

7-2000

Training international journalists

J. Bartram
Reuters, UK

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme>

Recommended Citation

Bartram, J., Training international journalists, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 9, 2000, 181-191.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss9/14>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Training International Journalists

John Bartram

Reuters, United Kingdom

I have been a journalist for 31 years, including 28 with *Reuters*. I started as a junior reporter on a local UK newspaper and most recently spent a fascinating four years as Reuters Asia Training Editor, based in Hong Kong and then Singapore. I stayed with Reuters so long simply because I was enjoying it. It is also one of the best schools for learning the importance of accuracy, the ability to write and think quickly and clearly, and the fundamental lessons that facts are sacred and that reporters do not have the right to change or interpret them when writing news stories.

This paper will examine eight key issues in the area of training journalists. Several are essential for all student journalists, but others are more vital for those who, like me, suffer from permanently itchy feet and wish to practise their craft in foreign climes. In either case my belief is that, in today's new e-world, journalism educators should still be teaching the basic journalism skills that are of practical use in the marketplace, they should not show an exaggerated interest in the PhD research that attracts so much coveted university funding, and they must try to put the interests and needs of their students first. I am fully aware of the academic debate raging between those who think that university journalism courses should be educating young people in a broad sense and others who believe these courses should provide youngsters with practical skills the profession can use. Both are valid, but I believe young people studying journalism have a perfect right to expect they will leave equipped with skills to find a job in an increasingly competitive environment.

The Ethical Dimension

This may seem an unusual point for the lead from a (recently) active journalist, but in my book all journalists must work according to a basic set of ethical or moral standards in order to maintain their own integrity and to reinforce public confidence

©AsiaPacific
MediaEducator
January-June 2000

(which is often lacking) in what they produce. If they can show they are following basic standards in the long run, they will produce a better product and do a better job.

There are too many examples of bad or insensitive reporting in newspapers or on TV around the world every day and such practices lead to the automatic matching in many people's minds of the words journalism and cynicism.

I could mention several cases, but one from my spell in Singapore sticks particularly in my mind. *The Straits Times*, government controlled and with a strong domestic agenda, toes the national line on politics, swallows the government's belief that nation building is the main purpose of journalism and dutifully reports all the good news about the Garden City. Many local newspapers around the world do the same, of course. But linked to the newspaper's preachy tone about standards in public life is an unpleasant and unnecessary undercurrent that simultaneously allows the portrayal of violence or tragedy in lurid detail, almost as a lesson to its citizens. The paper often carried pictures of victims of car crashes or of small children who had fallen off balconies, showing much gory and unnecessary detail and even identifying them with close up shots. Other papers do the same, but it was this double standard of preaching one type of morality and not practising another that I found difficult to accept.

An essential part of the job of journalist trainers is to give young journalists a clear understanding of such moral issues, to help them distinguish between right and wrong in reporting and to instil in them an understanding that it is not right to overstep the boundaries. If they do not like that they can easily work in the gutter end of the market. As I read recently, journalism is a big house containing many different rooms.

Knowledge Of The Law

This is linked in some ways to the moral issue. But where the first tells young journalists what they should ideally do, knowledge of the law will tell them what they can do or, more accurately, what they can write and get away with or how far they can go and still feel safe.

I have often found journalists to be woefully unaware of the laws of libel, the main legal danger they face in their working lives. You might think that people working for an organisation like Reuters would know what might land them in the courts, but I was surprised to see that the most popular course I ran there was on legal dangers and we still had plenty of copy being filed to the central editing desks that was not safe. If that was true of Reuters correspondents across Asia it is even more likely to be a risk faced by young and inexperienced journalists. I taught British

libel law because it is probably the stiffest in the world and because Reuters is UK-based, meaning it could theoretically be sued both where any libel occurred and at its London headquarters.

Journalists operating outside their national boundaries need to be familiar with the laws in force in the country in which they are working, with its political and judicial systems and, perhaps even more importantly, with the way these two forces interact and whether and to what degree there is any proper separation of powers between them. Without this information no journalist can operate safely, both in the personal sense of protecting life and limb and in helping to keep themselves and the employers out of the prisons and the courts. The balance between running a good story, avoiding trouble and also not causing unnecessary harm to others is a central and difficult issue for all working journalists. It can only be solved by common sense, by the application of deep, practical experience and with help from wise and careful editors back home.

