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On the cusp between global and local: Young journalists at the Straits Times

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On The Cusp Between Global And Local: Young Journalists At The Straits Times

This article portrays the induction process of young journalists into the newsroom at the Singaporean English daily, The Straits Times. The enquiry, part of on ongoing world-wide study, is premised on the fact that professional journalistic education is greatly influenced by the newsroom socialisation process. The Straits Times is bound to its parent company's editorial policy, which has as its "main concern the survival and continuing success of the Republic of Singapore". This editorial policy impacts on what and how the young journalists learn. Front-end controls make the young reporters work in close cooperation with their assigned supervisor. This way the young reporters are inducted into the style of the paper, and its ethical requirements. These, unlike at other researched papers, are learned on the job. However, within these perimeters, the young journalists feel no less ownership of their stories than do young journalists at other papers.

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This study of the induction of young journalists into the newsroom at the Singapore *Straits Times* is one in a series which, by now, has been carried out at seven papers in three continents. The overall goal of this inquiry is twofold. The first question it poses – what do young journalists need to learn most when entering the newsroom? – provides answers for professional education. The second question, arising from a wider study into newsroom practices, aims at finding out how the process of integration into the newsroom is handled by the newspaper. It does so by analyzing the descriptions of this process given by the young journalists and also by senior staff.

In conducting this research at major newspapers in different countries and continents, the comparison between what the young journalists see as their main learning task and what each paper perceives as its main teaching task sheds light on how the newspapers go about cultivating their accepted style. Style, as used here, incorporates ways of writing, ways of reporting

and the values informing them. The study, so far, has been carried out at T*he West Australian* in Perth, Western Australia (May 1999), at the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung,* Germany (October 1999), the *South China Morning Post* in Hong Kong (November 2000), *The Straits Times* in Singapore (December 2000), Norway's national daily, *Aftenposten* (September 2001), the Swiss national daily, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (July 2002) and the Spanish national daily, *El Pais* (July 2002). Of these, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung,* the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and *El Pais* are counted among the ten best papers in the world (FAZ, 1998: 12).

Given the size of the sample, it has become obvious that the similarities or dissimilarities between the induction processes at these papers do not occur along geographical lines. Instead they point to the lasting influence of various journalistic traditions, tempered by the paper's own style. Despite the differing political circumstances under which these papers are written, produced and published, the *South China Morning Post, The West Australian* and *The Straits Times* still bear to varying degrees the hallmark of the British journalistic tradition.

Of these, *The Straits Times* has to live with the most with restrictive media laws. As the "Singapore media are censored and regulated" (Ang, 2002: 80), the young journalists at *The Straits Times* have to contend with a world of many, one could say conflicting, values. However, their deliberate choosing of the journalistic profession is testimony to the fact that the job of journalists in Singapore is more complex and has more openings than often thought.

Research Problem

This paper touches on the theoretical areas of the question of the importance of the organizational sphere in shaping media content and research into professional education.

With regard to the significance of the organizational sphere, the research is premised on a variant of Shoemaker and Reese's layers-of-influence model, in which the individual sphere, the organizational sphere, the contextual sphere and the societal sphere make up the levels of impact on media content, (Shoemaker et al., 2000; Esser, 1998). However, the model used here conflates what, with Shoemaker and Reese, are two parts – routines and the managerial level. Routines, as shown in studies at *The West Australian,* are devised by the managerial level to obtain a certain product: they can be seen, as it were, as the long arm of the news organization and are an indivisible part in the mediation of control (Josephi, 2000: 123). This point was also convincingly argued in a much earlier study, Sigal's *Reporters and Officials – The Organization and Politics of Newsmaking,* which is based on observations at *The*

New York Times and *The Washington Post.* His study goes a long way toward answering the question of why newspapers vary. Sigal demonstrates how this can be clearly traced to their "bureaucratic politics [which] can have important consequences for news content" (Sigal, 1973: 4). Similarly, Reese in his *The News Paradigm and the Ideology of Objectivity: A Socialist at the Wall Street Journal,* shows that the paper had sufficient 'repair mechanisms' in place to deal with copy outside its accepted news paradigm. "The primary defense within the journalistic community was to reaffirm the ability of the editorial routine to handle anomalies and to wring out any potential bias", thus "minimizing the man and his message" (Reese, 1997: 432-433).

