

JOURNALISM

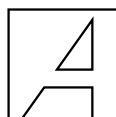
Eric Loo

BEST
PRACTICES
OF
JOURNALISM
IN
ASIA



Konrad
Adenauer
Stiftung

Best Practices of Journalism in Asia



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Adenauer
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Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
Singapore

Media Programme Asia

Best Practices of Journalism in Asia

by Eric Loo



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FOREWORD

Asia is arguably one of the most diverse regions in the world. Whether it is measured in terms of differing political systems, different levels of economic development or the vast array of social, cultural and religious traditions, no other region matches the diversity of Asia.

This complexity poses a particular challenge for Asian journalism in its quest to identify a commonly shared understanding of what constitutes best practice. Indeed, not only do Asian journalists have to do justice to a range of economic and political realities, they are also working within an environment that is undergoing rapid transformation.

Dr Eric Loo's book could not have come at a better time. It is my great pleasure to introduce this groundbreaking work, which develops a distinctly Asian perspective to the ongoing discourse on Asian journalism. In dialogue with award-winning journalists from the region, Dr Loo skillfully uncovers the multiple facets of the Asian media reality. Drawing on the vast experiences of some of the most established journalists in Asia, this book portrays a comprehensive picture of best (and bad) practices, in the Asian context.

Dr Loo's book marks a significant contribution to the efforts of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Media Programme Asia, in fostering dialogue between journalists and media teachers in Asia and Europe. By adding an Asian perspective to the debate on best practice in journalism, this book empowers Asian journalists to develop a model that pays tribute to the specific realities and cultural contexts within which they work and further advances a free and ethical press in Asia.

I am confident that this book will greatly advance the discourse on best practice in Asia and Europe alike and enable journalists to learn from and with each other.

Werner vom Busch
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PROLOGUE

In Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia, journalism instructional texts – mainly published in the United States – have traditionally been translated into local languages by media academics. Many of these academics were educated in the United States, and less so, the United Kingdom and Australia. Direct translation of the texts and deference to media models from English speaking democracies as the benchmarks of professional journalism practices, have overlooked the eclectic, enterprising work of journalists in Asia.¹ Journalists perform their work despite a range of constraints, from lack of access to the internet, computers and telephones, to more systemic problems like low wages, inadequate journalism training, low literacy and repressive media laws.

Instructional and academic journalism texts originating from Asia in recent years have attempted systematically to examine the practices, cultures and functions of journalists in Asian media environments, which are as diverse as the region's economy, communal politics and multi-ethnic communities.² This book attempts to add to the current literature on journalism in Asia. Readers are introduced to the different journeys taken by Asian journalists. Through their award-winning work they have, in unique ways, influenced and educated public understanding of human development concerns, and inspired their respective communities to act on issues that affect their daily life.

¹ *Explanation of the terms used in this book: "Asia" refers specifically to Southeast Asia on the working assumption that the pluralistic ASEAN region is representative of the spread of newspapers in Asia proper – stretching from India to Hong Kong. The geography spans across the least developed countries – such as Myanmar and Laos – to the 'newly industrialised countries' such as India, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines. "Western" refers particularly to the United States where major trans-national media institutions are located. Reuters and AFP, although based in Europe, are structurally and institutionally similar to AP and UPI, sharing the same model of Western media operations.*

² *See for example Asia Media Report: A Crisis Within, Inter Press Service Asia-Pacific Centre Foundation, Thailand, 2006. Other media-related publications are mainly published by the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC), Singapore (www.amic.org.sg); and professional journalist organisations in the region, which sites its publications online – such as the Southeast Asian Press Alliance (<http://www.seapabkk.org/>), Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (www.pcij.org), and Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (www.cmfr.com.ph/); Aliran (www.aliran.com) in Malaysia; and The Media Foundation's watchdog site, The Hoot (www.thehoot.org) in India.*

One media project illustrative of this change-oriented journalism was a community experiment - *Our Village Chhatera* - initiated by *The Hindustan Times* in Delhi in 1968. The experimental project involved a fortnightly column that ran over several years. It told the stories of villagers in Chhatera, and their resilience in addressing their need for better infrastructure, head-on. The column tracked the community's potential for micro-development and how the villagers achieved their development goals when given appropriate resources.

B.G. Verghese, editor of *The Hindustan Times* at that time, and initiator of the project recalls:

"Many, from the proprietor (initially) to staff and readers, first yawned, then complained at the waste of space on *Our Village Chhatera*. But it developed a faithful readership. Publicity galvanised the administration and service agencies into doing their job - and doing it better. The villagers felt greatly empowered. Scholars eagerly measured social change over the seven year period the column ran. Ambassadors got to see an India on the other side of diplomatic protocol. And city journalists, who could not tell rice from wheat or initially gaped at Persian wheels, grew to become far better and more sensitive journalists, able to take a more holistic view of Indian realities. *Chhatera* was an education." (Full interview in Chapter 2).

For the young journalists at *The Hindustan Times*, Verghese says, the experience gave them a critical understanding of the social functions inherent in their chosen profession. The journalist's role then was to not only inform, entertain, report or analyse the events, but also to motivate the villagers to make a positive change to their living conditions. To the villagers of Chhatera, *The Hindustan Times* was effectively the purveyor and catalyst for leading the village out of its dismal conditions to becoming a model of micro-development emulated by other communities.

Verghese's fortnightly column provided villagers with the recognition and moral support they needed. For the government officials, *The Hindustan Times* provided a critical feedback loop where people could voice their concerns as well as suggest alternative strategies to improve living conditions in Chhatera.

Implicit in the sustained coverage of Chhatera was the engagement of *The Hindustan Times'* journalists with the villagers. Herein lay the immersive³ reporting

³ This term is variably used by media researchers. "Immersive reporting", as a generic descriptor predates the more widely-used term "embedded journalism". Generally, immersive reporting refers to situations where journalists adopt an ethnographic or anthropological approach to interpret and understand the circumstances, problems and issues experienced by the community. Thus, one of the criticisms of this practice is its compromise of journalistic objectivity and impartiality.

methodologies and personal connections at grassroots that *The Hindustan Times* journalists applied to the community experiment. These ethnographic methodologies pose a challenge to conventional journalism practice, which reveres detached observation, defers to establishment and institutional sources for information, and treats news more as a commercial product than as a catalyst for community development and social change.

Indeed, journalists often see themselves as an objective mediator between the reader and the event or issue. The journalist's operant is objectivity. This requires the surrendering of personal involvement or experience with the issues or subject of the story and is antithetical to the immersive reporting approaches implicit in *Project Chhatera*. Objective detached observation in traditional journalism is clearly limited when it comes to the sensitive reporting of human conditions in developing societies.

Dionne Bunsha, roving correspondent for *Frontline*, recalls her experience in covering the plight of the poor in India and ethnic conflicts in Gujarat in the 90s: "The journalist as an unbiased observer is a myth." She says that journalists must shift from seeing readers or viewers as audiences, to seeing them as citizens, and from seeing them as consumers to members of a community. She echoes P. Sainath, rural affairs editor at *The Hindu* in Mumbai who notes, "I believe journalism is for people, not shareholders. For communities, not corporations."⁴

This book takes the position that journalists shall, and can, play an active role in instigating constructive change in their immediate communities. However, it is defined by the people's development needs and experience. Interviews and discussions in this book attempt to show the rationale for journalists to be actively involved in their community, as an effective means of evolving a practical model of best practice in the Asian context.

At its simplest level, best practices are often equated with the best tradition of journalism "to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable". However, this traditional standard of best practice is variably questioned given the dominant corporate ownership of the media. Verghese notes that market savvy proprietors and managers have taken over the newsrooms, and the print media are being carried away by sound bite journalism where inconsequential statements take over substance and meaning.

⁴ See full interview with Bunsha and Sainath in Ch.2.

Sainath, a recipient of the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Journalism in August 2007, explains that the declining standard in today's commercialised journalism:

" ... has a lot to do with ownership structures of the media and who gets to define what journalism is. Worldwide, the media are subject to corporate domination. You'll find truly great journalists unemployed or freelancing because they tend to be too independent for the liking of corporate bosses. When the financial bottom line is the only bottom line, good journalism goes down the tube. (That's why *Lakme Fashion Week*⁵ scores so heavily over farm suicides). Media monopolies are not just a threat to the content of newspapers and television; they are a danger to democracy itself. Corporate media bosses have intervened very majorly in the elections of various countries to try and see governments of their choice elected. (Full interview in Chapter 2)."

Dominant corporate influence on the mainstream media and its consequent undermining of "best practices" have seen journalists who can afford it, such as Andreas Harsono from Jakarta, Indonesia, venture into independent freelance work. Despite the daily challenge of finding ways to "pay my bills", Harsono represents a minority of journalists who have used the internet as a platform to "make a difference" to journalism standards in their respective societies. Harsono says:

"I'm not a part of the mainstream news organisation. I don't work for any big TV or newspapers [but] through a small but ideal organisation, Pantau. Because we are not linked to any big media company, we can be accepted by all of them - mostly through editorial enhancement training and working with them to develop in-house stylebooks and code[s] of professional practice. Most Indonesian journalists are not familiar with good practices ... [not even] basic thing[s] like "don't accept bribes" or "envelopes" (Personal interview in Jakarta, Nov.11, 2006)."

Harsono says rampant corruption is caused by low salaries, "because their companies don't perform very well, so they don't pay well. In some cases, if the companies perform very well, they use the money to expand their newspapers [instead of paying their journalists better salaries]". Harsono cites the *Tempo Jawa Pos Group* as a case in point, which has expanded "from less than 30 newspapers during Suharto's rule to about 150 newspapers in just five years after his downfall".

⁵ *Lakme Fashion Week is held twice a year in Mumbai to "integrate India into the global fashion world and redefine the future of fashion". Organised by Lakme (cosmetic brand) and IMG (international fashion event organiser), the fashion shows are spread over five days to showcase the collection of Indian and international fashion designers. The event includes exhibition stalls, fashion seminars and workshops.*

With chain ownership in Indonesia, newspapers are treated as business ventures instead of public service institutions. This has led to unethical practices where “journalists are required to find advertisements [and] encouraged by their newspapers to approach their sources for advertisements”.

Among the worst practices Harsono observes are when Indonesian journalists become involved in politics to supplement their incomes, such as acting as political speech writers and public relations officers. “Journalists just don’t realise that there are certain [best practice] benchmarks that they have to achieve.”

Herein lays one of the objectives of this book – to conceptualise the range of “best” and “bad” journalism practices in the Asian context. These practical objectives are premised on: (a) journalism is a producer of culture as well as a product of the culture where it operates; (b) thus, while journalism adheres to a set of universal ethical codes and methodology, as Yvonne Chua puts it, to “the commitment to the pursuit of truth, the discipline of verification and capacity to tell the story in an understandable yet compelling manner” – the journalist’s goals and functions are essentially framed by local socio-cultural, economic development factors, and to an extent, existential imperatives.

The above premises are derived from my previous work as a journalist and media educator in Malaysia, the Philippines and Australia, complemented by my observations of how indigenous values, political ideologies and belief systems have influenced journalism in Asia as a social, political and cultural construct. Ongoing discourse about journalism in Asia, however, is overly-focused on the imperatives of press freedom – as conceptualised from the dominant position of a democratic libertarian polity. More often than not, this generally carries the “western” interpretation of what the media ought to be, and thus by implication, the universal best practice benchmark.

Experience, however, shows that “best practices” of journalism in the Asian context are ideologically polarised. Governments in newly industrialised countries, such as Malaysia, and socialist blocs such as Indochina and Myanmar, see the media more as a state apparatus and a prime mover of “national development”. This is antithetical to the normative take that journalism is a public trust, where journalism’s primary task is to check on governments and businesses to keep them accountable for their policies and actions. This latter perception falls in line with the notion of the media as the people’s advocate. Best practice, or rather good journalism, in its simplest term, is therefore perceived and understood according to the state’s and civil activists’ expectations of what the media ought to be.

Exploration of best journalism practices in this book therefore does not defer to the Pulitzer-type criterion as the exclusive benchmark of journalistic excellence. Instead, it canvasses the scattered literature on best practices for a cultural context and gathers the opinions of working journalists in Asia, to grasp at these elusive benchmarks.

Attempts are made to contextualise the eclectic achievements of Asian journalists featured in this book, to show the conjectured vaguely defined forms of “best practices” in the region. From this perspective, the book takes the position that best practices in journalism are culturally interpreted and best understood from within the realities that define the socially transformative work of respective Asian journalists. As Verghese mentions in his commentary, “Norms will keep changing with changing times and circumstances and there will not be any one eternal standard of best practice.”

Dialogue and interviews with award-winning journalists are compiled to paint a picture of what best practices mean within Asian media realities. Structured conversations conducted through emails and on-camera at the respective journalist’s workplace – in Manila, Mumbai, New Delhi and Jakarta – delved into their personal, cultural and professional attributes. The questions focused on the journalist’s personal and professional values. Award-winning journalists were selected from countries known for their commitment to the tenets of press freedom such as India, the Philippines and Indonesia. Journalists from these three countries are known for their investigative journalism – often practised and executed at great risk to their personal safety.

A mix of methodologies was used to gather the empirical materials for this book:

- a) A self-administered online survey of newspaper journalists in Asia was accessible on the internet from April to September 2006. The survey was announced on the mailing list of the *International Journalism Network*, *Asian Media Forum*, and *Inter Press Service*. The survey gathered a set of qualitative data, which I hoped would paint a broader picture of how journalists from developing Asian countries perceived the concept of best practice.
- b) On-camera interviews with award winning journalists in India, Philippines and Indonesia. The interviews focused on the journalists’ capacity for directing their daily work towards serving their communities, despite the unrelenting forces of rampant media corporatisation.
- c) Commentaries by veteran journalists and educators on their perception of best practices of journalism in their respective countries, and how this could be taught to students across different political and cultural environments.

Email interviews with Asian journalists, and article contributions by journalism educators, are inserted at relevant sections in the book to add context to the chapter discussions.

The book's narrative structure intentionally uses minimal theoretical academic abstractions. Instead, it adopts a pragmatic approach – journalistic to an extent – to speculate what works best for journalists in Asia given the political constraints and resource limitations that many are compelled to work under, and which journalists in richer developed countries would take for granted.

As the title of the book implies, speculative discussions, commentaries and interviews with journalists aim to rediscover “development journalism” as a viable model for working out the recognisable benchmarks of best practice in the Asian context. Case studies and interviews were mainly conducted with English language newspapers – excluding the local language community radio, which is arguably the most influential medium in developing societies – for no other reason than language accessibility.

As Kunda Dixit, editor of *The Nepali Times* notes: “The use of radio in countries with low literacy, for example in Nepal, where community radio started out as an experiment in development communications, has now become a mainstream phenomenon that was a factor in the political uprising that led to Nepal's people power uprising in 2006. We may tend to focus too much on print media and English language journalism when we talk about development journalism. The real medium where DJ can come on its own is in local language journalism.” (Email correspondence, Nov.14, 2007).

With this limitation in mind, Chapter 1 reviews the imperatives of development oriented journalism, and examines how this genre of reporting is being adopted, or rejected, by Asian journalists in the English language newspapers. As the chapter explains, development journalism was first practised in India and the Philippines. It was seen as a form of reporting that focused on people affected by the causes and consequences of rapid socio-economic and political change in developing societies. However, the practice was somewhat hijacked by governments, for instance in the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia, to promote its policies in the name of “development” and “nation building”.

Development oriented journalism, as understood from a Western perspective, is undermined by its construct as a form of protocol journalism because of its predominant reporting on government policies and projects, rather than community

concerns. Its dull image, however, was less the fault of its fundamental goals than how it was practiced by journalists in a media environment that is regulated to excess. Current scepticism with the narrative, change-oriented, value-added and advocacy form of development reporting genre, is not so much concerned with its alleged subjectivity. As Chapter 1 explains, scepticism with development journalism has more to do with the perceptual block among mainstream journalists in leaping from objectifying news as a market-driven commodity, to viewing it as something that can bring about positive change.

Chapter 2 provides a profile of email interviews with award-winning journalists, followed by selected award-winning stories reproduced with permission. Chapter 3 introduces a qualitative online survey of Asian journalists' perceptions of best practices. Chapter 4 contains a commentary on best practice by a veteran Asian journalist and educator. This chapter aims to prompt readers to think about how journalists can make a difference to the profession through innovative teaching methods.

Chapter 5 concludes the book with an overview of the region. It asks: "What needs to be done to do the job better and how can journalism educators and journalists best do it?"

I hope this book will provide readers with a useful resource. Readers can reflect on how journalists and journalism educators can work together to challenge current practices, and explore better alternatives for covering their communities with greater depth and sensitivity, while embracing the essential role that good journalism plays in emerging democracies.

Finally, I would like to thank the Konrad Adenauer Foundation for supporting this project, the reviewers for their feedback, journalists who gave their time for face-to-face interviews, and media educators who thoughtfully contributed commentaries featured in this book.

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CHAPTER 1

DEVELOPMENT JOURNALISM: FORGING A PATH FOR BEST PRACTICES?

IN THE mid-1990s, “civic journalism” emerged in the United States as an alternative practice to re-engage the media with the community in the news-making process. Instead of being objectified as passive bystanders, citizens were provided with channels to talk to journalists and address issues that matter to citizens. It was essentially about journalists getting down to the coalface to report on events and issues from the community’s perspective. The rationale of the civic journalism alternative was as relevant then in the United States as it is today in the Asian media context.

Civic journalism initiatives were widely practised in the mid-60s, albeit informally, by journalists in developing agrarian-based nations such as India, the Philippines and Indonesia. Then, the practice was referred to as “development journalism,” a descriptor believed to be first mentioned at an economic writers’ training course in Manila in August 1968. Development news was interpreted as information directed at educating the people, enhancing living conditions of the poor and building communities.

Today’s recognition of civic journalism as part of professional practice, primarily among community newspapers in the United States, vindicates the developing world’s call in the 1960s for journalists in the developed West to take on a more community-building role in their reporting of Third World issues, as opposed to conflict-driven ‘infotainment’ journalism. The constructive community-oriented role, as framed at UNESCO forums since the 60s, has alluded to the principles of development journalism. However, development journalism soon acquired a bad name after relentless criticism of the practice by journalists trained and educated in more libertarian ‘western’ media systems. Development journalism was likened to a type of journalism that was easily manipulated, and thus, controlled by governments.

Historically, development journalism is derived from development communication. This was a practice pioneered by extension agricultural workers in India and the Philippines, whose job was to disseminate information on new agricultural methods,

to farmers during a period of broad agrarian reforms. Journalists reporting on rural economics had then been working closely with these agricultural information officers. Indonesia and Malaysia, for a while in the late 70s, were among countries where development journalism was practised, although it was not given the development journalism tag. Currently, this genre is by definition being practised by news agencies such as Inter Press Service (www.ips.org) and media communication websites such as *The Hoot* (www.thehoot.org), *The Communication Initiative* (www.comminit.com/), and *Center for Community Journalism and Development* (www.cccd.org).

One of the earliest progenitors of development news reporting in Asia was *Depthnews* founded by Manila-based *Press Foundation of Asia* (PFA) in 1968. *Depthnews* was a “news feature service to provide model stories for the region’s press: **D**evelopment **E**conomic and **P**opulation **T**hemes news, or DEPTHnews.” In the citation for its 1991 *Ramon Magsaysay Award for International Understanding*, PFA wrote, “*Depthnews* stories typically address issues of social change and development that are often overlooked by purveyors of “hard news”.¹ However, subscriptions to *Depthnews’* feature service, and support for the Press Foundation of Asia began to decline in the mid-90s and it ceased operation in December 2001.²

¹ <http://www.rmaf.org.ph/Awardees/Biography/BiographyPFA.htm> (Accessed July 2006)

² Juan L. Mercado, former editor of *Depthnews* recalls the factors leading to the closure:

*“One of the ironies of PFA was its founders – Amitabha Chowdhury and the late Tarzie Vittachi (both Ramon Magsaysay Award winners) - chose to headquarter the fledgling organisation in the Philippines because of constitutionally-guaranteed press freedom. Those guarantees, however, proved brittle. The martial law regime permitted PFA to operate, as part of its campaign to dress up the (Marcos) dictatorship. The regime, for example, swiped the concept of development journalism - which PFA pushed to ensure professional perceptive reports of Asia’s growth and setbacks - to mean “sunshine news”, that is, stories that avoided challenging the government. That enabled the organisation to carry on projects it innovated earlier, like *Depthnews*.*

“But PFA’s top leadership — among them Chino Roces and Eugenio Lopez Jr — were detained and constrained at every turn. I was also detained in the first wave of journalists’ arrests in September 1972. This hostile milieu prevented the emergence and maturing of a second generation of younger and equally path-blazing leaders. Momentum can carry one only so far. It did enable PFA to win the Magsaysay Award in 1991. But the drive that comes from renewed leadership was gone. And the inevitable decimation from deaths of PFA editors like Mochtar Lubis of Indonesia, Alan Chalkley, Vittachi and others took its toll. By 1995, it was clear that lack of young leadership and stagnant programs eroded the broad support PFA enjoyed from the region’s major newspapers.” (Email correspondence, Aug. 8, 2007)

In development communication, the central issue was how to effectively communicate information about agricultural innovations – primarily the adoption of new farming technology – to farmers in the Philippines. Its communication strategies, which relied on a combination of folk media and audio-visual aids, centred on the principle of communicating from within the knowledge base and life experiences of the farmers – i.e. the ethnographic method of seeking solutions to existing problems from a grassroots’ perspective and experience. The key strategy was engaging with the grassroots and empowering them with practical information.

Development journalism basically stretches this principle of grassroots communication by extending journalistic conventions and the conventional array of stories often framed by crisis, conflict and adversities, to embrace the context of community development imperatives. Thus, development journalism is neither an apology for governments nor a radical form of reporting. Essentially, development journalism is premised on the conviction that stories of the poor, the disenfranchised and the community where their potentials for human development have yet to be fully realised, can be narrated in other forms. That is, to frame and angle the stories towards constructive social change and transformation.

The next section explores the development journalism genre as a plausible model for the best practices of journalism in the Asian media setting.

DEVELOPMENT JOURNALISM AS A PRACTICE

Alan B. Chalkley (1979), an economic journalism trainer and one of the early proponents of development reporting from the Press Foundation of Asia (PFA), advocated that the journalist’s primary task was to inform, to interpret, to put the facts in a human context, and to draw informed conclusions. In the development journalism genre, the journalist’s central task is to show-and-tell by concrete examples, the development imperatives to their readers and the government. Rather than reporting disparate information in digestible capsules, the development journalist reflects on the question of how the series of stories written over a period could in time make a difference to prevailing realities. This is in contrast to the conventional fragmented reporting of issues at the structural, corporate, institutional and governmental levels.

Journalism educator Jo Ellen Fair (1988) conceptualises development journalism as reporting that relates to the primary, secondary and tertiary needs of a country’s population. She describes it as news that satisfies the needs of a country’s population and enhances self-reliance, i.e. news that relates to development or to social, economic or political problems. Johan Galtung and Richard Vincent provide

a more contemporary concept of development journalism. The journalist's task, they say, is to unravel the threads of the development drama that take place both in the centre and on the periphery, pick them out of the intricate web of relationships, "hold them up in the sunlight, and demonstrate the connections to readers, listeners and viewers" (1992 p. 146).

Essentially, development journalism eschews the assumption of detached observation inherent in conventional journalism. Instead, development journalism works on the principle of journalistic engagement with the audience to start a dialogue. The development journalism mode of communication is bottom-up, which allows the grassroots to make their concerns to the policy makers known, via the media. Thus, journalism must give individuals a voice to articulate alternative visions of society. Galtung and Vincent (1992) propose that development journalism requires a re-orientation of conventional journalistic principles such as:

1. "Whenever there is a reference to development, try to make it concrete in terms of human experience" (p.151). Journalists should write about people as subjects, actors and agents rather than as objects or victims with "needs deficits".
2. A development-oriented journalist would never forget the dimension of democracy. "The task of the media is to report what the system is doing. Democracy can only function when there is a free flow of information between people, the system and the media. Using the media to make people visible, both as objects and as subjects, becomes one task. Using it to expose the system through investigative reporting is the second. Using the media to expose media that fail to do their job, is the third" (p. 160).
3. Consider the possibility of reporting about development, not critically in terms of problems, but constructively in terms of positive programmes. Success stories may contribute to a general sense of optimism that can generate more momentum for democracy and development. People in similar situations elsewhere can benefit from such success stories if the report is adequately concrete (p. 162).
4. Allow the "people" to talk. This means giving them a voice. A useful approach is for journalists to sit down with a range of people to discuss the meaning of development to generate "an enormous range of visions" as well as "how-to" insights (pp.163-164).

Journalism educator, Shelton Gunaratne (1999), describes development journalism as an integral part of a "new journalism" that involves analytical interpretation, subtle investigation, constructive criticism and sincere association with the grassroots

rather than, by journalistic conventions, with the elites. He argues that development journalism is not compatible with either the “libertarian concept”, which defines the function of the mass media as providing information and entertainment; or the “authoritarian concept”, which stifles criticism of political machinery and the officials in power, and imposes a top-down approach to problem solving.

Development journalism does not involve so much a change in techniques or style of reporting as an attitudinal and cultural change in the journalist’s judgment of news, selection of news sources, and interpretation of newsworthy issues. The development journalist often goes beyond the paradigm of objectivity to actively instigate public discussion of possible resolutions to prevailing issues. He or she provides sources and information relevant to the clarification of core values. In the process, they generate constructive community discussions to seek workable resolutions. The development journalist’s aim is therefore not merely to persuade readers that a problem exists. It is to engage them in a search for pragmatic solutions to ongoing issues inherent in areas ranging from race and religion to public health, environment, education and human rights.

To recap, development journalism as understood from the dominant media paradigm is akin to government sponsored journalism. Development journalism’s pro-government image, arguably, was less the cause of its fundamental goals than how it was practised by journalists in parts of Asia where governments are inclined to define what should or should not be reported by the media.

EVALUATING DEVELOPMENT JOURNALISM AS BEST PRACTICE

The development-oriented journalist’s work does not by definition deal exclusively with development issues, though that is clearly a primary concern. A newspaper’s content is influenced by the variety of information and entertainment needs of its readers. But a development journalism-oriented newspaper treats popular cultural content and entertainment news as peripheral. Central to a development journalism-oriented newspaper is its treatment of news and information as a catalyst for positive social change. While recognising that it must adhere to the standards of ethical journalism, development journalism is continually evaluated against the criteria of community growth and human development rather than the bottom-line of circulation figures, ratings and advertising revenue.

The following pages provide a sample of stories published in *The Hindu* and *South China Morning Post*. The stories are by definition development-oriented news, which the pioneer of mass communication research, Wilbur Schramm (1964), categorised under economics, environment, science and health, education, population, food and shelter.

THE HINDU

01 JUNE 2003

THE BUS TO MUMBAI

Chandrababu Naidu is India's most celebrated Chief Minister. But parts of rural Andhra Pradesh, like Mahbubnagar, not 100 kilometres from where the seat of power is, are in big trouble. The crisis is driving large numbers of people to leave the State in search of work. The government though, does not concede to a major exodus. P. SAINATH and two others tour the villages in Mahbubnagar district and join migrants on a bus to Mumbai. Is the problem just drought?



Photo by P. Sainath

The bus is already full as early as an hour before departure. A couple of stops further on, the vehicle will be packed. Children are among the passengers.

MAHBUBNAGAR NAGAR BUS DEPOT (TELANGANA, ANDHRA PRADESH):

THE mercury is coming up on 46°, maybe 47°C as the passengers arrive. It's the bus to Mumbai and its 58 seats will be more than full. Perhaps at the starting point itself.

It's a temperature at which you hate everybody and arguments driven by colourful prose ring out in the bus depot (and on the buses). The travellers, like lakhs of

others in this poorest of Andhra Pradesh's districts, are voting with their feet. Most of them are tiny farmers and landless workers. The biggest group consists of Lambada adivasis. There are many poor dalits too. All getting out of a situation they find intolerable. In some estimates, close to a third of the district's populace could be working outside it just now.

Since they're doing so in May, the cliché of drought presents itself at once. The problem with that notion is that an even larger number of people migrate from here in the period from November to January.

There are three unusual passengers on the Mumbai bus today. Ramulu, secretary of the Andhra Pradesh Agricultural Workers Union in this district. Venugopal, a reporter with *Prajashakti*, a Telugu daily. And yours truly. This way, the travellers are our captives. For some hours, anyway. Now we can check if they are "fleeing the drought" that's believed to be the sole cause of distress here.

Why check? And why Mahbubnagar? Because it's less than a hundred kilometres from the State capital. Which is where the country's most celebrated chief minister sits. The crisis in the State's agriculture — and governance — is real. It has gripped this district for some time now. But with a national media reluctant to see that Andhra Pradesh is somewhat bigger than Hyderabad, Mr. Naidu's policies have not faced the scrutiny they deserve.

The extent of the distress-driven exodus is not agreed on, though. "There have been migrations from Mahbubnagar for a long time," says District Collector Madhusudhan Rao. And in that sense, he's right. However, he sees no reason to conclude that they have been much worse this season. In fact, "more work and grain is reaching the villages in this period".

Are migrations no greater, really?

When I tried making it to Mumbai from here in 1993, I was told then there was one bus from the region weekly. Today, there are 32 to 34 buses a week going straight to Mumbai from here. If the two more routes the Andhra Pradesh State Road Transport Corporation is planning come through, that number could cross 45 buses weekly.

Then there are the private bus services to Mumbai. And tens of thousands also take the trains each season. More have done so this year. All three trains going to Mumbai via Thandur are running full every day.

"About 65 per cent of this village has gone out looking for work on those buses," Chennaiah had laughed. That was in Kanimetta village of the Kothakota *mandal* the day before. He himself was a low-level labour recruiter. "That route to Mumbai is our lifeline." "Mumbai" really means several stops in Maharashtra, including Pune and Thane.

People are leaving Mahbubnagar in very large numbers. Many do so each year, anyway, as the Collector points out. But the flow has been getting worse in recent years. And it's certainly heavier in this one.

A large part of the RTC's revenue here comes from the Mumbai route. And it's clear that there are often over 100 passengers on those 58-seat buses. Which means some people are standing for much of that 18-hour journey. And then there are the huge numbers from this district heading for Hyderabad. Also, to at least 30 other destinations ranging from Gujarat to Rajasthan, even Orissa.

What accounts for this desperate out-migration?

"Without Mumbai and Pune, we cannot survive," says Pandu Nayak, a Lambada adivasi. In Perkiveed *tanda* (colony) of the Koilkonda *mandal* where he's from, "Our households are deep in debt. Our children, starving".

Venkataiah, from the same *tanda* adds: "Any chance of agriculture here is finished. The costs are simply too high. If you are a labourer, it's worse. In a month, you cannot find more than three or four days of work. All this makes life too hard. And now there is no water either. The government does nothing." ("Venkataiah" is not at all a typical Lambada name. But many in that community adopt such "mainstream" names when they venture out. Letting people know you're an adivasi is asking to be exploited).

What he's telling us pretty much matches with what we've already seen. In the villages of Gurrakonda, Kondapur or Vepur, for instance. People here are in deep distress. What little work there is, is in the hands of contractors who have cornered government projects. They prefer labourers from outside as such a group would be more submissive. Hence, not many from the district can find work here. Mahbubnagar's workers have been the backbone of some of the toughest construction projects in dozens of cities in other States. There, their labour is sought after. Here, they are kept idle.

However, the same contractors of Telangana will use thousands of these men and women in Rajasthan or Orissa. Cut off and alone in those States, they are more dependent and pliant.

Countless households lie locked up. Thousands of others have just the oldest member of the family left behind. The mass migrations destroy any chance of education for the children who accompany their parents for months at a time. (This is A.P.'s worst district in terms of literacy.) While agriculture has done badly countrywide, it has sunk in this State. And that for some time now. Growth in agriculture last year was minus 17.06 per cent.

And it wasn't just the drought. Mahbubnagar has done badly in good monsoon years, too. Other States have faced worse droughts without agriculture caving in to the extent it has in Andhra Pradesh. Often, too, migrants are leaving from relatively water surplus regions of the State. The country has seen many policies hostile to small farmers and landless workers this past decade. But here, they've been extra harsh. This State leads in farmers' suicides.

There's a steely ruthlessness towards the rural poor. The year 2001 saw rice exported to overseas markets at Rs. 5.45 a kilogram. It was a time of widespread hunger and distress. Yet, the State sold rice to its own poor at Rs. 6.40 a kg. Some of the "exports" were rejected as "unfit for humans". It was after this that food-for-work programmes began here in that season. Huge power tariff hikes, soaring input costs, fake pesticides, all these brought small farmers to their knees. Massive corruption in the food-for-work-programme hasn't helped either. It's all added up to an awful crisis.



Labourers from Mahbubnagar travel to nearly 30 destinations across the country to find work. Meanwhile, contractors bring in workers from other States to work in Mahbubnagar.

Debt-driven small farmers and landless workers have left this district in larger numbers this season. About two lakh people migrating seasonally has never been seen as an issue. The estimates of those on the move now vary vastly. From six lakhs to eight to 10 lakhs, according to claims in the Telugu press. Where they are going, there is at least better money.

“Yes, we earn more in Mumbai than here,” says Venkataiah. “But the moment we are back we have to pay our creditors much of what we save.” He could earn up to Rs. 250 in a single day in Mumbai as a carpenter. And he finds work on “maybe 15 days in a month. Twenty if I’m lucky”. However “don’t forget our loans here”, he says. That lands them in an unending trap. Every single person going to Mumbai is also in debt. “Whatever we earn in Mumbai, most of that goes in repaying our loans.”

We are on the road to Mumbai. Even as we sit in different parts of the bus, speaking to migrants, drivers Fashiuddin and Sattar prove a mine of information. They’ve done this route many times and know their passengers. Fashiuddin gives us a virtual disaster tour. He points to streams that have died, tanks that have dried. The lack of repairs to tanks and canals. The devastated fields, the impossibility of keeping your farm running.

“These are really hard working people, sir. But who cares for them? They cannot find work here. There is nothing done to give them employment. They are poor and in debt. On top of all of that comes the drought.” He’s clear that there is a significant man-made element to the crisis. “If only there was an attempt to give them some work,” he says. “That’s why they go to Mumbai,” he adds. “Most of them will go and work in building construction, brick making and roads.”

Patterns change according to where more construction is taking place. “Eighty per cent of this bus will empty at Pune,” predicts Sattar. He’s speaking as he helps a young woman with a two-month old baby board the bus at a stop. There’s a delay, with several tearful family farewells enacted at the same time. Sattar mixes sympathy with an ability to plug the farewell routines swiftly.

Our surprise find on board is M. Ganesh, a 20-year-old student. A Telugu whose family is in Mahbubnagar, he studies in Mumbai and stays there with his brother.

Ganesh is proud to be a card-carrying Shiv Sainik.

He is a bit bewildered when we ask him about Sena chief Thackeray's latest call for ridding Mumbai of "outsiders", especially poor ones landing up in the metro seeking work. "I've heard nothing about this," he says. "I've been away. But I will enquire about it when I get there."

In their destination towns, the migrants will live in appalling conditions. On the street, in soul-breaking slums or, at best, in filthy chawls. "Still, it's better than going hungry here," says Nagesh Goud on the bus. "At least we earn something." Increasingly, a large part of that something gets chewed up in medical costs. One of the biggest problems faced by the district's poor workers is rising health expenses.

Every migrant you speak to confirms he or she has had more than one episode of jaram (fever). "A visit to a doctor in Mumbai could cost between Rs. 40 to Rs. 100," says Nagesh. "That's not counting the medicines." The children fall ill very often. Most people cannot cope with the medical costs. And many have taken ailments from the cities back home to their villages. The general immunity of a population that's undernourished and overworked seems to be in decline. Yet, many more venture out to evade hunger and misery.

With a population of some 34 lakhs and perhaps close to a third of that ending up outside, Mahabnagar is in big trouble. Some other districts, too, face similar hardships. Software is not the only thing A.P. exports. Nor hi-tech brains to the United States. Misery-driven migrations, hunger, and distress are among its other major products.

P. Sainath is one of the two recipients of the A.H. Boerma Award, 2001, granted for his contribution in changing the nature of the development debate on food, hunger and rural development in the Indian media.

