Knighted in their profession: How foreign correspondents are selected by Australian press

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The preparation of newspaper correspondents for postings overseas has always been an inexact business. A decade ago it was suggested that such jobs were more likely doled out as a reward for services rendered or as a means of dealing with a problem within the domestic newsroom. There appears to be little evidence that this situation has changed. Given that the number of postings overseas is shrinking and the commitment of publishers to maintaining discrete foreign bureaus appears static, the low priority given to the training and education of correspondents is hardly surprising. There are signs, however, that journalism education in a general sense is beginning to be taken more seriously by the industry and perhaps in this trend lies hope for the better preparation of future correspondents.

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Almost 30 years ago, a handbook for aspiring journalists published by the Melbourne-based Herald & Weekly Times group (Coleman 1970) included a short chapter by Garry Barker on the role of the foreign correspondent. As a young reporter Barker spent a decade between 1959 and 1969 as a correspondent in the United States and South-East Asia. “Most reporters would agree that to be appointed a foreign correspondent for their newspaper is to be, in a sense, knighted in their profession,” he wrote. “It is an honour and a responsibility.”

Barker went on to describe the need sometimes to use elephants to get your copy out of remote parts of South-East Asia, the difficulties of finding a telegraph operator willing to transmit stories more than one take at a time and the vagaries of the Royal Lao Post and Telegraph Department. Those were indeed different days. (The book, Reporting for Work, also includes a chapter entitled “The Woman’s Role in Journalism”.)

Different days and yet, at least in some respects, not all that different. Computerisation, digital communication networks, satellite telephones and the Internet have significantly shrunk the
distance between the jungles of Sarawak and the foreign desk in Sydney. The elephants may be out of a job, but to be appointed a correspondent for a newspaper is still, in a sense, to be knighted.

The selection processes, the influences and the criteria upon which journalists are appointed to the permanent overseas posts staffed by Australian newspapers have hardly altered in the intervening decades. Some things have changed. There are fewer newspapers and fewer postings for a start. One of the impacts of a concentration in media ownership has been a net reduction in the number of newspaper correspondents sent overseas. In the mid-1960s, the *Melbourne Herald* group maintained five journalists in London, three in New York, full-time correspondents in Paris, Rome, Singapore and Rabaul, plus shared correspondents in Johannesburg, Tokyo, Toronto and New Delhi. The then Sydney-only Fairfax group maintained large bureaus in London and New York (Revill and Roderick 1965: 207-8).

In the case of the Fairfax papers, where there was once a *Melbourne Age* correspondent and a *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) correspondent in, say, Washington, there is now a joint Age-SMH correspondent -- including cities such as London and New York where there were formerly large bureaus. This situation is replicated in all of the eight cities where correspondents are now appointed from either paper on a two- to three-year rotation. The more specialised *Australian Financial Review* (AFR) maintains its own string of bureaus. In the case of bureaus operated by News Limited, there is the prospect (an expectation in some postings) that a correspondent's copy may be shared through an even broader range of group publications.

The dramatic reduction in the number of Australian metropolitan daily newspapers in recent years -- from 20 in 1987 to 12 in 1999 -- has also had an impact. Until the 1980s, papers such as *The Herald* and the *Sun News-Pictorial* in Melbourne, part of the Herald and Weekly Times Group acquired by Rupert Murdoch's News Limited in February 1987, staffed independent bureaus in many parts of the world. *The Sydney Sun*, which closed in 1988, maintained its own bureaus in New York and London (Chadwick 1989: 247-48). Only a handful of new bureaus have been opened in recent years by Australian newspapers. The Age-SMH, the AFR and *The Australian* have all opened or reopened a bureau in Jakarta within the past five years. *The Sunday Age*, which operated independently from its sister paper until the beginning of 1998, opened a bureau in London in August 1997 which was closed 11 months later when *The Sunday Age* and its staff were merged with the daily Age. Other bureaus, such as Moscow and Singapore have been closed and moved to Berlin and Bangkok respectively.
There are a couple of strands to the message that emerges from this. One is that the priority Australian newspapers place on having their own reporters on the ground internationally appears to be fairly static, if not declining. It is difficult to discern a premium being placed on the stories filed by the newspapers’ own correspondents. There is certainly no real growth in the number of bureaus being opened, either within the region or more broadly. Cost, of course, is a major consideration. Foreign bureaus are expensive to set up and maintain. Given that there are a range of alternative sources of copy, convincing reasons must be found by editors for maintaining correspondents overseas. It remains far cheaper to send in “firemen”, who may or may not have particular expertise in the country to which they are sent, when a crisis occurs. In terms of productivity, single-journalist bureaus overseas are probably not that cost efficient a way of garnering coverage. That may not be the way in which journalists would like their output to be measured, but like police and emergency service workers and any number of other occupations where applying such production industry-based measures are essentially absurd, that is increasingly the way in which journalists’ output is being measured by those who pay their salaries.