However, this is not to say that there is no room at all for journalists for individual scope. Numerous studies, such as Tuchman's *Making News* and Schlesinger's *Putting 'Reality' Together,* have shown that a journalist's work can only be regulated to a certain point. Ericson, Baranek and Chan, after extensive research, have concluded that a "considerable equivocality" exists between editors' struggle for control and reporters' assertion of autonomy (Ericson, Baranek & Chan 1987: 348). This present study accepts their finding of a certain fluidity of control, and accordingly poses the question to young journalists about the degree of perceived autonomy. While a number of newsroom studies exist, notably Tuchman, Gans, Schlesinger, Roshco, Sigal, Ericson, Baranek and Chan, none of these has focused on the entry of young journalists into the newsroom.

With regard to professional education, journalism schools have been seen as a more or less thorough preparation for 'real life' as a reporter. But in many places the idea of 'learning on the job' still exists, often when beginning journalists hold a tertiary degree, but not necessarily one in journalism studies. *The Straits Times* was the first paper visited in this research series which did not offer cadetships. *The Straits Times* also differs in that it takes in reporters 'mid career', meaning that these journalists have pursued for a decade or so another career elsewhere on the basis of their degree, for example, in the humanities or in law. However, most of those joining *The Straits Times* will have done internships at the paper, usually during their university breaks.

Another feature of *The Straits Times'* parent company, Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), is that they – like other Singaporean companies – offer scholarships. An outstanding academic record, evidence of co-curricular activities and the passing of five rounds of a selection process are prerequisites to obtain such a scholarship, which entitle the scholar to pursue a degree in Singapore or overseas with nearly all expenses met by SPH. In turn the graduates will be bonded to SPH for four years,

if they studied in Singapore, or six years, if they studied abroad. Until 2001 the number of scholarship holders continually increased, from 22 in 1999 to 27 in 2001 (SPH 2001). Not all will work at *The Straits Times*, but also at SPH's Chinese and Malay papers.

SPH offers training programs, but not in a compulsory way. For those entering the newsroom with no journalistic knowledge there is a three-week introductory course. Short courses on, for example, T-line shorthand, basic reporting and interviewing are also available, but seem to be taken up only according to need. Learning on the job is therefore the norm for young journalists at the Straits Times, but their work at the paper does not differ substantially from the work carried out by cadets, and can be examined on a par.

Research Method & Questions

The findings in this paper are grounded in one method of data collection – qualitative interviews. In each case, six young reporters or cadets and four to six senior staff were interviewed. To give the research a solid comparative basis, the exact same ten questions for young journalists and six for staff are used in each study.

The first two questions to the young journalists center on one of the two aims of this research, i.e. on finding out what young journalists need to learn most when entering the newsroom. They establish the young journalists' knowledge prior to joining their current newspaper, and what they see as their most important learning component since then. The responses to this wide open question provide answers as to what they see as their main challenge when entering the newsroom. The replies also reveal the influence of prior studies or work experience.

The subsequent questions pursue the second aim of this study of finding out how the process of integration into the newsroom is handled by the newspaper. The next two are aimed at the learning process itself, whether this was a structured process or whether it is learning by watching and/ or imitating. This gives an insight into which skills are acquired on the job, and how much imitating older colleagues is the path chosen by young journalists. Two questions are directed at ethical decisions, inquiring whether the young reporters had already brought their own notions of a journalist's ethics to the job, or whether these were shaped in the newsroom.

Since reporters, in order to perform their work, must learn to organize themselves to the point where their activities become habitualised (Ericson et al.,1987: 125), the next three questions aimed to find out how much the paper's established news routines

– from ways of writing to suggestions of news sources and the reading up of previous articles – determine a young reporter's approach to a task. The answers provide an insight into the extent to which young reporters are molded by the existing ways of working. Given the necessity for the young journalists to provide copy that fits into the overall style of the paper, the last question asks how the young journalists apportion their individual freedom within the organization. The underlying assumption is that a journalist can create an autonomous space in which to practice his craft, but at the same time this research attempts to find out whether this is indeed the perception gained by young journalists.