National law is the one faced by journalists around the world. International law only usually applies belatedly in the area of international conventions on human rights and these have been all too often ignored in many countries in which journalists operate.

In practical terms most journalists need to be familiar with the laws of libel and slander, of contempt of court and defamation. Copyright can also raise its head but this is usually more of an issue for newspapers and magazines (and of course nowadays for Internet services) rather than for an international news agency.

In my recent Asian experience with Reuters it was almost always libel that tripped people up. The main problem was convincing them that they could not simply regurgitate for an international audience any story that happened to be played up in a local press that often either did not know the correct standards, did not care about them or was simply able to get away with whatever it liked.

Practical examples always make the issues clearer so here is one, carefully reported in order to avoid the courts, which caused much amusement on Reuters Asia editing desk. In Bangladesh a local correspondent, whose name rhymes with that of a national poet in an unidentified country, filed a very long story about a university lecturer who was said to have been involved in a series of allegations of sexual misconduct against female (and I think male) students. Apart from not applying the acid "So What?" test for any story filed to an international audience, the journalist also fell into several legal traps. He named the lecturer and several of his alleged "victims", no-one at the time the story was filed seemed to have been charged as far as the editors could make out after

repeated messages asking for this to be checked, not enough efforts had been made to get balancing statements from all parties and the story gave unnecessary and lurid details of the alleged incidents which could only offend and cause harm and suffering to those involved. On top of that, the person could plainly not write, but that was another issue. Needless to say, Reuters never released the story but I am sure it may have played well in local papers in Bangladesh.

Economics

When I first joined Reuters in 1972, its London office was clearly divided into General News and the Economic Services and, as if to underline the fact that these were separate worlds, the two divisions were on different floors and their staff rarely met. The world is very different now. Successive oil price rises, financial crises and more recently, the Asian economic collapse triggered by the 1997 demise of the Thai baht, all pushed finance onto the front pages. I know that journalism teachers are well aware of this and that most have probably been actively ensuring that business journalism has a high place in their courses for some time. Anyone who has not yet done so needs to jump on the bandwagon quickly.

Beyond basic economic principles, the students also need a thorough understanding of practical international currency and trade issues and of how the major world institutions operate and support each other, or where they are failing to do so. The WTO meeting in Seattle showed only too clearly the need for lucid explanations of the issues behind the clash between a youthful, anti-globalisation idealism and the practical need for a world trading system that provides employment, food and economic growth around the world. Some would argue that this is the same system that provides students' parents with the money to fund their courses, allowing them the freedom which they have every right to exercise in their protests. My gut feeling is that not enough is being done to explain all this clearly and the way to start is by providing young journalists with the knowledge they need about how the world actually works.

Many of the staff hired while I was at Reuters had some economic experience or training in addition to basic journalism skills. That simply reflects the way the world has progressed in the past 20 years with business news now often forcing its way onto the front pages, expanding and decentralised financial markets that have stimulated an unprecedented recent era of expansion in some Western economies and lower inflation enjoyed by many countries. But do not despair. The basic journalism courses are still needed but they now need to be supplemented

by adding, for example, a more broad economic content to give young journalists the skills to obtain employment.

I recommend that journalism students should be taught how the currency, equities, bonds and commodities markets actually work internationally, not through economic theory alone, but by getting some practitioners into the classroom. The students need to know how the traders apply their skills as well as the underlying economic theory.

They will be reporting and explaining the results of what the traders do to a mass audience, not explaining the principles outlined in the textbooks. I would simply devote as much time in journalism courses as the university schedule allows to this practical understanding of economics. That is where much of the recent, and probably most of the future expansion, has been in news organisations.

When I was recently involved in choosing candidates for Reuters graduate trainees scheme we simply did not consider anyone who either did not have, or did not profess to have, an interest in economic affairs. It was as simple as that.