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Living Villages is a *Post* project with the Home Affairs Department to identify villages where the inhabitants have successfully taken the initiative to make their community better: safer, more pleasant and more vibrant. The rule was the villagers much have done the work themselves: no improvements by government agencies or developers were considered.

More than 70 villagers were proposed, and after exhaustive surveys we whittled them to seven. We have featured the six runners-up over the past six weeks, and today we reveal Peng Chau as the winning village.

Our hope is that recognition for these villages will encourage others to improve their own surroundings.

The winner: Peng Chau



Island folk seek out paths of the past to bring about sustainable development for the future

Kevin Sinclair and Annaliese O'Young Ruo-hwa

When Sannie Chan Lit-fong discovered a giant euphorbia tree had blown over in a June storm, she and other Peng Chau villagers did not simply lament the destruction of an island landmark.

Instead, volunteers armed with saws and axes went to the gully and cut healthy branches from the stricken rare tree, listed as an endangered species.

Sacred to fishermen which regard the species as a guardian angel, the giant euphorbia figured on most maps of Peng Chau.

Today nine young euphorbia, known as yuk kei lun ("Jade Unicorn") in Cantonese, now grow on the northern shore of the eco-friendly island.

"In a few years, they will be magnificent grove," notes Ms Chan with satisfaction.

Such prompt and automatic care for the environment is typical on Peng Chau, the one square kilometre island off Lantau. Under the umbrella of Green Peng Chau Association of which Ms Chan is president, a package of policies and programmes has transformed the island.

Stroll through the narrow lanes of the old village and no scrap of litter mars the neat streets. If there are no trees planted, then shrubs and plants in substantial pots decorate every house.

There is pride in the air.

Ms Chan, born on Peng Chau, spearheads the environmental movement that has won plenty of support from her fellow islanders; a recent survey showed more than 70 per cent actively support her various programmes.

These are ambitious. And realistic. Not only does she hope to brand Peng Chau as "eco-island" but also as a source of organic food and products.

We wander down the vast promenade which the government built between 1999 and 2003 at the phenomenal cost of \$158 million. Thousands of tonnes of concrete were used to create a 1.31km seawall enclosing 4.55 hectares of reclamation.

The huge chunk of concrete eliminated the famed waterfront arc of beach. It cut residents and restaurants off from the sea view. It was built, Ms Chan notes, without any consultation with most villagers.

Today no public works are done on the island without Green Peng Chau having input.

"When I was young, the island was totally self sufficient in food,"

"Chan's group has a bundle of proposals which add up to a comprehensive environmental and economic package. All help improve quality of life"



she muses. "Now we rely absolutely on bringing food in from outside." She wants to change that.

One major plan is to plant organic vegetables in a 30,000 square foot garden and to encourage other farmers, who are reappearing on the island, to follow organic practices.

The vegetables, sold at weekends in the island market, encourages tourists, an important economic part of the overall programme devised by Ms Chan.



"We are linking environment with tradition," she explains from the spacious room which is part library, part educational centre and headquarters of the eco-island movement.

"What we're trying to do here is to create a model for all Hong Kong, particularly New Territories villages," she said.

For years, the trim, bustling figure of Ms Chan has been a familiar weekend sight, leading groups of visitors around the island, pointing out some of the centuries-old limestone kilns, the abandoned factory that in the 1950s was the largest mattress manufacturer in Southeast Asia and the selection of temples that date back to the Ming Dynasty.

Her brisk educational tours were part of the reason she received a \$1.5 million grant last year to fund sustainable development. She views sustainable development as encompassing the preservation of the island's heritage - it has been occupied by man for an estimated 5,000 years - and protection of the three quarters of the island which remains rural or covered with trees.

That natural setting supports a thriving biodiversity with a huge variety of birds and insects taking advantage of the trees that cover most of Peng Chau. Offshore, divers count 35 different sorts of coral and from hillside vantage points you can sometimes see pink dolphins at play.

Ms Chan's group has a co-ordinated bundle of proposals which add up to a comprehensive environmental and economic package. All help to improve quality of life for villagers and visitors.

"I see the combination of our traditional island way of life with care for the wide range of animal and plant life as an attractive form of eco-tourism," she explains.

"Everybody benefits.

"That's why we have the eco-tourism education centre. It's important that villagers knows that eco-tourism helps everyone."

Farm owners who once grew rice can make a prosperous living by growing speciality crops of organic vegetables and fruit, which can fetch high prices at weekend markets.

And abandoned farmland is being brought back into productive use by renting plots to "Sunday farmers". These are people from town who go to Peng Chau at the weekend for the quiet satisfaction of growing their own organic crops.

This has a double benefit. It transforms overgrown fields into neat vegetable plots and helps boost green education.

One major thrust of the Green Peng Chau movement is to preserve the antiquities and monuments which stud the island. Many of the old kilns which were once so important to the island economy are now crumbling to ruin under luxuriant vegetation.

In the final phase of her programme, Ms Chan plans an eco-tourism education centre aimed at both residents and visitors. It will explain to tourist how what they see today fits in with the vibrant past.

Then she hopes to establish a museum which will trace man's 5,000 years on the island.

THE SIX OTHER FINALIST VILLAGES:



Tai Hang, Tai Po



Sheung Shui Heung



Tai O, Lantau



Yung Lung Wai, Yuen Long



San Shek Wan, Lantau



Tai Shui Hang, Sha Tin

WHY PICK THESE VILLAGES? READ FULL REPORTS AT WWW.SCMP.COM

Stories about India's poor by P.Sainath, rural affairs editor at *The Hindu*, show the essence of reporting from the perspectives of the victims of development. In an interview with Sainath on his coverage of India's poor, I asked him:

"In your lecture at Trinity College in Connecticut 2002 (you were then the first McGill Fellow in International Studies at the college) you were quoted in the campus newsletter Mosaic (April 2002) as saying: *"When I'm covering poverty as a journalist, I go and live in the communities I'm writing about. If I can't see the issues through their eyes, there's no point going and perpetuating old stereotypes about poverty."* This approach to journalism marks most of your writings, for instance in the story *"The bus to Mumbai"* (*The Hindu*, 01 June 2003) where you joined a group of migrant villagers from Mahbubnagar district on a bus in 46 degree heat. How did this immersive form of reporting evolve in your work?"

Sainath replied:

"I wouldn't like to pretend this conclusion was the outcome of some sublime intellectual process. It seems to me fairly simple - where you stand is often determined by where you're sitting. If you have not been in the hut that has no electric power, not a single bulb, how will you understand why the children in that home can never do well in studies? It's not important to merely 'see' the hut, but to be there when there is no power. I don't think it is 'good' to travel with migrants. I think it's a bit fraudulent to write knowingly about their lives if you have never done so. Even if you do it several times and not every single time, you'll be astonished at the depth it brings to your perceptions. For instance, we know that the average rural woman in India spends a third of her life on three chores: fetching water, firewood and fodder. But 'knowing' this is one thing. Walking with her, trying to live her day as she does — would that be the same thing? Try it once. It will give you an insight into the quality of her life that you will never forget and that will inform your work thereafter." (See chapter 2 for full interview.)

As Galtung and Vincent³ in their criticism of the structural flaws of the conventional news paradigm in the reporting of community development issues, observed:

³ Galtung, Johan, and Richard C. Vincent (1992), *Global glasnost: toward a new world information and communication order?* Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press.

It would be perfectly legitimate for a journalist to ask people around the world strange questions such as, 'What, according to you, is the meaning of life?' 'Do you feel life is worth living?' 'Would you live it again?' These are not questions that should be posed by social scientists alone. To have people reveal their inner agenda, not only their striving for material benefits, or at least for a minimum material basis, is already drama. Doing so journalistically, newspapers would become more similar to literature. There would be more truth, more realism, and less superficiality. Development must ultimately be human development. (1992 p.166)

Intrinsic in Galtung and Vincent's critique of the conventional news paradigm are first, journalists should adopt a more participatory approach to the reporting of human conditions; and second, journalists should perceive the issue of community development at the basic human level rather than through "objective" econometrics. Their observation echoed Mustapha Masmoudi's indictment of the world information order in the 70s: (1979, as cited in Stevenson, 1988):⁴

Information should be understood as a social good and a cultural product, and not as a material commodity or merchandise. ... Information is not the prerogative of a few individuals or entities that command the technical and financial means enabling them to control communication; rather, it must be conceived as a social function intrinsic to the various communities, cultures, and different conceptions of civilization. (p.143)

Galtung and Masmoudi observe that the dominant news paradigm of conventional journalism is not completely adequate in explaining the diverse social, psychological and cultural components of community development.

The *South China Morning Post* series of stories (October to November 2005) on model villages in Hong Kong provides an example of journalism's active role in promoting positive community change – in this case, inculcating a sense of community pride among respective villagers in Hong Kong's suburbs. Its blurb reads:

"*Living Villages* is a Post project with the Home Affairs department to identify villages in which the inhabitants have successfully taken the initiative to make their community better: safer, more pleasant and more vibrant. The rule was the villagers must have done the work themselves: no improvements by government

⁴ Stevenson, Robert L. (1988), *Communication, development and the Third World: the global politics of information*, Longman, NY & London.

agencies or developers were considered. More than 70 villages were proposed, and after exhaustive surveys we whittled them down to seven. Each Tuesday (Oct.5) from today, we present the six runners-up and the winning village on November 5. Hopefully, recognition for these villages will encourage others to improve their own surroundings.”

Written in descriptive narrative laced with strings of direct quotes, the villagers took centre stage in the stories. *SCMP* editor Fanny Fung was quoted as saying:

“Today many remote villages have withered and died, the clan scattered overseas. But more than 600 villages still remain. They are proud entities of the past, but are facing towards the future. It was to identify and honour communities that have tried successfully to help themselves ” (*SCMP, Nov.17, 2005*).

SCMP reported that journalist Kevin Sinclair, who wrote the stories with Anneliese O’Young Ruo-hwa, “went all over the New Territories to interview villagers”. Sinclair said the villages had become “the home for an interesting mix of people – including locals, expats and the working population – as an increasing number of indigenous villagers had left.” (*SCMP, Nov.17, 2005*)

The *Living Villages* series in the *SCMP* in 2005 mirrors the first experimental development journalism project in India in 1968.

DEVELOPMENT JOURNALISM EXPERIMENT: “OUR VILLAGE CHHATERA”

Our Village Chhatera represents the long history of development journalism in India. Chhatera is a village 25 miles northwest of Delhi. It had a population of 1,500 made up of landowning Jats and Brahmins and landless *Harijans*. Chhatera was the focus of a fortnightly column published in 1968 by *The Hindustan Times*, which showcased life in an Indian village. The purpose of the column was to change the orientation of the paper to include broader coverage of the rural areas. The criterion used for selecting a “typical” Indian village was that the village should be neither too near to Delhi, nor far away in either of the neighbouring states of Haryana or Uttar Pradesh. It should also be neither too small nor too large; and it should not be on the main road and yet not so remote as to be inaccessible. (Verghese, 1976)

⁵ See interview with Verghese in Chapter 2, and his commentary in Chapter 3. *Biography of Verghese* accessible at: <http://www.rmaf.org.ph/Awardees/Biography/BiographyVergheseBoo.htm>

The *Hindustan Times's* first coverage of Chhatera, initiated by its editor BG Verghese⁵ was in the form of a cover story for its Sunday magazine. Initially the villagers, except the children, were shy. But the newspaper won the confidence of the people. The farmers and elders began to tell the writers their problems, which were subsequently reported. "Our *Village Chhatera*" became a channel for grassroots input on how development could take place in the community. The column found itself playing the role of a catalyst by planting new ideas in the minds of the villagers and providing the needed linkage system between the people and the authorities. When the column started, several problems were brought to the attention of the government. One concerned a bridge that was in a total state of disrepair. Because 80 per cent of the village's fields were on the other side of the drain, cultivation was affected.

Chhatera wanted and needed a proper "all weather" bridge. The *Hindustan Times* publicised the villagers' problems with photographs. After its publication, the authorities reacted. District officials visited Chhatera. Later, a new bridge was provided along with a short-lived bus service. Soon after, development officers started visiting the village regularly. The village also became a social laboratory. Students from a university school of planning and agriculture in Delhi prepared a master plan and regional plan for Chhatera and its neighbourhood. The Department of Atomic Energy initiated a scheme to place television sets in 80 villages around Delhi to pre-test a bi-weekly farmers' programme, *Krishi Darshan*, focusing on improved agriculture. Village *Jat Chaupal*, was selected as the location. An open space was prepared for the audience. It was made a condition that everybody, irrespective of caste or sex, should be permitted to visit *Jat Chaupal*.

A major impact of television was that social taboos broke down. Men of all castes gathered together. The segregation of the sexes broke down as women joined the audience seated on one side. Soon after, the Syndicate Bank's Chhatera branch opened in 1970. Old habits of saving money gave way to modern banking services. Loans were sought for the purchase of buffaloes or bullocks, for drilling tube wells and for buying tractors. Through the mediation of the *Hindustan Times*, five new tractors were acquired for the village. Other firms provided other needs. For example, fertiliser companies conducted demonstrations and pesticide firms gave trial demonstrations. A leading manufacturer of sewing machines donated a couple of units for a newly formed "mahila mandal" or women's club.

For the journalists of *Hindustan Times*, the experience gave them a true understanding of the social functions of their profession. The journalist's role was not only to

inform, entertain, or analyse events, but also to motivate people to change. For the villagers of Chhatera, the *Hindustan Times* was the purveyor and catalyst for development. The fortnightly column gave them the needed support and confidence that they could do something to improve their socio-economic conditions. The *Hindustan Times* provided the necessary feedback channel for the people to air their problems, grievances and suggestions to government officials.

Implicit in the media work on Project Chhatera is the “immersion” and “involvement” of journalists in experiencing the problems faced by the villagers. Herein lays the common application of development-oriented reporting methods across the community. The point is not that journalists should declare themselves on partisan issues. It does mean that they actively encourage public discussion, providing the public space where shared information is translated into action.

At the core of development-oriented journalism is the element of empowerment. As Red Batario, founder of the Center for Community Journalism and Development in the Philippines notes, “Empowerment information not only helps tell the story more clearly but also how it allows citizens to make sense of what is happening around them, to see that they are not powerless to do something about community problems, and that their voices matter”⁶ (Batario, 2004, p.14).

Journalist Anthony Rowley, presiding judge of the annual Developing Asia Journalism Awards (DAJA), in his foreword to *Voices of Asia* (a compilation of award winning stories on development issues), reminded readers that “good journalism can make people aware of the human dimensions of development in a way that official reports can rarely do”. Development issues, he said, “are often cloaked in official jargon, so that they become unrecognisable as issues involving people. But good journalism can restore the human dimension and allow us to see these problems not in terms of cold statistics but of people and their sufferings.” (in Mettam, 2005:viii)

Journalists from India and the Philippines, generally considered the pioneers of the practice, see development journalism as more than press-statement driven public affairs reporting that is blindly supportive of government projects. On the contrary, development journalism is seen as a process of reporting where journalists and the people interact on a common platform with common goals. The aim is to explore community-led solutions to community development issues.

⁶ See interviews in Chapter 3.

CHARACTERISTICS OF DEVELOPMENT JOURNALISM

The discussion so far points to the following key elements in a development journalist's approach in telling the people's stories:

- Participant observation of events and issues
- Sensitive assessment of readers and community needs and interests
- Commitment of significant time and newsroom resources to research-based stories
- Engagement with the grassroots while being highly aware of opposing views
- Awareness of the impact of the story on the development of grassroots resources
- Contextual, cognitive and experiential knowledge of the issues reported.

The traits of a development journalist, based on the key elements above, are identified as:

- Keen empathy with the grassroots
- Capacity to inspire trust in sources across cultures, age, education, gender, race and class
- Broad research and intercultural communication skills
- Informed conviction on social issues
- Commitment to the social, cultural and political development of the grassroots
- Sensitivity to multi-dimensional perspectives of issues
- Flexible sense of news values and judgment of what is newsworthy.

The general working attitudes of a development journalist can be framed as follows:

- My articles should instigate and influence policies
- I see my profession as a tool of social change and development
- I am not a dispassionate observer of events. I participate in community development projects, interact and live with the people so that I can understand the process of change as they experience it
- I can stimulate social and economic changes in the life of the grassroots in a direction as seen through their eyes, not mine.

Development journalism methods, however, should not be seen as necessarily replacing conventional market-oriented journalistic practice. Arguably, development journalism highlights what conventional reporting has overlooked. That is, it gives equitable access and participation in the media to as wide an audience as it can, across diverse communities. The following table shows the theoretical and practical dimensions of conventional and development-oriented journalism - some of which complement each other.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL DIMENSIONS OF CONVENTIONAL AND DEVELOPMENT JOURNALISM

Conventional journalism

Mainstream source oriented.

Report on random events (What)

Weighs news against criteria of objectivity, interests of readership.

Dominant news value.

Balance in terms of neutrality.

Dispassionate observer.

Story is descriptive.

Occasionally provides possible solutions to issues with minimal consultation with the people.

Formation of public opinion is vertical - from dominant mainstream group to grassroots.

Highlights individual achievements and accomplishments.

Follows prescribed and tested rules and procedures in journalism.

Right to information without hindrance or censorship.
Free press.

Developmental journalism

User-source oriented.

Report on causes and processes leading to the events. (What, how, why)

Weighs news against criteria of development. (community access, equity, participation, self-reliance).

Development news value.

Balance tipped towards the grassroots.

Participant observer.

Story is descriptive and prescriptive.

Elicits alternative solutions to problems as understood and interpreted by the people.

Moulding of public opinion is horizontal - actual views of grassroots and those affected by policies are given priority.

Highlights "community empowerment" as source of self-reliant community.

Tries out new methods and procedures, takes risks - so has more ways of gathering information and its ultimate narratives.

Aware of conflict between reporter's and state's needs to promote development projects.

Deals mainly with crime, law and order, development, disasters, and deviant dramatic events. values,	Deals mainly with social-economic inculcation of development-oriented basic needs for food, shelter and security.
Profit maximisation. Popular appeal.	Runs risk of low readership. Less popular.
Factual reporting, objective, consumption subjective, oriented.	Interpretative (narrative) reporting, community-growth oriented.
Mass entertainment; 'infotainment'	Understanding, attitude and behavioural change.

Interviews with Asian journalists, compiled in the next chapter, show that the development journalist is an active learner as well as a sensitive storyteller and teacher who identifies with the needs and goals of the people. They are not neutral observers who remain unmoved or unchanged by what they see and write. They empathise with the sentiments of the people in social situations, and are themselves changed to some degree, as well as changing the situation in which they are direct participants.

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CHAPTER 2

JOURNALISM FOR THE PEOPLE: DIALOGUE WITH JOURNALISTS FROM ASIA

THIS chapter paints a picture of the personal, cultural and professional attributes of Asian journalists who have won awards for their work in countries where the media are relatively free - such as India, the Philippines, and more recently in Indonesia since the downfall of Suharto in 1998.¹ It also looks at countries known for repressive media laws such as Malaysia, which have continued to stymie the emergence of socially transformative journalism.

Email interviews were conducted with journalists from India, Philippines, Pakistan, Indonesia and Malaysia (and a Malaysian working as a military reporter in Washington DC)² to gather qualitative data to help construct a picture of the attributes that can potentially foster journalistic excellence. Good practices, seemingly, are intrinsic rather than consciously articulated in the journalists' responses. Implicit in a journalist's attempt at gauging their personal benchmark of best practices is their allusion to the more explicit elements of bad - or rather, unethical - practices. Samples of award winning stories by the journalists follow each interview to help readers see the context of the journalists' work across different socio-cultural and political environments.

To grasp at the elements of best practices, I start from my observations of what I see to be poor practices engendered in a newsroom environment. Arguably, a journalist's reward often comes less from the readers' recognition of their stories than from their editors and professional peers.

¹ *Freedom of the press 2006: A global survey of media independence*, Freedom House, New York (2006) describes the media in India, the Philippines and Indonesia as "partly free".

² *An interview with Michelle Tan is included to complement Shahanaaz Habib's. While both their reporting in the war zone does not by definition fall in the development journalism genre, their attempt to reconcile between detached observation and immersive reporting provides a perspective of reporting with conviction - as reflected in the work of the other journalists featured in this chapter.*

For many reporters, particularly those just starting out with no access to clear benchmarks of professional practice, the inclination is to work to meet their editor's approval of acceptable stories in terms of content and narrative style. This pre-determines the way particular issues are reported. Sociologists call this reading of the editor's inclination, and staying on the editor's good books, "role cues". These cues are communicated implicitly, at times intentionally, within the organisational structure. In the context of the media, that is corporate newsroom culture. Bad editors, through their work practice, unconsciously plant bad seeds. In the process, the environment nurtures a generation of bad reporters who self-censor to conform to the editor's inclinations. With the pressures of tight deadlines, reporters - albeit unconsciously - end up conforming to the newsroom's self-censorial tendencies.

Self-censorship, however, is embedded in the news process regardless of where the media operates. Good reporters, however, self-censor for good reasons - to steer clear of defamation, to avoid misrepresenting actualities, to be fair, meticulous with details and solidly accurate. It becomes a worry if self-censorship is habitual and unthinking, and when it is committed more for personal preservation than for ethical principles. Self-censorship committed out of learned fear, in many cases unjustifiably, only leads to uninvestigated legitimate issues, a compromised bigger picture, and concealed truth. This is most prevalent with subservient - or intimidated - journalism in Malaysia, Singapore and Indochina.

The question is whether repressive media laws have effectively hampered best practices, if any, from evolving in the newsroom. Or, are the laws seen as necessary to keep bad editors and bad journalists in check - that is, bad according to the state's definition? The right answer is elusive. What is clear though is that citations of award winning journalism in countries where the media operates under repressive laws have exclusively spotlighted alternative online publications such as *Malaysiakini* and *Aliran* - both located in Malaysia. Few awards have cited the mainstream media. This makes one wonder, as in the case of Malaysia, whether critically defining political events (such as during the reformasi year in 1998 when then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was arrested on sodomy charges) is necessary to spark a critical self-examination of professional values by journalists.

Cultural change from within the news industry in parts of Asia may be a long time arriving given that most don't have a professional fraternity where editors and journalists meet regularly to reflect on the standards of local and regional journalism. Except in India, most countries in Asia do not have independent media bodies or press councils to arbitrate disputes between journalists and the people they cover. The toughest criticism of poor practices in journalism must come from

within the profession - those who are most aware of the ethical decisions and practices of their colleagues.

Best practices in journalism will remain a concept as long as repressive media laws remain, where journalists continue habitually to write routine stories, and while issues of power abuse, deprivation, social injustice, corporate irresponsibility and corrupt governance, are considered out of bounds. The bottom line is - can the average citizen trust journalists to tell them what's really happening in their immediate environment? Apparently not, given the lack of public confidence in journalists' integrity, and a perceived lack of transparency in journalists' reporting because of their close association with politicians, such as in Indonesia, the Philippines, and to an extent, Malaysia. Ultimately, society only works well to the extent that journalists, acutely aware of their professional ideals and ethical practices, are vigilant in keeping watch over the powerful and speaking up for the weak. As P. Sainath notes "journalism is for the people, not the shareholders".

To paint a picture of what best practices mean to veteran journalists in Asia, I searched the internet for "award winning journalists" in Asia, to canvass their perspectives on how they went about writing their award winning stories. My search came up with a list of names, which mainly featured journalists from India and the Philippines. These journalists have won awards from national bodies and international human rights organisations, such as the International Federation of Journalists. One is the *Developing Asia Journalism Award*, made available since 2004 by the Asian Development Bank Institute of Tokyo.³

Further searching led to the journalists' award winning stories, which were cited online. Separate sets of questions were formulated for the respective journalists, with constant reference to their award winning stories. The journalists were asked about the process they took in researching and writing the story, the ethical and professional issues they faced, and their perception of the attributes they considered to be significant in fostering excellence in journalism.

The journalists were then contacted by phone to arrange the email interviews. These were conducted with several follow-ups for clarification. The email dialogues were

³ *The award is sponsored by the Tokyo-based Asian Development Bank Institute and Asian Development Bank, to acknowledge Asian and Pacific print journalists who produce high quality, balanced coverage of local issues affecting growth and development, and encourage good governance and policy-making in developing countries in the Asia-Pacific region. The awards focus on excellence in journalistic reporting about poverty, women and development issues.*

conducted over three months. A few were followed up with face-to-face interviews in Mumbai, New Delhi, Manila and Jakarta. Face-to-face interviews averaging an hour, were conducted with the awardees, and recorded on digital video.

The common referents of best practices in journalism alluded to by the journalists range from the relatively quixotic views of crusading journalism with underlying characteristics of development journalism, representing the plights of the weak and disenfranchised, to the realities of committed enterprise journalism in exposing public corruption and social injustices. To the journalists, best practices in journalism share these elements, as extracted verbatim from the email interviews:

- Methodical and good information organisational skills.
- Keen eye for statistical analyses.
- Dogged determination in fieldwork research.
- A keen eye on the big picture and context of issues.
- Context of meeting with sources must be clarified on the outset.
- Understanding the consequences or implications of the story on the victims or sources.
- Focus on the processes of events and the “why” apart from the “what” to achieve greater depth in the stories.
- Healthy dose of scepticism balanced by optimism with the good in people.
- Mutual trust and confidence between journalist and sources formed through years of relationship.
- Bridging the widening great disconnect between journalists and their readers.
- Immersive reporting from experiencing the life of the people in the stories.
- Capacity building through reporting on community and people development.
- Stories geared towards community transformation.
- Social obligations as a citizen first, journalist second.
- Strong conviction that your stories can make a difference to society.
- Acute sense of right and wrong.
- Keen empathy with the people you’re writing about.
- Becoming an activist and advocate for the poor and oppressed.
- Passion for the stories and issues.
- Believing in what you write.

Interestingly, none of the elements alluded to narrative structure, writing style or composition of journalistic texts. These elements were taken for granted and considered fundamental to professional journalism. Instead, the journalists’ perceptions of best practices focused on the functional aspects of what they wrote, the impact they hoped to achieve, the personal values they brought to their stories, and ultimately how their stories would serve the greater good.

As roving correspondent for *Frontline*, Dionne Bunsha, notes of her approach to writing about the social injustices in India "... anything that I am passionate about and which I have a strong background knowledge on turns out well. Anything that doesn't make me feel strongly shows in the story". Or as Glenda Gloria, editor of investigative magazine, *Newsbreak*, says, "It's usually the romance that sustains us when the going gets tough. We became journalists not because we wanted to be famous but because we felt that this profession could somehow make the Philippines a better place to live in."

As a comparison, the Pulitzer Prize for Journalism is awarded for distinguished investigative journalism work according to some the following criteria as noted in its website (<http://www.pulitzer.org/administration>):

- meritorious public service values;
- explanatory reporting that illuminates a significant and complex subject, demonstrating mastery of the subject, lucid writing and clear presentation, in print or in print and online;
- reporting on significant issues of local concern, demonstrating originality and community expertise;
- feature writing giving prime consideration to high literary quality and originality;
- editorial writing, the test of excellence being clearness of style, moral purpose, sound reasoning, and power to influence public opinion in what the writer conceives to be the right direction.

The criteria for journalistic excellence cited by other organisations are:

- *Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism* (www.pcij.org) believes that the media play a crucial role in scrutinising and strengthening democratic institutions. The media could - and should - be a catalyst for social debate and consensus that would promote public welfare. "To do so, the media must provide citizens with the bases for arriving at informed opinions and decisions". Thus, the center "promotes investigative reporting on current issues in Philippine society and on matters of large public interest".
- *The Walkley Awards in Australia* (<http://www.walkleys.com/categories.html#print>) recognise work that shows "courageous journalism, as well as writing excellence, accuracy, storytelling, newsworthiness, ethics, research, impact and public benefit". In terms of the story narrative, awards are given for work that shows "creativity, originality and writing flair".

- *The Ramnath Goenka Excellence in Journalism Awards* (www.expressindia.com/news/rngf/awards/index.html) from India “honours journalists who have shown extraordinary strength of character and integrity while reporting under dangerous, challenging or difficult circumstances. Ideally, the story or series should have exposed issues or problems such as improprieties or injustice, mismanagement, and/or corruption. It should have raised public awareness on the issue or involve taking extraordinary risks to reach a story that would not have been accessible easily”.

The RNG Award for Excellence in Journalism also “honours journalists who encourage public trust in the media by practising the highest standards of their profession in the face of political or economic pressures”. The criteria for awards are the significance of a news story to the public (or people’s) interest, resourcefulness and courage in gathering information, and skills in relating the stories to their readers. Other criteria are:

- Degree of difficulty/logistical challenges experienced.
- Comprehensiveness of the report.
- Resources available and means used for gathering information.

The above awards for excellence in journalism are directed at the journalist’s internal attributes and narrative appeal. However, as the dialogue with Asian journalists in the following section shows, attributes of best practices are externally directed at the human consequences and community transformative elements of the stories. The dialogue is categorised in three parts: reporting for the people; exposing the corrupt; reporting from the frontline. Each has its distinct experience yet shared perception of what constitutes best practice.

REPORTING FOR THE POOR AND DISENFRANCHISED

“If you have not been in the hut that has no electric power, not a single bulb, how will you understand why the children in that home can never do well in studies? It’s not important to merely “see” the hut, but to be there when there is no power. I think it’s a bit fraudulent to write knowingly about their lives if you have never done so.”

P. Sainath, Rural Affairs Editor, *The Hindu*

CARE FOR PEOPLE AND FOR WHAT PEOPLE CAN DO

Red Batario

Founder and Director

Center for Community Journalism & Development, Philippines

Eric Loo: What inspired you to start the Center for Community Journalism and Development?

Red Batario: It's a long story but one that I never tire of telling. It was actually born out of frustration with the way journalism, especially in local communities, was not living out its purpose of connecting citizens with issues that truly affect them by enabling them to make better and more informed decisions. Journalism was so one-dimensional and bereft of elements that would make it truly an empowering tool especially for the poor. It was using the conventional and traditional methods of the craft, refusing to think outside the box, and essentially giving prominence to those who already have the power and the loudest voices. It was simply reporting problems, not presenting ways by which ordinary people can solve those problems or that they have the power to do so. Also, the CCJD was founded to facilitate the capacity development of the community media (meaning news organisations and journalists who live and work outside of Metro Manila) since they have long been considered "poorer" cousins (in terms of training and financial resources) of their Manila counterparts.

CCJD clearly outlines its goals and mission in its profile page of www.ccjd.org/index.php. Since its inception in 2001, what has the center achieved so far?

RB: We've had some modest gains since 2001 such as being recognised by the United Nations Development Programme as a facility for media reforms and governance, having established links with media groups and individual journalists across the country in its advocacy campaign for good journalism through the adoption of public journalism approaches and principles. We have also established together with other media organisations like the Philippine Press Institute, Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility, Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, Kapisanan ng mga Brodkasters ng Pilipinas, the Freedom for Filipino Journalists Fund (FFJF), which provides support to families of journalists killed in the line of duty, and press freedom and responsibility advocacy.

The CCJD has trained more than 200 community journalists in public journalism, and in 2006 commenced a 52-hour certificate course in public journalism in partnership with the University of San Agustin in Iloilo City in Western Visayas. The CCJD has also conducted a public journalism workshop in Kuala Lumpur for Southeast Asian media, and presented a paper on the same topic in New Delhi for South Asian journalists. In 2006, the International News Safety Institute based in Brussels, Belgium named the CCJD as its regional office in Southeast Asia, in recognition of its efforts at pushing for journalists' safety and media reforms in the Philippines. I was appointed Regional Coordinator.

CCJD's mission and goals point to the potential of good writing, new ways of thinking about news, and the enabling power of grassroots journalism to change community mindsets about pressing development issues. What drives your optimism that journalists can make a difference?

RB: In many areas where we've worked, the paucity of quality information has led to so much disenfranchisement, especially among the poorer communities. People were either too timid or afraid to speak out because they don't have the kind of information that would show them that they have the right to do so. By enabling media and journalists to engage these communities in a more interactive manner by providing opportunities for participation, by getting more community voices into the stories, by framing issues from a people perspective, journalists actually have begun to stir discussion and debate, which are very important ingredients in a functioning democracy.

I'd now like to ask you about your perception of "development journalism". As understood by Western journalists, this reporting genre has suffered from its image as dull journalism, which mainly focuses on government pronouncements and development policies. Is this perception justified?

RB: Development journalism, or any other genre of journalism, in the first place should not be dull or uninteresting. It is the job of the journalist to make the complex interesting and understandable whether it is a government pronouncement or policy with vast implications on people's lives. In the Philippines, development journalism (there is a university course called development communications) was used in the early 70s to popularise the agriculture and development policies of the government, but the principles were not translated in a manner that would make the stories sound less hackneyed and contrived ... it was like reading propaganda, not news stories that have larger implications, say, for addressing poverty issues or livelihood opportunities. It was later 'shanghaied' by [former President Ferdinand] Marcos to trumpet the achievements of what he called the "new society". To my mind, development journalism should not be the exclusive domain of government

programmes, but should rather encompass a much larger public sphere that would encourage more, for instance, citizen participation in governance because people recognise that it is their right and responsibility to do so.

“Public journalism” (or “civic journalism”) and “development journalism” are terms often used interchangeably by media researchers, media reform advocates and academics. From a practitioner’s perspective, what “bad habits” should conventional journalists shake off to enter into the realm of “development journalism”?

RB: I wouldn’t exactly call these “bad habits”, but rather misplaced perceptions about the underlying principles that define the concept of development journalism. All it takes really is for journalists to shake off their fear of experimenting with a kind of journalism that expands the boundaries of conventional practice - that tells them to re-imagine the craft as a vehicle for community transformation and arena for public discourse.

What are the identifiable traits – in terms of attitudes and professional inclination - of a development-oriented journalist?

RB: That he or she is a citizen first and a journalist second; that he or she is a stakeholder in the community whose work and actions will impact, for better or worse, on the lives of people within that community. Other journalistic traits apply. For example, in the conventional practice of journalism, the dismantling of slum dwellers’ makeshift shanties will be treated as simply a police story with some people getting hurt when residents fought the wrecking crew with stones. A journalist with development orientation will write the story from a rights perspective, will most probably determine the root cause or causes of slum proliferation, will most definitely present a context, will invariably present the incident not simply as a problem for the police or the social welfare department to solve but rather as a community issue that involves all community members.

What values does a development journalist bring to a story, which otherwise are often overlooked, or found lacking in reporters who stay on the beaten track?

RB: All who engage in, and practise journalism should be guided by certain human values like honesty, integrity, fairness, humaneness, and a sense that the practice of the craft is merely entrusted to him or her, that any perceived power arising from that is not inherent in the person who acts as a steward.

Which means, journalists' primary function is to act as their readers' eyes, ears and voice? This implies that journalists are often caught in a quandary as to where they should place their first loyalty – to their employer, editor, their colleagues, their profession – or even their conscience. How can journalists deal with this dilemma?

RB: I agree wholeheartedly with Bill Kovach who wrote in his book *The Elements of Journalism* that journalism's first loyalty is to citizens and that journalists work for citizens rather than for their news organisations. I wish the ideas were mine but I do think he made very sound arguments about where journalists should place their loyalty and determine whom exactly they work for. Allow me to quote him here: "...people who gather news are not like employees of other companies. They have a social obligation that can actually override their employers' immediate interests at times ...". By using this line of thinking, journalists should be able to clearly define their craft and their own purpose.

For development journalism to catch on, what do you think needs to change in the newsroom? Or is it a case of development journalism being shunned in the newsroom because it conflicts with the traditional role of journalists as detached observers?

RB: Let me cite some of the CCJD's experience in promoting the public journalism philosophy. We've worked with the Philippine Press Institute, the national association of publishers, and the KBP, (Philippine's national association of broadcasters) and individual newspapers like the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* in adopting some, if not all of the operative principles of public journalism. I think to some degree, there is a growing appreciation for public journalism although many newsrooms still feel that it would entail a lot of effort and resources to rethink journalism in the face of day-to-day editorial realities. What is important at this point is that reporters and editors are willing to talk about this kind of journalism.

Development journalism is often wedded to concepts like community dialogue, re-connection with the grassroots, empowerment, public advocacy, catalyst for positive change and immersion reporting. Can you cite a concrete example, in the Philippine context, where development journalism has made a difference to the grassroots way of life where traditional journalism has failed?

