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Commentary

Whetting a journalist's appetite for investigative reporting

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Interest in investigative journalism has spiked in Asia and elsewhere, especially in new democracies, and along with it the demand for training in this field. The challenge for trainers in investigative reporting is to help journalists nimbly navigate what is often uncharted territory that demands dogged pursuit and unraveling of the truth. How to do it? This article shares with journalism trainers a few useful tips on getting journalists hooked on muckraking.

The fifty-something radio journalist stood tall and proud when he reported to fellow participants at an investigative reporting workshop what he planned to track in the next six months: *All* the ill-gotten assets the dictator Ferdinand Marcos had accumulated in his 20-year reign and stashed at home and abroad, including the United States and Switzerland.

The workshop was one of the first few I had put together in the mid-1990s, shortly after coming on board as director of training at the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism.

Gently and patiently, PCIJ trainers, myself included, explained why the radio veteran's first crack at investigative reporting, albeit fascinating, would be quixotic: A government commission dedicated to recovering the Marcos assets itself had barely pinpointed a fraction of the former president's wealth in what was by then its ninth year of existence.

This episode instantly pops into my mind each time I'm asked to share with fellow journalists what investigative reporting entails. One of the perennial challenges is to see to it that neophyte investigators take on small, realistic and manageable yet high-impact investigative projects. This guarantees a higher success rate and, consequently, builds their self-confidence to embark on more ambitious muckraking projects later on.

In many parts of Asia, interest in the work of investigative journalists began to pick up in the 1990s as more countries joined the march toward democracy. The Philippines, which had regained its democracy after the fall of Marcos in 1986, enjoyed a headstart in this genre of journalism.

By then, a handful of newspapers had tried their hand at investigative reporting. The television news magazine show *"Probe"* had built a loyal following for its investigative pieces. And PCIJ, which was founded in 1989, had been releasing the results of its trail-blazing investigations on a broad range of subjects, from the presidency and the legislature to health and women.

The mounting curiosity about investigative reporting, plus the growing demand for training in this field, eventually led PCIJ to create its Training Desk in 1994. Countless of investigative reporting workshops later, done at home and overseas, I've compiled a list of must-remembers as a trainer.

Don't set goals that are too high. The last thing to expect is that one training course will turn reporters into investigative journalists. Many often go into investigative reporting training just to find out what for them is still uncharted territory. After the first course, some conclude they are not cut out for sleuthing. Your only hope is that the training will equip them with new knowledge, skills and attitudes they can apply to their regular reporting.

There are journalists who want to do investigative reporting but may not be quite ready. The problem often has to do with their lack of mastery of journalism fundamentals. Sometimes it turns out that the more urgent need is a course on fact-checking or developing stories. The trainer may thus deem it best to eschew an investigative journalism course and settle first for a basic or advanced reporting seminar to ease these journalists' transition to investigatory work.

At the minimum, especially for a one- to three-day training, a basic investigative reporting course must attempt to define investigative reporting; explain the investigative process; illustrate the different investigative techniques, particularly the use of documents, pinning down important human sources and maximizing the use of computers; and discuss the ethical and legal concerns of investigative reporting

A writing workshop may not always work in an introductory course. Two or three days will give journalists sufficient time to plan an investigation, but not pull it off. In which case, they have nothing to write. At best, the basic course can introduce different strategies for organizing data and packaging stories and the conscious use of the nut graph. Use published reports as models.

As well, sector-specific sessions such as investigating business, environment and gender issues can be thrown into the basic course. But the topics would depend highly on the interests of the journalists. It would be a mistake to discuss business and economic stories with an audience consisting mostly of police reporters. For a highly diverse group, finding the right mix of topics is a big challenge.

A few themes appeal to many journalists. Corruption is one of them. But that can become a problem in itself. It can reinforce the mis-notion that investigative reporting must always be exposes about corruption, to the detriment of other issues that are worth probing.

So rather deliberately and pointedly, journalists should be told what investigative reporting is all about. It is, as the famous American investigative journalist Robert Greene reminds us, "the reporting, through one's own work, product and initiative, matters of importance which some persons or organizations wish to keep secret." These are stories on whatever issues that have impact on the public: water and sanitation, peace and order, health, taxes.

Journalists learn fast when shown examples of investigations that have been done. The examples also help them narrow and sharpen the focus of their investigations instead of dwelling on broad and vague themes such as corruption in public education, the threat of bird flu or AH1N1 or, in the case of the radio journalist in the opening paragraph, the entire ill-gotten wealth of Marcos.

One effective training material Filipino investigative journalist Luz Rimban has been using is a short TV report by a network about a hitherto unknown fact about peeled garlic that some hotels and fastfood restaurants buy in bulk from a Manila public market. Caught on camera was the revolting process of peeling and cleaning the spice: Clusters of garlic were first dropped into big plastic pails. Next, the containers were filled with petrol and laundry and bleaching powder. Vendors, with their unwashed bare feet, then stomped on the garlic until the peel came off. The last step was to rinse the garlic with water to wash off the smell. It is a simple but powerful story about a public health issue.