I have often met blinkered nationalism in my travels or, even worse, plain ignorance of the facts about what was happening outside national boundaries. Youngsters need to acquire the ability early on to see beyond their own small world, to show interest in and gain knowledge of public affairs in a broader world context. They should also learn to examine the reasons behind people's actions and learn the importance of context and background. It can sometimes be hard work encouraging people to see beyond the end of their nose. Some journalists will happily pursue very successful careers in one place, but it remains essential to widen students' horizons by expanding, not contracting, their range of interests if they want to work abroad.

In probing for reasons behind specific actions student journalists should be taught the skills of how to ask open instead of closed questions, the ability to listen to what someone is saying instead of sticking to their own agenda, the importance of talking to people with an open mind and the need for sensitivity to cultural difference. Any fact or statement only makes sense if it is put into context and, when running news-writing courses for Reuters, we always demanded that an essential nugget paragraph explaining the context should be inserted very high up in the story.

International news organisations often expect their correspondents to move smoothly to any part of the world at short notice. The more sane ones (they do exist but they may be the ones with the deeper pockets) increasingly try to post

International Outlook

Languages

correspondents to an area of which they have some prior knowledge and where they can speak the language.

An international outlook leads quite naturally to the need to master foreign languages if you wish to work abroad. I had one colleague at Reuters who successfully worked in four different places outside London and could hardly speak a word of anything but English. He worked in South Africa, Hong Kong, Singapore and Australia (where he at least mastered *strine*). He is now clearly in a minority and, in language terms, is one of a dying breed if not already in the dinosaur class.

At Reuters, and particularly for its graduate trainee scheme, we demanded fluency in at least two foreign languages as well as the native language for international work. This was only relaxed slightly recently if one of the languages was fluent Mandarin due to the expected need for more correspondents in Greater China. This policy was introduced because Reuters expected its correspondents to be willing and able to move to a new post at very short notice. The philosophy underlying the practice was that if you stayed too long in one country there was an increased danger of you associating too closely with it, lessening the likelihood for unbiased and independent reporting. This assumption could be questioned, and it often was. Getting the balance right between too long and too short an assignment was a constant source of concern. The basic theory was that you were learning fast in year one, competent in year two and perhaps becoming too familiar or too close to local practices in year three, after which you were usually moved on.

It was, however, rare for Reuters to use the often-maligned practice of sending visiting firemen out to cover a hot spot in an area of which they had little previous knowledge. When you have 2,000 journalists spread around the world this tends to be less of a problem, although Reuters obviously did send reinforcements to help cover a big story and assembled large teams of specialists in text, TV and pictures from different bureaux to cover large international conferences and meetings of world leaders.

Similar standards for learning foreign languages should be considered a prerequisite for journalism departments who wish to send out aspiring international journalists. If that is too much to demand, then learning languages should either be included in the timetable or time should be made for students to learn them outside the course time.

Confidence

This is an intangible quality that many would argue cannot be taught. But it can certainly be improved by active

encouragement and by making a serious attempt to instil a belief in young people that they can do the job. Some young journalists I have seen did not lack self-belief, to put it mildly. For them, it was more a question of how to control their enthusiasm without disheartening them. But many journalists did need that extra bit of encouragement that they were up to the job.

Perhaps even more important was the need to teach them to have an open mind and to have the confidence to listen to other people, rather than creating journalists who force their own views on others. This is particularly important in interviews where journalists need to show the skill and have the confidence to take side roads. By that I mean that they should remember to follow up the points the interviewee makes, which often elicit more information, and then bring the interview back to the main agenda.

This question of confidence often arises through a simple lack of experience and because severe demands are often made on young journalists nowadays in a very competitive environment. By competitive in the international news agency world I mean measuring the most important newsbreaks against the competition in seconds. Sometimes, especially in Asia, the issue also arose from cultural roots. Some people simply did not know how to ask difficult questions, coming from a society where deference to elders, to superiors or to the ruling authority was deeply engrained. In some societies inequality between the sexes also meant that women were more affected by these factors. This caused some difficulties when they came to work for a Western news organisation riven with the idea of inculcating its hard news approach in its students.