RB: In a small city in southern Philippines, Kidapawan, North Cotabato, a radio station with a programme that brings together journalists and citizens in a discussion of governance and community issues, was able to influence policy making at the city level especially with regards to making more transparent government processes like posting the budget and appropriations in public places. In Iloilo, a community paper sparked dialogues through a series of stories on hospital waste incineration that led to the plant's closure.

Can you explain how the community dialogues were organised, and process of producing the stories – that sets it apart from “conventional” journalism?

RB: Step 1. Have the journalists start conversations with the community on issues that they consider critically important to address and what their [the communities'] ideas are that may help solve the problem. Step 2. The stories about community members identifying and discussing local issues are published in newspapers and aired over the radio. In sidebars, people are invited to share their ideas on how to address the issue. Step 3. Journalists facilitate dialogues with the help of NGOs who have experience in community organising. Experts are invited as resource persons. People's ideas published in the papers are discussed to identify which ones will work best. Step 4. Results of discussions published and aired, reactions and feedback from other community members, local governments, and organised sectors elicited through phone-ins, mail, or through feedback section. Step 5. Support by local government or relevant authorities/agencies published as follow-up stories

What are the immediate issues in the Philippines that could be better covered by a development journalism approach?

RB: Most of these will have to do with local level governance and sectoral issues like monitoring government projects, inquiring into government performance areas, especially those mandated by the Local Government Code of 1991, as these have a direct bearing on the functioning of communities.

The local media, I presume, is covering the above issues, albeit not in the way that “public journalism” or “development journalism” would have portrayed them. What's your take on the shortcomings, if any, of current coverage of these issues – perhaps in the journalists' explanations of the context, interpretation and analysis of the issues?

RB: Many governance stories are treated merely as disjointed events that do not illustrate the interconnectedness of the different processes. If, for instance, an anti-corruption workshop will be covered, the story that will come out will most probably talk about the launching of a campaign against corruption. The story will not attempt to explain anti-corruption as ensuring transparency and accountability as hallmarks of good governance that can translate to better service delivery, meaningful citizen participation, increased revenues for the local government unit.

In your article, *What is journalism for? Media in the cusp of change*, you articulated very well the factors that hamper the Philippine press from being more effective in carrying out its public service tasks. These factors, you said, ranged from tabloidisation and crass commercialism to concentrated media ownership, low salaries among journalists, and thus, vulnerability to media corruption. What role does CCJD hope to play in the current dismal state of the Philippine media?

RB: The CCJD, together with other media organisations and press associations, has been very active in the advocacy for better journalism and has embarked on projects ranging from developing a media legal assistance bureau (especially for provincial or community journalists and freelancers who do not have the support of big organisations), drawing up an insurance scheme for frontline reporters and editors, conducting training workshops and seminars on public journalism, news safety, media ethics, and developing alternative sources of livelihood for journalists working in poorly paid conditions.

What follow-ups does CCJD have to gauge whether these training workshops have been effective in bringing about change, albeit slowly, in the newsroom?

RB: Our programmes consider the other half of the journalistic equation: meaning, what happens in the community afterwards? (Such as answering the “so what” question.) So what if the story was written? So what happens next? So what are citizens doing to address the problem? So how are citizens applying some of the strategies they have articulated in the news stories? ...by facilitating activities like community-media dialogues and meetings. We also link our projects whenever feasible with ongoing community and social development activities and track progress (to some extent) through email and e-groups. We also identify together with media and community groups, local issues that they may work on together as a public journalism project, such as activating neighbourhood watches or getting the local government to support a water systems programme.

You wrote that, “the problems that hound the media are the same problems that hobble the development and democratisation of Philippine society”. What are these problems, as they affect journalists, and how do you think the problems can be addressed?

RB: One of the biggest problems confronting Philippine journalism is corruption. Another is the commercialisation of the news. Both are deeply embedded in the fabric of journalism and are difficult, if not impossible, to address. Journalists themselves have long recognised these problems and are beginning to talk about the means to address these. One of the strategies initiated by the CCJD was the holding of a series of island workshops and consultations on “*Media Governance*,

Media in Governance” as some sort of reform agenda. Those who participated in the activities arrived at a consensus to draft the Plaridel Declaration, which is a 10-point reform measure involving media organisations, academia, business (especially advertisers), [and] non-government organisations, that hopefully will be adopted as a template or code to supplement various codes of ethics.

Your essay also notes that, “building a free press requires an audience that understands and appreciates the media’s role, one that can tell the difference between good and bad reporting and demands that irresponsible journalists be held to account”. From CCJD’s position, what is “good” and “bad” journalism?

RB: Journalism is said to be “bad” when only one side of the story is presented, when a story is slanted to favour one side or individual or organisation or sector, when it is not a fair accounting of an event or issue, when it is insensitive (to gender, women, children for example), when the story or sourcing is not verifiable, when it is not accurate, when it confuses rather than enlightens, when it obfuscates rather than clarifies. “Good” journalism is the opposite of all of the above.

How can journalists create opportunities for the people to take a more active role in public life? Or is this too much to expect, given the lack of training to understand the language of research and its relevance to “national development”?

RB: Simple. By sincerely demonstrating through their stories and reportage that they truly care about what happens to people and what people can do.

The *Committee to Protect Journalists* notes that at least 34 journalists have been killed in the Philippines since 1992, making the Philippines the fifth deadliest country for investigative journalists today. Are development-oriented journalists any less exposed to intimidation or threats to their lives than traditional investigative reporters exposing corruption in high places?

RB: In a country where a culture of impunity exists, no one is safe from threats, intimidation and even murder.

To operate in this “culture of impunity”, what advice do you have for young journalists starting out or those who hope to take up the profession?

RB: The Center for Community Journalism and Development has always argued that the responsible practice of the craft is the best protection that journalists can ever have in any kind of situation. Consistent practice of responsible journalism results in sustained credibility that can generate citizen support for journalists under threat. Public anger and protest over media harassment and intimidation can only happen when journalists enjoy a fair measure of credibility.

JOURNALISM IS FOR PEOPLE, NOT SHAREHOLDERS

Palagummi Sainath

Rural Affairs Editor, The Hindu.

Author of *Everybody Loves a Drought*, Penguin, Delhi, 1999.

European Commission's Natali Prize in 1994

Boerma Journalism Prize from the United Nations FAO, 2001

Ramon Magsaysay Award for Journalism, 2007

Eric Loo: Wikipedia's Answers.com describes you as an "award-winning Indian development journalist and photo-journalist focusing on social problems, rural affairs, poverty and the aftermaths of globalisation in India". What drives your dedication to report on the plights of the *adivasis*, the *dalits*, the disenfranchised?

P. Sainath: The Indian journalistic tradition, borne of a nation's struggle against imperialism, colonial rule, inequality and injustice. Unlike, say, in the UK, where the media first came up as purveyors of commercial intelligence (eg. Reuters), or acted as soothsayers and salesmen to the project of Empire, the Indian press was the child of our freedom struggle. Almost every national level leader involved in it was a journalist one way or the other. The Indian tradition did not come with the baggage of a false neutrality that simply served the status quo. It came into being by questioning, challenging, exposing, investigating the human condition and asking why the poor, exploited and oppressed were exploited and oppressed. People came to journalism because it offered them this unique opportunity to connect with their society. Most senior members of my extended family were part of the freedom struggle. Journalism and the two go together, or did. It was almost natural to go into journalism.

What forces have shaped your work, and defined for you what's important and what's not?

PS: I believe journalism is for people, not shareholders. For communities, not corporations. Also important: democracy and diversity, both of which are threatened by growing corporate control, which has use for neither. Equally important in a negative sense, rather than "unimportant", is the fundamental feature of the media of our times: the growing disconnect between mass media on the one hand and mass reality on the other.

Your bio highlights your criticisms of conventional journalism’s “service of power” in their coverage of the drought-stricken states in India. Evidently, this “service of power”, which often gives the last word to the authority, is the *modus operandi* of journalists. How can journalism educators teach their students to go beyond this *modus operandi*?

PS: I think we need to make a distinction here between journalists and media. Neither is a homogenous group (though the latter moves rapidly in that direction). There have always been journalists who did not, and do not, believe in the service of power - those who cut through the hypocrisy of pomp and stated the uncomfortable. I’ve always thought that the boy who said, “The Emperor has no clothes!” and pointed to a pathetic but powerful moron who was simply starkers, was one of the fine early journalists. He dragged into the public domain what others knew but would not say. Once he put it there, it made life simpler for everyone except the emperor.

Journalism teachers are not a homogenous group either, as I can attest, having been one myself for over 20 years in schools in this country and elsewhere. There are those who squawk from textbooks (mainly establishment American books), rattling off principles that were never followed or applied to the powerful. There are those with a total emphasis on craft, teaching unburdened by moral responsibility. There are those who have taught their students to think and reason and question, who emphasise the “why” of it. And some who also teach their students by personal example. So there are different kinds of teachers.

Journalism teachers have to decide who they wish to make their students responsible to – readers and people, or bosses and balance sheets. All this happens in a context. As corporate power tightens its grip on the profession, I’d like to see us make the students more and more subversive, undermining of the established order. In 2006 in India, the number of farmers who committed suicide in just one region, Vidharbha, passed 400. This was very poorly covered. Very few national media groups sent their reporters to this region. But they sent well over 500 journalists to cover the *Lakme Fashion Week*. And also gave phenomenal space to the fact that the Sensitive Index (SENSEX) of the Mumbai Stock Exchange crossed the 11,000 figure (it has since soared past 12,000 – and the farm suicides in Vidharbha past 500). This is the great disconnect between mass media and mass reality I spoke of. Journalism teachers should realise they are training their wards within this context.

I think they all need to point out a fundamental truth to their students: the greatest journalists have been dissidents. Thomas Paine, Mahatma Gandhi, Ambedkar, you make the list. How many establishment hacks would figure on your list? The

establishment hacks are best remembered as high priests or soothsayers. Who remembers those who railed against Paine? Who can recall the names of the editors of the pro-colonial stream of the press who raved and ranted against Gandhi?

In your lecture at Trinity College in Connecticut 2002 (you were then the first McGill Fellow in International Studies at the college), you were quoted in the campus newsletter Mosaic (April 2002) as saying: “When I’m covering poverty as a journalist, I go and live in the communities I’m writing about. If I can’t see the issues through their eyes, there’s no point going and perpetuating old stereotypes about poverty.” This approach to journalism marks most of your writings, for instance in the story “The bus to Mumbai” (*The Hindu*, 01 June 2003) where you joined a group of migrant villagers from Mahbubnagar district on a bus in 46 degree heat. How did this immersive form of reporting evolve in your work?

PS: I wouldn’t like to pretend this conclusion was the outcome of some sublime intellectual process. It seems to me fairly simple – where you stand is often determined by where you’re sitting. If you have not been in the hut that has no electric power, not a single bulb, how will you understand why the children in that home can never do well in studies? It’s not important to merely “see” the hut, but to be there when there is no power. I think it’s a bit fraudulent to write knowingly about their lives if you have never done so. Even if you do it several times and not every single time, you’ll be astonished at the depth it brings to your perceptions. For instance, we know that the average rural woman in India spends a third of her life on three chores: fetching water, firewood and fodder. But “knowing” this is one thing. Walking with her, trying to live her day as she does -- would that be the same thing? Try it once. It will give you an insight into the quality of her life that you will never forget, and that will inform your work thereafter.

Commenting on your Socratic teaching methods at Trinity, one of your students quoted you as saying, “Just having different opinions is not good enough for me. I’m not learning from your opinion if I don’t engage.” Do you see this principle of engagement lacking in the way that journalists traditionally report on issues of human tragedies, such as poverty and social inequities?

PS: By severely limiting the spectrum of opinion in your paper or on your channel, you can evade engaging gigantic realities. The US media are the best example of this. They steadily kept out any opinion (even from Europe, let alone the Third World) that undermined the case for war in Iraq. It’s been called a *cordon sanitaire* by some analysts. Remember that even with Vietnam, American audiences were the last to know what was going on. They promoted the work of journalists consciously

planting stories coming out of the White House and Pentagon that led their nation to invade Iraq. Later, they will give themselves prizes and awards for “breaking” stories that show why the decision to go to war was wrong, and pat themselves on the back in an exercise that gives hypocrisy a bad name.

Journalists are not a homogenous group. There are good ones and bad ones like in any other profession. Yet, the demands of good journalism are difficult to meet given the milieu they work in, the demands of the media outlets they work for. They’ll get any amount of space to cover a natural disaster. But very little to report the devastation wrought by human agency. The tsunami in India destroyed 30,300 houses in the coastal town of Nagapattinam in the state of Tamil Nadu. That was its worst destruction on that score and was, of course widely reported. The same week, the government of Maharashtra demolished 84,000 homes of poor people in Mumbai’s slums. That was barely reported at all. There were actually newspapers who told their reporters to lay off from covering that event. Mind you, 84,000 homes in a week (including some 10,000 on a single day) make the Israeli Army in the West Bank look like amateurs. Yet, it was not worthy of reporting for most media.

How can journalists better apply this principle of engagement in reporting on more abstract issues such as globalisation or public corruption?

PS: By telling their stories through the lives of people. And by taking up the far greater challenge of reporting the process, not just the events. It is actually relatively easy to report events, especially spectacular ones like fires, earthquakes, etc. Reporting processes demands a lot more hard work. Digging into things, investigating things, asking difficult questions. Process reporting doesn’t stop with “what” — it digs into “why.” Yet, to my mind there is enormous drama in processes. If you take up that challenge you’ll find reporting harder, but far more satisfying. Far more educative and sensitising. It touches and deepens your own humanity. It teaches you a lot more. The more you work through the lives of people, the more depth your reporting – and your intellect – will achieve. Of course, the research and knowledge of data are vital. But so is actual engagement with the lives of ordinary people.

In your opinion piece “When farmers die” (in OneWorld South Asia, 17/06/04) you pointed to the media’s failure in not exposing the causes of rising suicides among farmers in Andhra Pradesh. You wrote: “Almost every sector of Indian democracy failed the Andhra Pradesh farmer; the government and the political class; the tame intellectuals and planners; the human rights groups and a once-activist judiciary; and a media that failed in their simplest, yet vital duty in a democracy: to signal the weaknesses in society.”

Likewise, in your opinion piece (“Where India shining meets great depression”, *The Hindu*, 01/04/06) you highlighted the irony of news values where more news space is given to the *Sensex* and *Fashion Week* than the rising suicides among farmers in Vidharbha. Your comments imply a need for the intelligentsia, and journalists to seriously calibrate their moral compass. Indeed, public opinion polls – for instance in places like Australia, the UK and the US – consistently record the poor showing of journalists. How has journalism come to this rather dismal moral state?

PS: The more journalism moves away from the lives of ordinary people and communities, the more it sinks into this dismal state. The more the media gets corporatised, the more they will go down this road – profits above people. Even the public role of intellectuals and intelligentsia gets undermined. Those saying things inconvenient to entrenched power will simply not be covered. Noam Chomsky may be the most cited intellectual in the world – but his books are not reviewed in some very powerful newspapers right where he lives. In one way, it’s amusing we have to use the word “public intellectual”. It’s almost because we need to delineate those from private intellectuals, the hired guns who head corporate-bankrolled “think-tanks”. The more journalism re-discovers its links to ordinary folk and communities, the more it will be sensitive to its responsibilities. The more it gets corporatised, the more vacuous, banal and trivial it will get.

What can be done to reclaim journalism’s once noble task – to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable?

PS: That has a lot to do with ownership structures of the media and who gets to define what journalism is. Worldwide, the media are subject to corporate domination. You’ll find truly great journalists unemployed or freelancing because they tend to be too independent for the liking of corporate bosses. When the financial bottom line is the only bottom line, good journalism goes down the tube. (That’s why *Lakme Fashion Week* scores so heavily over farm suicides). Media monopolies are not just a threat to the content of newspapers and television; they are a danger to democracy itself. Corporate media bosses have intervened very majorly [sic] in the elections of various countries to try and see governments of their choice elected. You can see a clear example of this going on in Venezuela. The elite-owned media within that country and the corporate media within the United States – which has global influence – have shamelessly aligned themselves with forces rejected by the electorate of that nation and are determined to somehow bring them to power. The media watch group FAIR (in New York) has run a series of pieces on how blatant distortion and plain lying characterise the reporting of Venezuela by some of the biggest news media outlets in the United States.

So one task is to liberate the media from corporate monopolies. It's not as if this has not happened before. Recognising the problems arising from such big money domination, nations all over the world – including the United States – legislated to curb the excessive influence of the corporate monopolies. Official Press Commissions in India have in the past recommended the de-linking of media from business houses in a variety of ways. But the 1990s saw the breaking down of anti-monopoly legislation in the West (a process that had begun earlier, though). And things have gone steadily downhill. As long as corporate monopolies control journalism, they will comfort the comfortable and agonise the afflicted. So if you wish to have an independent media and a thriving democracy, you have to slacken the corporate grip on the media.

Further, you have to stop the deliberate confusing of "freedom of the press" with freedom of big business to do whatever it pleases. We've had several situations here [in India] where major newspapers have simply batted for their respective corporate groups quite shamelessly and screamed "infringement of press freedom" each time the mildest action is contemplated by the authorities against the corporate group concerned. For that, you have to assure the independence of journalists from government – and also from corporate tyranny. The way things stand now, the freedom and independence of the professional journalist who does not toe the corporate line means little or nothing. Unfair contracts, insecurity of tenure, internal censorship, and heavy pressure tend to tame many journalists who try to talk the truth to power.

But it isn't enough anymore to talk the truth to power. It is vital to talk the truth **about** power, including corporate media power. There is also the role of the public in a democracy. Too often, they are reduced to passive consumers of media output. That has to change. You need to create a far higher degree of media literacy, a far greater scepticism about and scrutiny of the media themselves. The more an active public knows about how the media function and how they ought to, the more demanding they will be, the higher the standards they will set. But they cannot do this when there is no diversity, no alternative standards to learn from, no options in a vapid, homogenised, mediocre, factory-produced journalism. Canned journalism is the death of individual effort, innovation, energy and brilliance.

In your work, you travel widely, meet and live with people in different circumstances. Reading your stories, I feel the people's state of despondency. How do you cope with the sense of frustration and helplessness, which I suppose does creep in occasionally?

PS: I actually have tremendous faith in the capacity of ordinary people to find their way – and ours. That's why I do this work. This country was not liberated from

British imperialism by the elites. It won its freedom because of the heroic struggles and sacrifice of poor peasants, workers and other downtrodden people. Two years ago, the 600-million strong electorate of this country gave a stinging rebuke to its rulers, thrashing them at the hustings for following policies that hurt and devastated the poor. That election result made the media look silly. Their predictions, opinion polls, exit polls et al, came a cropper. So yes, the rural poor may be in a terrible state – indeed, they are. But I also see that it is they, not the chattering classes, who keep democracy alive in this country. It's true, the stories on farm suicides indicate despondency. People take their own lives only as a very final step. However, I am also inspired each time I step into the countryside, by the astonishing resilience of ordinary Indians. For every farmer who takes his life, there are millions who don't, but who struggle on against incredible odds. Odds which you or I would prefer to run away from. So I gain strength from that. There is plenty one can do to alleviate the sufferings of the poor and the disenfranchised.

You're a photographer and a writer at the same time. Have there been cases where you felt compelled to put down your camera and notepad to try and stop what was going on in front of you?

PS: Certainly. But my photographs are rarely news photographs. And this kind of work covers processes more than it does events. I often put down the camera – for other reasons as well. I believe there are things I have no right to intrude on. I believe all photographs I take in the countryside – even if people don't protest – demand the consent of the subjects. You can be sure I would not spend much time photographing a person dying of sunstroke in this summer heat to make a good cover somewhere. I'd get him or her to a hospital fast as I could.

Your stories are characterised by ethnographic research, a strong sense of history, acute observations, a sharp focus on the grassroots, and listening to what they say. Indeed, it's hard to draw the line between telling the story as you see it, and telling the story as the victims experience it. Is this a fair observation?

PS: Yes and no. At one level, not really. You always have to see it as the people experience it. And I'd hesitate to label them "victims". I would also not like to suggest they are always passive because they are not. What you do is to try and give their experience context and coherence. If you meet those who have been part of my stories, you will find they are aware of what I have written and agree with it. Agree that it is a fair summing up of what they've told me, and of their lived experience. That can never be perfect, but it aims to get close. What's

very hard is not to get crushed by some of those experiences – which could be horrendous. Maybe that’s where your point gains relevance. That experience can be so overwhelming as to sometimes hurt the larger perspective. That line you’re talking of then makes sense: the ability to retain perspective.

Sometimes it cuts both ways. I have visited hundreds of households that have seen farmers’ suicides and have conducted very lengthy interviews and studies there. At one level, it gives the work far more depth and solidity. At another, it just kills those of us who do it. It destroys you, makes you sick physically and emotionally. Those of us doing it feel trapped. On the one hand, the story has to be told – and privileged above *Lakme Fashion Week*. On the other, it overwhelms you personally. At one level it enhances our understanding to do detailed work on it. On the other, we begin to drag ourselves to the next household. So it does deepen perspective. But it also confronts you with an experience, which, however widespread, is highly personal for that family. You have to retain the perspective that this highly personal tragedy is also a part of something much higher. How does one do justice to both? That’s the challenge.

I notice that much of your narrative contains few direct quotes. Instead, your style is marked by tight writing, a touch of irony, short terse sentences complemented by photographs that tell their own stories, empirical data, and contextualised descriptions of what you have seen. Has this easy, conversational writing style been your signature, or has it evolved through the years of trial and error?

PS: I think on the first point you are referring to the opinion pieces. The field reports have a lot of quotes. Sometimes you paraphrase for linguistic, translation and context reasons. The easier style you speak of is really for the editorial page. For the field report, people’s voices become far more vital. Of course, writing styles evolve over years. They also vary according to whom you think you are writing for. When you go to university, you feel almost compelled to write with heaviness far beyond your years, to make weighty accounts of small things. You also feel frowned upon if your writing is seen as not sufficiently “intellectual”. As you gain more experience and find out that it’s fun to be read – which you will be if you are readable – your language and style relaxes. Now you find the challenge is not to make the ordinary weighty. It is to make the complex simple, without botching it up.

I presume many of your sources, particularly those from the grassroots, speak to you in the local dialect. In interpreting, and translating the quotes, how do you decide which appropriate words to use to reflect the idiolect and nuances expressed by your sources?

PS: I speak several languages equally badly! I do make myself understood in at least four languages and a few dialects. But I am not a great linguist. I think the far more difficult issue than language, though, is credibility. Why are you there? Why should they talk to you? How do they know you will not misuse the information they give you? Of what use to them is this interaction? How do they know you won't land them in trouble?

For that: networking and confidence building is crucial. I always try to approach a village or community through people they trust and respect. For instance, the local peasant union organiser who has risked his life for them, maybe taken a couple of landlord bullets on their behalf. I also spend a lot of time trying to build their confidence. My friends and I make it clear to the people we interview that this is a two-way thing; that they too, have the right to ask us as many personal questions as they wish. I try and send them what I've written and certainly the photographs. Build the confidence and trust and you'll be surprised how people manage to communicate. They want to talk to you, they will. You'll find a way. Another fact works in my favour in a very major way: I always work with local journalists, many of whom I've helped train or who see themselves as my students – though in a different way. Without them, I'[d have] taken five times as long to get a story done. For one thing, the language problem virtually disappears. For another: we're always discussing what we've just experienced or seen – and that deepens understanding for all of us. Also, I don't wallow in the logic of "scoop" and "exclusive" so every one of the young journalists with me is free to file their story even before I send in mine. What's becomes "exclusive" is the treatment of, or way of telling the story, I guess. So there's a sense of collective wisdom in each story too. I'm learning from my experience and that of my professional colleagues.

THE HINDU

Photo by P. Sainath

As farm suicides in Vidharbha cross the 500-mark in under a year, families are holding funerals and weddings at the same time.

Sometimes, on the same day. In moving shows of solidarity, very poor villagers are pitching in with money and labour to help conduct the marriages and funerals of down-and-out neighbours.



THE BURDEN OF DEBT: Kamlabai (centre), widow of Gosavi Pawar, with other mourning relatives in Koljhari village. In the background, lying on the cot, is Pawar's aged father. The Banjara household took part in three weddings and a funeral in 24 hours. The agrarian crisis has thrown up more than one such bizarre situation.

THREE WEDDINGS AND A FUNERAL

IN ONE third of Gosavi Pawar's house there was mourning. In another third, celebration. In the last part of his home there was preparation for both mourning and celebration. This Banjara household in Yavatmal had to conduct a funeral and three weddings in 24 hours.

Pawar was the eldest brother and head of the extended family. The 'bada-pitaji' or big father. "In the Banjara samaj," says Mohan Jadhav, "the eldest brother accepts a major role in the marriages of his kin. And he had to perform two that week." Jadhav is secretary of the Vidharbha Jan Andolan Samiti (VJAS) and helped steer the family through its crisis. "Gosavi was deep in debt. As every farmer here is. Yet, he tried to get the weddings done."

He was also one of ten indebted farmers who killed themselves on May 9. And among the 520 who have taken their lives since June last year in the region's ongoing agrarian crisis. The distress driving the deaths reflects in everything from cancelled weddings to funerals.

Pawar was deep in debt and had little money for the new farming season. He had even resorted to a 'khande palat' to raise the crop loan he required. That is, 'switching the burden from one shoulder to another.' He needed Rs.65,000 to work his seven acres. But owed the bank Rs.50,000, which he had to clear first. "So," says Kishore Tiwari of the VJAS, "he took the latter amount from a moneylender at a charge of Rs.2500 — for just one day. He cleared his bank debt with that, got the crop loan and repaid the lender. This means he was left with just Rs.12,500. And a new debt of Rs.65,000." Khande palat is common in the debt-ridden villages here. Gosavi Pawar went on May 8 from his village of Koljhari to the town of Mohada. The wedding of Savita, daughter of one brother, was set for May 9. That of Pramod, son of another brother, was fixed for May 10. But Pawar never returned. "I first learned of his death from an auto driver," says his son Prakash. "My father had gone to Mohada to buy the clothes, garments and other gifts for the weddings." But no merchant there was willing to extend him credit on the purchases. Already in despair over his debts, Pawar took his own life.

He was brought to the post-mortem centre in Yavatmal town. The police wanted the body removed quickly — post-mortem centres in Vidharbha are busy places. But the grieving family needed to delay bringing him home. "How could they bring a dead body to a house where a wedding was on?" asks deputy sarpanch Tulsiram Chavan. So the body's return was slowed down until the baraat had left the house. Despite this, body and baraat met at a junction. Pawar's pallbearers moved away into a field, behind a cluster of trees to avoid contact. But the bride Savita wept, knowing it was her Kaka's last journey she was seeing at a distance.

There was still another wedding to go the next day. "I wanted to postpone mine when I learned uncle was dead," says the bridegroom, Pramod Pawar. "But the village pointed out that the bride's family and others would be put to huge losses. More so because another couple's marriage was also tied to mine to save money." Vidharbha's crisis has seen many weddings called off. Few can afford them. The village elders knew that delay could mean cancellation. So, heartbroken, they went ahead.

"We were so disturbed by my brother's suicide, we could not even attend to our guests," says Phulsingh, father of Pramod. "I wanted to call it off." That's when the residents of this debt-burdened village came to their rescue in a moving show of solidarity. People as poor as the family and worse, contributed small sums and other help to see it through. "We held a meeting that night to plan, and everybody chipped in," says deputy sarpanch Chavan. "Some took charge of the cooking. Others looked after the guests. A few arranged the funeral, yet others the

transport.” And a village celebrated its grief. For many across this region, funerals and weddings now depend on the aid of neighbours whose economic condition might be more dismal than their own.

Savita was married on May 9. Her uncle’s funeral took place the same evening. Her cousin Pramod’s wedding took place on May 10, along with that of the last couple. The collective effort of the Banjara clans saw the family come through the ordeal. At least for now.

The 80-plus Banjara families in this ‘no-liquor’ village have a collective debt of over Rs.22 lakh. Koljhari’s agriculture is a picture of all that has gone wrong. Soaring costs, fake inputs, crashing output prices, growing debt, and a collapse of formal credit. As with many others, Pawar’s tryst with Bt cotton also proved a disaster. His seven acres yielded just four quintals. A crippling loss. Meanwhile, most adults here — and quite a few who are not — have sought work under the national rural employment guarantee programme. But nothing has happened so far.

Debt-related suicides in Vidharbha show no sign of slowing down. “Nor are they likely to,” says Wamanrao Rathore in Koljhari. “See, people have readied their fields for the new season. But no one has bought the inputs as yet. Who can afford them? The banks won’t give them loans. How do they cultivate?”

The 520 suicides listed by the Vidharbha Jan Andolan Samiti since last June is the highest number recorded here since 1998. The 306 since January means there’s one every ten hours now. While farm suicides doubled almost every year between 2001-04, the leap since last November has been huge. That’s when it became clear the government would not reverse the cut in cotton price it had announced. Last year, the state withdrew its ‘advance bonus’ of Rs.500 a quintal. This brought down what the farmer received for cotton to the MSP of Rs.1700 a quintal. A move that has fed into and spurred disaster.

In Vidharbha’s register of suicides, Pawar is just another statistic. Number 499. For Prakash and widow Kamlabai, he was father and husband. And yet, his death was not a complete surprise. “Yes. We feared he might do this,” says Prakash. “Anyone in our condition could do this. I could also do this.”

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RECLAIM PUBLIC SERVICE VALUES OF JOURNALISM

BG Verghese

Former editor of Times of India, and The Hindustan Times.

Visiting professor at Centre for Policy Research, Delhi

1975 winner of Ramon Magsaysay Award for Journalism

Founder and director of Media Foundation and The Hoot (www.thehoot.org)

Eric Loo: What's your average day at work like at the centre? How do you manage your time between writing your newspaper column, research, consulting and reporting?

B.G. Verghese: I now have no programme at the Centre for Policy Research though I am still on the faculty. I work out of home and do a weekly column and am busy book writing, lecturing, seminaring and am associated with a number of NGOs. I am currently working on articles and lectures on development topics, mentoring journalism students.

Often cited in academic discussions of development journalism is "Our Village Chhatera" which you initiated in 1968 when you were editor of *The Hindustan Times*. To what extent have the media in India emulated the Chhatera initiative or fostered similar development-oriented journalism projects?

BGV: A number of papers run stories on development or have a page on rural India or agriculture. P. Sainath of *The Hindu* has been specially engaged as a rural/development writer and is doing an excellent job. The Media Foundation has an annual Award for an Outstanding Woman Journalist. Development, social change and social concerns are among the criteria for selection by an independent jury.

You have received numerous international journalism awards, among which is the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1975. The award citation noted that, "In spite of Verghese's constructive developmental reporting in 1973, India's political and economic conditions were perceived to have worsened by the end of the year." It added that you "also perceived a basic collapse of moral authority ... (that) the pervasive cynicism and self-seeking had

come about because of the corruption, drift and indecision within the top echelons of government.”¹ Has your perception changed since then?

BGV: These trends continue alongside a widening and deepening of democracy in India. Poverty, illiteracy, disease and hunger and unemployment affect tens of millions amid contrasting success stories. The trajectory is upward but managing multiple transitions and coping with vast communities at different levels of development is not easy. There are great challenges and opportunities ahead. I remain an optimist.

Where do you see development journalism playing a constructive role today?

BGV: In writing about social change, technological and environmental impacts, the need to balance growth with equity, the need for regional balance, monitoring the social sector and HDI (Health and Development Initiative), which are the foundations for sustainable development and social stability, keeping an eye on gender equity and a fair deal for the marginalised. At the same time focusing on success stories and excellence, and insisting on the best standard. Focusing on tomorrow's problems, for example, urban issues, employment, social conservatism.

In a Newspaper Day commemorative article published in The Deccan Herald (“Who shall watch the watchdog if it errs?” 29/01/06), you note that the Indian press has much to celebrate in its 225-year history, where in some exceptional cases “the peaks are higher than before”. Some of these peaks were highlighted in *Breaking the Big Story – Great Moments in Indian Journalism* (Penguin Books, 2003), which you edited. However, you caution that there remains “much to ponder”. Your final assessment alluded to the declining standard in journalism, where “market savvy proprietors and managers” have taken over the newsrooms, where the “print media too has been carried away by sound byte journalism where inconsequential statements take over substance and meaning”. What is your advice to journalists in tackling the unrelenting forces of market-driven journalism?

BGV: Introspection, peer pressure and public opinion could be the correctives. This is happening. The Prime Minister, among others, has addressed these questions and the media has taken note.

¹ <http://www.rmaf.org.ph/Awardees/Biography/BiographyVergheseBoo.htm>

P. Sainath, rural affairs editor at The Hindu, in his opinion piece, "When farmers die" (in *The Hindu*, 22/06/04)² pointed to the media's failure in not exposing the causes of rising suicides among farmers in Andhra Pradesh. He wrote: "Almost every sector of Indian democracy failed the Andhra Pradesh farmer; the government and the political class; the tame intellectuals and planners; the human rights groups and a once-activist judiciary; and a media that failed in their simplest, yet vital duty in a democracy: to signal the weaknesses in society." Do you see development journalism as the alternative to conventional reporting in a society of wide disparities? Or is development journalism yet to gain a foothold in the newsrooms?

BGV: We need public service broadcasting and community broadcasting both of which are weak at present. *Prasar Bharati* (Broadcasting Corporation of India) has not worked in the way intended and community broadcasting is still in its infancy and too constrained. These battles have to be fought. Papers do publish analytical articles that focus on issues like farmer suicides and what underlies them, and the broadcast channels also do have good panel discussions on such issues.

In an editorial ("Where India shining meets great depression", *The Hindu*, 01/04/06)³ Sainath likewise highlighted the irony of news values where more news space is given to the *Sensex* and *Fashion Week* than the rising suicides among farmers in Vidharbha - which implies a need for the intelligentsia, and journalists to seriously calibrate their moral compass. Indeed, public opinion polls in places like Australia, UK and the US likewise consistently record the poor showing of journalists. How has journalism come to this dismal moral state?

BGV: Editors have been in decline and managers on the ascendancy. The market (circulation, advertising, ratings) caters to the consumer. The public interest demands attention be paid to the citizen, especially when millions live on the fringe of subsistence and are basically beyond the pale of the market. The pendulum has oscillated one way, and there are forces trying to swing it in the other direction.

What can be done to reclaim journalism's once noble task – for instance, to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable?

BGV: Training, political leadership that sets a national agenda, enlightened editors. The growth of local and community papers for which such things are "news".

² <http://www.hinduonnet.com/2004/06/22/stories/2004062202041000.htm>

³ <http://www.hinduonnet.com/2006/04/01/05hldline.htm>

About the *Media Foundation* founded in 1979, which you chair: The foundation's goals and mission are clearly outlined in its home page (www.thehoot.org). Since the foundation's inception, what hurdles did the organisation have to jump to arrive at where it is today?

BGV: The Media Foundation is a small organisation with very modest funds. It has no staff and is run as a labour of love. It has published some media books and holds an annual lecture and discussion along with the Award of the Chameli Devi Jain Award for an Outstanding Woman Media person, which has become a bit of a media event because of the quality of the occasion.

About the media watch website "*The Hoot*", which began in 2001: It's a widely accessed portal, which reminds readers of how journalism with a critical social conscience ought to be. What's your assessment of *The Hoot's* influence in raising the standards of journalism in India?

BGV: *The Hoot* is now fairly well established and is visited by professionals, students, media officials, academics and others in India and abroad. It acts as a media watchdog and invites and encourages critical evaluation, comment and debate on content, style, ethics, impact and follow up of print and broadcast output. It has conducted surveys and aims to expand its range and coverage. Sevanti Ninan is the person responsible for its conceptualisation, operation and success.

On your perception of "development journalism": It's often wedded to concepts like community dialogue, connection with the grassroots, empowerment, public advocacy, catalyst for positive change. Western journalists, however, see this reporting genre as akin to protocol news reporting, which mainly focuses on government pronouncements and development policies. Perhaps the constructive role of development journalism – regardless of political or cultural settings – has not been promoted as well as it should?

BGV: Development journalism is not about government and official handouts or propaganda, but about people and how their lives are impacted by what governments do or do not do. It is not concerned merely with growth and "shining India", an election slogan that led the last ruling coalition to defeat in the 2004 general election. It is concerned with issues of equity, social justice, quality of life for all and not just some of the people in a society "where wealth accumulates but men decay".