Whereas bureaus were once seen as a long-term investment, with companies purchasing properties in the cities in which the correspondents were based, this is now much less likely to be the case. The prospect of a bureau being closed after a few years of operation or moved to another country (e.g. Fairfax’s move from Moscow to Berlin) demonstrates either a responsiveness to change or an attitude of impermanence, depending on your viewpoint.

Both News Limited and Fairfax subscribe to the international services provided by English and American news groups. The reader of The Age is as likely, if not more likely, to read the news according to the correspondent of the Daily Telegraph (London) or the Los Angeles Times as they are to read a story filed by one of the paper’s own correspondents. The same applies to readers of The Australian, although the newspaper services are different (e.g. The Times group of London). Both groups have access to the stories filed by the major international news agencies to which they subscribe, such as Reuters, Agence France-Presse and Associated Press. Much of this is supplied via a common feed from Australian Associated Press, which also maintains its own correspondents in various centres.

Certainly there is still a strong editorial preference towards using copy from the paper’s own correspondents, but in some instances – especially in relation to stories from the United States – the “own” version will be up against half-a-dozen or more alternatives. It may or may not match in quantity or quality the
other offerings. The availability of such alternative sources, often featuring the work of journalists with an international reputation such as Robert Fisk (London Independent), providing a broad range of news, commentary and feature material at a relatively low cost is a major disincentive to Australian newspapers establishing more international bureaus of their own.

One opportunity lost (or simply left begging) by Australian news groups has been to establish their own networks of expert regional correspondents in the Asia-Pacific region and to on-sell their copy on the same basis as they buy in copy from overseas. There is more than a little irony in the fact that a story on some aspect of Malaysian politics is as likely to have been written by a journalist writing for an English paper as by an own correspondent for an Australia publication. In an era of increasingly globalised information, there are those who would argue that the need for information to pass through a particular cultural filter in order that it be both acceptable and relevant to any particular domestic audience is no longer relevant.

If we look at Asia-Pacific regional coverage as an example, historically there has been little serious demonstration of a commitment on the part of Australian newspaper publishers to a studied coverage beyond the handful of permanent postings established over the years and the sending in of journalists on an ad hoc basis to cover regional flare ups. The publishers would argue, perhaps, that this is evidence of a commitment to covering the region. But there has been little in terms of an industry commitment to encouraging journalists to develop an expertise in the region, let alone to facilitate that process. Such impetus as there has been has come from government or from journalists themselves. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) has run various programs over recent years, either directly or through sub-agencies. The North Asia Visits program started by DFAT during the early 1990s is one example. The Indonesia visits and training programs conducted through the Australia Indonesia Institute is another. The Australian Journalists Association and its subsequent incarnation the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance have also been active players in this style of educational activity. The fact that such programs have arisen not from within the industry, but for the most part externally is interesting. It suggests a perception -- especially on the part of government -- that there was a deficiency in this regard and that this was creating a sufficient problem to warrant action from outside the industry. Much of this activity arose in the context of a debate about the impact of cultural differences on reporting countries such as Indonesia (Kingsbury 1997: 117-24).