The issue is too large to be covered fully in this paper, but in practice we tried to address it with patience and without abandoning basic news principles. This was one of the issues we covered in a new course, *Managing in Editorial*, which I created with an external specialist in management training who was an occupational psychologist. It was aimed at providing Reuters Bureau Chiefs and all senior journalists across Asia with all the non-writing skills they needed to run a bureau and was very popular.

This is another essential skill that should be taught rigorously and checked with refresher courses during the first few years of employment. I know because I did not do it thoroughly myself. When I started on my UK local newspaper I worked my way through evening classes up to the mandatory 120 wpm to pass the proficiency certificate and then promptly and steadily forgot it after that. How did I ever manage to achieve Reuters'

Shorthand

Writing Like An Angel

standards of accuracy all these years as a result? If I got there it must have been through a mixture of the few basic outlines I could remember, lots of careful checking and a certain amount of luck. To paraphrase Dickens; do as I say, not as I did, and do not rely on the tape recorder alone because it will not always get you out of a jam and cannot be used in all situations.

I know newspaper editors frequently bemoan that fact that young journalists have not mastered shorthand when they emerge from journalism courses. While shorthand may not be regarded as academic, journalism educators could, and in my view should, make sure enough time is allowed during the courses for others to teach shorthand to young journalists. It can be done outside the academic teaching time and by outside experts, but you are not equipping someone for a writing job if you do not make sure this is done. Equally, editors who moan about this must provide the money and the time to provide shorthand training for their successful applicants who have not come out of journalism school. Reuters certainly did, although many new entrants already had it.

This is the basic skill that we always looked for and that Reuters tried to test in all its aspiring employees. Sometimes you could see a spark of brilliance or individuality in a test piece but more often you had to go by your own judgment and a gut feeling when deciding whom to employ. I still do not know whether the few writing angels we found (I certainly was not one myself and there are precious few around) possessed a God-given ability or whether they just learned it through hard work. But there should be no argument that it is possible to judge whether students have got the Pyramid right in news reporting, if the facts are in the correct order, if the story makes sense, if it is put into its proper context and whether it is basically an interesting read.

There did not seem to me to be any fine distinction that could be drawn in terms of brilliance or individuality between applicants who had formal journalism training and those who had a degree in another subject. That may be partly because we were looking for a particular set of skills rather than placing great emphasis on the need for any formal, prior journalism training. However, applicants who had completed a journalism course, or who had experience of student newspapers, were likely to have a head start in the very practical skills of getting the mechanics of news writing right first time.

Interns

My recent experiences in running Reuters central intern and graduate trainee schemes in Asia were amongst the most interesting and satisfying part of my career because of the

opportunities it provided to take an interest in and help mould the futures of some of the brightest young people trying to make a career in journalism. My colleagues and I found that there was little point in taking an intern for a brief period of time, say one or two months, as this provided little satisfaction on either side. The intern never learned much and remained stuck in the watch-and-ask mode, while we, as employers, felt frustrated because time and effort was being spent to explain how things worked with little or no productive effort in return. That was equally frustrating, of course, for the interns who were not allowed to write and learn from comments about their copy. So we insisted on six-month internships.

For three years I took two final-year students a year from Singapore's Nanyang Technological University, one from the writing course and one from TV production. This went so well that several of them were offered fulltime jobs afterwards, and most obtained employment immediately in the local media. One highlight was the TV intern whose command of Mandarin saved the day for the Singapore TV production desk when a severe earthquake shook Taiwan. None of the desk staff spoke Chinese fluently and he took the lead, phoning round and getting Reuters the feeds from Taiwan TV which scooped the opposition and produced great footage. Just as a footnote, our Taiwan Bureau Chief was out of the country at the time and his deputy, eight months pregnant, was driven to the office in the middle of the night by her husband. She produced a stream of good copy under the careful and gentle guidance of the desk editors in Singapore.

We also took a journalism graduate from Perth on a six-month reporting stint in the Singapore bureau, and he did well enough to be offered a permanent job on the new Asia Internet desk when it was set up just as he was due to end his internship.

We found that interns did well when they remembered not to be afraid to ask the basic questions if they were unsure, without feeling like a fool because they did not understand. It was also important for them to remember once something was explained. Most working journalists in my experience (and certainly those at international news agencies) are creatures of great enthusiasms, miniscule attention spans and perhaps relatively small brainpower, but they possess an incredible ability to focus on the issue at hand. As a result they do not like repeating things or being distracted from what they feel is important at any particular moment. So an invaluable lesson for interns is to choose your moment and don't ask twice.