What does a development journalist bring to a story, which otherwise are often overlooked, or found lacking in a reporter who stays on the beaten track?

BGV: One looks at success as measured by material gain; the other also looks at social interest or public good.

For development journalism to catch on, what do you think needs to change in the traditional newsrooms? Or is it a case of development journalism being shunned in the newsroom because it conflicts with the traditional role of journalists as detached observers?

BGV: Redefining news values and space allocation. Writing of development issues that make it relevant to the lives of the well-heeled and “unconcerned”. The current Naxalite-Maoist problem in India is more than a law and order issue. Its roots lie in socio-economic exploitation, neglect, alienation, anger.

Apart from the *Our Village Chhatera* initiative, what other cases come to mind in which development journalism has made a real difference to the grassroots’ way of life where traditional journalism has somewhat failed?

BGV: The Centre for Science and Environment’s “*Down to Earth*” has led many successful campaigns on air and water quality, sanitation and health, rainwater harvesting and water management, the quality of bottled water and soft drinks. It has influenced governments, the courts, Parliament, the corporate world and international policymakers, brilliantly.

In your address at a conference on Media and Right to Development in New Delhi in February 2003 (*The Hindu*, 10/02/03)⁴ you pointed out that the media’s interest in social processes had diminished over the years but its emphasis on events or sound bytes had increased”. Has the situation changed for the better since then?

BGV: The battle has been joined.

In the same address, you also noted, “though the media is market-driven, it is also true that half of India is outside its ambit. So, what we have is an information-rich society and an information-starved one. This gap needs to be filled.” (*The Hindu*, 10/02/03) You said that you hoped a time would come when the grassroots media would influence the national media and set the agenda. Do you see any indications of the grassroots media achieving this influence today? What hurdles do the grassroots media need to clear to achieve this influence that you refer to?

BGV: Refer to *Down to Earth* mentioned above and several stories by mainstream papers on major issues like the national employment guarantee scheme, breakdown in the criminal justice system linked to the need for police reform, the right to information campaign, and many campaigns against corruption, etc. Awards are being instituted for this kind of journalism, and journalists and newspapers, which make them role models.

⁴ <http://www.hinduonnet.com/2003/02/10/stories/2003021001561300.htm>

GOOD JOURNALISM STRIVES FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Dionne Bunsha

Correspondent for Frontline at The Hindu.

International Federation of Journalists 2005 Award

Author of *Scarred: Experiment with Violence in Gujarat*, Penguin, New Delhi 2006

Eric Loo: Can you tell me a bit of your background before you became a roving correspondent?

Dionne Bunsha: After I graduated, I did a course in Social Communications Media at the Sophia Polytechnic, Mumbai. As part of the course, I did a one-month internship at *The Times of India* after which they asked me to join them as a reporter. I worked there for four years.

I did a lot of articles within Mumbai, on parts of the city that I had never been inside before – juvenile detention centres, courts, public hospitals, brothels, the garbage dump yard, shelters for the homeless. Occasionally, I was allowed to do assignments outside the city. I did a series on the farmers' suicides in 1999, stories on industrial pollution, atrocities against "criminal tribes", water scarcity, people displaced by development projects, malnutrition in tribal areas. I left *The Times of India* to study further. I got a scholarship to do a Masters in Development Studies at the London School of Economics. Then, I went to Cuenca, Ecuador for three months and worked as an English teacher. It was a great way to get to know a place - to actually be part of it. I didn't want to visit as a tourist because then you don't really experience much outside the guidebook. I made some wonderful friends there, who adopted me as part of their families. Cuenca will always be very special for me. I came back to India and joined Frontline and have been there since.

What's your average work day like?

DB: There's no average work day really. Everything is flexible, except the deadline. Me and my colleagues in Mumbai list out our story ideas and send them to our editor in Chennai. Once I am assigned the story, I start doing my research and field work. While in the field, I try to squeeze in as much as I can, so the days are long and hectic. Then, I write my story. Journalism also involves being in touch with people and what is happening. I spend a lot of time on the phone, surfing the net, reading reports, publications and email groups, attending press conferences, public

meetings and protests. I keep in touch with a lot of people and organisations. So, it's not like you complete your interview and leave without a trace. Often, you build relationships, sometimes even with people whom you write against. I try to send the magazine to people who I met, so that they can see the result.

You graduated from the London School of Economics (LSE) in 2000 with an M.Sc in Development Studies. How have your graduate studies in the UK and your cross-cultural experience shaped your reporting and defined what's important and what's not?

DB: The best part of our course was that we had a great mix of people from different parts of the world, except Africa, which was really unrepresented. But I learned a lot more from my friends – the students – than I did from the actual course material or professors there. Most of us from “developing” countries felt an immediate empathy with each other. Though our countries and cultures were so diverse, there were so many things in common. All the academic stuff improved the way I approached my fieldwork, made it a little more rigorous. And, it demystified things like economics.

How do you keep yourself informed of what stories need to be written?

DB: It's very important to have your ear to the ground and be connected to organisations that represent people's concerns. I keep in touch with different people – those who I have interviewed in the past, activists, a few bureaucrats, other journalists, researchers, lawyers. I also keep myself updated through email groups and by following the newspapers and magazines. Often you go looking for a story and people will tell you 10 more. That happens a lot – one story leads to another. Also, by travelling, you get a sense of what issues are becoming more important for people. For example, there's massive unemployment and displacement of slum dwellers in cities, or the farm crisis that is crippling rural India, but you don't see any reflection of that in the national or international media. The media plays up the India Shining stories – the Sensex, shopping malls, Bollywood. Everyday, the news channels have a half an hour programme covering only socialite parties of the day, but there's no dedicated half hour slot everyday for any other issue – not music and culture, education, health, human rights, environment or science and technology – all of which are more relevant to our lives than some high society parties.

How many stories do you write in a week, and the average word length?

DB: It depends on what is happening. Usually one or two stories a fortnight. Word length around 1500 words. When there's a crisis like Gujarat, then it increases even up to five stories.

In a short bio of LSE graduates (<http://www.simonbatterbury.net/home/lsemc.htm>), you were quoted as saying that being a correspondent is a "...journalist's dream job ... time to research stories, lots of travelling and field work, no editorial interference ... progressive and committed ...". However, a dream job has its good days and bad days. Is this a fair observation of your work?

DB: What I meant when I said it was a "dream job" is that I am lucky to work with a magazine like Frontline that believes in certain ideals - rigorous journalism that strives for social justice. Our editor, N. Ram, gives us the time and flexibility to explore stories and has faith in his journalists. In fact, he was the one who encouraged me to write my book. In other media organisations, profit, not journalism, is the main driving force. They don't give their journalists as much freedom and flexibility, and are not as interested in the quality and accuracy of their content.

Yes, there are lows. I went through a very bad time while I was covering the aftermath of the Gujarat violence. I kept going back, hearing the same tragic stories, seeing no improvement, and no one listening to people who were totally broken and shoved in the margins, isolated and discriminated against. After the violence ended, the refugees and witnesses who had already been targeted in the pogrom were being jailed on false charges, while the accused who were politically powerful were roaming freely on the streets. Sometimes seeing the injustices just breaks your heart. You feel very helpless and wonder what have you achieved by merely writing. It also makes you feel like a parasite - you do your interviews and leave. What do people get for investing time and energy in telling you their story? Yet, they are so hospitable, generous and patient. The good days are when people respond to your stories. Someone uses it as proof in a court case. Or governments are forced to take notice. Or the people you interviewed are happy with the story. Or someone writes you an email saying that your story moved them in some way.

An internet search comes up with many of your stories published in India and overseas, such as in *The New Internationalist*. A common theme runs through your stories - the plights of the poor and impoverished, gender and minority issues, ethnic conflicts and human rights abuse. What drives your passion to report on these topics?

DB: Just seeing the injustices that are part of daily life. Anyone living in a society with such bizarre inequalities can't help but be affected, moved, angry - even at the contradictions within our own lives. Also, people's generosity, strength, spirit and sense of humour, despite all the odds, make me feel that this is the least I can do. It is our duty as journalists to give voice to issues that matter, not to cater to the fluff that most newspaper advertisers and media barons would prefer us to write about.

In your *Frontline* stories, you cover as many sides as you possibly can to explain what you have witnessed, for example, the demolition of slum dwellings (*A tale of two Mumbais*, Vol: 22:7, March 12 - 25, 2005) and the spate of Hindu attacks on Muslims in Gujarat. How do you frame the stories, and select your sources, without appearing to take sides?

DB: I try to look at an issue from as many angles as possible, to bring as many subtleties and viewpoints into it. There aren't just two sides, but 100 different sides to every story. I try to bring in as much of that as an article permits. That's why while doing a wildlife story in Gir or Kutch, it was also vital to speak to local people who are part of that ecosystem, but are considered "encroachers". While doing the slum demolition stories, it was important to speak to people from the elite industrialist lobby that wants them removed.

While covering the Gujarat pogrom, I didn't only stick to the stories of the victims, but also interviewed the people who were part of the mob and their leaders who planned the attacks. It's important to understand their perspective as well, to understand our society. I even went to a camp where the Bajrang Dal trains young boys in fighting techniques, to see where it all starts and know who are the youth they attract.

The journalist as an unbiased observer is a myth. If you see injustice, which most of us often do, it's difficult to remain detached. If you spend time on a story, you are bound to get involved. A good journalist should be able to get the reader/viewer also involved and feel for the people whose story you are telling. By going to interview people, and deciding to tell their story to a wide audience, you are intervening in their lives and you have a certain responsibility towards them. If you interview a politician or bureaucrat, you owe it to him/her and your reader to put forward his/her view accurately.

Your work takes you to different places, situations and communities – a few of which you have visited many times. But, for places that you're visiting for the first time, how do you go about researching and writing the stories, and locating the right sources to talk to?

DB: While researching a story, I find out about various organisations working on those issues, or in that region, and they lead you to different sources. I try to find local contacts through national mass organisations I can trust, like the Kisan Sabha, the All-India Democratic Women's Association, some human rights groups, or reliable and genuine NGOs and activists – those who I know have their ear to the ground and will represent the concerns of the poorest. And it's also very important to know who your local contact is so that you know where he is coming

from and whether he will show you only one side of the picture. Reliable contacts who will give you a good idea of the local politics and power dynamics are very important. When you interview someone, it's very important to know where he/she is coming from. Is he a landlord? Is he also a moneylender? Is he a contractor? Is he/she affiliated with any political party? What is his/her caste? That also helps you understand that others may not speak openly if there is someone more powerful in the same group. Depending on the story, it's also important to get perspectives of people from different strata of society right from local mafia to landless labourers.

As a roving correspondent, you are a photographer and a reporter at the same time. Have there been cases where you feel compelled to put down your camera, recorder and notepad to try and stop what was going on in front of you?

DB: Yes, you often feel very helpless while in the field. When people tell you about their fight for survival, whether it is bar dancers or refugees in Gujarat or farmers in distress in Vidarbha or slum dwellers in Mumbai or *adivasis* (indigenous people) removed from their homes in the Kuno forest to create a sanctuary, they talk to you in the hope that you will be influential enough to do something for them. But most times, nothing changes after you write your article. If only it were that simple...

I keep asking myself whether it's time to stop writing and start acting. But individual action doesn't get very far. It has to be part of a bigger, more sustained campaign or movement in which organisations or political parties are involved. My stories are often reporting on ongoing trends in society, not immediate events. So it's more difficult to stop something that's an invisible force. Sometimes, I do put my pen down. Once, I re-visited a place, not to write, but only to try and do something. I did a story on people evicted from the Kuno forest (where they want to translocate the Asiatic lions from Gir forest). For my article, I had visited people who had gone back to the forest because the conditions in the place they were re-settled were horrible. After I left, the entire village was evicted and harassed by the forest department staff because they spoke to me. To try and stop the harassment, I called the minister. He asked me to bring the people of the village to meet him.

The local NGO supposed to be working for the rehabilitation of these people refused to take them for the meeting. So I went back to the forest to trace them. I had no idea where they went after they had been evacuated from the sanctuary. When I found them, they were keen to go for the meeting, so I took them to the capital, Bhopal. It was the first time they had stepped out of their village, so I also felt a great sense of responsibility for their safety. Also, each day spent in Bhopal meant they were losing one day of work. Luckily, the minister and his bureaucrats heard

them out. But it's been one year since then and they have done nothing for them. They still call me up to ask me to come again because the rehabilitation promises are still not met. So even when you stop reporting and try to stop the injustices you see, it doesn't always work.

Your stories are characterised by much background research, a sense of history, keen observations, a sharp focus on the grassroots, and listening to what they say. It's a challenge to draw the line between telling the story as you see it, or telling the story as the people (or victims) experienced it. Is this a fair observation?

DB: It's not difficult to tell people's stories as they see it. All you have to do is listen, and if necessary, clarify. I sometimes tend to get too empathetic and too involved with people I interview. The way I see a story is very close to the way people have experienced it. The only difference may sometimes be that I see other sides as well because I also interview others, and I can also see how their experience fits into the bigger picture because I have easier access to information. But the focus of my articles is always peoples' experiences and stories, placed in a larger context.

Some stories, particularly on the conflict in Gujarat, place you in dangerous situations. What are some of these dangers, and how do you deal with them in the field?

DB: The biggest danger is to your sanity. There were times when the silence of the curfew felt a bit eerie, but I have never been in any physical danger. So, sorry to disappoint you, but I have no stories of being feet away from a bomb or a bullet. We were outside the Akshardham temple while it was being attacked, but too far to be in any danger. Most journalists know how to measure and negotiate risks. Being in the thick of things doesn't necessarily mean you will get the entire story. Moreover, the stories I am interested in are not about events, but people's lives, about how larger trends in society affect people.

While covering the aftermath of the Gujarat violence, I wanted to meet the people involved in the attacks, to understand what drove them to do it. I interviewed some of the accused. They all had political affiliation and backing, so I had to be careful in the way I dealt with them and also in the way I wrote about them. I went to a camp where the Bajrang Dal, a Hindu extremist group, trains young boys to "defend the Hindu religion". I was the only woman there in the midst of extremely orthodox, hard-line political people, so I was very careful not to ask too many questions, and just listened and observed.

I am often more worried about the people I interview than I am about myself. Will they be safe once I leave? Will they have to face adverse consequences for speaking

to me? This includes not only refugees in Gujarat or adivasis in the forest or girls in a dance bar but also activists, police officials or bureaucrats who want the truth to be told.

Being a woman reporter, is it a factor in helping you report on minority and gender issues in what is generally seen to be a male dominated society?

DB: Yes, it definitely helps to be a woman. Women and children open up easier to me than they would to a man. But men in India are so chauvinistic that they find it very uncomfortable talking with a woman who is independent, confident, and not traditional and conservative. In rural India, most men can't believe I am from the same country as them. They are so used to seeing women who are suppressed. Sometimes, urban middle class Indian men are very patronising. They ask you probing questions about your personal life. When it comes to investigative stories, and trying to get information out of policemen, politicians or the underworld, it definitely helps to be a man. A lot of my male colleagues can befriend these kinds of sources much easier and with a lot of male bonding and back-slapping, get them to spill the beans over a drink. That's something women can't do. We have to work longer at building rapport with people in authority.

When you write your stories, with all the imageries, what do you want your readers to feel or think?

DB: I would like them to first feel, then think. And make connections with their own experiences and with what they read. And lastly, act. That would be wonderful. The best would be for your story to embarrass the government or company and force it to act. Or prompt someone else to enter the fray to find a solution. Actually, if you can make someone more aware and make him/her view the world differently, it's great.

What narrative techniques do you use to draw your readers into the story and your analysis of the situation?

DB: I try to draw the reader into one person's story and then use it to explore various issues and get into a wider analysis, while not losing sight of the story. I don't know how often I succeed.

I presume many of your sources, particularly those from the grassroots, speak to you in the local dialect. In interpreting, and translating the direct quotes, how do you decide on what appropriate words to use to reflect the idiolect and true expressions of your sources?

DB: I write my notes in English, so the initial translation takes place at the first step itself. I often check with my local contact to get the right meaning and also

the context of what people are saying. If I don't understand a particular word or phrase, I write it down and check later. Or, if someone uses a very colourful phrase or some local saying or sings a song, then I write it down verbatim so that I can think more about how to translate it.

Your work has won a number of journalism awards. How do you see your stories contributing to the education of your readers, and influencing government policies?

DB: I really don't know how much of an influence my writing has. There are a few instances where there has been some impact. When I was in *The Times of India*, the High Court took note of my articles on the conditions in the remand homes and ordered the Juvenile Court to take action. After the Gujarat carnage, I managed to find out from the Gujarat police that they had closed more than half the riot cases. Later, human rights groups filed a petition in the Supreme Court asking for these cases to be re-opened. And the court has ordered the police to re-assess all the closed cases. The response to my book on the aftermath of Gujarat, called *Scarred: Experiments with Violence in Gujarat*, has been very heartening. I thought that it is a very serious subject and no one would read it. But people who I never expected to read it called and told me they went through it in two days! That was very encouraging.

As a roving correspondent, what are the best, and perhaps, the worst stories have you written?

DB: My best work is on the Gujarat carnage aftermath and on the farmers' suicides in Vidarbha, which I have been following since 1999. All the stories I have done which are individual stories or profiles of people are also something that I think have worked well. Some of my environmental feature stories have also got a very good response – like the article on the lions of Gir forest and on evictions from the Kuno forest, or a recent photo feature I did on the Little Rann of Kutch. My strong point is people's stories, fieldwork, interviews and first person accounts. I'm not comfortable writing anything without doing fieldwork and meeting people. The worst stories are the ones I have to do in a hurry, without much fieldwork. Basically, anything that I am passionate about and which I have strong background knowledge on turns out well. Anything that doesn't make me feel strongly shows in the story.

What is your advice to journalism students who want to become roving correspondents?

DB: To be adventurous, curious, passionate, compassionate, analytical, to see things differently. But also understand the society and the local dynamics of any place you go to, even if it is the lane next to your house. You should also feel

some responsibility towards the people whom you interview. Today's big media companies don't encourage much fieldwork and investigation, so you can't wait for your boss to tell you to do a story, you will have to do it yourself. When I was in *the Times of India*, I used to do stories that I wanted to on the weekends, and whenever there were days that there was a shortage of stories, I would give them to my editor. As you work, you learn the different ways to get the stories you care about published/aired.

What are the attributes that one needs to have to pursue a "dream job" the way you have pursued? Psychologically, what does it take to do the kind of work that you do?

DB: You need to be armed with a good sense of humour. It really helps if you can laugh at yourself and the bizarre situations you get into. Also, you have to feel for what you are writing about because that's what motivates you to put in all the hard work. You have to be empathetic and patient because you have to listen to a lot of different people and also it takes time to find what you are looking for. Many times, you go on wild goose chases. I can be really irritating at times, because I am quite a stickler and I keep asking "why". Also, you have to be able to place what you are seeing in a wider perspective.

How would you describe the type of journalism you practise? Some would say it's close to what is called "development journalism".

DB: I would be happy if I was called a good journalist and writer. I wouldn't like to attach any other labels. I'd say its journalism that's more focused on people and their experiences. I have been inspired by my teacher, P. Sainath. He is a big role model, not only as a journalist but also as a person. The writers I greatly admire are Robert Fisk, Thor Heyerdahl, Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Marquez's *News of a Kidnapping* is so brilliant. It reads like a thriller, but it's all real. That's what I strive for: To make real stories gripping, and through the story, paint a picture of society. I'm still crawling, though. There's a long way to go.

Frontline

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Photo by Shashi Ashiwal

While the victims of the State government's demolition drive in Mumbai's slums remain homeless, the rules are apparently twisted to enable mill owners to make a killing out of mill lands.

URBAN DEVELOPMENT A TALE OF TWO MUMBAIS

WHEN the bulldozers came to demolish his colony, Anand Nagar, the only thing Rajendra Shresht picked up from the ruins of his hut was a bottle of kerosene and a box of matches. No legal document, no photograph, no cooking vessel, nothing else. As he and his family rushed outside the gate of the colony, he shouted at the municipal vans, "Don't destroy our homes." Immediately after, he poured kerosene on his body, set himself on fire and ran inside the police van parked nearby.

"The police just watched as he burned for 20 minutes. The demolition squad didn't stop the destruction inside the slum for even a second", said his friend Jaikant Naidu. Shresht's wife Martha and 11-year-old son are homeless and devastated. Three months after the demolition, they still have to live with a friend. Others like Jaikant are camped outside the padlocked gate.

Their only shelter is a banyan tree across which plastic sheets are hung, along with bags, clothes and even a clock. Women wander from lane to lane searching for a water tap - outside a shop or inside a residential building - any place where they will not be shooed away. Now they have to pay an additional Rs.5 every day to use the public toilet and take a bath. It eats into more than 10 per cent of their wages. Children lost their school books in the chaos. Their exams are approaching, but they have nowhere to study. Recently, a young girl died - she had been ill after camping in the sun without proper food or water. It has been three months of hell and no one knows when it will end.

THE demolitions were part of the Maharashtra government's "clean up" drive, under which all "unauthorised" slums registered after 1995 were to be removed. Around 91,000 houses were destroyed, some of them registered before 1995. The 600-odd residents of Anand Nagar, for instance, have been living there for 30 years. Located opposite a row of five star hotels in Mumbai's posh seafront Juhu, this plot is prime property.

"They want to make this a car park for a five-star hotel. The Airport Authority has put up a board claiming the land, although the registered owner is the Forest Department," Jaikant Naidu said. "If we are called encroachers, why aren't they? This land doesn't belong to them either. How come a restaurant on this same plot has remained untouched? Beautify this city. We also want that. But does it have to be at the cost of the lives of the poor?"

The demolition drive that left 4.5 lakh people homeless was part of Vision 2020, the government's plan to make Mumbai a "world-class" city like Shanghai. These plans are based on a report prepared by McKinsey Consultants and sponsored by Bombay First, a corporate-funded lobby group. The State government has wholeheartedly embraced their blueprint for the city and the majority of the city's residents are grappling with the consequences.

In principle, the recommendations seem all right - improve the economy and the quality of life. They want the government to build 1.1 million homes for slum dwellers in the next 10 years so as to reduce the slum population from 65 per cent to 10 per cent. But, instead of building homes, the first step that the government took towards that end was the large-scale eviction of people from their homes without any arrangement for their relocation. The demolition drive was started months after the Congress-Nationalist Congress Party alliance returned to power promising, among other things, that all slums that came up before 2000 would be made legal.



A shopping mall and a bowling alley that have been built on the Phoenix Mill compound after securing clearance for a workers' recreation centre. Photo by Neera Adarkar.

The human tragedy that followed the demolitions prompted the Congress high command to pull up Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh. He ordered a stop to the evictions and his government is now conducting a survey of hutments that came up between 1995 and 2000. However, the Chief Minister said the government did not have the 300 acres needed to rehabilitate slum dwellers.

"We are not happy that the government has stopped the demolition drive and is considering bringing forward the cut-off date to 2000," says Vijay Mahajan, CEO of Bombay First. "It's the politicians, police, municipal staff and slum lords who bring the slums to the city by allowing encroachments and taking money for it. They should be punished. It is a theft of public land." Bombay First has asked the government to develop the vacated spaces as gardens and playgrounds adopted by corporates.

Mahajan says that people settled in Mumbai after 1995 "have no right to be here". "They can go wherever they want, we don't want them here. Why do they come to the city if they don't have a place to stay? With slums, the city cannot be world class. Our lifestyle is deteriorating because of them. It gives a bad impression to foreigners."

The government and the elite find more than 60 per cent of the city's 12-15 million residents an "eyesore". A small lobby of powerful "citizens' groups" has persuaded the government to strike at Mumbai's most unique feature - its cosmopolitan nature. The people driven out constitute its enterprising working class, who have made it India's commercial capital, one of the most efficient cities in the country.

The belief that slums are mushrooming all over the city is not based on fact. Slum dwellers make up 65 per cent of the city's population, but occupy only 6 per cent of its total land area - 2,525 of 43,000 hectares, according to the 1995 report of the government-appointed Afzal Purkar Committee, said Deepika D'Souza of the India Centre for Human Rights and Law.

Supporters of the demolitions argue that the high density of population is a drain on infrastructure. However, Deepika D'Souza points out that slums are a minimal drain on public utilities because they have none. "If there is a lack of infrastructure, then how are building permissions granted all over the city for large high rises, many of which have swimming pools. Where is the water, road space and sewerage pipes to cope with this massive increase?"

Malls and multiplexes, the new big things, are far more taxing on infrastructure. When Crossroads, the city's first mall, opened, cars were double parked on the road, creating a massive traffic jam, which prompted the Shiv Sena to launch an agitation against the mall. While the poor are called "encroachers", no action is ever taken against the sprawling illegal constructions across the city. High rises violating floor space index, development control and coastal regulation rules remain untouched. Mora Gaon, a fishing village in Juhu, is near the homes of film stars like Madhuri Dixit, Dev Anand and Dimple Kapadia. A section of Mora Gaon that houses some of the city's first residents, its fisherfolk, was also targeted during the demolition.

"They say that we are violating coastal zone regulations, but this plot was reserved for a fishing colony. And, land reserved for us is being encroached by bungalows on the beach," said Dashrath Mangela, a Mora Gaon resident. "If our land is being encroached on, where are we supposed to go? A housing society and a college are also encroaching on the mangroves. Why haven't they been demolished? Who needs the coast more than fishermen?"

There is selective rule of law, says Y.P. Singh, a former bureaucrat-turned-anti-corruption activist. Under the Urban Land Ceiling Act (ULCA), which ensured an equitable distribution of land, anyone owning more than 500 square metres of space is supposed to surrender the surplus land to the government or use 70 per cent of

the land for low income housing. However, the government never implemented the Act and only 165 acres of the 30,000 acres of vacant land available under the ULCA has been surrendered to the government.

“Exemptions given for mass housing have been misused to build luxury complexes for the rich. If the government had ensured that these exemptions were used for mass accommodation, a large part of the city’s housing problem would not exist today,” Y.P. Singh said.

Moreover, there are over 400 government properties for which lease deeds have expired and lessees pay rents far below the market rate, according to documents obtained by right-to-information activist, Shailesh Gandhi. He says that there are many cases of land being supposedly given on lease, but without deed. The average rate that lessees, some of them rich companies, trusts and posh recreational gymkhanas, pay is Rs.21 a square metre, whereas the minimum market rate is Rs.2,500. Gandhi calculates that the government loses Rs.362 crores in revenue for expired leases and Rs.3,000 crores for all leases.

Besides, there are blatant violations of development control and FSI rules. “For instance, Atria, a new mall in Central Mumbai, is being built on land earmarked for housing the homeless,” Y.P. Singh said. The government had planned to regularise more than 100 of 154 buildings violating building norms such as FSI rules, until an activist took the matter to court. A 24-storey building under construction at Kandivli, a western suburb, had 17 floors built illegally.

“It’s not just slum dwellers, the government intends to take action against these violators also, but they are rich people who have managed to move court for stay orders,” said Sanjay Ubale, Principal Secretary, Special Projects, Maharashtra Government.

The Bowling Company, a mall and recreation centre at the Phoenix Mill complex, applied to the Bombay Municipal Corporation for clearance, saying that “recreation facilities” were being added to the mill (which stopped production years ago) for the over 1,000 workers and more than 200 staff and additionally 1,000 to 5,000 executives of various other offices located on our premises”. It added that recreation facilities were needed to avert an agitation by workers. The land, incidentally, had been leased to Phoenix Mills only to run the mill.

Mumbai’s cotton mills propelled the city towards industrialisation and economic prosperity and drew workers to the city. The mills, however, faced competition from

unorganised power looms in the 1980s, a time of real estate boom in Mumbai. Many mill owners were keen to sell the vast tracts of valuable land they owned, rather than modernise their mills to keep up with the competition. As mills closed down, many illegally, more than one lakh workers lost jobs. Shopping malls and posh buildings sprang up where their factories had once stood. Many now work as security guards, taxi drivers, hawkers, earning less than a quarter of what they earned 20 years ago.

MORE such policy-twisting in favour of mill owners came to light recently when the Bombay Environmental Action Group (BEAG) filed a public interest petition against the amendment of the Development Control rules. Under the original rule [DC Rule No. 58(1)], sale of mill land was allowed on the condition that one-third of the land would go to the Municipal Corporation for open spaces and one-third to the Maharashtra Housing and Development Authority for public housing and the rest could be used by the owner for commercial development. Sometime in 2001, the government slipped in an amendment, which said that only open land on which there is no construction should be distributed in this manner.

“The State government’s intention seems to be to make available more land to mill owners, but it’s at the cost of the city,” said Arvind Adarkar, an architect.

The Municipal Corporation passed a notice of motion in its general meeting on October 9, 2003, requesting the government to revoke the amendment. It also requested the government to revoke any permission that may have been granted to textile mills after the amendment. The government has chosen to ignore the protest and the corporation continues to grant approvals to proposals under the modified rule.

There are 600 acres of mill land in the city. If all this land was re-developed under the old rule, 165 to 200 acres would have been used for open spaces by the Municipal Corporation, and 160 to 220 acres would be given for low-cost housing. Instead, under the amended rule, only 32 acres would be given for open spaces and 25 acres for affordable housing, according to BEAG estimates. The city stands to lose vast chunks of public land - around 400 acres.

After the petition, the State government has appointed a committee headed by Housing Development Finance Corporation chairperson Deepak Parekh, to review this amendment. The Mill Owners’ Association insists that the original D.C. rule stated that if the original structure is retained or re-structured, there is no need to share the land with the government.

The sale proceeds from mill lands are supposed to be used to revive the mills. But the mills are not functioning and workers have not been paid for years. Subhash Narke, a worker from Khatau Mills, has been waiting for eight years for his salary dues. "The Supreme Court has ordered the owners to pay workers, but they blatantly violate court orders," he said. Khatau Mill stands on land leased by the government. The owners pay Rs.10,156 as annual rent, as documents obtained by Shailesh Gandhi show. At least five of Mumbai's 58 mills stand on leasehold land.

The government's policy seems to be freebies for the rich, but eviction for the poor. A hawker recently removed from Mumbai's famous Marine Drive was told that Anil Ambani, who jogs there, finds the likes of him a nuisance. There is now a clear divide - the well-fed and the dispossessed. "To make the city attractive to foreigners, the government is willing to make its own people homeless," said Jaikant Naidu, still camping in the dark at Anand Nagar.

Story available at: www.hindu.com/fline/fl2207/stories/20050408001404200.htm. This article was first published in The Hindu and is reproduced with permission.

REDEFINING JOURNALISTS' PROFESSIONAL ROLES

M. Suchitra

Development Journalist of the Year 2006
2006 Developing Asia Journalism Award

Eric Loo: What has shaped your journalism, and defined for you what's important and what's not?

M. Suchitra: I did my Masters in Nuclear Physics. I think my science background has helped me to be more objective, accurate and precise while reporting. I belong to the old school of journalism where journalists are supposed to be socially committed. So I do stories from the side of ordinary people.

What prompted you to write the Attapadi's *adivasi* women story?

MS: In the mid-90s, a struggle by the *adivasis* under the leadership of an *adivasi* woman called C K Janu started gaining strength. The struggle was to pressure the government to implement the two-decade-old law that ensured the restoration of alienated *adivasi* lands. Successive governments in the state, instead of implementing the law, had been protecting the interests of the settlers in the *adivasi* region. I did a couple of stories on this struggle and decided to go deeper into the impact of land alienation. Meanwhile, I won the National Foundation for India Media Fellowship to study the problems faced by the indigenous tribes in Kerala (South India). For one year, I travelled extensively in the remote hill areas. The situation in Attappadi was really shocking. Though Kerala sees itself as the most progressive state in India, the living conditions of the tribes in the remote hill areas of the state are pathetic. The government has spent a huge amount of money on the welfare and development of the tribes. But the process of mainstreaming has shattered the erstwhile self-reliant social and administrative system of these communities. Though the state has attained a Physical Quality of Life Index as high as 80, the tribes live in abject poverty. The unimaginative and shortsighted 'development' process hit the women the worst. I decided to highlight their problems.

I see that you relied more on outside institutional sources to tell the stories of the *adivasi* women rather than letting the women, such as Pappa, tell their own stories in their own voices. Did you originally plan this story format, or was the story led more by your research?

MS: As for this story, I feel that people like Pappa may not be able to give you the whole picture. In fact, it was a government doctor who told me about the increasing incidents of maternal deaths. I think I have looked at the issue from various angles. My research has helped me form a clear picture of the ground realities here and frame the story.

There were no comments from the *adivasi* men, who, as you mentioned in your story, “enslave themselves to liquor”. Is this intentional?

MS: The story focused on the increasing maternal and infant mortality rates among the tribes in Attappadi and also on the inaccessibility, inefficiency and ineffectiveness of the health care system. I don't think comments from *adivasi* men on liquor will strengthen the story. I have written a separate report on how *adivasi* hamlets here became illicit liquor brewing centres and how the liquor and ganja mafia have tightened their grip on these communities.

How did you go about researching and framing the *adivasi* women's stories?

MS: I travelled extensively in the *adivasi* areas and talked to as many people as possible, including *adivasi* men, women, mooppans (traditional heads of the communities), leaders of various *adivasi* organisations, NGOs working in Attappadi, social researchers, tribal development officers, doctors, health workers, social activists and also government officials. I collected data from various research institutes. Many new story ideas emerged during this process, and I listed out the stories that I should write about. I wrote a series of 10 stories on the tribes.

How did you decide who to talk to, and what to highlight?

MS: You meet people like Pappa during your fieldwork. As for the others, I talk to people who can provide me with authentic information on the issue or who can throw some light on the issues. For instance, I decided to talk to Dr Prabhudas as he has been working in Attappadi for the last 20 years. I knew he would be able to give me a lot of information I needed. I highlight those issues that have not been covered by the media so far.

What did you constantly ask yourself when you wrote the story?

MS: Will *adivasi* women benefit from this story?

Sensitive observations and convicted writing often conflict with the refrain that journalists are to be clinically detached observers; likewise their reporting. How do you decide which stories require your personal engagement, and which require a straight mechanical reporting of the hard facts -- the 5Ws and 1H so to speak?

MS: When you are covering routine events like press conferences, you can write straight reports. Even then, I feel, reporting shouldn't be mechanical. As reporters, you need to be alert always. If you're writing a special story or a feature, it requires your personal engagement. Since I am an independent journalist now, I never do mechanical reporting. I write stories which I really want to write about. I think, even when you support a particular cause or empathise with a group of people, stories should not be biased.

What narrative techniques do you use to draw your readers into the story and your analysis of the issue?

MS: Readability of a report is very important. Readers will dump a well-researched report if it's not readable. Intros should grab readers into the story. There should be a thread connecting all paragraphs, and there should be a natural flow. I make it a point to use direct, simple, lucid language so that readers can easily understand what you say. They should not stumble on words while reading the report. Even if you have all the statistics and data, reporting from the field is absolutely necessary to give colour to your story. Also, I always try to be accurate with facts and statistics. If there is a factual error, you might lose your credibility.

I presume your sources, such as Pappa, speak to you in the local dialect. In interpreting, and translating the quotes, how did you decide which appropriate words to use to reflect the idiolect and nuances expressed by the adivasi women?

MS: You cannot do a word-by-word translation of dialects. The words which you use should reflect the spirit of what has been told. So far, I have not had much difficulty in translating dialects.

Reading your stories, I feel the *adivasi* women's plight. One wonders what can be done to alleviate their living conditions. How do you cope with the sense of frustration and helplessness, which I suppose can creep in occasionally, when you write your stories?

MS: That frustration and the feeling of helplessness are always there. It's part of the profession. You keep on writing on some issues and [there is] no action by those who should take action. That leads to real frustration. But if you are in some other profession you will have other kinds of frustrations. Journalists dig out truths

and it's the duty of the people's movements or small pressure groups or the government to take up the issues or take necessary steps to solve the problems. Even if we are frustrated, we have to do our duty, don't we? The media have a vital role in supporting democracy.

Have your stories over the years led to concrete steps being taken by the government and related bodies to address the plights of the poor and the disenfranchised in Kerala?