That the industry itself has not been at the forefront in this
regard is hardly surprising given its general failure to promote training and education, most especially once journalists have entered the industry. Even more disappointing, in Victoria at least, has been the continuing lack of interaction between journalism education, working journalists and employers. That situation is, however, slowly improving. Fifteen years ago, many cadets entered newspaper journalism with a liberal arts or other degree, but a journalism graduate was a rare creature, especially in Victoria. In the late 1990s, a good number of graduates from an increasing number of journalism and media studies courses are finding employment in metropolitan, suburban and provincial newspapers.

Schultz (1989: 43-46) pointed to the difficulties of finding relevant models for journalism education which were valuable to the educators, the students and the industry. A decade later, many of the issues she highlighted remain unresolved. The lack of broad career structure within journalism generally remains a common theme of complaint among journalists themselves. Within that context, the notion of training for foreign correspondents remains even more remote. The indifference of the industry to journalism education remains. While many trainee journalists are selected from the ranks of journalism graduates, many are still chosen from graduates in other fields. This suggests that journalism education is in no way seen as a prerequisite for entry into the craft by employers. In some respects it is a generational issue. Many of those still making the decisions about who will be employed as trainees are themselves the product of craft-based, on-the-job training rather than university education. The extent to which this situation will change in the near future remains to be seen. There is some evidence to suggest the dominant culture is changing. The recent appointment within Fairfax of former Queensland University of Technology journalism lecturer Cratis Hippocrates to take charge of group editorial training is one such sign of change.

In tandem with the ongoing dilemmas of education training, what Schultz (1994: 35) has dubbed the “paradox of professionalism” continues to beset journalists. At a time when the professionalism of journalists is increasingly under scrutiny, the fact that there are no formal qualifications for entry into what ipso facto remains a craft places both practitioners and their employers at a disadvantage when issues such as ethics come to the fore. The recent furore in Australia surrounding the payment of substantial sums to Sydney radio personality John Laws by the Australian Banking Association in consideration for favourable
editorial treatment of the banks on his talkback program simply served to illustrate the point. Laws argued he was not a journalist and this obviated any ethical dilemma when it came to accepting the money. Yet, in many respects, his program performs all the features of a radio current affairs program. The very fact that he had to point out that he was not a journalist underscores the public confusion about which media figures are or are not working journalists.

Against such a backdrop, the lack of specific training and education of the small number of Australian newspaper journalists who are posted to represent their organisations overseas is hardly surprising. Moreover, there appear to be no formal mechanisms or criteria within either Fairfax or News Limited for such appointments, which remain largely at the discretion of the editors. Postings are not advertised externally or internally. Appointments tend to be made from the ranks of senior reporting or editing staff. Individual journalists may seek out a particular overseas posting, lobbying an editor personally in order to secure a bureau. It would appear that the factors considered include a journalist's broad experience, writing ability and capacity to work alone and under hostile conditions. Personal circumstances can also affect selection (e.g. whether a journalist's spouse/family is prepared to move overseas). Applicable foreign language skills, while considered a bonus, are not regarded as mandatory.

The one sign of what might be considered "career structure" is the tendency towards repeat postings. Once a journalist has secured one foreign posting, the chance of a repeat posting appears to be significantly enhanced, especially in the Asia-Pacific. Of the four Fairfax bureaus in the region, three are currently staffed by journalists who have previously been posted to the region. The "experience" factor is, however, more likely to be used as a bargaining chip by an applicant lobbying for a post than as a formal criteria. Some editors do consider it persuasive.

At this stage it would appear that the internal dynamics and politics of the newspaper office continue to have as much, if not more, to do with appointment of foreign correspondents than training or education. Sadly, Schultz's observation (1989: 42) that foreign postings are used either as a reward or as a way of solving a problem at home appears just as applicable a decade later. Certainly some appointments are made on the basis of past experience in the field, but equally postings of correspondents without particular expertise in the countries to which they are being sent continue to be made. That is not to suggest that most of these journalists don't do a creditable job representing their
organisations or reporting on the countries to which they have been sent. But it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that editors continue to sell themselves and their newspapers short in not facilitating better training and preparation of future correspondents years in advance of their appointment.

REFERENCES


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