Several of our interns were accepted because of the persistence of their lecturers. If lecturers show determination in fostering and maintaining personal contacts with journalists that

Graduate Trainees

can make a difference. It takes time but it is the best way to succeed.

A graduate trainee is a different animal from an intern. Reuters trainees are very bright young things and worldwide only about 12 made it to the scheme each year from up to 800 applicants, with two from the US, six from Europe and four from Asia. The main difference from internships, of course, is that Reuters offers them permanent contracts, with a guarantee of future employment if they do well enough.

But even for the trainees there is no certain job at the end of the road, as they have to pass a series of stringent tests. High hurdles are put in their way during the first two years.

The skills they need to possess are the ability to write like angels, an interest and curiosity about what is happening around them, a sound knowledge of economics, a persistent yet pleasant personality, a fluent command of three languages including perfect written English, the essential ability to spot the news, write a clear lead and compose a logical and interesting story as well as occasionally write elegant features. Those are the targets when the selection process starts and the successful candidates are the ones that can offer the best combination of these attributes while still convincing the selection panel that the one thing they most want to do in life is to become a journalist, travel the world and write. They are told that journalism will not make them rich but that it is a lot more fun than many other professions.

In the three years I ran the scheme in Asia we took 13 graduate trainees, with one more than the normal annual quota of four in the first year. The Tokyo bureau always hired one Japanese national and she started work there in April. The others were hired by the Asian editorial headquarters and began in late August. All four started their traineeships with a three-month stint in London with the journalist trainees from other countries attending courses and learning on the central editing desks. The Asian group then came to Singapore for nine months, finishing with one year's reporting in a bureau where they spoke the language. Over the years we reduced sharply the amount of time they spent on the Singapore editing desks and increased their direct experience of reporting. Trainees chosen in Singapore all had to have fluent Mandarin or Cantonese as the main aim of the scheme in those years was to provide more reporters to meet the expected expansion of the Greater Chinese bureaux in Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Taipei and Hong Kong.

In each case the aim was to produce journalists who could aspire to run a small Reuters bureau in five or six years and become the Bureau Chief of a large one within 10 years. Great efforts were

made to keep them within the organisation given the time and effort editors spent on the scheme, but some (perhaps too many) did leave after five or six years.

In the years I was involved three trainees came from Britain, Singapore and Japan, two were Canadian, one American and one was from Hong Kong. They now have permanent jobs in Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Tokyo reporting on Chinese dissidents, politics and culture, covering investment flows around Asia for text and TV services from Hong Kong and following the travails of the Japanese economy. Year two trainees are now in their second year working and learning in Beijing, Shanghai and Seoul. One resigned due to family issues to join her banker husband in Tokyo. The last group has just finished its initial three months in London and will spend the first half of 2001 on a fast reporting track in various South East Asia bureaux after only one month on the Singapore editing desks.

I outlined above the skills they all needed to make the grade. The other main factors which gave them the edge over hundreds of other applicants were an ability to express themselves clearly and confidently and to think on their feet, the honesty to admit what they did not know and, increasingly recently, an interest in macro-economic affairs and financial markets. Above all they had to be enthusiastic and convince us that they really wanted the job more than anything else in the world.

Journalism is fun, but it is also hard work and often involves very long and unsocial hours and many setbacks. Young journalists wanting to make the grade should be aware well in advance, if they are more interested in making money, that they should consider becoming an investment banker instead of seeking to write about the bankers' investments. What major international news organisations need above all is young people who are interested in other people, in what motivates and drives them, youngsters who have a natural and insatiable curiosity about the world around them, who will not take no for an answer but who also have a driving ambition to present a fair, accurate and balanced picture of all aspects of the world they see. ■

Final Words

JOHN BARTRAM has been a journalist for 31 years, including 28 years with Reuters as a foreign correspondent, European Financial Editor, Quality Editor and Asia Training Editor. Email: John.Bartram@ukgateway.net
