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Delivering Emirates News

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Abstract

As a journalist with the English language Emirates News in Dubai, every day is different. As my colleague, reporter Sheri Jamkhou, puts it, “The best points of the job are that it’s not monotonous, you get to meet different people from all walks of life, and a new opportunity arises every day.” For most members of the team (and any journalist with even a minor addiction to news) the day starts as soon as we switch on a television, scan through internet news sites or scroll through our Twitter feeds. We bring ourselves up-to-speed on the local, regional and international news of the day and begin to consider which stories may be appropriate for us to cover in that evening’s half-hour bulletin. As a part of Dubai Media Incorporated (a Dubai Government department), our news priorities start in Dubai, move to the rest of the UAE, the Gulf and Middle East, and finally broaden out to international stories, where we have time in the bulletin. The main reason we focus on local stories over international news, is that there are cable networks and international providers who already cover global news well, but our niche, our advantage and indeed our charter is to provide news on Dubai to our Anglophone audience.

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The News Day

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Our audience is very diverse in practically every demographic. It includes those in Dubai and the UAE: local Emiratis, people from neighbouring Arab nations and expatriates from further afield, with both English-speaking and non-English speaking backgrounds. Then there is a large audience not based in the UAE, who watch Dubai One on a regional network, or via the internet (http://vod.dmi.ae/media/program/222/Emirates_News_Dubai_One). We know from our feedback that our internet viewers are loyal and regular watchers – usually with a deep affinity for Dubai, perhaps as former residents who wish to stay in touch and keep up-to-date with developments here.

Going to air at 8:30pm, we start work on the bulletin at 1pm. Any reporters who are assigned to cover early shoots in the morning will turn up before the rest of the team, but depending on how long it takes to file their reports, they will usually be able to leave early as well. So, after we arrive at the Dubai TV News Center in Media City we do a quick scan of the news sites, make some notes, then gather for our editorial meeting.

This is a consultative process, run by the producer of the day and an opportunity from the entire team to get an overview of which stories are on the day’s news agenda. Business editor Greg Fairlie says one of the best points of the job is “suggesting stories in editorial meetings and seeing them that evening form part of the news-day.”

We’ll discuss the local newspapers, international sources (including AP and Reuters newswires) and consult our DMI colleagues who work on the Arabic language programmes (Local News, International, Business and Sport). The producer will assign stories to individual writers and then we’ll raise any other housekeeping or forward planning issues.

I manage the team's presence on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube presence, so once a week I will usually give my colleagues an update on which stories have been the most popular and how our stats are comparing against other shows on Dubai One (there's nothing wrong with a little bit of healthy competition in television!)

On-the-Road or In-house

So now it's time to get to work preparing our individual news elements for the evening's bulletin. When preparing a piece of news for TV, depending on the origin of the story this will either involve heading out with a crew to film, or cover the story in-house, using a resources in the newsroom. There are pros and cons to both and every bulletin has a mix of the two, but I really enjoy sourcing my own stories from local contacts, arranging interviews and filming on location. Sheri agrees: "There's also a lot I've learned from the job such as how to interact with people from different nationalities and backgrounds."

The best thing about working in general news is that on any given day we can cover anything from the top of the bulletin (news about the President, Vice-President or ruling families) to business, international news, sport or weather at the bottom. It's truly a vocation where you become a jack-of-all-trades and master of none! Some of my recent reports include the UAE's organic-food industry; the importance of body language in business; recycling and sustainability; shark conservation and a multiple births festival.

Amir also likes the variety. He says "I have had the opportunity to work on many different aspects in journalism, not tied down to one role, i.e. working on business to protocol, entertainment to the lighter side of news." Even within a specialty like sport, there's more freedom here. According to Graham, "If I was working in sports TV in the UK, I would most likely be attached to one sport only, where as here I can move between many."

If it's happening elsewhere, then we're still able to cover it in-house, as we have plenty of access to different news sources to research and write it. We have several options for sourcing footage: either from a shoot our colleagues have loaded onto our internal servers; file footage from the archives or international sources that are available on the newswires. Sometimes there is a very important story our producers deem worthy to include but there is no footage available. This is frustrating but one of the limitations of news everywhere. In this case we have access to a talented team of graphic artists who can create a map, a gallery of still photos, or other kinds of graphic elements to portray the story in another way, and still make good television.