Expect journalists to grumble when you get them during the training to formulate their investigative hypothesis or the theory or hunch they intend to prove. They feel this exercise is best left to the classroom. Many change their minds, though, after they have gotten a dose of well-crafted hypotheses and been coerced to write one. By the time they put down their pens, many of them realize how the hypothesis helps delimit

their inquiry and make it realizable. Here's one well-written hypothesis that eventually guided a team of four journalists in an East Asian country in their investigation:

> "Posh residential units are being built for the president, prime minister and other high-ranking government officials in a protected area, in violation of an existing law that allows only temporary structures for tourism and research. Construction of these permanent structures was made possible by a string of orders circumventing the law and issued by no less than the Ministry of Environment."

Whether it is for half a day or four days, the training should dwell at length on the investigative process, from the first lead and sniff, to the investigative techniques and fact- and libel-checking. A chart demonstrating the process step by step often comes in handy. Nothing, however, beats walking journalists through each step that goes into the making of an actual investigative report.

Because it helped unseat a president, PCIJ's investigation on the unexplained wealth and excesses in office of Joseph Estrada, in which I was involved, is of great interest to many journalists in the Philippines and elsewhere. The investigation has even been written up by the World Bank Institute for use in its training on investigative reporting. *(Journalistic Legwork that Tumbled a President: A Case Study and Guide for Investigative Journalists* can be downloaded from *http://www.worldbank.org/wbi/governance/pubs/estrada.html.)* The reports on Estrada illustrate rather clearly the investigative process and the rich mix of data-gathering methods (documents, interviews, observation and computer-assisted reporting) at the disposal of journalists.

More recently, I have found myself describing to journalists and researchers the elaborate process my colleagues at VERA Files and I employed to trace a $1.3 million bayfront home in an upscale neighborhood in the Bay Area in California to President Gloria Arroyo's elder son, Juan Miguel "Mikey" Arroyo. He had omitted to declare the five-bedroom property in his recent annual asset declarations as a member of Congress. It was the top story of nearly all leading newspapers and television networks. Unable to explain how a man of limited means could at the time acquire the property, Arroyo would later explain that he had raised the money from wedding gifts and election campaign contributions—a possible violation of the law because he never declared any campaign contributions he had gotten to the electoral commission. When the public didn't buy the reason he gave, the president's son was reduced to saying that he married well.

Many other stories serve as good examples, including small but equally meaningful ones to ensure that investigative reporting does not come across as too daunting to beginners. Take this journalistic investigation on how the Philippine military had kidnapped children of suspected communist rebels to force their parents to surrender. Through wide-ranging interviews and documents obtained from the military, courts, church, nongovernmental organizations and the legislature, the writers documented the little-known military operations that resulted in heartbreaking forced separations.

The learning process is further helped by having participants deconstruct investigative reports and identify and classify the sources of information in order to figure out what works and doesn't. That requires giving readings in advance—and making sure the journalists have read the reports when they show up at the session. In the case

of a video, that means supplying journalists the background on what they are about to watch and coming up with key questions to guide the discussion right after the showing.

When I first ran the basic course on investigative reporting, I assumed that the basics of interviewing could be skipped. After all, the participants were mostly professional journalists who had logged at least three years of work experience. I had long changed my mind after assessing the quality of questions some participants came up with. A disturbing number were unintelligible, poorly phrased or badly sequenced. Others could easily be answered if the journalists simply did background research.

Getting journalists to draft questions and subjecting these to critiquing by the trainers and co-participants often help them recognize their mistakes. An equally effective training strategy is to run a mock interview with a known news subject (say, an ambassador from a big country) who would give journalists at the end of the session a candid assessment of how good—or bad—their questions were and how they asked the questions. It can be a humbling experience for journalists.

Some journalists need to sharpen their listening skills. In the mock interview, they can be restricted to asking just one question of the news subject. This forces them to pay close attention to the discussion and learn to pick up from where other interviewers leave off.

Certain journalists are apparently unused to conducting extensive as well as intensive interviews, having gotten used to short interviews that end quickly once the good quote or soundbite emerges. Too, some journalists don't practise multiple sourcing, even for controversial or sensitive information. Then there are journalists unaccustomed to confrontational interviews and can't ask pointblank about a wrongdoing or an improper act or behavior.

At one training for Mindanao journalists, a radio reporter announced that he was raring to accost a lawmaker from the region about the documents he had obtained showing the public official's alleged misuse of government funds. But when the lawmaker walked into the training room later in the afternoon for the mock interview, there wasn't a single peep from the journalist. He later explained that he didn't know when and how to pose the question.

Role-playing or making journalists act out situations where they have to deal with tough interview subjects is worth trying. But a lot of preparation and time are needed to prepare and run the exercise. Scenarios, for one, have to be well thought out. Clear, detailed instructions must be given. Key questions for processing and evaluating the activity are needed. Despite all the preparations, however, things can go wrong, especially when journalists refuse to cooperate because they look at role-playing as just a game.