MS: An isolated report or feature on the issues of the poor might not impact on the policies. The media should highlight the issues and the civil groups (and political parties too) should take up those issues and press the government for policy changes. There should be a collective and continuous effort to impact the policies concerning the poor and marginalised. But generally, the mainstream media are not interested in such issues, and the government lacks the political will and fails to take concrete steps to solve the problems. As for the *adivasis* in Kerala, they constitute less than 1% of the total population of the state. They are not a significant vote bank with money and clout. So most often their problems remain unresolved.

Your story won you the DAJA 2005 award as "Development Journalist of the Year". How do you see your *adivasi* story (and others to come) contributing to the education of your readers, and, more significantly, influencing government policies?

MS: I believe my stories have contributed to educating readers. I often get serious feedback from readers. They tell me my stories are informative.

What personally rewarding stories have you written in your career? Why do you consider them to be personally rewarding?

MS: Except for a few, I think almost all of my stories are personally rewarding. In the process of writing a report — travelling, collecting data, meeting people, talking to them and finally publishing a well-written story — you yourself get educated. For instance, recently I wrote a story on the proliferation of Special Economic Zones (SEZ) in India and their social and economic impacts. It was a real experience. I got first-hand information on the plight of the workers, how the tight competition in the international market affects them while Multi-National Corporations (MNCs) make profits. I learned a lot about the international trade agreements and positive and negative impacts of Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs).

What is your advice to journalism students on how to make a difference to their community?

MS: Today's young journalists are enthusiastic professionals. They are careerists and hardworking too. Also, they have the advantages of technology. During the last several decades, means of communication have really been revolutionised and the process still continues. At the same time, what I feel is that the gap between the mass media and the mass reality has also widened. The chasm between what is being told by the mainstream media and what is being felt by the people across the world, is widening every day. The media often forget its crucial role as the fourth pillar of democracy and its responsibility of defining, reviewing and its role with regard to social concerns and people's problems. They are more interested in controversies, sensational news or party politics rather than real politics. In this context, what I have to say to the young journalists is that they should be sensitive to social issues and try for positive social change. They should be aware of the need to consciously examine and redefine their professional role as more than mere observers and carriers of information. Also, they should be aware of the need and the possibilities of communication for social change.

What are the attributes that journalism students need to acquire to pursue the stories, and the career in the way that you have pursued?

MS: They should be aware of, and sensitive to, the problems of the poor and the marginalised sections and should be willing to highlight these issues. City-based journalism often distances journalists from the grassroots.



INDIA TOGETHER

Remote adivasis face health care chasm

Despite crores of rupees having been spent in the name of tribal and other development programmes in one block of Palakkad district in Kerala, the region suffers from poor access to decent health care. 80 per cent of the adivasi population here are living in abject poverty.

M Suchitra reports.



*Ill and impoverished.
A tribal mother and her child,
Sholayur panchayat. Pic: T Mohandas.*

25 July 2005 - The afternoon is hot. Pappa sits in the shade of a tree in front of her mud-thatched hut holding her baby close to her bosom. The child is groaning with high fever. Pappa is only 30 years old, but looks much older. Thin with a pale face and tired eyes, she is an agricultural labourer, earning Rs 40-50 a day. She has five children.

All the five times, Pappa delivered her baby at home. She worked until her labour pain reached its peak. When she felt that it was about time for the baby to be born she would stop work, get into the hut and squat in the dark dingy room. Then the expectant mother would hold on to the knotted rope hung from the ceiling for strength. Pappa delivered all her babies squatting. There had never been anyone to attend to her during delivery. Each time, she cut the umbilical cord herself, bathed the baby and buried the afterbirth herself.

“To stop the bleeding from the umbilical cord all you have to do is to pour some kerosene oil on it and then put some dough on it. If that isn’t enough, you can also put some talcum powder,” the mother of five says with all the assurance of a doctor. Asked why not go to a hospital for delivery, Pappa answers, “Why should anyone go to hospital for delivery? They don’t do things our way. You have to lie down to deliver your babies there!”

This mother and her children belong to the Muduga tribe, and live in Varagampadi Ooru (a colony) in Sholayur Gram Panchayat in Attappadi block of Kerala's Palakkad district. They are lucky. The proof is in the fact that they are alive. This is not a piece of luck that every adivasi mother and her children living in Sholayur as well as the other two gram panchayats — Agali and Pudur — have.

It's true that Kerala claims to have attained a high Physical Quality of Life Index - as high as 80 - and has maternal and infant mortality rates much lower than other states in India. Ninety-nine percent of deliveries are institutionalised in the state. But statistics at the Community Health Centre at Agali, the block's headquarters, show a different picture.

A different story altogether

Between March 2003 and March 2004, there had been four deaths in the 603 births during the period. When 12 children die in every thousand births in mainstream Kerala, infant mortality including those stillborn is 66 for Attappadi. Eighty percent of the newborn babies are under the normal weight of 2.5 kgs. The real picture could be worse than the one statistics reveal.

The large incidence of maternal and infant deaths is malnourishment, and this in turn is due to poverty, inefficiency and ineffectiveness of the health services provided by the government and the tribal people's inaccessibility to it. There are three government primary health centres (PHC), one Community Health Centre (CHC) and 27 sub-centres in this 745-sq km block. But a large number of tribal women in this region prefer deliveries at home.

The Bethany Tribal Mission Hospital, near Anakkatty, near Sholayur on the Kerala Tamilnadu border, reports 230-275 births in a year of which adivasi women account for only 10 or 12. These women are usually from the Irulas who could merge into the mainstream lifestyles. The Kurumbas who have not yet emerged out of the forests and the Mudugas who have still not adjusted to life outside the forests hardly ever come to the hospital. In the process of mainstreaming the tribal communities over the years, the tribe of traditional midwives has almost died out.

Even though adivasi women have the self-confidence to have their deliveries at home, childbirth in the absence of trained midwives often leads to tragedy. Cutting the umbilical cord with rusted knives or razor blades, tying stones to the end of the cord so that it falls off, tying up the cord with dirty bits of string, applying mud to stop the bleeding, leaving the mother dirty even when the child is cleaned up — all these happen when inexperienced women help in the delivery process.

To make the matters worse, many of the sub-centres do not have ANMs (Auxiliary Nurse Midwife). All the sub-centres are in isolated areas, and government nurses are scared to stay in these places alone. Most of the nurses, recruited from far away places, are hesitant to work in this remote and backward tribal belt, and they stay away from duties on continuous leave. The deserted sub-centres often become centres for gambling and drinking and even for brewing illicit liquor.

The women are often unable to reach hospitals even if they want to. They have to walk over difficult hilly terrain for eight and ten kilometres before they can get hold of a vehicle. For adivasis who live in hamlets like Galasi, Thudukki, Moolagangal, in Attappadi block, even the Community Health Centre at Agali is a distant world.

“The tribal women, when they reach the hospital after a complicated delivery are very often in a critical condition,” points out Dr Prabhudas, an assistant surgeon at the Primary Health Centre at Pudur. Dr Prabhudas has been working in Attappadi for the last 20 years. “As the facilities for attending a complicated delivery case are inadequate in the primary health centres and community health centre, we often refer them to a taluk hospital or district hospital.”

And to reach the Mannarghat Taluk Hospital from Agali, one has to travel two hours by bus. The district hospital at Palakkad is further one hour. “There is nothing surprising about the fact that patients in critical condition mostly die on the way,” says Dr Prabhudas.

Even on reaching the government hospitals after a lot of effort, the adivasi women and children are not fortunate enough to be treated by specialists. The posts of gynaecologists and paediatricians remain vacant in most of these hospitals. Specialist doctors prefer private hospitals to government hospitals. A gynaecologist who joins a government hospital is entitled to a pay of Rs 8000 to Rs 10000. But private hospitals that charge hefty fees for abortions and caesareans are willing to pay much more. Specialists are paid anything from Rs 25000 to Rs 30000 when they sign-up. Naturally, doctors prefer private hospitals. Adivasi women who work as casual labourers do not have the financial wherewithal to get treated at private hospitals.

“Earlier, at least graduate doctors used to show some interest in being posted to such remote areas, as such services entitled them to preference in admission to post-graduate courses. Now that the government stopped giving preference to remote area services during admission to post graduate courses, even graduate doctors are reluctant to work in remote and backward places like Attappadi,” says Dr Prabhudas.

Whether the deliveries take place at home or hospital, doctors point out that tribal mothers are not healthy enough to deliver healthy babies. Most pregnant women and lactating mothers hardly have enough for two square meals a day. "Almost all of them are terribly anaemic. Either they have sickle cell anaemia or anaemia from lack of proper diet. Most of them suffer from protein deficiency too. It is dangerous for a pregnant woman to have a haemoglobin count below ten. But most pregnant adivasi women have counts of seven or eight. It even goes down to five or six in some," says Dr. Muralidharan, the medical superintendent at the Bethany Tribal Mission Hospital. According to him, eclampsia (high blood pressure and seizures) is very common in the third trimester in Attappadi's adivasi women.

Uprooted first, and then mainstreaming fails

Their tragic tale started when the forest reached the hands of the government and the land around it, in the hands of the settlers. Earlier, when they lived in the forest their diet was a balanced one, consisting of tubers and fruits and meat. And they used to cultivate protein-and-iron-rich food like ragi, maize, pulses and chama. But later, during the influx of settlers, tribals were forced to retreat to the barren, parched, uncultivable hill-slopes. Adivasi communities constituted 63% of Attappadi's population in 1961. According to the 2001 Census, the total population of Attappadi is 66,171 and Scheduled Tribes constitute 27,121. Adivasi population has come down to 41%.

A survey report prepared as early as 1977 by a project officer at the state's Integrated Tribal Development Project reveals that the tribals had then lost 14,000 hectares of fertile land to settlers, and now 27,000-strong tribal people hold just 2,000 acres of land.

Most of the adivasi women shoulder the responsibility of raising the family on their own, while their men enslave themselves to liquor. The women have no option other than going back to their wage labour within a few days after delivery. Many of them suffer from acute and chronic back pain.

Attappadi testifies how a mainstream development process could deeply shatter an erstwhile self-sustained community. It is the



*A tribal family from Pudur panchayat
Pic: T Mohandas.*

first block in Kerala where the Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP) was initiated by the state government. It had been declared an ITDP block in 1970 after the State Planning Board assessed it as the most backward block in the state. Ever since, the state government implemented a good number of special projects — Attappadi Co-operative Farming Society, the Western Ghats Development Programme, the Attappadi Valley Irrigation Programme — for the development of the block, and many other poverty alleviation programmes under the ITDP and Integrated Rural Development Project.

According to the State Planning Board, during the Ninth Five Year Plan (1997-2002) Rs 13.28 crores have been spent in this block alone. Out of this amount, 20% was spent in the health sector. A Rs 219-crore eco-restoration project (Attappadi Comprehensive Environmental Conservation and Wasteland Development Project) aided by the Japan government is being implanted in this area since 1996 through Attappadi Hills Area Development Society (AHADS), a state government agency.

Yet, the region remains a symbol of backwardness with about 80 per cent of the tribal population living in abject poverty. None of the projects implemented here so far have taken the peculiarities of adivasi culture and beliefs into consideration. Even the much-hyped People's Planning Programme implemented in the state during 1997-2002 as the Ninth Five Year Plan, turned out to be a failure in Attappadi since non-tribals constitute the majority of the population, and also, due to the illiteracy (overall literacy rate of Attappadi is 49.5 per cent - in sharp contrast with the totally-literate mainstream Kerala) and lack of political and administrative awareness of the adivasis.

State's priorities change

There are stark disparities in the healthcare services available to remote tribal regions compared to other parts of the state. Also, as Dr B Ekbal, national convenor of the Jan Swasthya Abhiyan (People's Health Movement) points out, there has been a definite decline in the public health care system in the state since the 1980s. Starting from the 1980s there was an overall drop in the rate of growth in government health expenditure due to a fiscal crisis. This was accentuated after 1991 as a result of economic liberalisation policies.

In a study of the impact of macroeconomic adjustment policies on access to healthcare, Dr D Narayana of the Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, notes that between 1981-82 and 1997-98, the state's expenditure on medical and public health services, as a proportion of total expenditure, declined from 9.62% to 6.98%. Capital expenditure on medical and public health services, as a percentage of total capital expenditure, plunged from 9.61% to 1.57%.

"As a result of this rolling back of government support to healthcare, the first major casualty has been the rural health sector," says Dr B Ekbal, "It's actually the lack of political commitment that has largely brought about a decline in the public healthcare system in Kerala. The state doesn't even have a health policy of its own. There has been no proper planning at the policy level. The government is spending more money on super specialty hospitals than focusing on the primary health care system."

The State Health Department takes an indifferent attitude towards the health issues of the tribal communities. The last comprehensive survey in Kerala on the state of health and socio-economic status of the adivasis was carried out in 1992. Instead of seeking sustainable solutions to the problems faced by the tribal communities as a result of their alienation from land, forest and culture, what is being done is the distribution of free rice and iron tablets when starvation and anaemia become acute. When a good amount of money is being otherwise spent on development projects through the three-tier panchayats and the centrally-assisted welfare schemes, is providing basic healthcare services to the tribal communities that difficult?

(Quest Features & Footage).

M Suchitra is a Kochi-based journalist associated with the Quest Features and Footage. She was named the Development Journalist of the Year at the Developing Asia Journalism Awards 2006, for this article.

Story available at: <http://www.indiatogether.org/2005/jul/hlt-attappadi.htm>

This article was first published in India Together (www.indiatogether.org) and is republished with permission".

EXPOSING THE CORRUPT

“It is not easy to work in Pakistan where ... anyone who doesn't toe the government line can be considered to be against the 'national interests'. Whatever benefit journalists enjoy today in Pakistan is because of the struggle they have put in over the years. The government is trying its best to gag the media, but ... technological development has made it very difficult to control the flow of information. Those who work and live in Pakistan do have to live under a lot of pressure. Journalism in every society is a challenging job. As a journalist, you are a critic of society. And when you criticise, either society or any organisation or for that matter any individuals, you tend to create enemies. The challenge is to stick to your commitment, and keep doing the work that you think will ultimately benefit society in the long run.”

Massoud Ansari, Correspondent for Newline, Pakistan.

LACE SCEPTICISM WITH OPTIMISM ABOUT THE GOOD IN PEOPLE

Glenda Gloria

Managing Editor of *Newsbreak*, Philippines.
2005 Jaime V. Ongpin Award for Investigative Journalism.

Eric Loo: *Newsbreak* claims in its home page (www.newsbreak.com.ph) that it's "the Philippine magazine that is the most credible read in the country today". What sets *Newsbreak* apart from other English language news magazines in the country?

Glenda Gloria: First, *Newsbreak* has the luxury of time, which most newspaper reporters don't have. I think this has to be acknowledged, because I know that given ample time, many good journalists can come up with more insightful and in-depth stories. Having said that, I would like to believe that *Newsbreak* remains the most credible read, even in the news magazine industry, largely because we have this mantra: good journalism sells. We have a high regard for the Philippine audience; we know that they are a discriminating audience, the TV stations' news judgments notwithstanding. Thus, we add perspective and insights into our stories. We put a lot of insider stuff in them. We make sense of the news that they read (which is stated below our masthead: We Make Sense of the News). We don't add to the confusion that all sorts of media reports cause sometimes - we clarify.

Third is the discipline of the staff that comes with their "romantic" view of journalism; it's usually the "romance" that sustains us when the going gets tough. We became journalists not because we wanted to be famous (really!) but because we felt that this profession could somehow make the Philippines a better place to live in. Thus, we go through a rigorous process of checking and counter-checking our facts. We do this through both the paper trail and human trail. To us, there is no such thing as a small story. We bleed for every story. I always advise our writers not to be misled when they are given an assignment that will only fill up a page of the magazine. The shorter the story, the harder the work, in fact, since you have to condense everything in just 800 words even if the work you've done can probably fill two more pages.

What prompted you to write the two-part series on “Cover-up in the military”, for which you received with your co-writer (Raphael Martin), the JVO award in 2005?

GG: I have been covering the military since 1989. This was the biggest corruption scandal to hit the Philippine military since I began covering it. Newspapers already came out with bits and pieces of the story, and I personally wanted to make more sense of it, to dig deeper, and to explain how the system in the military could cause generals to be as corrupt as General Garcia (see accompanying story).

How did the information come to your attention, which led to your blind item story on Maj. Gen. Carlos Garcia’s son’s arrest in San Francisco airport for not declaring the US\$100,000 he had on him?

GG: I received two text messages from long-time sources. One was a colonel in the army (who I would later identify in my story, Col. Ricardo Morales), another had retired (he died late 2005). I was incredulous when they told me that the son of a general was arrested at a US airport for smuggling US\$100,000. I thought that was too big, that it was too much. I thought they were exaggerating. I did my initial checks with some sources who didn’t know about it. So we decided to put it in our blind item first to see if some people would react to it.

Did the Chief-of-Staff, Gen. Abaya, initiate the dinner date with *Newsbreak* in early August after he read the *Newsbreak* story? Did you feel obliged to keep much of the dinner conversation off the record?

GG: No, Abaya didn’t initiate the dinner. We asked for an informal interview with him (and at that point, even if we had written about it in the blind item, that wasn’t our motivation for setting that interview. I forget now what story we were working on then). As is his style, he asked us for dinner in his home because that was the only time he could have for us. This is an interesting aspect of the process. You see, Abaya thought that everything we talked about was off the record. In fact, he was so angry at my article (according to his wife) because he said I got it out of context. He clarified (to another editor but not to me personally; and he didn’t want to write a letter to “correct” me) that when he said that he had transferred Garcia to a less lucrative post, he didn’t mean he was simply doing that. Did I feel obliged to keep everything off the record? No, precisely because during the dinner, I did ask him about our blind item. And that’s when he confirmed that it was General Garcia and that he had moved him to another position. I was asking him as a journalist. I was there as a journalist. He did not say, off the record.

The peculiarity of the Philippine context, however, is such that things do get personal. Sources sometimes set interview appointments over dinner or lunch.

We'd rather see sources during office hours, as a matter of policy. We'd rather pay our way every single time, too. But there are opportunities that you simply can't miss if you're running after a story—opportunities that will not in any way violate ethical standards. And sometimes, those opportunities come in the form of social gatherings or dinners. This is probably a no-no in Western practices, but that's how it is sometimes in the region. General Abaya probably felt that I had abused his hospitality. In this country, getting an appointment with the chief of staff can be tough. He is a very busy person. But we were fortunate that he respected the magazine and that he respected us enough to accommodate us in his home. Of course, he has probably changed his mind since.

With the far-reaching implications of the story, how did you get your sources from within the AFP (Armed Forces of the Philippines) to talk to you, and be quoted?

GG: I like how Seymour Hersh explained how he got sources in the US military to talk to him about prison abuse. He says one can't separate his work on Abu Ghraib from his body of work for the last three decades. I've covered the military for 17 years already. Some of the generals now at the helm of the Armed Forces were still shy colonels when I first met them. Local journalists always complain about access to the military. I do understand their predicament. When I was young, the military beat consumed me and I spent all my waking hours knocking on officers' offices and homes and visiting their camps. It's really tough; you really have to spend many years with the institution to be able to win the confidence of sources.

What hurdles did you have to jump to obtain all the relevant documents pointing to Garcia's accumulated wealth?

GG: By the time I started working on it, the civilian agencies investigating the case were willing to release the documents. I got most of the documents from the civilian agencies - NONE from the military.

Do you find the traits – *utaang* no loob and kinship ties – a hindrance to your information gathering in what you described in your story as a “culture that pervades among men in uniform”? How did you overcome this hurdle?

GG: It's the personalistic nature of Philippine society that gives investigative journalists a tough time. In the military, we have the so-called *mistah* system (the military lingo for classmate) that involves classmates at the Philippine Military Academy. There's this unwritten rule among PMA grads not to speak ill of classmates. Sometimes, even if that classmate has done something wrong. General Garcia belongs to an influential batch – Class 1971, which includes the likes of former

rebel leader, ex-Sen. Gregorio “Gringo” Honasan and Sen. Panfilo Lacson. I didn’t get any useful information about Garcia from any of his classmates. Honasan, in fact, told the media that Garcia should not be singled out.

What skills would one need to track the paper trail? How long did you take to research and piece together the puzzle?

GG: A knack for details, a knack for making sense of dates, numbers, facts, patterns, trends. Contacts in government agencies. Knowledge of how the bureaucracy works. Patience. Doggedness. It took me about a month.

As part of an investigative reporting team, how did you facilitate the writing process?

GG: I asked Raphael Martin to do some interviews based on the kinds of officers he has access to, and submit the stories to me. I was the lead writer and put everything together. There’s got to be a leader writer in a team, I think, who ideally has a full grasp of the story and its direction.

Some parts of the story read like value judgments based on your journalistic investigations, experience with the AFP, observations, and conversations with your sources. For example in the 15th para, you wrote, “Internally, the chief of staff (Abaya) enjoys the power of moral suasion over his peers”. And in the 17th para, you wrote, “Two things stopped the AFP high command from investigating Garcia: the unchecked, antiquated procurement and disbursement system in the AFP and the culture that pervades among men in uniform.” Do you think this interlacing of attributed observations and unattributed value judgments are peculiar to *Newsbreak’s* investigative journalism, that may not be suitable to, for instance, reporting in the daily papers?

GG: Is the 15th para a judgment call or a statement of fact? It’s a fact that internally, the chief of staff of the Philippine military enjoys the power of moral suasion over his peers. He exercises moral leadership over them, and they repeatedly say this whenever they assume command. In the 17th para, this is just a summary, or what investigative reporters call the nut graph of what I discussed in the subsequent paragraphs (about the system of “conversion” and the comptroller mafia culture).

With the nature of the military cover-up story, many of your sources would prefer anonymity. How did you impress on your readers the reliability and accuracy of the information?

GG: I described the sources to them as much as I could. I backed up their claims with interviews with other sources and with the paper trail.

To what extent would you use unnamed sources? What “rules” do you follow in using anonymous sources in your investigative stories?

GG: As a general rule, we avoid using anonymous sources. We always tell the staff that the first step is to encourage sources to talk on the record. No information from a single anonymous source is used. We don't allow this in *Newsbreak*. This has to be corroborated by another source (whose information did not come from the previous source we used – otherwise, what's the point?). We do understand, however, that the military and its sensitive programmes/activities is really a difficult beat to crack. Especially on corruption issues. So we verified all the sensitive info from anonymous sources in the Garcia story with two other sources (so, three sources at most).

Did you feel at times that you needed to seek legal advice on what information you could or could not publish?

GG: We always ask a lawyer to read a sensitive story before it comes out in the magazine. We don't consult him on which facts or information to publish. We simply give him the final copy and ask him if he reads anything libelous. He found nothing libelous in the Garcia story.

Parts of your stories are narrative reconstructions of events, some of which took place years earlier. What techniques did you use to let your readers know which events were witnessed by you, or were reconstructed from your research and chats with your anonymous sources?

GG: When I witnessed it, I said *Newsbreak* was there. Otherwise, I refer to sources who related that information.

Have your stories pushed the AFP to conduct further investigation into Garcia and his son? Has the expose´ led to an independent inquiry, for instance, into the “comptroller mafia” in the AFP?

GG: The Garcia scandal has led to the abolition of the comptrollership staff. I will not dare say that it's because of my story. The Garcia scandal took a life of its own. My other story on another comptroller after Garcia, Jacinto Ligot, led to his and his family's prosecution. The Ligots have been charged with plunder in the Sandiganbayan, the anti-graft court. I am particularly proud of that story because the charges stemmed mainly from it; for once in my entire career, I saw how a story reached a conclusive end: the filing of a case against a corrupt official.

It's perceived that the resources and time committed to investigative journalism are more achievable for a weekly magazine like *Newsbreak*, which daily newspaper reporters don't have access to. Is this a fair observation?

GG: It is partly a fair observation. But I would like to note that unlike big newspaper organisations, *Newsbreak* has limited funding. We get by with limited resources. That's why we don't come out with investigative stories every issue. We rely on our own personal vehicles or rent one for out-of-town assignments; the company has no company vehicle. We are a small staff. As editors, we write and do investigative stories ourselves. So it's not just the staff writers who go to the field. We have no hazard pay for our writers and photographer. We don't get bonuses, except those provided by law. We get a lot of "psychic income".

But look at the country's two biggest newspapers, for example. They have lots of money; they have big staff, many senior reporters at their beck and call who can be deployed for long-term investigative work. They have several full-time editors who can coach and guide reporters as the latter do investigative pieces. I'm sorry, but these big newspaper organisations can't be justified in not doing investigative journalism. Unless, of course, they don't think it's worth their time.

What tips or lessons – in terms of ethical practice, research and attitudes – from investigating the 'military cover-up' story, can you share with other journalists?

GG: Well, funny as it may sound, but the lesson I learned there is "DON'T dine with the chief of staff". He might misconstrue you as a friend and not as a journalist. He might think it's a social call and that therefore everything is off the record. There's a lot of grey area there, so better not do it next time around. Second, assume the good in people despite everything. This I tried to do when I did the story. I tried very hard to keep an open mind that not all members of the comptroller mafia are corrupt. But as I worked on the story, the less convinced I became. In the end, it made me feel that all comptrollers were corrupt. Which is a sweeping indictment, of course. And an unfair one, unless proven in every case. So avoid generalisations.

The Philippines is known to be one of the most dangerous places for investigative journalists. Since 1992, the Committee to Protect Journalists has noted that 34 journalists have been killed, making the Philippines one of the most deadliest countries for journalists today. In your investigation of corruption and malpractices in high places, to what extent are you exposing yourself to intimidation or physical attacks? How do you take on this "occupational hazard"?

GG: On Aug. 2, 2005, my mother and sister (who live in our family home; I live nearby) received a funeral wreath that the delivery-man said was meant for me. The funeral wreath carried a ribbon that said, "Condolence from your loving friends". It was my first death threat as a journalist. This happened after I wrote a story about the military's alleged involvement in the alleged wiretapping of President Arroyo and an election official in the 2004 presidential elections. It also came as I was supervising future stories related to election cheating. I realised then that what we've done and intend to do in *Newsbreak* has really angered some people. I felt vulnerable, and I started to worry for my family. I wished that it was I, not my mother and sister, who received the wreath. That they were the ones who got it made it much more difficult to deal with. It does come with the territory. But that's easier said than done.

When you get a threat like that, you get scared. You ask questions: am I overdoing it? Is this worth it? Is this the kind of media environment I deserve? But after a while, you just get over it. You take the necessary precautions, you lie low for some weeks, then you go back to work again. Journalism is the only work I know. I love my work and it loves me, too. It has given me tremendous blessings and opportunities, not just for personal growth, but also for serving my community in my own little ways. I don't know of a job better than this. So if what comes with it are these threats, I would have to live with them.

What traits do you think one should inculcate to become an award-winning journalist, as you have?

GG: First, that you should NEVER be conscious of getting an award for a story. You do a story, you expose wrongdoing because it's worth doing and not because you're going to get praised for it. Second, you have to have a healthy dose of scepticism on one hand, and optimism on the other. Corrupt practices get exposed largely because there are good citizens willing to expose them. Even as you stumble upon wrongdoing, never forget the inherent goodness of people in government and society in general. Third, you have to be willing to work hard and to take risks. Fourth, you have to have a healthy dose of humility to make you say at some point – I got it wrong, I need to verify this, I don't know all.

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COVER-UP IN THE MILITARY PART I

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JAILED. Retired Army Maj. Gen. Carlos Garcia (left) at a Senate hearing in Manila before ill-gotten wealth charges were filed against him. Then Armed Forces chief of staff Gen. Narciso Abaya (right) looks on. NEWSBREAK PHOTO.

This is the sad story of how military generals protect their own, and why.

As early as January 2004, the Armed Forces leadership got wind of reports that about US\$100,000 being taken to the US in December 2003 by a son of Maj. Gen. Carlos F. Garcia had been intercepted at an American airport for being undeclared. The military leadership did not lift a finger to verify the reports, much less investigate the elder Garcia.

In March, claiming he had no hard evidence to prove the “rumours,” Gen. Narciso Abaya, Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) chief of staff, chose an easy way out of the mess: he transferred Garcia from the lucrative position of J6 (AFP deputy chief of staff for comptrollership) to J5 (AFP deputy chief of staff for plans and programmes), which has the lowest budgets of all the J-staff offices in Camp Aguinaldo.

Over dinner in early August with NEWSBREAK, after we wrote a blind item on the US airport incident, Abaya disclosed that he had been “hearing things” about Garcia, thus his decision to move him to J5. “At least, walang pera doon (There’s no money in that office),” he explained.

The transfer didn't sit well with some officers.

From March to June, the recalcitrant Army Col. Ricardo "Dick" Morales—one of the presidential guards of former President Ferdinand Marcos who joined the rebel movement that staged a coup against him in 1986—pestered Abaya with text messages asking him two questions: first, if the reports about Garcia's son were true; second, what the AFP leadership intended to do about it. Abaya himself had told NEWSBREAK that "Morales has been busy texting me about Garcia."

By July, feeling nothing was being done about it, Morales decided to write to Abaya. In his July 15 letter, Morales told the AFP chief that as far as he knew, the US had already relayed the information to the Intelligence Service of the AFP (Isafp). It was the talk in military camps.

While he didn't want to prejudge Garcia, Morales told Abaya, the comptroller had to come clean for the sake of the institution.

Morales also asked Abaya if Garcia's transfer to J5 had something to do with the US incident. Morales thought: Is Abaya now sending signals to the AFP that the J5, which attracts the strategists and good writers in the military, is a lounging area for the corrupt?

Abaya called up Morales and ordered him to bring his complaint to the AFP Office of Ethical Standards and Public Accountability (OESPA), the unit tasked to look into complaints against soldiers. Morales did, only to be asked by an OESPA officer for advice on how they should proceed from that information. The head of the OESPA, Vice Admiral Ariston de los Reyes Jr., who was Garcia's classmate in the Philippine Military Academy (PMA), did not deem it necessary to inhibit himself from the case.

"We did not know who among the US authorities we were supposed to deal with regarding the incident. The information from the letter only said so much," De los Reyes told NEWSBREAK. The AFP was satisfied with Garcia's August 2 letter to Abaya explaining that the money had come from loans from friends and relatives.

If the military bosses wanted to probe Garcia's dollar possessions and other assets in the US, they would have gotten results—easily.

The Philippine military is the staunchest ally of the US in the region, and Abaya, a West Point graduate, has extensive personal and official networks with American authorities. The Philippine-US Joint Defense Assessment has been in place since

last year, a mechanism that allows officials from the Pentagon and the US Pacific Command to assist the military on key reform areas.

One phone call by Abaya would have led to a discreet probe of Garcia's properties in the US and an accounting of how much his family had carried through US airports in the last few years.

Internally, the chief of staff enjoys the power of moral suasion over his peers. Abaya, even if he is chair of the board of the AFP Savings and Loans Association Inc. (AFPSLAI) where Garcia has millions in deposits, could not poke into the transactions since the bank is covered by Central Bank rules. But through informal channels, the chief of staff can get information from the bank, which is run by retired military officers.

Abaya, however, told a House hearing that he needed time to gather evidence against Garcia and that "we were already overtaken" by the Ombudsman's actions.

Two things stopped the AFP high command from investigating Garcia: the unchecked, antiquated procurement and disbursement system in the AFP and the culture that pervades among men in uniform.

It doesn't help that the defense secretary, lawyer Avelino Cruz, is new on the job. While many favour the appointment of a civilian to the helm of the defense department, Cruz has a handicap at this crucial time: he barely knows the complex organisation to be able to crack the whip on it.

"He has to fight tooth and nail to change the culture [in the military]," said Orlando Mercado, the first civilian defense secretary in the post-Marcos era.

Lucky general

Until his questionable wealth was exposed, Garcia had the best of both worlds. He belonged to two powerful cliques in the Armed Forces: the class of 1971 of the PMA, which includes Abaya (who graduated on the same year from West Point but is included in the PMA Alumni Registry as a member of the class) and the so-called comptroller family, a tight, exclusive bloc of military officers who corner appointments to comptrollership positions. If one is to find another explanation for this stroke of luck, Garcia, like Abaya, is an Ilocano.

Until last year, Garcia was class president of the Class 1971 alumni. A PMA classmate describes him as a "very generous" officer.

No senior officer of the AFP in recent history has been punished for corruption or incompetence in the battlefield. At the most, they are transferred to remote provinces, put on a “floating” status, or, like Garcia, named to a low-budget unit.

Two senior generals had been investigated and charged with corruption in high-profile cases—but only after they had retired. They were former AFP chief of staff Gen. Lisandro Abadia and his PMA classmate (1962), retired Brig. Gen. Jose Ramiscal Jr.

Abadia was former comptroller of the Army (G-6) while Ramiscal was former J6. Ramiscal is facing 24 graft cases and 148 counts of estafa before the Sandiganbayan for allegedly mismanaging the AFP Retirement and Separation Benefits System (RSBS). A similar graft case was recommended by the Senate against Abadia, and this is still pending with the Ombudsman. Both men were charged by civilian agencies.

In January 2002, the AFP investigated four Army and Air Force officers for their involvement in selling duty-free goods in the black market in East Timor, where they were assigned as part of the United Nations peacekeeping force. The case was so embarrassing to the country that the military leadership threatened to dismiss them from service. Today, the alleged leader of the black market group, Army Col. Allan Bontuyan, is the deputy commander of an Army task force based in northern Mindanao. The military had cleared him.

Garcia undoubtedly knew the military culture well enough to get reckless in the last two years before his scheduled retirement in November 18 this year.

In 2002 alone, immigration records showed that he made a dozen trips abroad—Europe, US, Singapore, Hong Kong—even if his work didn’t require him to do so. The same records obtained by NEWSBREAK showed that the general made seven trips abroad in 2003, including a trip to Europe in early December with his wife, a military aide, and the latter’s wife. After that European trip, Garcia went to the US on Dec. 29, 2003. Between the Europe and US trip was the incident of December 19, when his son was apprehended at the San Francisco airport for failing to declare \$100,000. The son was travelling with his younger brother.

It was in 2002, a year after his appointment to J6, that Garcia’s bank deposits and properties rose. That year, his deposits in AFPSLAI reached P7 million. In 2003, he took \$200,000 to the US as down payment for two posh condominium units in New York. From January to March this year, he made three outward dollar transmittals amounting to P27 million.

Estimates show he must have brought P71 million to the US from 1993 to last year, enough to buy 71,000 pairs of boots for soldiers or provide a one-year meal allowance to 6,500 troops.

Marcelo's shock

Unfortunately for Garcia, Ombudsman Simeon Marcelo has been busy training his field investigators and prosecutors. Boggled down by a meagre budget when he was appointed to the post in 2001, Marcelo had to tap grant money to help him improve the work of his staff. Among the aid agencies that have been funding Marcelo's training programmes is the US government's aid agency that has been working in the Philippines for a long time now—the USAID.

Early this year, upon Marcelo's request, USAID brought officials from the US Customs and the Federal Bureau of Investigation to give a lecture to Ombudsman investigators. That's when Marcelo personally met with officials of these agencies, who have since kept in touch with him. And that's why Marcelo got to pin down Garcia—not because of some US conspiracy, as raised by Sen. Juan Ponce Enrile and other sectors, to pressure the Arroyo government to be tougher on terrorists.

During an October 9 forum sponsored by the Presidential Management Staff in Malacañang, Marcelo talked about the Garcia affair, which he described as "tsamba" (luck) for his office. "When these US Customs officials were here, they mentioned to me over dinner that they have anti-corruption officials who monitor movement of assets such as in the airports," Marcelo recalled. "So I told them that since I am investigating officials from the Customs, Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH), and Bureau of Internal Revenue, perhaps they should help me." The three agencies are perceived to be the most corrupt. Marcelo asked the Americans to inform him of any suspicious entry of money to the US from the Philippines in the last 12 months, hoping this could yield familiar names from these agencies.

"To my shock and surprise, on September 14 they transmitted to me a list of the amount that General Garcia has brought to the US," Marcelo said. "It was manna from heaven."

Garcia's case has somehow upset the Ombudsman's timetable. For this year and the next, he has been training his guns on the top three agencies. "My timetable for the military was 2006 yet...but the case is already here and I can't turn my back on it."

The military was reluctant at first to give the Ombudsman all the records pertaining to Garcia, Marcelo disclosed. He got all the data he needed by issuing the AFP a

subpoena. On September 28, finding a prima facie case against Garcia, Marcelo ordered him suspended for six months without pay.