The staff was asked a matching set of six questions. At the *Straits Times* questions were put to the supervisors of the young journalists. *The Straits Times* was the first paper in this research series not to have a cadet program. So each young journalist, whether coming directly from university or being a 'mid career entry' – that is changing from another profession into journalism – has a supervisor assigned to them, who is either the section editor or a senior journalist. The interviews were conducted with Chua Mui Hoong, then assistant editor of the *News* section, which covers Singaporean news, and supervisor of two young journalists in this section; with Sumiko Tan, then deputy editor and now editor of the *Life! Section;* Tammy Tan, news editor, *Money* desk (business section); Audrey Quek from the foreign desk and sports editor Yap Koon Hong. Yap Koon Hong and in particular Sumiko Tan are also well-known columnists.

Two questions focus on what young reporters have to learn most, and the ethical decision-making process. The staff are asked whether they are teaching the young journalists a way that suits their paper best or what could be considered good journalistic practice anywhere; whether views on politicians or business leaders are strongly conveyed to the young journalists; and how much journalism courses at university prepare young reporters.

Obtaining replies from both staff and young journalists allows for two scenarios to emerge, one of which describes the existing organization, its style and the values it tries to pass on. The other scenario illuminates the learning process. Taken together these answers provide a comprehensive picture of the induction process.

Context: Singapore And The Straits Times

The Republic of Singapore was founded in 1965 after the merger with Malaysia, which had been attempted two years earlier, had failed. Since then Singapore has tried to forge its own identity and instil a sense of patriotism. Its citizen's pledge reads, "We, the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united

people, regardless of race, language or religion, to build a democratic society based on justice and equality as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation" (Singapore, 2000: 132).

No-one doubts the outstanding achievements of Singapore under the guidance of Prime Minister, now Senior Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, towards prosperity and progress. However, the pledge towards building a democratic society has to be seen as lip service only. Though inheriting the Westminster system of government, Singapore's ruling People's Action Party (PAP), in power since the inception of Singapore, allows very few voices of dissent. This was justified by the need for a united people having to build their own national institutions and its own defence force after the British withdrawal in 1971.

The media's role was cast in similar terms of aiding nation building (Lee, 2000: 212-225), and among the laws passed to ensure the government's control over the media are: the Sedition Act, which prohibits behaviour including speeches, publications and distribution or circulation of publications with seditious tendency; the Undesirable Publications Act; the Internal Security Act, which prohibits the printing, publication, sale, issue, circulation or possession of a document or publication deemed prejudicial to the national interest, public order or society of Singapore; and the Newspaper and Printing Press Act, which concerns licensing of newspaper companies, periodicals and printing presses (Ang, 1998: 165).

The application of the Newspaper and Printing Press Act in particular has led to a press monopoly in Singapore. In 1971 Singapore had four English language newspapers, four Chinese dailies and one Malay paper owned by different companies and families (Turnbull, 1995: 287). Today most of Singapore's newspapers are entrusted in the hands of one company, Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), which was founded in 1984 (Turnbull, 1995, 349). In 1987 Cheong Yip Seng, who had been with the *Straits Times* since 1963, became its editor-in-chief of the English and Malay newspapers, and Leslie Fong, with the *Straits Times* group since 1982, became its editor.

Since its beginning SPH has supported the national interest. This has been written into SPH's editorial policy, which says "[Our newspapers] have as their main concern the survival and the continuing success of the Republic of Singapore. They can best contribute to that objective by being informed and balanced in their coverage of news and views, by helping to form a national consensus, by accurate and fair reporting, by understanding their staff and raising the quality of their work, and by being always relevant to their readers" (SPH, 1995). The functions of informing,

explaining, stimulating and entertaining are then spelled out in greater detail. While the main aim of ensuring the success of the Republic of Singapore is reiterated in most of these four points, SPH all the same sees its role as engendering discussion by "questioning and commenting competently and constructively on national policies" and "by providing a forum for the exchange of views and reader responses" (SPH, 1995). *The Straits Times'* editorial policy puts it in line with development journalism, which places dissemination of development orientated news and information first and which does not consider "democracy to be a critical or necessary element in the development process" (Shafer, 1998: 42).

