people, places, and other news sources to aid you with your reporting on the topic of your choice, using concrete examples.

Generating story ideas

Reporters have to write at the same pace as the news is made, so they can't afford to get writer's block. In this chapter I go through the different ways I develop story ideas, plus shortcuts you can use to generate dozens of story ideas in advance.

Conducting effective interviews

You already know about Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How. It's a little trickier when you're trying to ask those questions to a VIP in your fandom. This guide will show you how to nab big interviews while you're small, and how to blow them away with your professionalism.

Covering an event

Field reporting can be the most exciting and intimidating part of the job. Here's how to do your reporting when you're on the spot by planning as much in advance as possible. You'll learn to divide your coverage into tasks to do before, during, and after an event.

Ethics and bias

Your passions should guide your writing, not your opinions. This chapter will help you tell the difference. We'll go over fact-checking, balanced reporting, and transparency as well as review the biggest mistakes I've made as a reporter—so you don't have to relive them!

Blogging and branding

You know you have what it takes, but how do you let the whole world know? This chapter will outline what it takes to put yourself out there with a blog or portfolio site, using mine as examples. A good brand is all the best parts of your personality magnified. This is how to find and showcase those parts.

Pitching and publishing

The last chapter was about getting publishers to come to you. This one is about how you can reach out to them. We'll go over how you can reach out to editors and publishers with a few irresistible pitching scripts. By the end of this read, you'll be well on your way to seeing your name in print! ■

Worksheet A: Identify your skills

You already know you have the most important edge: passion for your subject. But your hobbies may be hiding career skills that are just as valuable. In column A, list one of your hobbies. In column B, try and list that hobby as if you were putting it on your resumé.

I've gone ahead and filled out the first two. It sounds silly, but you might be surprised at how marketable your fandom can be!

reading and writing fanfiction	copywriting, ghostwriting, copy editing
founding/moderating a forum	community building and management

Worksheet B: Dispelling doubts

A lot of the negative beliefs you might hold that keep you from pursuing your dream job are automatic thoughts—that is, thoughts you’ve always believed without question.

Use this worksheet to put those unproven beliefs to the test.

Example

Untested belief: *My fandom is trivial and not newsworthy.*

Where did this belief come from? *Well, we never learned about reporting about geek communities in journalism school...*

Another perspective: *There are a lot of people who care about news in the geek world—other geeks! They’re a built-in audience.*

Your turn!

Examples: *My job can’t be my hobby. I’ll be a sell-out.*

Untested belief: _____

Where did it come from? _____

Another perspective: _____

Untested belief: _____

Where did it come from? _____

Another perspective: _____