When the news broke, Abaya could not even persuade Garcia to present himself to the media. The AFP initially refused to produce an official photograph of the man; the media had to rely on a charcoal portrait displayed in his office. Yet, when the military exposed some of its officers for allegedly campaigning for the opposition in the last elections, military officials not only identified them, they immediately had them grounded and recalled to headquarters.

The high command waited almost two weeks after Garcia's suspension before filing court-martial proceedings against him, and only after the President ordered them to do so. A court-martial case gives the military immediate and total custody of an accused. The delay allowed Garcia to leave his quarters, withdraw P19 million from AFPSLAI, and plot his defense.

'Comptroller Mafia'

How could Garcia have enriched himself so fast? And why is the military afraid to touch him?

It's not quite accurate to say that Garcia is a mere sacrificial lamb in this sordid affair. As J6 from March 2001 to September this year, Garcia was a power centre all by himself. Officers from captains to generals went to him if they needed approval for more allocation for their units, allowance for their travels, or money for social activities, like Christmas parties.

Besides, Garcia was secure as a member of the comptroller family—an elite bloc of former and current military comptrollers in the AFP and its major service commands. Among the former chiefs of staff who belong to the comptroller family are Abadia and retired general, Roy Cimatu.

Officers interviewed by NEWSBREAK call them "the comptroller mafia." As such, they follow a certain career path that assures them the comptroller post most of the time in their careers, according to a former Army chief. They usually treat combat assignments as mere requirements; they know that they will always land in a comptroller job after months in the battlefield.

In most cases, a comptroller who is scheduled to retire or assigned to the field will make sure that it is officers from the "family" who will replace him, the same source says.

The AFP has a comptroller eligibility list, a short list of military officers qualified to be comptrollers. "Once you're there, you become associated with the mafia one way or the other," says an Air Force general. Garcia didn't spend much time with the comptroller family before he became J6; he used to be logistics officer of the Army (June 1992 to November 1993). However, he began his career in the military as a comptroller for the 51st engineering brigade in the 1970s.

The Army's engineering brigade is another unit that deserves scrutiny. Garcia spent at least nine years there. Because it does road projects for the national and local governments, the brigade gets its resources not only from the AFP but from the national government as well. It is a beneficiary of pork barrel funds from lawmakers. Ideally, the brigade should just do work for military purposes; some officers say that its mission should be reassessed.

Garcia was the Army's chief of engineers when he was promoted to J6 in March 2001, shortly after Edsa 2. Gen. Diomedio Villanueva, the chief of staff at the time, told NEWSBREAK that Garcia's appointment "was already approved by Malacañang" when he took over as AFP boss.

Garcia's predecessor was Jacinto Ligot, now a retired major general and a known close associate of Angelo Reyes, whom Villanueva replaced as AFP chief and who is now interior and local government secretary. Ligot owns a unit in the posh Essensa Towers in Makati City, says a former defense official.

"They take care of each other," says the official. When comptrollers are required to take field assignments, chances are they will succeed in these command posts because of financial support from the "comptroller family." The official adds: "They never fail in the field because *bubuhusan sila ng pera ng mga kasama nilang comptroller.*"

The source cites the case of former AFP budget officer Army Col. George Rabusa, who is now with the Central Command (Cencom) in the Visayas but who was investigated by the Ombudsman for unexplained wealth in 2002. To take the heat off Rabusa, his superiors sent him to Cencom, which was then commanded by Ligot, his former boss at J6.

The new J6 who replaced Garcia is Brig. Gen. Antonio L. Romero, who also once served as deputy J6.

Arroyo's flawed style

Garcia is the only J6 to have served five AFP chiefs of staff. Blame this on President Arroyo's preference during her first term for appointing favourite generals to the top AFP post even if they were to retire in a few months. This somehow ensured Garcia's tenure because no short-term chief of staff would dare replace his budget adviser.

"I saw no need to replace him when I assumed office," retired AFP chief Gen. Dionisio Santiago admitted. "Why should I when I would be serving for only four months?"

Even if he served for only four months (November 2002 to April 2003), Santiago claimed he was able to finish 14 building projects—and Garcia, he said, made sure all these were amply funded. Aside from Villanueva and Santiago, the other chiefs of staff served by Garcia were: Cimatú (May 2002 to September 2002), Benjamin Defensor (September 2002 to November 2002), and Abaya (April 2003 to November 2004).

Overlooked by Abaya was one of the recommendations last year by the Feliciano Commission that investigated the causes of the July 2003 Oakwood mutiny: for junior and senior comptrollers in the AFP to serve only for two years at the most in their posts.

A former comptroller told NEWSBREAK that it was unwise for the leadership to keep an officer as comptroller until his retirement. "You don't retire a comptroller at his post because if he turns out to be a bad choice and an abusive one, then you are courting trouble," he said. He laments that their work has been tainted by abusive officers. "We tried in the past to establish criteria on who can be comptrollers...that it should not be just anyone else...unfortunately, such has been set aside."

Prized post

Comptrollership used to be a mere technical job.

In the 1970s and '80s, PMAers looked down on this work so that only the non-PMAers and commissioned officers applied for the post. The prestigious staff positions then were intelligence and operations.

Now it's the other way around: military classes for comptrollership sometimes have to shut off officers seeking to attend advanced courses for this work. Enrolment in intelligence courses, on the other hand, is thinning.

In the past, commanders and J-staff officers had control of their allocations, but the J6 has emerged as the central clearing house for all AFP money. All the J-staff and major commands now pass their request for allocation to the J6, which has the final say.

Comptrollers in all levels in the AFP (down to the battalions) are the chief financial advisers of commanders on how their budgets may be used. The J6 is the principal financial adviser of the chief of staff. He controls the disbursement of funds in the whole AFP and determines who receives how much. The J6 has the power to evaluate the mission accomplishment reports of these units and determine if they deserve the resources they are getting.

Said the Feliciano Commission in its 2003 report: "Not surprisingly, a commander tends to follow the comptroller's advice on how [an allotment advice] can be utilised to generate cash or supplies."

It is the J6 who drafts and presents the AFP budget to Congress for approval. Three officers say the J6 can "to a certain extent" hold the chief of staff hostage because of the special "skills" that he possesses and the dependence of the chief of staff on quick money for operations.

Thus, Garcia was not being forthright when he told a House hearing that his duty as J6 was "simply ministerial."

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COPING WITH HAZARDS OF INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

Yvonne Chua

Former Training Director, Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism.
2005 Jaime V. Ongpin Award for Investigative Journalism.

Eric Loo: What prompted your investigation of the Philippine Congress?

Yvonne Chua: It was a follow-up to the investigation the PCIJ first did in 1994. The first one focused chiefly on family, business and other interests of members of the House of Representatives. A second one in 2000 more or less looked into the same aspects. The PCIJ expanded the 2004 investigation to scrutinise issues related to the accountability and transparency – or lack of it – of the lawmakers as individuals and Congress as an institution. The center also widened the scope of its investigation to include members of the Senate. Among other things, PCIJ looked at how lawmakers have employed their powers to further enrich themselves and entrench their families in power. It examined how legislators employed their powers to make laws, to conduct legislative inquiries, to examine the national budget, and to vet presidential appointments to get benefits for themselves, their allies and their kin.

As part of an investigative reporting team, how did you facilitate the story writing process?

YC: At the outset of the project, all of us discussed and agreed on the parameters on how to go about the investigation, including how to write the story. We were each assigned a particular subject(s). Having done team reporting, we knew the value of passing on to our colleagues, the information that we had gathered or come across that was related to the subject of their investigation. We also held several meetings to keep track of the progress of each member's investigation and coordinate our work. Four writers were involved in the project. Meetings were held when necessary.

What skills would one need, to keep tabs on the two years of paper trail?

YC: It's imperative for a journalist doing such a project to learn to methodically organise their files. This means devising a system to physically and electronically organise and classify the voluminous information that is accumulated in the course of the investigation. Depending on the nature of the information, filing can be done either by date, by subject, by personality, by corporation. It helps if a journalist

regularly reviews the documents s/he has obtained to remind him/her what s/he already has or still lacks. A journalist should also periodically analyse the data so s/he can connect the dots, spot trends or patterns, detect deviations. I have always found it helpful to build databases and tables even early on in the data gathering phase. I use a combination, depending on the data I'm dealing with. Most of the time, spreadsheets (Excel or Calc) suffice. But I switch to database managers like Access when the data becomes voluminous. I use statistical analysis software (SPSS or EPI Info) to generate certain stats, especially for surveys. In this project, though, Excel was enough.

It's said that the resources committed to two years of investigation are more achievable for an institution such as PCIJ, which daily newspaper reporters don't have access to. Is this a fair observation?

YC: Daily newspaper reporters are just as, if not more capable of, doing this sort of investigation. In fact, beat reporters enjoy an edge over institutions like the PCIJ. They spend a lot of time in the beat, Congress for example, and are presumably better acquainted with its workings. They should find it easier to access the information since they are supposed to have cultivated a pool of sources. Big newspapers also have the money to invest in investigative projects, including forming I-Teams.

Your two-part feature series points to a blatant lack of accountability in the Congress's usage of funds. The bulk of the features are heavy on statistics, thus somewhat heavy reading. The features show few parts are taken up by direct quotes. Is this intentional?

YC: Yes, it was. For a long time now, Filipinos kept talking about Congress's lack of accountability, but failed to provide proof. It was also difficult to get people to go on the record with their allegations about the lawmakers, who are powerful in Philippine society. Some tended to give broad generalisations. So we decided to present hard, empirical data. Some data had not been presented to the public. Or if they had been, they were not analysed and presented in the same way that we did. While the Philippines have a constitutional provision on the right to information, mind you, it was a struggle to get the data from Congress and the Commission on Audit.

With the nature of the story, it's understandable that many of your sources would prefer anonymity. How did you impress on your readers the reliability of the information?

YC: Note that we use descriptive phrases for unnamed sources – “a government auditor,” “a legislator's chief of staff”, “a party-list representative”, “a two-term congressman” – so readers would know from whom the information is coming. It

is also a way to tell readers that we didn't make up the sources. We never use the vague phrase "sources said", like some publications do. That's a big no-no.

To what extent would you use unnamed sources in investigative journalism? What "rules" do you follow in using anonymous sources in your investigative stories?

YC: As much as possible, we convince our sources to go on the record. But we understand their reluctance to do so when it means danger to their life, limb, employment, and/or their family. Request for anonymity is evaluated on a case-to-case basis. It also involves discussion with the executive director and with colleagues. Questions like the following need to be addressed: How vital is the information? Is there no other way to obtain the information? Could we convince the source to go on the record if we got somebody else to? If the source insists on anonymity, then the demand to get corroboration becomes even greater. We rely heavily on the guidelines the Poynter Institute and Society for Professional Journalists have come up with on the use of anonymous sources.

Parts of your stories are narrative reconstruction of events, some of which took place years earlier. What techniques do you use to let your readers know which events are witnessed by you or were reconstructed from your research or conversations with your anonymous sources?

YC: Putting a date is one. Attribution is another, including using words like "recalls". Using direct quotes – especially weaving them into a short dialogue, where possible – also helps.

The narrative structure in part 3, with its human-oriented pitch in the first five paragraphs, provides a more engaging read, than part 2. How do you decide which narrative structure to use for which story?

YC: First of all, let me give you the correct wording of the first paragraph in the third part, as some words were inadvertently dropped in the online version: "THE Twelfth Congress formally opened on July 23, 2001, when a lawmaker's secretary handed him the cash equivalent of his very first paycheck as a member of the House of Representatives."

That is how I prefer to lead off my stories. But in this instance, the editor felt the best way to open part 2, which I must say is a 'numbers-numbing' story, was with a straight lead to achieve the biggest impact on readers who did not know the extent of money that has been given to and spent by lawmakers. On that point she was right. In addition, I did not have an anecdote that was as powerful as the one I had for part 3. The version I wrote for our book, entitled "The Rulemakers," employs a

soft, historical lead. That worked rather well. But a book caters to an audience that has more time and patience to wade through details.

Whenever I come across an incident, anecdote or example that more or less embodies the thesis of my investigation, I'd go for the narrative structure. I keep reminding myself that journalists are storytellers – an Aesop writing non-fiction – and there are many storytelling devices at our disposal. The challenge, of course, is to choose the most appropriate and effective device.

Are you optimistic that your stories will lead to concrete actions by the government in cleaning up the 'pork barrelling' in Congress?

YC: Investigations done on Congress in general and pork barrel in particular by the PCIJ and other news organisations have led to public outrage and forced the government to adopt reforms to check abuses in pork barrel spending. But even as these measures are being put in place, ingenious lawmakers find ways to go around the rules or, even worse, come up with new forms of pork barrel. That's why journalists always have to be on our toes.

What do you think is the bigger picture to what seems to be a chronic problem among the legislators?

YC: Allow me to give you excerpts of an article I recently wrote. It was based on an interview with former student activist-Constitutional Commission member-sectoral representative-education under-secretary, Jose Luis Gascon, about the restoration of democracy in the Philippines after the people power revolution at EDSA in 1986. I share his view:

Now 41, Gascon will always be known as the youngest member of the 1986 Constitutional Commission that drafted the 1987 charter. He was named four years later to the Eighth Congress as youth sector representative, which gave him a direct hand in crafting the country's laws.

At the time, he was one of the faces of the supposedly new politics. But then the system itself got old all too soon, although it may have been more of a case of a return to old ways.

Gascon himself says it was a matter of retaining the wrong things. "The mistake (of those in EDSA 1) was thinking it was sufficient to remove a dictator...and everything would fall into place," he says. "We have seen that that does not happen. We removed the dictator, but we retained the political system."

...IN GASCON'S book, it is Congress that embodies the failure of political reforms to take off or take root. He notes that those elected into Congress 1987 were the same people or clans that had been of the old system. "The system," he says, "(just) adapted itself in the democratic context." The consequence: A well-entrenched political elite holds sway, perpetuating itself in power through money politics and political dynasties, with the chief goal of protecting and preserving its political and business interests rather than pursuing much needed reforms in society.

Alas, the imposition of term limits has been futile in breaking the stranglehold of traditional politics. As Gascon now sees it, the limits are an "artificial mechanism to bring about some form of regular transition of power from one political force to another."

What has happened is that politicians stay in power by getting their spouses, siblings and relatives to warm their seats until conditions are ripe for them to return. "In fact," Gascon observes, "dynasties have consolidated. You have one congressman, another relative is the mayor or the senator, and they reinforce each other." The dynasties' return is evident enough in members of Congress who belong to his generation – many belong to political families, and have inherited their legislative seats from their parents or uncles or aunts, who in turn have gone on to occupy local posts in the clan's bailiwick.

"People are not elected to positions primarily on the basis of their legislative or political agenda," he says. "The reasons for their being elected to office are often defined by the strength of political clans in the different districts of the country."

The shift from a two- to multi-party system notwithstanding, the political party system remains weak. Political parties, says the Liberal Party member, remain "alliances of conveniences."

Against this political culture, the party-list system has not been successful in transforming the congressional landscape as shrewd politicians have exploited this initiative as well to cling to power, Gascon notes.

"There are no real political parties (in Congress) that articulate the agenda of reforms. It is defined or determined by leaders whose political positions change based on convenience. That's why there's no sustainability of reforms," he concludes.

What tips or lessons learnt from writing the story can you share with other journalists?

YC: The few ones that quickly come to mind:

- Always look for the trees AND the forest. A lot of journalists forget the big picture and context that help readers understand events. Or they forget to provide the details to support their thesis.
- Be innovative. Look for different ways to treat and present data. This often means learning new skills, including the use of technology, in data gathering, analysis and presentation
- Be persistent, especially when it comes to accessing documents. For example, the Commission on Audit was initially reluctant to let us look at its reports on the pork barrel spending of congressmen. We insisted and it agreed, but would not let us bring out the reports or have them photocopied. We kept insisting. It later agreed to let us copy the report BY HAND. I initially did that. But that was exhausting. So I brought a tape recorder with me and dictated the parts I needed for the story. It took me days, but I got the data.
- Get help from experts who can explain technical details. They often lead to other pieces of information and important sources.
- Spruce up the report with anecdotes, quotes, examples.
- Remember there are many ways to tell a story. Experiment with different techniques before deciding on one that will work for your story or you're skilled in using.

I'd now like to ask you about the Jaime V. Ongpin award. What traits do you think one should have to become an "award-winning" journalist? How would you define "excellence in journalism" given that good journalism goes beyond exposé or breaking investigative pieces?

YC: I've never really thought about what it takes to be an "award-winning" journalist. What matters most to me as a journalist is the commitment to the pursuit of truth, the discipline of verification and capacity to tell the story in an understandable yet compelling manner.

Your work has won a number of journalism awards. How do you see your stories contributing to the education of your readers, and influencing government policies?

YC: PCIJ is most known for its series on the unexplained wealth of former President Joseph Estrada. I was part of the team of journalists that put together the stories. The series was one of the bases for the impeachment complaint against Estrada, who was eventually ousted from office. The stories I've done on public education have also made some impact on government policies. They were used as input in the reforms made to the procurement system at the education department.

The Philippines is known to be one of the most dangerous places for investigative journalists. The Committee to Protect Journalists has noted that 34 journalists have been killed since 1992, making the Philippines one of the deadliest countries for journalists today. In your journalistic investigation into public corruption and malpractices in high places, to what extent are you exposing yourself to intimidation or attacks? How do you cope with this "occupational hazard"?

YC: Last year, CPJ described the Philippines as the "most murderous" country for journalists. A lot of the killings occur in the countryside where the rule of law is weak and many journalists do not have access to the kind of protection that journalists in the capital have. At PCIJ, we make sure that our investigative reports are airtight, accurate, fair and balanced. That's one of the best ways of protecting ourselves: good journalism. As a rule, we get the side of the target of the investigation before releasing it—alas, not with success all the time. So while we do get threats of libel suits, only one case has ever been filed in the prosecutor's office and none has made it to the courts. Other subjects of our investigation try to downplay our findings by casting doubt on the credibility of the institution. We have guidelines on what to do in case we receive threats, as individual or as institution, and/or find ourselves in perilous situations. The guidelines contain contact details of lawyers and media groups we can get in touch with. These are re-issued each time we perceive we are in danger.

GOOD JOURNALISM EXPOSES AND EDUCATES

Massoud Ansari

Correspondent for Newline, Pakistan.
Lorenzo Natali Prize for Asia and the Pacific 2003
Developing Asia Journalism Award 2005
Kurt Schork Award in International Journalism 2006

Eric Loo: You have won several awards for your stories – the 2003 *Natali Prize for Journalism* awarded by the International Federation of Journalists for your story on the Afghan repatriation scheme in Pakistan; and the 2005 *People and Development Journalism Award* from the Asian Development Bank Institute. What inspired you to write those stories?

Massoud Ansari: I always try get into something which is not only challenging but I also have a conviction that if my little effort could be of some help to others I should not shy away from putting in that effort. I've made a commitment to myself to expose corruption, whenever or wherever I see it. I strongly believe that someone always has to pay the cost for any kind of corruption. Corruption has become a kind of an enigma in third world countries and continues to make the lives of millions of people even more miserable. I also try to write about subjects which people either ignore or hesitate to write about. For example, lately I did a few stories on corruption in the Pakistani education system to the poor system in the health sector. As I also write for Western publications, I report about militancy in Pakistan.

Your 3,000 word special report (*The Great Repatriation Scam*, Newline, October 2002), which won the Natali Prize, traces the maze of corruption among the NGOs assigned to oversee the repatriation of Afghan refugees. How did you go about tracing the paper trail, and getting people to reveal what went on behind the scene?

MA: Soon after the fall of the Taliban and takeover of the interim Afghan government by Hamid Karzai, the international community began to devise repatriation schemes for Afghan refugees in neighbouring countries such as Pakistan, Iran and Central Asia. While there was tacit acceptance of the fact that thousands of refugees would not voluntarily return home, and could not be forced to, the attempt was to facilitate those who were willing to return. After the Tokyo conference in January 2002, where governments pledged to contribute US\$5billion for the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Afghanistan, the world community agreed to encourage refugee repatriation. It launched its operation in Pakistan under UNHCR, where according to

one estimate, 3.2 million Afghans had sought refuge. The UNHCR project in Pakistan, a US\$273million enterprise, proposed to repatriate some 400,000 refugees in the first phase from March 2002 to December 2002.

Instead of assisting the refugees, the officials at the UNHCR started making money out of this scheme. My story started when a bunch of Afghan refugees came to my office and leveled allegations against the UNHCR staff, saying that they were forcing their women to sleep with them to accommodate them for these travels. Even as they made these allegations, none of them were willing to be quoted. I met quite a few who said the same thing but no one was willing to come forward to say it on record. They were poor people and it was not easy for them to stand up against a strong mafia at the UNCHR. I kept thinking of how to go about the story – both to expose the criminals and to save many unlettered people from this high-handedness.

As I went deeper into the story, I found that there were also financial scams. Besides harassing the refugee women, they were also minting money. I kept working on that and managed to collect documentary evidence. One source led to another. It took me at least two months to investigate the story. I knew that if I was able to prove either moral or financial corruption, there would be some action taken and they would be shown the door. After the story was published, a special team from Geneva arrived to initiate a high level inquiry into the scams. The officials were removed, including the head of its mission in Karachi, and contracts awarded to the fraudulent NGOs were terminated. That was the first time in the history of UNHCR that people at senior level were removed after the publication of this story. The UNHCR later adopted foolproof arrangements to make the process of repatriation more transparent by installing computerised cameras to check the recyclers, and also to assist the genuine people who were willing to return to Afghanistan in the wake of the fall of the Taliban government.

The Afghan story is heavy on empirical data. It's quite heavy reading as I follow the maze of corruption. Few direct quotes from your human sources are used in your report. Is this intentional?

MA: It was intentional. Most of the people I spoke to were not willing to go on record. They were all scared of the fact that if someone finds out that they are the one who leaked this information, it could put their jobs at stake. Pakistan is not a welfare state. Secondly, it is very difficult for people to get decent jobs and once they are out of a job it is always difficult for them to find another. Even if some of them may not be involved in corruption, they usually keep their mouths shut and do not get involved in exposing these mafias. They always live on a knife-edge and

it is never easy for these individuals to fight against these lobbies. In fact, this is what makes the job of a journalist even more difficult in Pakistan. You always collect the information with a commitment that at no stage will their names be leaked to protect their identities. So that's why most of the time we end up with quoting unnamed sources.

To what extent would you use unnamed sources in investigative journalism?

MA: Reporting white-collar crime or corruption, and that again in the international or multi-national outfits is not easy. As a journalist one always knows its legal and ethical limitations. It is even more difficult in Pakistan where there is no freedom of right to access information. Freedom to information in the West may be one's right but if someone cooperates here (in Pakistan) and volunteers information it is a "personal favour". And this "favour" is only "granted" with the condition that they cannot be quoted and will remain anonymous. There have been so many cases in which even some government officials, whose names are quoted or leaked, have been charged for sedition under the draconian law - Government Secrecy Act under the Pakistan Criminal Procedure Code (Cr. PC). Any individual can be imprisoned for life under this Act or even hanged, but that all depends on the sensitivity of the subject/information. With private organisations the people do not want to be quoted because they can be fired if their bosses find out that they spoke with the media. These bosses are often directly or indirectly beneficiaries of these scams.

What "rules" do you follow in using anonymous sources in your investigative stories?

MA: Well, the rule is always simple. We double or triple check the information – and it is not a one source story. Secondly, I always try to determine if there is any interest of any individual who is leaking the information. It happens quite often that people pass you faulty information to settle their personal rivalries ... but as I said that can always be verified if you double check the information.

Parts of your Afghan repatriation stories are narrative reconstruction of events, some of which took place years earlier. What techniques do you use to let your readers know which events are witnessed by you or were reconstructed from your research or conversations with your anonymous sources?

MA: Well – the idea is always not only to expose – but also to educate your readers. We do reconstruct some of the things, which I reckon is mainly to consider the readers of a particular newspaper or news magazine's "audience". We do include or reconstruct things, which we think may interest our readers.

About your story, which won the 2005 People and Development Journalism Award. The narrative structure in the *Holy Terror* (and subsequent follow-up story *Saving Grace*) with its human-oriented pitch provides a personal twist and a more engaging read than the Afghan repatriation story. Given that *The Great Repatriation Scam* and *Holy Terror/Saving Grace* are both stories about flagrant abuse of human rights, how did you decide which narrative structure to use for each story?

MA: You decide how to narrate the story at the end of your work and that all will depend on the kind of information you get or the amount of information you may have. I always tell my colleagues that sometimes “too much information” that you collect can spoil the story – because you cannot only lose your focus but can also load it with so much information that it becomes very difficult for the readers to follow.

Where is Abid now and how is he?

MA: Actually, it was simply amazing the way the people reacted to my story initially published in *Sunday Telegraph*, of Abid who became a victim of a Mulla’s (religious clergy) wrath after he refused to have sex with him. After my story was published, we received huge donations from *Sunday Telegraph* readers for the treatment of Abid. It was very difficult for me to arrange for a hospital where he could be treated or even to arrange for his travel visa. It is virtually impossible for people in Pakistan to get visas to travel to the West due to the terrorism threat. But I was never disappointed at any of these stages and managed to send Abid to Greece for his treatment. I felt myself being at the top of the earth when he returned to Pakistan and was able to see again. I believe that this was the greatest award I could ever achieve in my career as a journalist. We received donations up to the tune of over 16,000 pounds sterling and we are now helping Abid to rehabilitate and set up a business. I placed him in a Blind Rehabilitation Centre, where he has learned some skills.

***Reporters sans Frontieres* notes in its 2005 annual report on the Pakistan media that journalists are regularly targeted by the military and authorities for writing stories that “harm the country’s interest”. This refers to correspondents, such as you, who write for the foreign media. What is your greatest challenge as a reporter in Pakistan, who has to be extra careful that your stories don’t “harm the country’s interest”?**

MA: It is not easy to work in Pakistan where generally the mindset of those in power is totally different. Anyone who doesn’t toe the government line can be considered to be against the “national interests”. Whatever benefit journalists enjoy today in Pakistan is because of the struggle they have put in over the years. The government

is trying its best to gag the media, but I reckon it is not easy because Pakistan is now exposed to the world in the last few years. Technological development has also made it very difficult to control the flow of information. Of course, those who work and live in Pakistan do have to live under a lot of pressure. Journalism in every society is a challenging job. As a journalist you are a critic of society. And when you criticise either society or any organisation or, for that matter, any individuals, you tend to create enemies. The challenge is to stick to your commitment, and keep doing the work that you think will ultimately benefit society in the long run.

RSF also notes the following: "The struggle against Islamist terrorism, which is very active in Pakistan, has given the authorities a pretext for cracking down on independent news media. Journalists who are critical of President Pervez Musharraf's policies and those working for the foreign press are the leading targets of the security services. The army also imposed a news blackout on its military operations in the areas bordering on Afghanistan." How do you operate in this environment?

MA: I personally have not faced any such problem – but I know that many of my colleagues went through different kinds of direct and indirect persecution at the hands of government "goons". This all is part of the game and I also think that when you face this situation quite often you get used to it.

I'd now like to ask you about your most recent story, which you think is one of the best you have done since the Afghan refugee and Abid stories. Can you describe what the story is about?

MA: I think the story in which I exposed the corrupt bureaucracy who, in nexus with feudal politicians, was not only involved in the embezzlement of huge funds meant for the already fragile education system of the country, but its involvement into a multi-billion rupees scam of fraudulently withdrawing pensions and other old age benefits of the poor government sector employees. The picture of the country's education system today looks more ominous because, in the absence of public sector schools, people are sending their kids to hundreds and thousands of religious seminaries where fundamentalist Islam is the core subject – which is obviously no less than a doomsday scenario.

Why do you think this story is particularly rewarding personally?

MA: I like the subject of education more than anything else. The subject is close to my heart. I feel that this is where the nation can make a difference. I personally think that I may retire from journalism in the next few years and may set up some school or university where we should impart quality and cheap education to the children of the lower strata. I wish I can take the initiative and may be able to do it. By doing this, I think I can set a precedent, which could be followed by others.

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UNHCR'S REPATRIATION SCHEME FOR AFGHAN REFUGEES IS STYMIED BY THE MALPRACTICES OF BOTH, THE AGENCY AND ITS LOCAL IMPLEMENTERS.

Rather than dispensing the branded drugs authorised by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) for Afghans being repatriated under the agency's auspices, ailing refugees are being administered spurious or cheaper substandard medicine by the NGOs contracted to oversee the job. For example, Ibuprofen (brand name, Brufen) has been substituted for Klint - a highly substandard replacement.



Refugees identified as candidates for repatriation by another NGO working in the field are sent to the implementing agency appointed by the UNHCR mission in Karachi. Instead of receiving the required assistance, a sizeable fee is demanded from the refugees for the service that is supposed to be provided to them gratis.

A doctor employed at the VRC (Voluntary Repatriation Centre) at the Hub Afghan Camp finds his services terminated because his 10 thousand rupee a month salary is considered too high. He is replaced by a "doctor" charging only 8,000 rupees monthly. Interestingly the money allocated for doctors under the UNHCR repatriation scheme is in the range of 20 - 25 thousand rupees monthly.

These are just a few of the complaints that have poured into the Karachi mission of the UNHCR. They come from assorted NGOs working with Afghan refugees and former employees of local NGOs that have been awarded the contracts for the repatriation project — some of whom had their services terminated after they filed the complaints.

While the list of allegations of grave irregularities reported to UNHCR's Karachi mission is lengthy, the following is all the latter reported to its head office in Islamabad. "Although the health units at the VRCs are providing medical assistance to the repatriates, paying special attention to the possibility of dehydration of youngsters during the long journey [back to Afghanistan], we received a report that three children coming from Karachi died of dehydration in the Kandahar encashment centre. The medical unit is providing one package of ORS to each child up to 15 years of age for the trip."

The reluctance of the Karachi UNHCR mission to relay the information it had received to its head office owes to a simple fact: its own alleged complicity in the malpractices.

The corruption of the NGOs involved in these irregularities, allegedly in collaboration with some senior UNHCR officials, has in fact stymied to a large extent the greatest repatriation of refugees in world history.

Soon after the fall of the Taliban and the takeover of the interim Afghan government by Hamid Karzai, the international community began to devise repatriation schemes for Afghan refugees in neighbouring countries such as Pakistan, Iran and Central Asia. While there was tacit acceptance of the fact that thousands of refugees would not voluntarily return home, and could not be forced to, the attempt was to facilitate those who were willing to return to Afghanistan.

After the Tokyo conference in January 2002, where the heads of different countries pledged to contribute five billion dollars for the rebuilding, reconstruction and rehabilitation of Afghanistan, the world community agreed to aggressively encourage the repatriation. It is, of course, a different story how the international community has betrayed the Afghan nation by releasing only a fraction of the funds pledged in Tokyo, but the repatriation effort was undertaken by the UNHCR nonetheless.

It launched its operation in Pakistan, where according to one estimate, at least 3.2 million Afghans have sought refuge. The UNHCR project in Pakistan, a US\$273m enterprise proposed to repatriate some 400 thousand refugees in its first phase, from March 2002 to December 2002. As part of the programme, VRCs were set up in different parts of the country, especially where there were larger concentrations of refugees, such as parts of NWFP, Balochistan and Karachi.

Rather than appointing its own staff at these VRCs, the UNHCR awarded a local NGO, SHARP, which had earlier been engaged in other projects with the UN mission,

the contract to assist it in implementing the repatriation operation. SHARP was involved in all the phases of repatriation, including surveys of refugee clusters, an agency information campaign, pre-registration of Afghans, verification and registration of those Afghans who opt for voluntary repatriation assistance, and data base management. A huge budget of several million rupees was allocated and put at the disposal of SHARP for staffing and other repatriation-related activities, including construction of the VRCs.

According to the plan, when a refugee family indicated a desire to return to Afghanistan, they would not receive any funds in Pakistan because it was feared they might renege on their plan to return once they had the money, but they would be given Voluntary Repatriation Forms (VRFs) by the VRCs in the area which they could encash from UNCHR offices in Afghanistan upon their return.

Encashment centres for this purpose were set up by the UNHCR at Kandahar and Jalalabad. As a part of the deal, once the refugees display their VRFs at the centres, the UNHCR staff gives them 150 US dollars as an incentive, along with 50 kilograms of wheat, blankets, tarpaulins, buckets, etc.

The problems began when a new mission was set up in Karachi in March, where the UNHCR identified about 0.7 million Afghan refugees who were potential repatriates. A Kenyan national, William Sakataka, was asked to lead the mission.

Earlier, Sakataka was heading UNHCR operations in Quetta, but the agency had to remove him from there allegedly after complaints piled up against his sexual harassment of female workers of various NGOs working with the UNHCR. Although several reports had been filed at the UNHCR head office in Islamabad and at the agency's headquarters in Geneva about Sakataka's activities, it was the hue and cry raised over his attempted seduction of a local girl in Quetta, who happened to be related to a tribal chief, that prompted the UNCHR to evacuate Sakataka and send him back to Kenya.

Not long afterwards, however, the UNHCR set up its mission in Karachi, and he was recalled from Kenya to take it over. When Hasim Utkan, the UNHCR country chief was asked why the UNHCR had given charge of such an important mission to a man accused of serious offences, he responded, "It is the internal problem of the department."

After UNHCR's office in Karachi was set up, it decided to seek assistance from local NGOs who had been working with the Afghan communities in Karachi. SHARP was

provided a lucrative contract. Assistance was also sought from FOCUS, an NGO run by Agha Khanis, which has been assisting Afghans mainly from Hazara, for the past several years; and the Marie Adelaide Leprosy Centre (MALC), an NGO run by Dr. Ruth Pfau, a German lady who has been working for the eradication of leprosy in Pakistan for many decades and has worked closely with Afghan refugees. FOCUS agreed to supply medical teams to the VRCs free of charge. MALC was then committed to assist the UNHCR in its repatriation drive.

Since the repatriation involves a long, arduous road journey, the UNHCR also awarded contracts to another NGO, Health Vision, purported to be working in the health sector, to carry out medical check-ups of the returning refugees. According to plan, this NGO was to identify those who were healthy enough to travel, while those who were infirm were to be provided treatment and sent on their way once they were fit to travel. This NGO was assigned to appoint its own staff for this project and was provided funds for this purpose and branded medicines to dispense to the refugees when required.

As the refugees started hearing about the incentives being provided to the refugees willing to repatriate, they started pouring in to the two repatriation centres set up in Sohrab Goth in Karachi, and Hub in Balochistan, bordering Karachi.

Given the numbers, which grew daily according to sources, staff members of SHARP soon realised what a goldmine the repatriation operation could be for them. Thereafter SHARP employees allegedly started demanding bribes from the refugees in return for VRFs. Furthermore, they forced the returning Afghans to take the mode of transport to Afghanistan as they dictated because by now they had also cut deals with the transporters plying the Pak-Afghanistan track. Normally the fare from Karachi to Quetta is 350 rupees and the cost for the charter of an air-conditioned coach is in the range of 10-15 thousand rupees. The refugees were made to pay between 20 and 30 thousand rupees for the latter.

According to sources, since the vehicles carrying the refugees were given a sort of "diplomatic immunity" because the UNHCR had requested various provincial departments not to harass the passengers on their way back to Afghanistan, the transporters decided to start a smuggling operation alongside ferrying passengers. A few vehicles loaded with contraband items were in fact, apprehended by Pakistani authorities at the border.

SHARP employees allegedly went even further: professional Afghan smugglers were provided several sets of VRFs under fake names. They would buy commodities in Pakistan, travel to Afghanistan, sell them there, encash their VRFs and return

to Pakistan for further business. As a result, many genuine Afghan repatriating families with VRFs were made to wait for days at the encashment centres to have their credentials verified.

All this was happening in clear view - and it is reported in collusion with UNHCR staff in Karachi. Even when some UNHCR officials did catch the SHARP staff red-handed taking bribes from the refugees, no action was initiated against them. One example is that of Peter Kassier, a UNHCR official who, in his correspondence with another official, Jack Redden, mentioned that the UNHCR had caught a SHARP employee at Takhtbaig in August demanding bribes from refugees and warned them to desist from such malpractices. However, no action was taken against them.