The Straits Times' then editor, Leslie Fong, now editor-at-large, took a similar line in his essay in the paper's 150 anniversary supplement on 15 July 1995, when saying:

"I would rather not have the Straits Times imagine itself as a latter-day St. George chasing around for a dragon to slay, because there is no dragon that needs slaying … Of course, the danger for the Straits Times is that working with rather than against the establishment can become such a habit of mind that it would not recognize the need to break ranks even when that stares it in the face … But I would like to think that should the establishment turn rogue, the Straits Times will not be found wanting. It will do its duty" (Tay, 2000: 5).

However, to date little is done to alleviate the "negative perception towards political expression" (Gomez, 2000: 3). Former Straits Times journalist Cherian George describes the ruling party's stance as that "the press should be independent, but subordinate to an elected government" (George, 2000: 70). The question of where exactly the out-of-bounds markers lie confounds not only journalists or critics but even members of the ruling People's Action Party (Nirmala, 2002:17).

Concurrently, a discussion is being held as to whether extant media theory is too dependent on Western social theory (Chua, 2002: 119). Denis McQuail, in his keynote address to the 2000 IAMCR conference in Singapore, acknowledged, "we are still struggling to diversify the basis of normative thinking about media" (McQuail, 2000:11). In trying to find pathways towards an Asian media theory, John C. Merrill asked whether social stability and harmony could be named as the new mission for the press (Merrill, 2000: 33), a path also taken in the US by the new civic/public journalism.

However, Richard Shafer, in earlier comparing public journalism and development journalism as interventionist press models, concluded that both are open to forms of repression, whether political repression or corporate manipulation (Shafer, 1998: 49).

All the same, the *Straits Times* has to be seen as one of the important platforms of public discussion in as far as they exist. Prime examples are well-known Singaporean author Catherine Lim's critical commentaries published in the paper in September and November 1994. While her first article was tolerated, the second article earned her a severe rebuke from the Prime Minister's office for trying "to set the political agenda from outside the political arena" (George, 2000: 41; Tan, 2002: 48). To date, the *Straits Times'* contribution to public debate consists mostly of considered comments by its columnists.

Given the *Straits Times'* long history as a colonial paper – it was founded in 1845 – the paper still bears some of the hallmarks of the British journalistic tradition. Its characteristics are, in part, a strict separation of news and comment, but also an extensive use of direct quotes and privileging of authoritative voices and sources. It is the latter mode in particular, which can be described not so much as the preferred but the only way of providing national political information in Singapore.

The policy of being supportive of government has not harmed the fortunes of SPH as it underpins its monopoly position. The *Straits Times'* circulation in October 2000 was 383,542 copies, slightly down from its peak in August 1999 of 395,174. It also has since been affected further by the world-wide downturn in advertising revenue. All the same the *Straits Times* provides its parent company, SPH, with an enviable revenue base (SPH, 2000).

One of the tests to Singapore's policy of enforced harmony and limited public debate are the technological advances of the Internet. In an interview with the *International Herald Tribune* (IHT), Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew was asked, "The Internet age is one of openness. It simply isn't possible to control information in the ways governments have often tried to do. Is that posing a challenge for Singapore, where you believe that an orderly society is important?" To this SM Lee Kuan Yew answered, "There is no way we can stop it now. The answer must be credibility. … To govern you must have credibility… It's like what the major newspapers try to establish – a certain reputation for having thoroughly investigated the sources and not making wild statements" (Lee, 2001: 8).

Yet the Singaporean government's sensitivity over 'wild statements' was felt most recently by the Bloomberg News Service who, on its website, had alleged that Deputy Prime Minister Lee's wife "won the top job at Temasek Holdings because of nepotism, rather than merit." Bloomberg settled the defamation charge for US$340,000 (ST, 31 August 2002).

As the questioning by then IHT executive editor, David Ignatius, and Asia editor, Michael Richardson, indicates – openness

is not necessarily a notion associated with Singapore. But, as Simon C.T. Tay pointed out, there is "an absence of absolute, ideological thinking" (Tay, 2000: 5). Indeed, to the outsider, Singapore is a baffling conundrum of openness and restrictions. *The Straits Times*, of all papers researched so far, was the only one to give the researcher a magnetic card to have access to the premises for the week's duration of the visit, and the researcher was left to spend as much time in the newsroom as she chose to.