Exposure trips to sites of stories and to interview sources enhance the learning process. Before the trip, get a resource person to give a good briefing and distribute background materials before the trip. Discuss possible interview subjects and the questions that can be raised.

Surprisingly, there still are journalists who believe they can get by with little or no documents. For example, it is not uncommon to find journalists who do not know

that corporations file General Information Sheets with the government and these documents show changes in ownership, among other things. These journalists are among the hardest to train because they are clueless about what documents are available, where and how to access them, and how to use the documents in their stories. In instances like these, trainers may find themselves rattling off a long list of documents that are available to journalists and the record custodians.

Almost always, journalists bring up obstacles to accessing documents and seek suggestions on how to overcome these. Trainers have an easier time addressing the issue with journalists who work in democratic states that guarantee the right to information such as the Philippines and Thailand. Most of the time, participants only have to be reminded about their right, what constitute public and nonpublic records, what equipment to bring to capture the documents, and the steps they can take when denied access.

But in countries that punish possession of what are commonly considered public records in democracies, journalists may be putting themselves in danger by doggedly pursuing the paper trail. Under these circumstances, the practice of investigative journalism is almost certain to be nonexistent. And it would be imprudent to advise journalists to throw caution to the wind, especially when draconian laws like the Official Secrets Act and Internal Security Act hang over their heads, as they do in Malaysia and Singapore.

Trainers, however, ought not to pass up the opportunity to equip journalists even in authoritarian states with investigative skills, including document gathering and analysis. Who knows? These countries might just wake up one day to find democracy in their midst, as has happened in the Philippines and in many parts of Asia and the world.

Investigative reporting training must stress the importance of looking for the smoking gun, or the physical evidence that would pin down a wrongdoing. In the Estrada investigation, this was the blueprint of a mansion he was building for a mistress using a crony as his front: The document bore the first names of his three children by her. In the case of Arroyo's son, these were documents, mostly deeds, filed with the records office in San Mateo county in California and his asset declarations filed with the Office of the Ombudsman in Manila. Inviting professional detectives to talk to journalists about their work, especially the paper chase and surveillance work, also enlivens the training.

A number of journalists are skilled in obtaining documents. Sometimes, however, their problem lies in their inability to analyze the documents, especially highly technical ones, and grasp their importance. Show them lots of sample documents with stories waiting to be told. One example: A delivery receipt for a shipment of school desks to a provincial government where all the entries, even the date, are left blank save for the name of the governor and a wrong address. Why the missing data? Trainers can start a collection of documents from the different sectors, from audit and police reports to budget and procurement records.

Numeracy training should figure high in the trainer's list, even if some journalists detest numbers. Besides introducing spreadsheets, it helps to have participants learn to read financial statements, both of government and the private sector. Knowledge and use of database managers and statistical software also brings investigations to a

different plane, especially if the journalist dreams to be in the league of Donald Barlett and James Steele, the duo widely acclaimed for the "database journalism" or "expert journalism" they have done for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Time Magazine*. In the Philippines, application of mapping software has enabled one giant television network to pinpoint on its own exact locations of fire-, flood- , traffic- and carnap-prone areas in the metropolis, and even narrow down to just nine the number of provinces most vulnerable to bird flu.

The PCIJ first introduced computer-assisted reporting in the mid-1990s when Microsoft just released Windows. Back then, journalists needed to be first taught Windows and even the mouse before spreadsheets and the internet. Not anymore. Trainers, however, may still run into journalists, especially in the remote areas, whose lives remain untouched by e-mail and the internet. And even for those who navigate the web, the unfamiliarity with advanced or search to hasten their research is something that needs to be addressed.

The session on ethics is not the easiest to run. Many journalists want to share their experiences, and there usually isn't enough time for everyone to do that. So the session closes with some unhappy participants. There are also occasions when the discussion gets skewed toward one topic, usually corruption in the media, and the trainer loses the opportunity to talk about other important ethical concerns. One way to avoid all these is to get journalists to submit days before the training a short write-up of an ethical situation involving themselves that they would like to talk about. This allows the trainer to connect their situations to the corresponding ethical principles and assume control over the flow of the discussion.

As much as possible, don't let journalists leave the course without designing an investigative project that they hopefully can begin working on when they're back in their newsrooms. Have them include in their proposals the suggested title; investigative hypothesis; rationale or significance of the investigation; research methodology; output; timetable; and the budget. Again, it's much like what professors make students do in class. But the exercise is useful in making journalists more methodical in approaching their stories.

To be sure, not all journalists will end up an investigative reporter after the initial training in investigative journalism. That is why follow-up courses are useful; they often serve as a confidence-building measure and boost the chances that some will at least try to conduct one investigation. Mentoring demands time and patience, but it is still the best way to ensure that the tribe of investigative reporters multiplies.

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