Because of the increasing number of reports of irregularities, Ruth Pfau's MALC decided to distance itself from the repatriation project, making it clear that it could not accept the suffering of the refugees at the VRCs due to the methods employed in the repatriation, which said Dr. Pfau, amounted to a breach of trust.

In a letter to the UNHCR's Karachi mission Dr. Ruth Pfau wrote, "At present we are feeling [we are] being used. We send [you] a group of people at our own expense. We do trust that you will register them so that they get their 140 US dollars. They have been waiting in Karachi for quite some time, putting up with quite some trouble, and I anyhow feel we don't compensate them even with a fraction for the harm and hardships we caused them. With the half of the information withheld from us today, I feel at the moment too insecure to continue to work with UNHCR so closely."

While MALC refused to work with the UNHCR's Karachi mission, the other NGO, FOCUS, that had offered the repatriates free medical assistance, had its services unceremoniously dispensed with for no apparent reason, and the unknown and reportedly dubious outfit, Health Vision, was awarded the contract and huge funds placed at its disposal.

Sources disclose that this development owed to Sakataka's increasingly cordial relationship with one Dr. Shafqat Soomro, a former employee of the provincial excise and taxation department who was dismissed from office because of corruption charges. Health Vision allegedly earned the contract from the UNHCR as a quid pro quo for "services" Soomro provided to Sakataka. According to a letter sent to the UNHCR head office at Islamabad and also to Geneva, Dr. Shafqat had provided Sakataka an apartment in Clifton, access to various nightclubs and catered to his penchant for assorted nocturnal proclivities.

According to reports, after Sakataka deputed the latter to locate an NGO working in the health sector, Health Vision, an NGO that was earlier registered by one Dr. Sharif Thaheem, was identified, and Dr. Shafqat Soomro became its general secretary. Thereupon the FOCUS staff were given their marching orders by the Karachi office of the UNHRC and the contract was awarded to Health Vision for carrying out health operations at the centres for a nine-month period.

In return, other than the funds, which Health vision received to appoint new staff and for salaries, it was provided branded drugs which were to be distributed among the repatriates according to need.

From the outset, Health Vision reportedly reneged on its part of the deal. Instead of paying the medical staff salaries drawn up by the UNHCR medical staff, the organisation appointed quacks in place of doctors, along with other unskilled paramedics for a fraction of the stipulated amount in direct contravention of its contract. Furthermore, the branded drugs allocated for the refugees were sold in the open market by Health Vision, and substandard and unbranded drugs were supplied to the returnees instead.

Interestingly, many doctors working on the project appraised the UNHCR monitoring staff in Karachi about the state of affairs, but instead of initiating action against Health Vision, the agency sacked the doctors from their jobs. One of the victims of this travesty, Dr. Mohammed Ashfaq Shaikh, found himself out of a job when he complained to the UNHCR staff about Health Vision's ongoing malpractices, even though it was in confidence. The information was apparently leaked to the NGO who saw to it that the doctor was fired.

In addition to the host of malpractices by the NGOs, the repatriation exercise has been made even harder because of the role of many refugees themselves. According to UN officials, they have rejected claims by some 50,000 refugee families because they were trying to qualify for basic assistance more than once.

Nonetheless, UNHCR country chief, Hasim Utkan in Pakistan, claims that they have so far repatriated 1.6 million refugees to Afghanistan in the last few months. However, this figure includes repatriates from Iran as well, another country that has played host to the Afghans for many years. The UNHCR chief bases his claims of the number of repatriates on the number of VRFs that have been disbursed. According to insiders, the actual figure of those who have genuinely returned to Afghanistan permanently does not exceed 500,000.

In a meeting held on June 2, the UNHCR admitted that the performance of the staff at the VRCs was unsatisfactory and unskilled staff had been appointed at these centres, but no action was taken against anyone. However, when complaints piled up against the Karachi operation, sources disclosed the UNHCR sent a special mission from Islamabad, headed by Marc Andre Bunzli, who is serving as senior technical coordinator for the agency. After investigation, Bunzli filed a detailed report about the affairs of the NGOs working with the UNHCR, and the Karachi mission agreed to address the allegations leveled against Health Vision, and also against some members of the UNHCR staff.

Information about the sorry state of affairs leaked to the public when office-bearers of SHARP, the other NGO involved in the registration and repatriation drive, fell out with each other and started to air their dirty linen in public.

In a meeting of the members of the Central Executive Committee of SHARP, held on September 10, chairman Liaquat Binori, was dismissed from his post for his involvement in massive corruption. A copy of the minutes of this meeting were sent to the UNHCR, and also to assorted banks asking them to close SHARP's accounts to investigate the financial irregularities that had occurred. Asif Qadri was appointed the new chairman of SHARP.

Insiders disclose that the UNHCR head office in Pakistan is trying to hush up the case because it has been claiming to its headquarters in Geneva that its repatriation project has been successful.

When questioned about the situation, UNHCR country chief, Hasim Utkan contended that while there have been many reports of irregularities, he had not received any concrete evidence which could lead the agency to take action against any of those accused. However, he maintained all allegations are currently under review by the UNHCR, and appropriate action will be taken if and when deemed necessary.

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Reporting from the frontline

"It's easy to detach yourself ... but the bottom line is war is about people. And at the end of the day, try as much as you want, the reporter is human, too. One of the stories I wrote in Iraq that I'll never forget is the memorial service I covered for two soldiers who were killed in action in Ramadi. The pain of that assignment has stayed with me and I remember every minute of it. Sometimes you just have to let it go and write."

Michelle Tan, *The Army Times*, Washington

KEEPING EMOTIONS INTACT IN WAR REPORTING

Shahanaaz Habib

News Editor, The Star, Malaysia.

Author, *Between Blood & Bombs*, Times Publishing, Malaysia 2005.

Eric Loo: You're the first Malaysian journalist sent to cover war in a foreign country. What led to your assignment to cover the war in Iraq in April 2003?

Shahanaaz Habib: There was another journalist in the 1970s who covered the Vietnam War. And a colleague had covered the Bosnian conflict. So there have been other Malaysian journalists who covered wars in foreign countries. As to what led me to cover the war in Iraq – my boss came up to me one day in late Feb 2003 and said the newspaper was thinking of sending me along with a senior editor to Iraq to cover the war and asked if I was prepared to go. (The senior editor did not get into Iraq in the end. We decided to split up in Jordan because we figured that way at least one of us would have a better chance of getting in. He tried the Turkey route and couldn't get in. I went in by land through Jordan.)

What preparations and training did you go through before leaving for Iraq?

SH: None, partly because we don't report on war much, so we do not have specialised training and preparation. All I did was read up on Iraq, Saddam etc and made contacts with Iraqis living in Malaysia. I had to figure out how I was going to get into Iraq – through Jordan, Syria, Kuwait, Saudi, Turkey or Iran. I checked with humanitarian aid organisations and found that Jordan and Syria were probably the best bet. It was only a year after the Iraq experience that I finally went for proper training. I attended the *Hostile Environment* Training (Hefat) conducted by Centurion, a group of ex-military people in the UK, on preparing oneself in situations of war, conflict, disaster, hostage taking and first aid. I had asked to go for this training in 2004 and after my Iraq experience. It was a good training programme, but frightfully expensive. I am the only local journalist who has gone for the *Hefat* course so far. Since the Daniel Pearl murder, the course has become a mandatory requirement for international journalists from the bigger organisations like *AP*, *Reuters*, *AFP*, *Sky News* – before they are allowed to cover conflict and war. Unfortunately, finances do not allow most Malaysian journalists to benefit from such training.

With no military experience, language or experience living with the Iraqi people, what help did you have in gathering information, meeting the locals, taking the photos and writing the stories?

SH: People were generally helpful. One of the guides was a French photographer I met in Baghdad and was really helpful with info. I needed a driver to move around, and an interpreter to get past the language problem. There were academics I met on my rounds who spoke English and whom I made friends with. Iraqis – whether they welcomed or opposed the war – seemed to have a good opinion of Malaysia, Malaysians and the then Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad. This too helped.

How did you piece together your stories in situations that were confusing, complex, and often risky?

SH: Basically, I wrote stories about the people and how their lives were affected by the war. What they saw, how they felt. I tried hard to get both sides of the stories. I did not duplicate what the wire stories were focusing on – which were stories like who was winning the war, the location of the US troops as they advanced into Baghdad. I was working on my own. I didn't even have a satellite phone or satellite modem to send stories and had to rely on other reporters to help me out. So I went for alternative stories – people stories, the untold stories, the faces behind the war.

How did you decide what stories to write? How did you deal with the daily pressure of filing your eyewitness stories?

SH: I just moved around and wrote what I thought I would have liked to read and know – and hoped that people would like to read and know about that too. The pressure was tough because I had no satellite modem or satellite phone so I didn't have the technological means to file stories. Which meant that I had to run around after a story asking other reporters who were not using their satellite modems, to help send my story. I was able to cast aside the other pressures – the psychological pressures of what I was seeing – because I was just so busy getting the story, dealing with the driver, interpreter, getting enough food and water – most importantly finding a way to file stories back to the newspaper.

How did you file your stories back to *The Star*, and how often?

SH: I asked other reporters to help through their satellite modem. And I managed to send a story or two everyday during the March/April war. For text stories, the file is small so foreign reporters were OK about helping send my stories. I didn't get to send photos through because the files were larger and thus would cost a lot more – and I didn't have a digital camera with me. I only had an analog camera, which was inconvenient in terms of sending off photos through the satellite system. When

I was asked to go back into Iraq in Nov 2003, I asked the Star to buy a satellite phone and satellite modem. The newspaper got our first satellite equipment in Nov 2003 – which was useful in December the same year when we covered the earthquake in Bam, Iran. Since then we have bought more satellite phones and satellite modems. In my second trip to Iraq, I had already got myself a digital camera. It was probably one of the first things I bought once I got back to Malaysia after covering the war on Iraq.

How did you decide which narrative style to take for which stories? Or do you follow a set plan for highlighting different aspects of the war?

SH: I didn't follow a set plan. After all it's war. You can't have a set plan because things are volatile and unexpected. But I tried to go for a variety of stories. That's natural in the profession because you don't want to be telling the same story over and over again. I was always looking for something new, that meant highlighting different aspects of the war. After Baghdad fell, I finally could get access to the American soldiers and spoke to them to get their side of what they saw and how they felt. (I wasn't embedded. Thus, prior to April 9, I did not have access to the US troops and their allies). It is a normal part of journalism to speak to all sides. The Kurds, the Shiites, the Sunnis, the Christians, the Americans, the human shields, the doctors, academics, zoo keeper - whoever would talk - you talk to them.

What did you hope to convey to your readers back home each time you wrote your stories?

SH: I didn't have any preconception. I just wanted to be their eyes, ears and nose, and write what I was seeing, hearing, feeling and smelling so that the readers could experience this with me.

Does knowing that your stories will also be placed on *The Star Online* influence your story angles and its contents?

SH: I had no clue if the Star would use my stories at all. I had no phone – so no email and no contact with the newspaper. The telecommunications system was knocked out by bombs, so the only way to communicate was through a satellite phone, and satellite modem. I managed to call only once or twice using someone else's satellite phone. And those calls were very brief and confined to "did you receive my stories today?" "Is the story garbled or okay?" I couldn't chat or exchange info because it was on borrowed satellite phones, and satellite calls are pricey. I had no idea if my newspaper would use the stories at all or if they wanted me to come back. But I kept on writing because I believed I was doing my job as a reporter.

The American media often uses the euphemism “collateral damage” for civilians – many of them children and women - killed in the crossfire. This somehow gives the war a more benign feel. What’s your advice to journalists covering the reality of civilians killed in the war?

SH: That war is painful and ugly. As reporters, we have to try to be detached from being caught in the whirlwind of emotions, and focus on telling the story. Reporters have to protect themselves psychologically and be able to function by focusing on telling the story objectively, without taking sides. Because for everything there are two sides. It’s important to show both. And to do the job, one has to “suspend judgment”.

There’s a perception that some journalists covering the Iraqi war are “hotel room warriors” who don’t spent much time on the battlefield. Is this a fair observation?

SH: I went into Iraq twice, and it was not as dangerous as the present day. In [April & May] 2003, although dangerous, reporters were still going out to report and get stories. There were not so many of those “hotel room warriors” you speak of. By November 2003, many reporters, especially Western journalists, had started using armed escorts whenever they went out – some travelled in armoured cars – but they were still going out! Although many stayed away from Fallujah, but they were still going out. The situation has changed since the last time I was there. It has become far more dangerous and dark.

In war reporting, it’s said that the first casualty is often the truth. With your experience in Iraq is this a fair observation?

SH: I suppose that’s true because there is a lot of confusion as well as different people in power (eg. the US president, the Iraqi president) trying to spin the story the way they want. So they feed the media with information, which is not true and, yes, in such a situation – with little time – it is very difficult to tell what is truth and what is spin or psychological warfare.

After seeing what you have seen in the frontline, how has it changed the way you see the war in Iraq today?

SH: I was not surprised at all that three years later Iraq’s turned out to be such a mess with no sight of resolution and that there were no weapons of mass destruction there in the first place. I’m not sure if I could have seen that coming if I had not gone in three years ago – but I might have. The difference is perhaps I “feel more” for the people of Iraq and think of whether the families I got to know and the people I met are still okay, if they are alive and well, or frightened and angry. These are real people I met and got to know so it’s people I know who are living through the war every single day.

You mentioned in a review of your book *Between Blood & Bombs* that as a reporter you had to remain detached “to get the story and not to feel” (from AllMalaysia.info, Oct.18, 2004). How did you keep your emotions and the trauma of seeing the ravages of war from being transferred to your narrative?

SH: It comes with experience and with the belief that it is important not to let emotions get in the way of the story. But there were moments when I broke down – I wrote about it in the book – when I felt that I had become so cold and I felt horrified that I had become so inhuman and dispassionate about telling the story; and another time when I left Iraq and had a nightmare of a bomb exploding near my feet. During the course of writing, you shove emotions, feelings aside to get on with the job. But sometimes – especially after the whole reporting is over – things and incidents catch up with you later.

How was your background as a Muslim helpful in your reporting? Or did it make no difference?

SH: I suppose it helped because Muslims, both Sunnis and Shiites alike, were always happy to see another Muslim and were very friendly and warm. And they were willing to give up their bed, room and food if I was in need.

Being a female Muslim journalist on the battlefield, did you feel your sources saw you differently?

SH: They were very respectful. Iraq is a modern and progressive country with women doctors, intellectuals, scientists, politicians, and so they did not think it was really all that odd. They didn't see me as a threat. They trusted me and extended their homes and gave me addresses of their families to interview and stay with. The Shiites in the south who were a little more conservative were curious and would ask questions. But they were respectful and very friendly. I don't know if it would be different for the men because generally the Iraqis are friendly.

Did you mingle much with journalists from the local Iraqi or foreign media? If you did, how helpful were these interactions with other journalists, to your stories?

SH: With foreign journalists, yes, but not with Iraqi journalists. There were many “people” from the Iraqi intelligence keeping an eye on us foreigners. So I stayed away from Iraqi journalists because I didn't want them feeding back whatever I was saying to the Iraqi information ministry and I didn't want to draw attention or get them into trouble. Foreign journalists helped because we exchanged stories and what we saw and learnt.

What prompted you to write the book *Between Blood and Bombs*?

SH: The senior editor P. K. Katharason whom I was to go to Iraq with (the one who used the Turkey route and didn't get in) asked me to and convinced me that I should do it. So I did. I was also prompted by the fact that not many Malaysian journalists write books and hoped that this would change. And that bosses would give time off to journalists to write books.

For those who have no military training, no language skills, and no experience in covering global conflict, what's your advice if they are to be assigned to Iraq?

SH: Use your common sense, logic, and instinct and be on the look out. Be also physically and mentally fit. Mental strength is very important.

TELLING THE SOLDIERS' STORIES

Michelle Tan

Military reporter, The Army Times, Washington.

Chips Quinn Scholar, Summer 2000, Chips Quinn Foundation and Freedom Forum

2005 First Quarter Project Enterprise runner-up for coverage from Afghanistan

2004 Minnesota Associated Press Award for coverage from Afghanistan

2004 Best of Gannett second place award for online coverage from Afghanistan

Eric Loo: Your first assignment to a conflict zone was in 2004 when you spent three weeks in Afghanistan reporting for *St Cloud Times*. How did that experience prepare you for your assignment in Iraq from Jan-March 2007?

Michelle Tan: Photographer James J. Lee and I were embedded with soldiers at the company level (anywhere from 100-130 soldiers) or smaller and we tried to go out on patrol with the soldiers as much as possible because that's where we felt we'd find the best stories. Afghanistan gave me an idea of what to expect – and what not to expect – in Iraq. In Afghanistan I embedded with an engineer battalion whose job was to clear land mines. The biggest threat to us was land mines. In Iraq we spent most of our time with the infantry. When we weren't with the infantry we were with armour or field artillery soldiers, also combat arms soldiers. Roadside bombs were a big threat, but we also risked snipers, random shootings, car bombs and suicide bombers.

The terrain in Afghanistan was much more rugged, desolate and rural. Kabul was a big city but we didn't spend that much time there. In Iraq, we spent maybe two weeks in more rural areas but the rest of our time was spent in the cities of Ramadi and Baghdad, which are huge urban areas packed with people. In Afghanistan I wrote for the *St. Cloud Times*, which is a smaller, community-based paper. My focus in Afghanistan was one specific Army unit, the soldiers in that unit and their lives in the war zone. In Iraq, I wrote for *Army Times*, which covers the Army as a whole. We embedded with a number of different units in a number of different places, and while I tried to personalise the stories, I also had to think about the bigger picture and think about what soldiers around the world want to know about their brothers-in-arms.

What preparations and training did you go through before you left for Iraq?

MT: *Army Times* sent me to a five-day training programme run by Centurion Risk Assessment, a British company run by former British Royal Marines. The course,

attended mostly by journalists and aid workers, teaches you everything from first aid to different types of weapons, and how to handle yourself if you're kidnapped, to surviving extremely hot or cold weather. *Army Times* provided me with body armour and a helmet, but there were many things I needed to have, including the right clothes, a *Leatherman* tool, 550 cord, ear plugs, over-the-counter medication for colds or headaches or diarrhea, and a number of other things we don't think about for regular business trips. I had to set up our string of embeds with Army officials in Iraq and get all our paperwork in order, which was probably one of the most labour intensive parts of the process.

What you saw when you arrived in Iraq, was it what you anticipated?

MT: Landing in Baghdad after travelling and not sleeping for four days was surreal. But not long after we arrived, the sprawling base that is Baghdad International Airport and Camp Striker started to feel familiar. The bases in Afghanistan and Iraq are not that different. But as we moved from the big bases to the smaller combat outposts around the country, every new destination was a surprise. Each combat outpost is different – it's usually one or a bunch of houses right in the middle of whatever city you happen to be in, and conditions at each combat outpost are different. The big bases in Iraq are well equipped, with dining facilities, gyms, internet access, post exchanges and other luxuries we take for granted. Most combat outposts are relatively basic. Some have showers, most don't. Some have portable toilets. Others burn their refuse in a barrel. Most serve two meals a day. Toilet paper is hard to come by. The soldiers who live at these places generally are combat arms soldiers, the ones who go out every day on patrol or raids.

How did you "acculturate" yourself to being the only female journalist embedded with the US military?

MT: I wasn't the only female journalist embedded with the military, but because of the nature of our assignment and the types of units we were with (infantry, armour, field artillery), I was often the only female in the group or the only female living at a particular combat outpost. Female soldiers are not allowed to be in combat arms branches, but as a journalist I was able to do many things and go many places female soldiers aren't allowed to go. The only problems I ran into were more logistical. Many of the smaller, more austere combat outposts didn't have facilities for females, so I often had a hand-written sign that said "Female" to post on the door to the bathroom. Or I had to wait my turn to take a shower or try to find someone to stand guard outside the bathroom door while I took a shower.

Did you feel your sources responded to you differently because of your gender?

MT: Yes and no. I felt that the soldiers were more willing to open up to me because of my gender. I think they would have been more reserved and less willing to talk openly about how they were doing and how they were feeling if I was male. On the other hand, once they saw that I could hang out with them – share the same jokes and keep up with them on patrol – they also were more open with me. I had some issues with the Iraqi soldiers and police that we worked with and the Iraqis we came across while on patrol. Many of them didn't know how to deal with me. I was stared at a lot, and many of them would crowd around me, which made me uncomfortable.

Reporting for the *Army Times*, your stories understandably were written for an American audience – primarily families of the soldiers serving in Iraq. To what extent were you able to write stories about the Iraqi people?

MT: The opportunity was limited. Our primary focus is the Army and its soldiers, and our primary readers are soldiers, so that was our first priority. Any interaction we had with Iraqis was limited to Iraqi soldiers and police and the civilians we'd meet while on patrol. Everything we wrote was from the eyes of the soldiers.

How did you decide what stories to write? How did you deal with the daily pressure of filing your eyewitness stories?

MT: "J" and I went into the assignment with some themes in mind – we wanted to focus on the soldiers who are training the Iraqi army and police, for example – but we also took it one day at a time. Typically, we'd go to a unit, spend some time with the soldiers and story and photo ideas would emerge from there. The beauty of being in Iraq is that you're immersed in the story. The story is everywhere you look, and I definitely miss that now that I'm back in the office. I filed the stories as they came. There was no quota, and most of the pressure I felt was self-applied. It wasn't too hard for me to deal with deadlines and writing. I love the pressure and there were so many stories to tell from Iraq that I was never at a loss.

How did you piece together your stories in situations that were confusing, complex, and often risky?

MT: I did it with time and patience. It's strange, because when I was in Iraq, people would ask me about certain things they'd heard on the news, and most of the time I didn't know what they were talking about because we were so insulated. We were often in a news black hole. What we knew was what we were living at the time, which I think is how life is for many soldiers. It all comes down to being observant of what was going on around me. I had to be vigilant and watch for things that might

seem odd or things that might be a sign that trouble was in the air. It's a balancing act, and I think people get better at it with time and experience. "J" was great to have on the trip because he had been to Iraq twice before and we'd bounce ideas, fears, thoughts and observations off each other. It helps to have a battle buddy.

How did you file your stories back to *The Army Times*, and how often?

MT: We had a satellite modem. We couldn't have done the work we did without it. I'd say we sent material – stories, photos, audio slideshows – back to the office several times a week. We also had a satellite phone, which is a must-have for anybody planning to report from a war zone.

What did you hope to convey to readers of *The Army Times* each time you wrote your stories? Or did you follow a set plan for highlighting different aspects of the war?

MT: I'm not that organised. I tended to go with my gut. "J" and I would go to a unit and we trusted our instincts to find the story. I just hope my stories brought a piece of the war home to our readers – whether it's an insight into their loved one's life, an idea of what their own deployment might be like or lessons learned that could be passed on from one soldier to another.

The phrase "collateral damage" is often used by the American media as a euphemism for civilians killed in the crossfire – many of them children and women. This somehow gives the war a more benign feel. What's your "advice" to journalists covering this reality of civilians killed in the war?

MT: In every war, the innocent will die. It's a difficult thing to witness, hear about or write about. Editors across the country talk about "passing the breakfast test," making sure what's in their newspapers doesn't cause their readers to choke on or throw up their cereal in the morning. It's a fine line, in my opinion. I'm not a fan of "war porn," gratuitous, gory photos of dead bodies, but I believe that we have sanitised this war so much that people have stopped caring. Everybody deals with things differently. You have to be aware of how you react and deal with what you see on the battlefield – and know when to ask for help.

There's a perception that some journalists covering the Iraqi war are "hotel room warriors" who don't spend much time on the battlefield. How true or fair is this perception during your time in Iraq?

MT: I think that perception is half true and/or fair. *Army Times* doesn't report from hotel rooms. We live like the troops live and we do as they do. And we're not the only ones. There are journalists who are out and about with the troops. But there are also those who stay within the confines of the Green Zone. I think it's important

to have a balance of both groups. One benefit of being in the Green Zone is you can get the bigger picture from the higher-level officers who're running the war, while those in the field get down to the "real person" level of the story.

How did you keep your emotions and the trauma of seeing the ravages of war from being transferred to your stories?

MT: I think all journalists have the ability to "switch on" the journalist inside them. It's easy to detach yourself from the situation about which you're reporting and just spill the facts and figures. I've learned to do that pretty well, but on this trip I allowed myself to open up a little bit more. The people who fight it – and the people who're caught in the middle – are somebody's father, mother, daughter, son, husband, wife. Try as much as you want, the reporter is human, too. One of the stories I wrote from Iraq that I'll never forget is the memorial service "J" and I covered for two soldiers who were killed in action in Ramadi. The pain of that assignment has stayed with me and I remember every minute of it. Sometimes you just have to let it go and write.

Understandably, your main assignment was to tell the American soldier's stories. Did you feel a need to contextualise your work by telling the many untold stories of the Iraqi people – and perhaps, Iraqi soldiers too – to your readers of *The Army Times*?

MT: I didn't have much access to the Iraqi people because of the nature of our assignment, but I did try to focus on the Iraqi soldiers. Most, if not all, of the Army units we were with often train, go on patrol with and spend time with Iraqi army units. For *Army Times* readers, the progress of the Iraqi army is critical because it's a barometer for when American forces can withdraw from Iraq. We tried to focus on that, but language was often a barrier. Also, it was sometimes difficult to get to know the Iraqis because they didn't quite know how to interact with a foreign woman. Bottom line is we didn't get much time with Iraqi civilians. Our interaction with them was limited to the people we saw and talked to while out on patrol with the American soldiers.

With the increasing number of casualties in the US military and their impact on the soldiers' morale and their families back home, to what extent did you feel a need to "self-censor" your stories?

MT: We were very aware of what we could print and when. For example, if a soldier is killed we can't identify him or her until the [US] Department of Defence does so. We wouldn't want a family to find out about their loved one's death from a newspaper. Also, we can't write about troop movements until after the fact, for operational security reasons. Apart from that, I didn't feel a need to "self-censor"

myself. I think it's important to get the story out, but there's also a need to be genuine and honest and sensitive. I think our readers appreciate that.

You were protected by the US military as an embedded journalist. Understandably, friendships were formed with the soldiers. Sometimes, your journalistic principles for truly reporting what you saw and heard could be compromised. How then did you deal with the ethical dilemma of reporting the "good and not-so-good" stories of soldiers "tour of duty", for readers of *The Army Times*?

MT: You're right. It's easy to form friendships with the people you're embedded with – [those] who protect you and look after you in very intense and dangerous situations. I still keep in touch with many of them. It can be difficult to maintain the journalistic arm's length. I tried to always keep that in the back of my mind when I was in Iraq – and when the topic would come up in conversation, the soldiers knew where I stood. I was up front with them – I would tell them I was happy to write the "good stories" but that I also had to write the "not-so-good" stories if the situation called for it.

After seeing what you have seen in the frontline, how has it changed the way you see the war in Iraq today?

MT: I have always tried not to have an opinion about Iraq – at least I've tried not to express it – because of what I do for a living. But being in Iraq will definitely open your eyes to what is going on over there. What I saw was a mixed bag. I was encouraged by what I believed to be progress, even in areas as notorious as Ramadi. I was frustrated by the role politics plays in how our soldiers are allowed to fight this war. But most of all, being in Iraq helped me put a human face to the war – the soldiers who fight it, the innocents who are stuck in the middle and the terrorists on the other side. I'm conflicted. I'm frustrated when people back home don't seem to care about what is going on in Iraq. It hurts when I think about the soldiers and their families, and about the beautiful children who live in Iraq. I cannot imagine the horror and pain of living in Iraq.

How has reporting from the conflict zone in Iraq affected or changed the way you carry out your more routine assignments in Washington, now that the adrenaline rush is no longer there?

MT: I don't think my reporting has changed much, although I think my experience in Iraq gives me more credibility with the soldiers, and I'm able to connect with them better if/when they find out I was embedded with a unit with which they used to serve, or in an area where they served. Adjusting to the routine of the office and the more mundane stories that come with not being in a war zone was

tough. [In Iraq] I was right in the middle of the story, and the story and all its players were all around me. But, the stories we do from here are important, too. I'm able to still cover the Army. That helps with the adjustment. Having been in Iraq gives me fresh perspectives and it's always a factor in the back of my mind when I write my stories. I know what the guys are doing over there and I'm always thinking about the soldiers I met there and I try to write for them. I feel like I've eased back into my routine pretty well. I worry about the soldiers I met – one of them was killed by a roadside bomb about two weeks after I met him – and now that many of them have had their deployments extended by three months, I feel that's three more months of danger and vulnerability for them. I miss the thrill of going out on a mission and making it back alive. I miss the adrenaline that comes with a hard day's work in tough conditions.

For those who have no military training, no language skills, and no experience in covering global conflict, what's your advice if they are to be assigned to Iraq?

MT: First, be sure you want to do this. Your bosses cannot make you go. I'm fortunate because my bosses made it clear that going to Iraq was entirely my choice. Second, if you're going to be embedded with the military, brush up on some of the basics. It helps to know how the military is structured – for example, the Army deploys brigade combat teams of about 3,500 soldiers. Brigades have battalions, which have companies, which have platoons, which have squads, which have teams. It's good to know the rank structure – enlisted and officer – and how to read the ranks the soldiers wear on their uniforms.

Third, it's very important to learn about the place where you're about to spend the next few days or weeks or months. Learn the geography, the people, the culture. Fourth, if you're going to spend time with the military, it's very important to listen to what the soldiers tell you when you're outside the wire. My biggest fear was that I would be the reason somebody got hurt or killed. They are the professionals. They know the area; they know what works and what doesn't. When your life and their lives are on the line, they need to know they can trust you and that you trust them.

Fifth, talk to people who have done this before. I was fortunate to have many colleagues who have more experience than I do when it comes to covering war, and they were all very willing to share their stories, give me advice and guide me through the process. Finally, be ready for a potentially life-changing experience. You will be in the middle of what is possibly the biggest story of your life, and you will be amazed at how it can change you.

CHAPTER 3

ONLINE QUALITATIVE SURVEY: 'BEST PRACTICES IN JOURNALISM'

"Some norms in journalism are universal (and presumably eternal) and some are cultural or time specific. But while the norms may be universal, their applications may differ from time to time and region to region. The quest is to get to the truth as close as possible. The desires to tell or narrate stories are some of the norms that don't change through time or geography."

- Endy Bayuni, Editor, *The Jakarta Post*.

THIS chapter describes the responses to an online survey of Asian journalists' perceptions of what constitutes best practices in their profession. A pilot questionnaire was pre-tested in February 2006 with a sample of working journalists selected from my personal contact list. A revised self-administered questionnaire, comprising a mix of close-ended multiple choice and open-ended questions, was placed online from April to September.

An invitation to journalists to participate in the online survey was disseminated through the *International Journalism Network* (www.ijnet.org), *Asian Media Forum* and the *Inter Press Service* (www.ips.org) mailing list. *The Asian News Network* (www.asianewsnet.net) was approached for a list of its partner organisations. Two follow-up invitations were emailed in June and September. A total of 60 journalists responded to the online survey. Each questionnaire took about 15-20 minutes to complete.

The survey was framed to:

1. Identify what Asian journalists consider the main characteristics of "best practices" in their respective journalism.
2. Source samples of award-winning stories; identify the narrative structure, content type and goals of these stories as seen from the perspective of the journalist/s.
3. Source veteran journalists for interviews via email, and a follow-up face-to-face dialogue at their workplace.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with veteran journalists in Manila in February 2006; Mumbai and Delhi in April; and Jakarta in November. Each on-camera interview lasted an average of 45 minutes. The journalists interviewed on camera were:

- Palagummi Sainath, rural affairs editor of *The Hindu*, Mumbai.
- Dionne Bunsha, correspondent for *Frontline* and *India Together*, Mumbai.
- Usha Rai, freelance development journalist, and former deputy director of *Press Institute of India*, New Delhi.
- Ajit Bhattachajea, former editor of *The Hindu*, and former director of *Press Institute of India*.
- Yvonne Chua, investigative journalist, *Philippine Center for Journalism*.
- Glenda Gloria, managing editor, *Newsbreak*, Manila, Philippines.
- Red Batario, founder and director of *Center for Community Journalism and Development*, Philippines.
- Virgil Santos, chair of editorial board, *Businessworld*, Manila.
- Stephen Tan, founder and editor-in-chief, *Malaysiakini*, Kuala Lumpur.
- Kunda Dixit, editor, *The Nepali Times*, Kathmandu.
- Andreas Harsono, freelance journalist and founder of Pantau, Jakarta, Indonesia.
- Endy Bayuni, editor-in-chief, *The Jakarta Post*.
- Bambang Harymurti, editor-in-chief, *Tempo*, Jakarta.
- Jacob Oetama, editor-in-chief and publisher, *Kompas*, Jakarta.
- Warief Djajanto Basorie, freelance journalist and instructor, *Drs Soetomo Press Institute*, Jakarta.

The online questionnaire survey, as reported in this chapter, provides the backdrop for the email dialogue and on-camera interviews.

Sampling method: Online limitations

I used a two-stage sampling plan. In the first stage to locate participants for the survey, I contacted *Asian Media Forum (AMF)*, *Inter Press Service (IPS)*, and other media discussion groups in Asia. For instance, in Indonesia, I contacted the English paper, *Jakarta Post*, and the Indonesian environmental reporters' discussion group. In the Philippines, I approached the Asian Center for Journalism at Ateneo de Manila University for its mailing list of professional journalists in Asia enrolled in its Master of Journalism programme. Only full-time journalists were selected for the questionnaire survey.

An online survey method was chosen for its convenience and economic access to journalists in Asia, who otherwise would be difficult to reach via landline channels. The virtual communities of journalists provided by mailing lists and discussion groups, provided access to people who share specific interests. However, I recognised that not all journalists allowed their email addresses to be listed in discussion groups, which made accurate sample sizing of an online population difficult. Nevertheless, the automatic online feedback form made data collection convenient and economical.

The main disadvantage of an online survey methodology is the varied levels of uncertainty with the validity of the data, arising from sampling anomalies. For online surveys, it is difficult to ascertain the non-response rate compared with traditional mailed questionnaires where the number of hard copies posted is known. Secondly, self-selection bias is possible with online surveys where some journalists respond to an invitation to participate while others ignore the request, which essentially leads to systematic bias.

The response rate to the online survey was, in later judgment, influenced by the journalists' experience or comfort level with online activities, and willingness to take 20 minutes to answer the online multiple choice and open-ended questions. Therefore, the sampling population was far from random, and thus is limited in its scope of representation. Follow-ups with telephone calls might have increased the response rate. But follow-ups were constrained by poor telecommunication connections and lack of accessibility to journalists' direct lines in countries such as the Philippines, India, Indonesia and Pakistan. Voicemails left on the journalists' work telephones (contact numbers were obtained from the news organisation's websites) asking them to reply by email did not receive any response either.

The respondents were skewed towards Malaysia (21.7%), Indonesia (20%), and the Philippines (15%). India, Pakistan and Bangladesh follow with 8.3% response rate.

While the survey findings provided useful data on the attitudes and perceptions of Asian journalists towards what constitutes "best practices", it did not provide sufficiently conclusive data. Thus, the data was not general to the whole population. It provides a snapshot of one event. Nevertheless, the descriptive findings sufficed in providing a peek into the general perception by Asian journalists of what they thought were the elements of "best practices". This serves as a starting point for a broader study of the elements of "best practices" as derived from the professional experience of journalists across different cultural, economic and political settings in Asia.

For researchers who wish to replicate and extend this survey, a more representative sample can be achieved as follows:

1. Identify the main newspapers in each Asian capital city by its circulation and market share.
2. Identify the total number of full-time journalists in each capital city.

3. Determine the number of full-time journalists to be surveyed from each newspaper organisation according to its market share. With proportionate purposive sampling, for instance, if newspaper XY accounts for 30% of the market share, and there are a total of 100 full time journalists working in the capital city, select 30% of the number of journalists employed at newspaper XY for the questionnaire survey.
4. Identify the gender distribution of journalists surveyed from each newspaper organisation, to be determined proportionately from within the organisation.
5. The survey should be administered in the newsroom by trained researchers in prompting journalists to answer the open-ended questions.
6. The face-to-face survey should be carried out by country researchers competent in administering the questionnaires and coding the answers.