The premises in Kim Seng Road, taken up in 1978, were decidedly old fashioned by Singaporean standards. Some sections of the paper, such as the *Life!* and sport sections, were on different floors from the main newsroom. As in Australian and American newsrooms, only the section editors have their own rooms. The non-hierarchical and very collegial atmosphere was emphasised by the fact that well-known journalists and columnists, such as Asad Latif, Chua Lee Hoong and Sumiko Tan, occupy workstations no different from other journalists.

The young reporters spoke openly about their experience of entering the newsroom, volunteering remarks such as that they self-censor. In trying to find out how young journalists, who often have been educated abroad, are inducted into the newsroom of a paper, which declaredly has chosen to be government supportive, one finds them on the cusp between global awareness and local laws. Latif has since reiterated this, pointing out that in the age of the Internet, "[newspapers] will [evolve], as they have done. But even as they do, newspapers will think in global terms, but will act in local terms" (Latif, 2001).

Findings: The Young Journalists

The background of the six young journalists interviewed varied considerably. Three of them had studied abroad – two on SPH scholarships. One had been to the University of Edinburgh, majoring in English Literature, one had been to the London School of Economics, and one had read management, Japanese and Indonesian studies at the University of Leeds. One of the young reporters was a 'mid-career' intake, applying to the *Straits Times* after a law degree at the National University of Singapore (NUS), and practicing with one of Singapore's large law firms for five years and subsequently working in Customer Services with one of Singapore's largest industrial landowning corporations. One held an English Honours degree from NUS, and had worked at another SPH and an on-line paper before joining the *Straits Times.*

Only one of them had majored in journalism at Nanyang Technical University (NTU). However, being the only interviewed in this series is no reflection on the number of journalism graduates joining SPH which offers – bar one – the only employment

opportunity in Singapore to work at a newspaper, be it English language, Chinese or Malay. This young journalist mentioned "a mass recruitment from our school," which was facilitated by the fact that senior Straits Times staff teach in the NTU program.

In difference to papers which offer cadetships and give their cadets stints in all sections, the young journalists at the *Straits Times* choose their desk and stay there. The two who held SPH scholarships first did a six months stint at sub-editing in their section before being assigned to a beat. All the others reported, 'being thrown in at the deep end' and – with exception of the one with the journalism degree – they all said that everything they learned was learned on the job.

Interestingly all of them mentioned that one of the most important facets of their learning was how to ask questions. As one put it, "If you don't open your mouth and dare to ask questions, then it is to your disadvantage." These questions ranged from practical things, like how to send in lines and how and when to commission artwork to getting help with sharpening news sense.

The other important learning curve was how to deal with deadlines and how to manage time. In their words, this requires them to be able to go to an interview or a press conference and there and then sizing up what is the point. Once the young journalist comes back into the newsroom they de-brief with their supervisor. De-briefing has to be seen first and foremost as a quality control measure, in which the supervisor checks whether the young journalist has got his or her news angle right. But the session also alerts the supervisor in the case of sensitive stories to make sure that the proprieties have been observed. Until the late 1970s the *Straits Times* was – like many British publications – a 'back-end' driven paper, with the night editor deciding contents and layout of the paper (Turnbull, 1995: 327). Under editor-in-chief Peter Lim it moved to a more consultative process, in which the "repair mechanism" (Reese, 1997: 443) has moved very much to the front end. According to the young journalists the sub-editors mostly only cut copy. All young reporters said that writing came easily to them. This seems to indicate that the *Straits Times'* process favours good writing skills.

Though the term 'de-briefing' is somewhat daunting, the process is not as arduous as it may be imagined. One of the young journalists described it such, "You had to learn when to de-brief – when there is a window of time and they [the supervisors] are not too busy – and how to de-brief – do it quickly, tell them what the story is. One thing I realize is that it is up to you to make the news, because you are the one out there, and the supervisor relies tremendously on you to tell her what is the news. … You see what

is going on and you start angling the story in your head. So you come back and tell her from your point of view what it is and usually she goes along with that. De-briefing is very important because you basically have to sell your story. She is on your side, but you have to sell it to her."