News Gathering

It's very easy to open your inbox, look through the media releases you have been sent, and decide what you will report on that day. But as a journalist, there is an expectation to be proactive in finding your own stories to bring to the team. There is a certain thrill in being able to announce at the editorial meeting that someone has agreed to an exclusive interview. The number one thing a reporter can do to find their own stories is to manage their contacts thoroughly and network, network, network!

As a young reporter I was taught to keep a little black book of every person I'd ever spoken to

for a story, and guard it jealously. I was taught to ‘do my rounds’ making calls to each of them on a regular basis, to sniff out my next stories. Cultivating sources is much easier with email, but regular personal contact is the key.

Sometimes however, in cases of sensitive news, even with good networking, it is just not possible to get comment on the story of the day, and without confirmation or denial, there is no story. My colleague Robert Hillier, an executive producer, believes it’s often not that strategic. “It doesn’t necessarily mean that’s part of official policy but it’s often based on people’s personal ease at dealing with the media,” says Robert, “because of the hierarchical structure of the country, people tend to refer-up. The top guy has to be the spokesman and if that guy is uncomfortable dealing with the media, that then permeates down through the rest of the organization.”

To give a regional perspective, a former colleague on our Arabic international news team, Omar Makhfi, told me, “sources are very accessible here compared to other places with a high-level of freedom like Lebanon and Morocco, it’s easier to get in contact with a minister.”

News values

Like journalists everywhere, we are required to use our professional judgment and experience to assess an item’s newsworthiness and determine how any given story should or should not be covered in our broadcast. We have very few formal guidelines and most often come to a consensus amongst ourselves, occasionally seeing fit to refer an editorial decision to management.

My studies in journalism taught me that news values (criteria for judging newsworthiness) were firmly rooted in culture. I remember a very convenient (and probably too convenient) list of seven factors that influenced how news should be judged: impact, timeliness, prominence, proximity, conflict, currency and bizarreness”. I won’t even try to convince you that we apply these measures to any of our editorial decisions, but I will give you an example of the last factor, bizarreness, that has stuck with me for years. The headline ‘Dog Bites Man’ doesn’t carry any weight at all, it’s just not newsworthy. ‘Man Bites Dog’, is a completely different story!

But we don’t need textbooks to know that each journalist in our newsroom has gained their own sense of newsworthiness from their own cultural background. The experience on our team covers every continent on Earth (except Antarctica, unfortunately) and this diversity often makes for lively debate! My news values have been shaped in regional Australian television, public broadcasting, cable TV newsrooms in London, and now here in Dubai.

“It’s not all that different from BBC producer guidelines in terms of ethical treatment, in terms of balance and fairness, in terms of libels and so on,” says Robert, “I think informally, you kind of just know, and you kind of just know fairly quickly, what you can and cannot do.”

Amir sums it up nicely: “The majority of media outlets where I have worked in Dubai have shown me that everyone seems to know what the deal is in our part of the world when it comes to journalism and how we portray things.”

Robert cautions us to keep perspective when assessing our news values:

What we mustn't do is import our Western liberal centuries-old media culture into a new country with a different set of norms, values and sociopolitical structures. I think in that context if you think about what we would call non-democratic countries around the world, i.e. where the leadership is not directly elected, there are many forms that the media in those countries take and we're not North Korea, we're not Burma, we're not Zimbabwe, we actually have enormous amounts of freedom to write and say what we like. Whether or not being what we would consider a typical investigative journalist is possible here, maybe it's not, but it's also not possible in about 120 countries around the world either and I may well include the UK and the US in that too.

Specialisations

As well as general news, on weekdays we have dedicated business and sports segments compiled by our very experienced business and sports editors. They are largely autonomous and are each responsible for filling approximately 5 minutes of the bulletin each night Sunday to Thursday. But with their experience and contacts all over the country, this is a piece of cake. They often manage to secure exclusive announcements and high profile interviews live in studio.