Other young journalists described the process in similar terms. "In the de-briefing with her [the supervisor] she helps you to sift through what is the important bit …" Or, "[you] report back to him what has transpired and he will help you organize your thoughts. He also would give you ideas on how to get around a thorny or tricky situation."

From this it is clear that the supervisor is the most important person guiding the young journalist. However, the young reporters were reluctant calling their induction into the newsroom as being done by watching or imitating senior colleagues. All but one said that they had to go out and do their job on their own more or less from day one. During the internships there was a lot of handholding but not once they joined their desks as young reporters.

In the question of ethics, the young journalists said they learned on the job. SPH has clear guidelines regarding presents – pens, diaries and small gifts can be accepted – but larger gifts such as a palm pilots or mobile phones have to be declared. There is little wining and dining. One young journalists mentioned her supervisor's good advice that there is no such thing as a free lunch, and added from her own experience that once when she attended a lunch where she just could not pay for herself, her hosts were on the phone an hour later selling ideas. The young journalist working at the money desk made his own personal decision not to own stock, because he did not want to be compromised and undermine his credibility.

The young journalists were also clear about the fact that the question of ethics touches on the boundaries of reporting set by the government. As one of them said, "*The Straits Times* is slightly different from papers in other countries, in the sense that it is very closely watched and guided by the government. So especially when it comes to stories, which have to do with the ministries or government policies, you have to be very careful and they *[The Straits Times]* is very careful as well."

This means that they write stories in a way that would not have been his or her own choosing. If the copy, in the end, bears too little resemblance with what the young journalist would have wanted to write, he or she can ask to have her by-line removed. Others said that they, at times, can not be as critical as they would like to be, ask at press conferences questions they would like to ask or go with the angle that seems to them the most newsworthy.

One of the young reporters repeatedly said, "you self-censor yourself going to the … desk, and tell them things you want to tell. That way I can make sure that my story can come up well."

Ethical sensitivities not only touch internal political matters, but they can be about religious sensitivities – also involving photos – or at the foreign desk of how to report Singapore's immediate neighbours. As one young journalist put it, they live in a schizophrenic world, having to negotiate between varying sets of values, and trying to get as much space for their own ideas and stories involves compromises. Yet there is a sense that they all – as part of the staff – bear responsibility for keeping the paper out of trouble.

Despite these parameters the young journalists feel that they are "quite happy how they [the stories] turn out", and that "most of the time the stories are yours". In allocating percentages in weighting individual input versus organizational and institutional practice in their work, they invariably out it as "60% mine, 40% theirs".

Senior Staff

The answers given by senior staff varied more than those of the young journalists, mostly due to the different nature of their sections. All the same, there was a high degree of agreement on what the young journalists needed to learn most. Those were; a concept of news; building confidence; instilling in them the idea of currency, objectivity and balance; and hoping that they bring a passion for the job and a strong sense of curiosity.

Chua Miu Hoong, then assistant editor and supervisor at the news desk, put it in even stronger terms:

"[Journalism] is more like a vocation, and you must abide by a certain code of conduct and by a certain code of ethics. Ethics – with this I mean everything from making sure that you report accurately, are fair to your sources, making sure that every story is balanced, making sure that you are never lying, never misrepresenting a quote, never inventing a quote, never making up information." (12 December 2000).

On a more basic level, the young reporters are told about the standard operating procedures, such as what time they are expected to come in, how they are supposed to reply to supervisors' queries and how they are supposed to brief the supervisor on stories. The de-briefing is at first often not understood by the young journalists.

Tammy Tan, supervisor at the money desk, said, "They don't de-brief, they unload. So basically they just throw everything at you. And they don't tell you the story … they want you to tell them the story. Which is wrong." She has to remind them, "I am

not finding the angle for you. I wasn't there. You tell me what was the most important thing that happened" (13 December 2000). Ever so often the desk has to crosscheck with the story that is flashed over the wires to make sure that the young reporter has not missed an important angle.

Of all the desks the money desk is most concerned with scoops such as mergers, acquisitions, retrenchments, closures and corporate moves. These stories are placed on the back page. Also the money desk is the one which has to contend most with being a very young desk. Many people have been there barely two years. Tammy Tan explains that this is due to the money desk being so bankable. "[We] have people who are so specialized that they become prized assets … because we are in a situation where we meet top people. We are a lot more bankable than, let's say, an industry expert who has never met an CEO – not even his own CEO" (13 December 2000). For this reason the desk lost many people to the industry, to PR, the banks and stock broking. It also meant that one of the main tasks of the money desk is building up confidence in their young reporters to give them the assertiveness to follow through with questions and stories.

According to Tammy Tan, not all newsmakers are nice, and young reporters are not always a match, for example for American CEOs who are accustomed to a different media culture and a more aggressive exchange between newsmaker and reporter.

All supervisors agreed that what they teach young journalists is specifically the *Straits Times'* style. For sports editor Yap Koon Hong, "that begins with the surprise that most of them don't read the papers" (14 December 2000). Chua Miu Hoong confirmed the young journalists assertion that the 'front end' makes sure that the copy fits into the paper:

Yes, here it is done by the front end… It is their [the copy desk's] job, as well as the supervisors' to make sure that the reporters' copy is clean, is clear, is bright and that it fits our paper's tone and style. That is one of the reason's why we maintain a quality of copy. (12 December 2000)

Chua would like to see the young journalists' copy sharper, more interpretative and more analytical, but acknowledges that this is a long process.

Sumiko Tan, editor of Life!, sees the main problem slightly differently: "I think what is most lacking in young journalists is a sense of curiosity … Out of ten, maybe seven of them don't have a passion for journalism, a hunger for the story. These are gems when we do get them. … We always tell them we rather not see them in the newsroom, because as a reporter you should be out finding things, getting quotes than using the telephone." (11 December 2000)

All supervisors emphasized the importance of research and reading up on previous stories, so to be certain what is new and what isn't. While there is a considerate approach to the newsmakers (T. Tan, 11 December 2000; Chua, 14 December 2000), and the danger of defamation is strenuously avoided, the money desk usually knows where it stands with its community. "Singapore is a very small country. Shady characters don't survive long or they made it so big that everyone knows that they got there because they were shady. It's just that the industry is so small that it is kind of public knowledge" (T. Tan, 13 December 2000). As far as newsmakers generally are concerned, "there is a lot of informal information being exchanged and traded. And that is very valuable" (Chua, 12 December 2000).

All supervisors emphatically agreed that ethics are learned on the job. According to Audrey Quek from the foreign desk, "we try to keep to the basic rule of asking, 'Am I being fair? Am I being truthful?" (11 December 2000). Sports editor Yap Koon Hong adds to this:

"I find that a lot of my younger reporters come in … and most of them are graduates – [and] they are aware of a culture of journalism where – probably because the historical basis of journalism is based in the West – questions of human rights, questions of freedom of the press [are voiced]. They have their own ideas of what we should do and what we should write. I would say, yes, increasingly I see them coming in with their own views of how any story should be seen. Whereas there was less of that ten years ago. Or when I first started twenty years ago. So I think it [ethics] is less a question of being taught or learned, more a matter of discussion." (14 December 2000).

Yap sees this linked to his task of making the young journalists understand the paper they are working for. "This is my fifth paper I am working for … it is not the New York Times yet, but it is a pretty authoritative paper … in the context of this country it is an institution" (14 December 2000).

Conclusion

At *The Straits Times* the degree of concurrence in answers of senior staff and young journalists is high. Like at other papers looked at, the staff, however, pointed to the need for a passion for the job and a sense of curiosity and urgency – factors not mentioned by the young reporters. They are usually too much absorbed in the task of finding their foothold in a system which offers them some, but not too many, helping hands. This agreement can also be explained by the fact that they work at *The Straits Times* not as cadets but as young journalists with a particular beat, and therefore inhabit the same world as senior staff. Both

are caught in the conundrum of global awareness and local restrictions which characterizes Singapore.

Regarding the research series so far, the interviews at *The Straits Times* confirm the results of other visits – most importantly that the cadets or young reporters learn the ways of their newspaper via the newsroom practices. Irrespective of their previous degree of knowledge, the media organization has the greatest influence on shaping the young journalists' product. This is underlined by the fact that what they learn at each paper is different – partly due to the variances among the papers, partly due to the countries' differing political systems and media cultures. In Singapore this means accurate reporting of authoritative voices, and treading a fine line between curiosity and criticism. ∎

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