Our business editor, Greg Fairlie, is a senior presenter at Dubai One. He's worked in media for more than 20 years. He began his career in radio in the UK, working for Virgin, RTL and the BBC before moving to Austria, and then Australia. Greg then moved to the Middle East, as a breakfast radio host on Lebanon's Radio One. He crossed into television in 2000, for CNBC, MBC, NBN and Zee TV in Lebanon before moving to Dubai. But even someone with as much experience as Greg still finds inspiration in his work. "Stories about the many entrepreneurs in Dubai are always enlightening," he says. "With the business sector being diverse, there have been numerous stories out on the road that inspire one as a reporter."

We are equally lucky to have our sports editor Graham Clews on board, and it seems the feeling is mutual "I enjoy the freedom to do my own thing with little interference, mainly because I'm one of the only ones who understands sport." Prior to joining the news team he worked on Dubai One's 'World of Sports' programme. He's an accomplished TV producer, reporter and anchor, with a professional background hosting events as a compere and MC. Hailing from Watford, just north of London, Graham's personal favourite sports are football and golf.

Daily Grind vs Special Perks

I think any of my colleagues would agree with me, that the most common reaction we receive on saying we work in television, is something along the lines of it being a glamorous vocation. Deadlines, having to work with limited time and resources, a schedule sometimes anti-social, filming in sometimes hot, dusty, conditions with lots of waiting around and a lot of hard slog. I hope I've convinced you that it is rarely glamorous! But, yes, there are certain perks.

The truly rewarding moments are when you realize you've been able to help effect social change, or give an opportunity to someone who needs to be heard. But other than that, there are some other perks to the job, and my colleagues certainly agree that these centre around travel and celebrities! My career highlights include meeting Morgan Freeman and filming in Afghanistan.

Sheri says: “Working as a journalist has given me the chance to meet influential people, and that wouldn’t arise elsewhere. I’ve had the chance to meet people from the fashion industry such as Roberto Cavalli, and big names in sport too, like Boris Becker.”

“Meeting extremely diverse people from all cultures and backgrounds are the best things about my job,” says Greg, “I also went with Dubai One to Nepal for the first time and that was life changing.”

Graham’s top moments have been his interviews with sports stars such as Tiger Woods, Roger Federer and Lewis Hamilton. And Amir lists his favourite parts of the job as “Car launches, film festivals and covering stories outside the country. I have had the opportunity to travel to countries I may not have traveled to had it not been for work.”

But, I do want to emphasise, it’s certainly not always so glamorous!

Media in Dubai

One thing we all agree on is that we are fairly lucky to be able to do what we do here, with so few English-language television news outlets in the region, especially those with daily coverage and a commitment to local news. The UAE is always offering up wonderful stories with vibrant characters and colourful events, so our job telling these stories, is made easy.

“I’m always fascinated by the difference in the seven emirates, each has its own character,” says Greg. “The first time I went to Al Ain I was mesmerized by the number of roundabouts and how green it is there. Driving into Ras Al Khaimah stuck behind ten or so camels was also a memory I’m holding onto.”

For those applying Western liberal norms, the way we use our professional judgement may appear different. I asked my colleagues how they thought we may appear to those abroad:

Robert: I would say they would think we were extremely ‘on message’, but you have to have an experience of actually living and working here. You can’t report bad news if it isn’t there, that’s the problem. The fact is that things are actually OK.

Omar: I think there are a lot of clichés about the Arab media. Some people, through my knowledge of the French press for example, think the Arab media are omnipotent, they are strong. And they are, judging by the effect that Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya have. This is one perception, the other one, of course is that the media are very weak, but I think somehow, the media in the Arab world is in the middle. The ‘human capital’, the journalists themselves, are highly competitive if you put them in an international context.

Sheri is excited about the future of media here. “Dubai is an emerging city, and the role of media is also growing too with the city, which makes it ever-changing and exciting,” she says, “hopefully I’ll be able to excel in my position as a reporter and present a segment in the near future.”

But maybe now’s a good time to include a word of advice from her more senior colleague, Greg: “Opportunities come through hard work, there are no short cuts anywhere.”