Demographics of respondents

A total of 43 journalists responded to the online survey between April and July. A second invitation was disseminated through the IPS and AMF websites in August. This attracted 17 more respondents, raising the total to 60. The distribution of journalists by country and gender, who responded to the survey, is shown in Tables 1 and 2 in the appendix.

The distribution of respondents was skewed towards Malaysia. This raised the following questions: Could it be an indication of higher usage of the internet, which also provides a channel for Malaysian journalists to express their professional discontent? Was it indicative of greater Malaysian presence in journalism mailing lists? Follow-up attempts to obtain more responses from journalists in Cambodia, Sri Lanka, India and China, through emails and phone calls were unsuccessful.

The youngest respondent was 22 years of age and the oldest was 54, with a mean age of 34. About 90% (n=54) had a university degree; five (8.3%) had a college certificate and one a high school certificate.

The respondents' years of experience in journalism ranged from 4-5 years (8.5%) to 7 years (10%), and 13 years (10%) to 20 years (12%). The respondents had an average of 10 years experience in journalism.

Table 1: Country of origin

	Frequency	Percent
Malaysia	13	21.7
Indonesia	12	20.0
Philippines	9	15.0
Bangladesh	5	8.3
India	5	8.3
Pakistan	5	8.3
Cambodia	3	5.0
Sri Lanka	3	5.0
China	2	3.3
Thailand	1	1.7
Bhutan	1	1.7
Myanmar	1	1.7
Total	60	100.0

Table 2: Gender

	Frequency	Percent
Male	35	58.3
Female	25	41.7
Total	60	100.0

Half of the respondents (30) currently work in news reporting, followed by 28.3% (17) in editorial management; 15% (9) in feature writing; 5% (3) in sub-editing; and one in column/opinion writing (see Table 3). Most have worked for an average of seven years at their present location. Most first worked in newspapers (60%) and news agencies (20%), followed by television (10%), magazines (5%) and online news sites (3.3%).

Table 3: Main job responsibility

Main job	Frequency	Percent
News reporting	30	50.0
Editorial management	17	28.3
Feature writing	9	15.0
Sub-editing	3	5.0
Opinion / column writing	1	1.7
Total	57	100.0

Table 4: Media first worked

Media	Frequency	Percent
Newspaper	36	60.0
News agency	12	20.0
TV	6	10.0
Magazine	3	5.0
Online news site	2	3.3
Radio	1	1.7
Total	60	100.0

Qualitative findings

Journalists were asked to respond on an approval scale of 1-4, to scenarios of reporting where they would have to draw on their sense of right and wrong in deciding the actions they would take. A number nearer to 1 indicates approval, and a number closer to 4 indicates disapproval. The questions and range of responses are provided in the next page.

Table 5 shows that journalists were generally firm on “going undercover” (approval scale of 1.88) to break a story. However, the mean distribution of the approval scores did not provide a strong basis for drawing a definitive picture of where they stood on the other possible actions to take when assigned to cover an important story. For instance, to the question of whether they would break their journalistic code to write the story if they had no choice, the mean score was 3.08, which leaned towards the disapproval end of the spectrum. Would they use leaked information without confirming its accuracy? Rightly so, most would not take that step or had no opinion (mean score was 3.38).

Q. If you come across an important story, which of the following would you do or would not do under any circumstances? (Please select your approval or disapproval according to the following ranking scores).

- 1 – Definitely WOULD DO.
- 2 – Would do if it doesn’t harm my sources.
- 3 – I have no opinion.
- 4 – Definitely WOULD NOT DO under any circumstances.

Table 5: What journalists would do in different ethical scenarios

Actions	Mean N = 60	S.D.
Go undercover	1.88	.958
Even if story conflicts with news org, will still write the story	2.30	1.239
Frame story to influence government policies	2.32	1.242
Agree to go off the record, but still use information	2.43	1.015
Pay for confidential information	2.73	1.118
Re-angle story to align with personal values	2.88	1.223
Break journalism code of ethics if no choice	3.08	1.183
Take style and angle off the Net	3.30	1.046
Use leaked information without confirmation	3.38	.940

With other ethical issues such as paying for confidential information (mean of 2.73), and betraying an off-the-record agreement (mean of 2.43), the journalists were somewhat non-committal (mean of 2.6). However, they would generally write the story even if it conflicted with their organisation's editorial policies (especially with news organisations in regulated media environments such as in Malaysia, China, Pakistan and Bangladesh). Most would not compromise their stories to fit in with their organisation's stand on national issues. They would attempt to frame their stories, less to fall in line with their personal values but more to influence government policies.

Respondents were also asked to identify journalistic tasks they would consider crucial to their work.

How important to you are the following tasks in journalism? (Please rank the importance of the tasks according to the scores below)

- 1 – Extremely important.
- 2 – Quite important.
- 3 – Neutral (or no opinion)
- 4 – Quite unimportant.
- 5 – Not important at all.

Table 6: What journalists consider their crucial tasks.

Actions	Mean N = 60	S.D.
Explain, analyse, interpret	1.35	.732
Explain national development issues	1.35	.732
Write to inspire and help solve problems	1.57	.831
Represent readers to ask hard questions	1.62	.940
Write to develop intellectual / cultural interests	1.63	.736
Set public agenda	1.90	.877
Hunt stories to attract most audience	2.02	.983
Comply with editorial policies	2.33	1.115
Write to entertain	2.57	1.079
Compromise to fit with editorial policies	3.33	1.311

Writing to entertain was not seen as extremely important although its imperative in commercial journalism was generally acknowledged.

The survey posed a series of open-ended question as to why the journalists cited their most recent story as the “best” work they had produced over the last two months from the date they responded to the survey. The main trace element in the stories cited was its focus on the plights of the people at the grassroots’ level; the conviction for the story; and the journalists’ personal engagement with the people involved. This connection was well summed up by a journalist from Bhutan: “The story gave me a stronger reason to love what I do.”

The next section provides a list of edited answers selected from among the 60 journalists.

Why the most recent story was deemed as “best” work done

- I had to bring the story on Afghanistan landmines home to our local readers. It’s enterprise work that involved a lot of research and time, which was a departure from the daily grind, and more in-depth than what we could regularly do at a small community-based daily.
- My story managed to create an awareness among the ethnic minority (Pakhtoons in Karachi) so that they can educate themselves to play a contributing role in society.
- I introduced a fresh angle on the high illiteracy rates in the rural areas, especially among girls, and the demographic changes happening in rural colleges. This angle is often ignored in the urban-centric media in India.

- It was an investigative story on ecstasy, which uncovered how the rich were involved in the illegal drugs (in Indonesia). I managed to interview what otherwise were inaccessible and elusive sources.
- Heightened people's education and awareness of the need for peaceful elections and the consequences of ethnic violence in Sri Lanka.
- Story focused on the conflict between the right of the people to the land, and protection of animals and environment. I had to travel to a remote island in the Philippines to hear the stories of two extremely opposing sides.
- I placed a human face in a story about HIV in the Philippines, but without limiting it to a sob story. I tackled the policy issues.
- Story exposes the myths of overseas education, the reality of what it takes to study abroad and how one should make it a fruitful experience by choosing a good institution. My article received positive comments from other journalists, academicians, and management executives. (India)
- A story on the clash of civilisation and which bridges the gap between Islam and the "West". Story led to feedback from readers and discussion in letters to the paper. (Pakistan).
- The story titled "Transporting Dorokha'a Oranges" highlighted the difficulties that two different groups of natives face in transporting mandarins from rural areas in Bhutan that are not connected by motorable [sic] roads to the nearest road-point where the fruit is sold. The mandarins are usually transported manually or on horseback from Dorokha - for a nominal fee, which they use for buying household necessities and take back home. Ordinary people living in urban areas are almost unaware of how the natives live. The story gave me a stronger reason to love what I do.
- Highlighted the plights of the voiceless migrant Burmese women, in reproductive and sexual health. Story was written following discussion of abortion issues in six Mekong countries during the 3rd Asia-Pacific Conference on Reproductive and Sexual Health.
- Special report on women who, having undergone an abortion, are treated like "third class citizens" when they go to hospitals for post-abortion care. My story challenges readers to re-think their attitudes and understand why women are forced to abort. (Philippines)
- Investigative story on the possible mark-up of the election goods tender held by the Indonesian Election Commission (KPU) in 2003. I found the paper price was marked up by double in the tender by paper firms, which resulted in the state paying more than it should. It took time for me to find the important sources and necessary documents. The process was different from daily news reporting from press statements.

- Analysis of how widening of the rich-poor gap has led to deteriorating health, education and other important areas, for people in the country side. Story angle unveils the impact of so-called development on the poor and “voiceless”. The story took a longer time to write, more fieldwork research, more analytical. (Bangladesh)
- My story examined a controversial law that bars religious conversion in a state in India. I focused on religious minorities as the main sources as opposed to politicians, who are often the main actors in past reports. Story was written in the midst of elections in five states of India. This story became an election issue.
- Eviction of 232 illegal settlers in Semarang Central Java. It uncovered corrupt dealings between the landowner and Mayor of Semarang. My story focused on the plights of the settlers in the area of health and education, especially for the children of the settlers.
- Story was angled to tell readers that while people power was effective in toppling dictators like Marcos in the Philippines or Suharto in Indonesia, the people should not go to the streets each time they wanted a new president. My story focused on giving democracy a chance, that there is an impeachment process in parliament.
- Political story on public corruption in Malaysia, which helped expose the extraordinary amount of money spent by the ruling coalition in Malaysian polls. We (Malaysiakini) did a lot of background checks to ensure we got the facts right. Also on publication of the story, we did numerous follow-up stories on the issue.
- Criminal Law Haunts Human Rights in Cambodia. The story indicated that democracy and human rights are being threatened by a series of arrests of human rights activists and opposition party officials, including a director of a radio station for his criticisms of political figures.
- Story exposed the effects of deforestation and entrenched poverty of the indigenous people in Malaysia. Despite the economic wealth of the country, they are still lagging behind politically, socially and economically. My story examined the effects of uncontrolled development on the livelihood of the indigenous people who have lived in the forest even before Malaysia gained its independence.
- I visited a remote village on the India-Pakistan border connecting Rajasthan, Gujarat and the Runn of Katch, to profile an ancient desert community long forgotten since 1947. I was curious about how they have survived two wars, sitting on the edge of modern Pakistan, and yet so far removed from its benefits. The story focused on the possibility of new prospects for the community’s development with the opening of India-Pakistan’s southern border. I introduced the ancient community to the readers, its glorious history, its troubled presence and the fact the governments of India and Pakistan have failed this community. Much of what’s told in the story was not known to a majority of Pakistanis. The

story took me to the remotest part of the country, which is often inaccessible. I saw first-hand a different land, a different people about which very little is known. It was certainly outside my routine of covering mainly urban politics and economics.

- My story explained the important role of political parties and leaders to keep their supporters in check before and after the election. Preventing violence during the election period in Sri Lanka.
- Story on child prostitution where I was able to observe and talk to them. It was a very personal work for me and I tried to communicate to my readers my feelings of seeing the world through the eyes of a child prostitute. (Indonesia)
- Poor road construction causing high mortality rates in road accidents. My story exposed the corrupt contractors and government officials in Pakistan.
- Story is about the controversy in the nursing licensure examinations, the leak that happened and how the Philippine government and the industry players are treating it. Story strikes at the heart of most Filipino's desire to work abroad, ultimately in the United States. The message in the story is that in the end, there are no short cuts to the 'promised land.' I think what's good with the story is the moral lesson that in life, what's most essential is credibility, honesty and integrity.
- Story on trans-sexuals in the Philippines. I watched a couple of popular shows and interviewed the "trannies" on and off the stage. Aside from the artists, I also interviewed "trannies" who are not artists but work in ordinary jobs and who try to blend into society. I interviewed about 10 people, and the story grew from what could have been a titillating piece into a study of how "trannies" try to blend into society and how they differentiate themselves not just from the straight people, but also from the gay ones. It was more social and analytical, as opposed to the cultural reviews I used to do for *Inquirer* or the entertainment and human resource pieces I'm doing now for ABS-CBN publication magazines. And because it was multi-source, I had a better grasp of the complex issues and the people involved.
- Indonesia government's policy on importing rice. I felt a sense of mission where I thought the true story about corrupt politicians must be made known to the public.

Why stories were different from routine work

- Enterprise investigative work, for instance, exposing public corruption.
- Commitment to speak with previously inaccessible sources.
- Break new ground in story angle, for instance, a trend story as opposed to the conventional angle taken by the newspapers.
- Challenge readers to re-think their attitudes towards issues, such as abortion.
- Break from conventional topics tackled by newspapers, and consequently, stories receive positive feedback from readers and other stakeholders.

- Story topics that relate to the grassroots or the “voiceless,” especially those living in rural areas (for instance, the mandarin-transport story in Bhutan, health and abortion issues in Burma), targeted to educate the urban readers.
- Personal observation and experience of stories result in personal satisfaction, and thus give reporters a reason to love what they do.
- Stories are solution oriented.
- Focus on the what, why and how, to address the problems at hand.
- Process of getting a story requires innovative methods, for instance, staying with the subject of stories and experiencing the issue at hand (e.g. rights of people and protection of animals in remote island in the Philippines; experiencing the poor public transportation system to write a story on same topic, then telling stories from the commuters’ perspective as opposed to government spokespersons’; impeachment and constitutional procedure as opposed to “people power” in the streets; story of the desert people in a remote village sitting on the India-Pakistan border connecting Rajasthan, Gujarat and the Runn of Katch).
- It was different because I worked on it for more than a month (silk industry in Bangladesh) and tried to know more and more after talking to different stakeholders.

Weaving through the fabric of the respondents’ testimony was “a sense of mission” and gravitation towards telling the people’s stories. Expressed personal rewards stemmed from the journalists’ conviction that their stories, which went beyond the routine work of reporting from press statements and conferences, made a difference – by enlightening the general public, thus raising their awareness of issues previously neglected by the urban-oriented, commercialised media.

No concrete empirical data, however, was available from this survey to demonstrate how the stories had led to qualitative changes in their newspaper’s general coverage of community development affairs. Nevertheless, an impression gauged from the journalists’ responses was that their stories generally elicited positive feedback – personally from the sources to the journalists, letters to the editors, or comments from their peers. Herein lies the potentially inspirational value of people-development oriented stories for the journalists – and apparently too for their readers. The journalists’ perceptions of their “best” work were driven by the values, attitudes and objectives that they applied to their respective enterprise stories.

To recap, I have applied the development communicator’s philosophy of purposive attitude change to examine how the journalists surveyed had attempted to help their readers express and address the issues affecting their lives. Development journalism as a concept is characteristic of development communication, in that it is community-based. Its advocacy role is its distinctive character. To test this notion,

the survey asked journalists to identify a list of reflective questions, which they asked in the process of framing their stories. For instance, instead of habitually asking, "Will this story interest my readers?" did the journalists ask, "How will this story affect my readers?" "How will this story improve the social conditions of my readers?" "How will this story help clarify the current situation or help solve perennial problems?"

Following is a distribution of the reflective questions the journalists asked when they worked on their stories as alluded to in the previous section.

- How do I focus my work so that I don't bite off more than I can chew? How do I bring this home to my readers? How do I make them care?
- Will my story have any impact on my readers so that they will act on the problems?
- How can this story benefit my readers? Who will be educated through it?
- How can I explain the technical terms clearly and correctly? How can I approach the issue from a new perspective?
- What would ordinary people really want to know about the issue at hand? Do my readers really care about the issue?
- Who else shall I interview to keep the story fair to all sides?
- How can I present the story without siding with any of the parties? How can I make people decide which side to take after reading the story?
- How can I move government or non-government organisations to act? Can there be a compromise or middle ground?
- Am I consciously phrasing my questions to get answers to satisfy my personal beliefs?
- Are activists' views so harsh that the editors may edit them to avoid offending the authorities?
- How can I best serve the human cause?
- What is my objective in writing the story? Whom do I want to influence? Is the story new to my readers? Will it see print? Will it generate just enough curiosity that readers will not be too caught up in the debate but instead look inward and re-think their attitudes?
- How will it affect people from other religions, and what exactly might they be looking for?
- Why I am writing this story at this time?
- Religion is a sensitive issue in Malaysia. Did I degrade other religions? Did I present the story fairly?
- Was this true? How could something like this happen? Exactly how much was spent by various parties on election campaigning?
- Who am I writing for? Is the story able to change something in society? Will the story cause conflict or promote peace?

- Does the conference have any impact either on people's well being, or to change government's policy, and/or help the audience [ministers/ bureaucrats] in attaining [at least] some professional improvement? From what points were the statements made at the conference? Did the conference turn out to be another talkfest? Did the politicians' statements contradict what they previously said in the papers?
- Why did it happen? Why did the government decide what they decided? What could be done to create a public outcry? What could the government do to make the situation better for the indigenous people? Why is poverty so rampant among these people?
- Why and how would this community be important for my readers? What important points about the problems of this community can I highlight? How can I bring out the richness of this community's heritage and history, which is not known to most Pakistanis? How can I link this community's future to the important political and economic developments in the region?
- What are the causes of election violence? How are the people or party supporters responsible? What are the preventive measures? What is the role of political party leaders and their representatives during election campaigns? What can voters do to minimise conflict? What lessons can be learnt from past conflicts?
- Who is right and who is wrong? What are the real issues at hand? What lessons can be learned?
- Why do the "trannies" [trans-sexuals] do what they do? What price do they pay for it? What do they hope to accomplish, and what measures have to be taken if they are to gain equality?
- Will my story move or inspire stakeholders to act?

Common elements in reflective questions

- How do I make my readers care?
- How will my story benefit my readers, or change the situation?
- How can I educate readers to prompt positive change in attitudes – for example, towards abortion, indigenous people and civic behaviour?
- Will the publisher/editor be angry for my story attacking the giant advertisers?
- Staying impartial in a controversial story where impartiality is hard to achieve. Thus, how to signal to readers the right position to take.
- Whether editors will edit the story too harshly to toe the government line, for example, in the context of the Malaysian media.
- What, why and how – with a focus on how, the story will be able to prompt or initiate change through mobilisation of public opinion leading to government actions.

- Why am I writing the story? To save the industry or just to let the readers know about the bad situation?
- Journalist's preconception and stereotype of the subject changes in the process of investigating the story (for example, trans-sexuals in the Philippines).

The common threads in the reflective questions are the "why", "how", "what if" and "what now" dimensions of reporting. Implicit in the reflective questions are the notions of hope, social change, education, advocating for the people, and anticipated impact of stories in making a difference to prevailing conditions of the poor and disenfranchised. These are reflective of the demographics of developing societies in Asia.

There is a commonly held view that regardless of ideological, social or political persuasions, the journalist's news decision-making process, apart from editorial organisational factors, is determined by the degree of conflict, the unusual, the scandalous and the controversial, implied in the event or issue. Another view says that journalists, like their readers, are saturated with an array of social, political and cultural values. These values achieve their clearest definition when journalists are reporting during times of crisis, conflict and chaotic uncertainties. The more popular view is that journalistic judgement of the value of a news event or issue, is gauged primarily by what journalists think would make the greatest impact on, and be of greatest interest to, their primary audience.

Common among the above definitions of news and its accompanying values are the elements of conflict, controversy, negativity and mass appeal. However, these media value systems, which are widely accepted as a construction of the liberal media in western democracies, may not truly reflect how the media function across different cultural and political contexts. This underlines my working assumption that journalism is a producer and a product of the environments in which it operates.

What "best practices" mean to Asian journalists

This survey has attempted to draw out the fundamental practices and principles that frame the range of experiences of the journalists surveyed across different cultural settings. What is considered to be "best" or effective practice in one situation apparently may not be so in another. For instance, the immersive extended journalism as practised by P. Sainath and Dionne Bunsha in their representation of the plights of the rural poor in India would not be as effective in other politico-cultural settings - where direct engagement by journalists in the community would be regarded with suspicion by the powers-that-be. Best practices in journalism are arguably defined by media contexts and socio-cultural circumstances.

My survey attempted to identify the trace elements or values implicit in the principles upon which the journalists had based their practice. The determinants of best practices can be identified as:

- Impartiality, honesty and sincerity in telling the stories.
- Context, comparison and contrast.
- Trenchant analysis of past and present.
- Journalist's enthusiasm, conviction and passion for the subject matter.

The trace elements gathered from the open-ended question: "What journalistic traits do you think one should have to become an "award-winning" journalist?" as extracted from the responses, were:

- Doing whatever you can to reveal facts for the betterment of society.
- Integrity, sincerity and honesty – what you do when no one (editors included) is looking.
- Initiate, instigate, discuss, debate and dissect an issue that affects the people.
- To tell the truth for readers' understanding of complex issues.
- Persistence in getting information from otherwise inaccessible sources.
- Always maintain journalistic standards and do not victimise innocent people in the stories.
- Upholding journalistic principles, ethical values, and standards. Sometimes situations and conditions may not allow the upholding of ethics, but journalists must attempt to reach near perfection.
- Must reach the depths of what is true or false and then get them published.
- Be aware of consequences of the stories on the public. Journalistic accountability and responsibility to readers being foremost.
- Doing the best job possible with the tools you have, despite the restrictions.
- Report the truth and expose falsehoods.
- Investigative work should not be hindered by the editor or newspaper management, government or external agencies. Even if a journalist faces conflict with any or all of them, freedom of expression should not be curtailed.
- To stand by your moral obligation while carrying out your professional responsibility.
- To report or write about issues that matter to the ordinary people, not just to merely please the powers that be.
- Not to treat newspaper as a trashy, money-making racy paper. Best practice means abiding by an agreed code of ethics that reflects the local sentiment and contributes to the national good.
- Keeping the readers' best interests in mind always.
- Report facts as they are. No talking down to your readers. No pontification or editorialisation. Always look for a human angle to tell your story. Stories are about human beings, so the human face in the story should not be missed.

- Learning by doing. Always ask people who have more experience. Try to see any kind of case from many viewpoints.
- To be honest, courageous in expressing reports/views in a simple way. And to have faith in readers/ viewers' wisdom.
- If you are righteous, then your story becomes solid as an oak tree. It will take a lot to bring you down.
- A certain set of standards applied to the profession, based on balance and universal values of truth telling and promoting commonly understood values like peace, care for humanity, respect and honesty. These values are applied in the daily course of my work, balanced with other interests such as commercial values and political influences.

The respondents said the traits of an "award-winning" journalist were:

- Hard work, determination, and attention to detail.
- Fact finding with courage to dig out the truth, and then stand by your story.
- In-depth research with verifiable facts supported by hard data and documents.
- Good interviewing and people skills, honest with oneself, not manipulative and carries no hidden agenda, except to help change society for the better.
- Commitment, hard work, analytical skills.
- Open-mindedness, persistent and perspicacious.
- Keen curiosity, sharp eye for stories behind the news.
- Truthful, impartial and good story-telling skills.
- Telling the story of the people following universally acceptable values of right and wrong.
- Acute political and social conscience; always try to be on the side of the dispossessed, the poor and the weak.
- Being constantly alert and sensitive to the environment.
- Passion for unraveling the truth and writing about it.
- Having desire to inform and seek truth despite facing obstacles from those in power.
- Serving the oppressed and encountering the oppressor.
- Being sceptical of what one hears or sees. Check it out.
- A team player, excellent investigative skills, good interpersonal skills, ability to present stories in an exciting, clear and concise manner.
- A journalist is like a preacher; practice what you preach. For instance, a journalist investigates piracy in Malaysia. It won him an award, yet he is one of the buyers of pirated DVDs, CDs and software. That would be hypocritical.
- There are different kinds of journalists, each is unique in their own way, and there is only one thing that they have in common: integrity.

- The willingness of the journalist to learn, to relearn and not judge his or her sources.
- Doggedness, acute sense of fairness, a clear vision of how the story will serve the readers.
- Fighting-spirit/journalism warrior type.
- A clear head, a conscience. Also a heart.

The common traits of “award-winning” journalists can be summed up thus:

- Passion for subject matter.
- Write for the oppressed and encounter the oppressor.
- Empathy for the public.
- Clear understanding of consequences of what is written.
- Devotion to the task of transforming community.

It is clear at this point that in trying to paint a picture of best practices of journalism in Asia, one needs to understand:

- (a) the context, the socio-political constraints and resource limitations that journalists have to contend with in their enterprise journalistic work; and
- (b) the journalists’ working principles deemed to be most effective in uncovering and breaking the story for a particular medium with a clear purpose, which is to serve the interest of the public. The question is whether the interest of the public, and that of the media proprietors, aligns with the journalists’ conviction of what is right and wrong.

As a television journalist from the Philippines notes in her survey response: “(Best practice) means producing an objective, accurate and entertaining piece that would serve the interests of the readers of that particular medium. The TV magazine connects OFW overseas Filipino workers and readers with their mother country. The websites have to generate reader participation. I can’t pretend to do the traditional honourable journalism that is practised by the broadsheets where every piece has to be hard-hitting and newsworthy. But to the best that I can, the pieces have to be informative, accurate and useful to my readers. One thing I will not do, though, which I’ve told my staff, is that we will not sell our articles, regardless of the pressure to buckle to advertising and marketing, which have a major say on editorial policies. We delineate the line between by-lined articles and advertorials. We will not lie or fabricate stories. These are lines I will not cross.”

Another example is the case of Indonesia, where abetted corruption between political sources and journalists are known to be rampant. In the next section, I provide the edited transcripts of an email interview I conducted with Endy Bayuni, editor-in-chief of The *Jakarta Post*.

THE JAKARTA POST: FORGING PUBLIC SERVICE VALUES



Eric Loo (right): What pressing issues do Indonesian journalists face today?

Endy Bayuni (left): I would name three: the legal environment, and related to this is the question of access to information, and the third is professionalism, or rather lack of it, which in turn hurts the profession's credibility in the public eye.

The 1999 Press Law is probably one of the most liberal in Southeast Asia. It jealously guards the profession but does not sufficiently protect the interests of the public against malpractices by journalists. That is precisely where the problem is: no one suing the media for defamation would use the press law, opting instead to invoke the Criminal Code which also has articles on defamation. A ruling by the Supreme Court in February 2006 in favor of *Tempo* magazine, set the jurisprudence that all press defamation cases should be tried under the 1999 Press Law, but still left the question unanswered about the need to better protect the public. The Press Law is so protective of the profession that most people would try to avoid using it. Some find other means to secure "justice". Businessmen, politicians and organisations that have a bone to pick with journalists have in the past resorted to deploying the mob to intimidate and harass journalists, or vandalise, or take over media property. While today we enjoy greater legal protection, the press law will remain a dead document until it gives better protection to the public against malpractices. Media organisations are also fighting against dozens of articles in the draft review of the Criminal Code, that restrict or hamper the profession.

While Indonesia now enjoys much more press freedom, the struggle to secure and defend this freedom continues because there are forces in society which continue to seek to re-impose some forms of state control over the media. Access to information remains a major issue for journalists today. We in the media, with our friends in Parliament, have been fighting to secure the passage of the bill on freedom of information, but the government has deployed all tactics to delay or even to kill the bill. The bill lingers with uncertainty in parliament. Instead, the government has now pushed its own bill, one on state secrecy, which contradicts the freedom of information bill, into the national legislative agenda.

Lack of professionalism among journalists is another big problem for the media. Inaccurate reporting, sensationalism, and lack of ethics are commonly found, even among the mainstream media today. Part of the problem may be because of the low pay. Journalists rank among the lowest paid professions in Indonesia. With such low pay, it is harder to attract the best brains into this profession. This in turn is hurting the credibility of the media in the public eye.

What cause these issues?

EB: The legal framework is largely still the legacy of the Soeharto years. Although we enacted a new press law in 1999, people's attitudes or contempt toward the law remain largely unchanged. Attitudes change slowly. Intolerance to criticisms and differences of opinion, preference to settle scores by the use of force or mobs rather than resorting to legal channels, are some of the legacies of the past that are changing very slowly. The democratic culture (including tolerance towards differences of opinion and willingness to accept criticism) has not taken root in Indonesia yet. Lack of professionalism and violation of ethics is largely caused by poor training and education among journalists. There is also the bottom-line pressure in the media industry, often forcing them to hire unqualified and untrained people as journalists, or selecting news or programmes for their commercial, rather than news value.

How can these issues be addressed or even corrected?

EB: With regards to attitudes and culture, it is really a matter of time before a democratic culture takes root among the people, particularly among the political elite. The main thing is that journalists continue to fight to improve the legal frameworks, including a more balanced press law, and hopefully soon, a new legislation that guarantees the right to access official documents in the interests of the public. On professionalism, the answer will be more training and education for journalists. Currently, most journalists receive minimum training at the beginning of their career. Ideally, they should receive training and education throughout their career, in journalism, and also in the industrial aspects like newsroom management, marketing and government relations.

What causes the "bad journalism" in Indonesia that you refer to?

EB: Bottom line pressures, poorly trained staff, ignorance, lack of cultural or religious sensitivity, acting arbitrarily, and worse, having a hidden political agenda.

How is *Jakarta Post's* journalism similar or different from journalism in the English speaking world, generally called the "West"?

EB: I don't believe so much in labelling journalism into "Western" and "Eastern" or on the basis of specific groups of peoples or cultures or geography. Within "Western"

journalism, there is a whole range of strains and types. We take the English speaking world, as an example. There, you find big differences between Britain, American and Australian journalism. From my interaction with journalists all over the world, including during [my] Nieman year at Harvard, I found that journalists from whatever country share many of the same values and passions, such as the quest to get to the truth, the passion to tell or narrate stories. Where we differ largely is in style, and to some extent, this is defined by the language used. *Jakarta Post* journalism is much closer to American, British and Australian journalism because we all use the English language. We need only a few words to tell our story because English is a more exact language. But Indonesian language media may find that they are closer to French language media, which tends to emphasise the beauty of language, but often leaves the meaning vague. There are universal values in journalism and then there are cultural specifics. Journalism anywhere in the free world will most likely look and feel the same. Of course there will be differences in the way the news or stories are told because of different languages and styles used. But these are more cultural specific, rather than "Asian" or "Western" values. Asia is so large and heterogenous (much more so than Europe/the West) that it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what Asian values are.

Apart from language and readership, how is *The Jakarta Post* different from the mainstream Indonesian newspapers?

EB: Language for us is just a medium of expression. Of course we chose English because it is the language of the globalised community. More and more people in Indonesia, as in the rest of the world, are speaking the language, so more and more of them need to read in English, including reading their newspaper. So to answer the question, we differ from other newspapers in Indonesia in terms of our vision and mission: to build a more humane civil society in this hugely diverse nation. We have a vision of what Indonesia should be, and we feel that many people, Indonesians and non-Indonesians, share this vision. They are our target audience. Currently, half of our readers are non-Indonesians, and the other half are Indonesians. In future, we believe that more and more Indonesians will become the majority as our readership grows.

How similar or different are the demographics of *The Post's* journalists?

EB: We still emphasise the hiring of Indonesians to work in the newsrooms. That means one of the requirements is that they are able to write in English. They come from all corners of the archipelago and all kinds of economic and social backgrounds. It is not all that different from what Indonesian language newspapers hire. Our newsroom is very pluralistic: you find all kinds of people here. And it also has an international feel to it because we also hire a bunch of non-Indonesians, mostly native English speakers, to help in the editing process.

To what extent has your experience with the “Western” media influenced your editorship?

EB: I think every stint I did in different media, whether Indonesian or “Western” has had an influence on me. What I learned most from my experience in international news agencies was the strong discipline and the professionalism demanded there. These have helped me to advance in my career when I moved back to The *Jakarta Post* in 1991, until today.

How can we reconcile the low pay of journalists with the high demand for integrity that comes with the job?

EB: Of course it helps if journalists are adequately paid. But money should not be the main concern or even goal for anyone wanting to come into the profession. If they look for money, they should go and work at PR companies, where the pay is much better. Those who come into this profession must really have a strong passion to serve the public, to search for the truth. There has to be a strong idealism - probably a romantic fool. But I agree that if your basic needs are met, then journalists can concentrate better in their job. But money or pay is not the main determination of the quality or integrity of a journalist.

How optimistic are you that the “envelope journalism” dilemma in Indonesia can be turned around?

EB: I am hopeful, but not that optimistic. The problem was around even when I joined this profession in 1983. There were attempts to curtail or eradicate this practice but we did not make any headway. So at present, a number of media have made it their own policy to ban journalists from taking money from news sources, whatever the circumstances and however small or big the amount is involved. The *Jakarta Post* and a few other publications that I know have strict rules about this. We have fired one journalist for asking for money from news sources, and we hope this serves as a lesson to others in the newsroom. We just hope that more and more media make it their policy to ban the taking of money from news sources. The practice is hurting the credibility of the profession. But the most we can do at this moment is to maintain the credibility of our own newspaper and our journalists.

There was a campaign launched by the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) early this year to stamp out envelope journalism and other forms of corruption within the profession. Such a campaign must have the support of the public, but news sources, including government agencies, continue to give out envelopes to journalists.

What are the universal benchmarks for best practice in journalism?

EB: Journalism is essentially a public service, so the benchmark is when you do a good job in serving your reader or community where you operate. Here, it is essential to invoke the fourth estate function of the media, as a means of checks on the powers of government and other institutions, as a means to give voices to the people, particularly the weak and marginalised in society, as a means of keeping the public or community informed, and as means of informing the public about the choices available to them come election time.

Do norms change with times and circumstances?

EB: Some norms in journalism are universal (and presumably eternal) and some are cultural or time specific. The former don't change because they are universal; the latter change with geography and time. But while the norms may be universal, their applications may differ from time to time and region to region. The quest is to get to the truth as close as possible. The desires to tell or narrate stories are some of the norms that don't change through time or geography. They are universal.

What are the best practices benchmarks in *The Jakarta Post*?

EB: Accuracy, clarity, comprehensive, and engaging are some of the best practices benchmarks we have set for ourselves. There are models of newspapers that have succeeded in doing this, so it is best for us to talk about models. We believe that when it comes to English language newspaper journalism, *The New York Times* is the best in the world, so we strive to be as good as them.

How do you ensure that journalists adhere to best practice standards?

EB: We discuss and review, and refine our best practice standards continuously through our daily editorial meetings. Essentially, we learn from experience. Of course, we are also providing more and more training, not just for new journalists, but also now for mid-career and senior journalists.

What's your advice to young journalists on developing best practices?

EB: Set the highest standard possible (your readers expect no less than that) and then work hard to achieve those standards you aspire to. It won't happen overnight, but through hard work and persistence, you can achieve your goal. It's a life-long learning experience in journalism, so never stop learning new methods and styles and adapt to the latest technology.

CHAPTER 4

GRASPING THE REALITIES OF BEST PRACTICES OF JOURNALISM IN ASIA

Good journalism essentially relies on one's capacity for critical observation, reasoning, and ability to write for an audience to help them understand the complexities of their environment.

Good journalism promotes a rich, nuanced, complex and diverse public conversation on contemporary affairs. This means, good journalists are not mere transcribers, but translators and interpreters of issues and events.

PUBLIC perception of journalists' ethical practice is low, in an environment where the media are seen to be indulging in excessive commercialism and falling short of meeting their public service functions. In academia, journalism educators are continually faced with the task of working out more effective and engaging techniques for teaching and inspiring students on possible ways to reclaim the public service function of journalists. If this reclamation is to materialise, the needling question is what should journalists – and journalism educators – be doing to evolve clear benchmarks of best practices in the profession? How can journalists be educated to internalise the trace elements of "best practices" identified in the previous chapter? What are the "best practices" of journalism that media educators should be teaching, and which professional journalists should be practicing?

The first step toward reinventing journalism education and defining "best practices" in the Asian context is to recognise that journalism, on its own merit, is an intellectual enterprise. As Padma Iyer, project editor at the national broadsheet, *The Australian*, notes, "best practice in journalism emerges from the long-term knowledge base of each student". A serious journalist is by definition a public intellectual, who, as Sainath notes, differs from those "private intellectuals, the hired guns who head corporate-bankrolled think-tanks". The essence of this difference lies in the functions and objectives that the public and "private" intellectual each serves – the former serving the public interest, and the latter, being agents of the image management industry, serving mainly corporate and commercial interests.

Indeed, journalism goes beyond ambulance chasing, doing death knocks, and re-writing press releases. Worthy news journalism arguably goes beyond reporting about sex, money and crime. In-depth journalism is a product of empirical enquiry, contextual interpretation of issues, sourced interviews, and verified information. Good journalism essentially relies on one's capacity for critical observations, reasoning, and ability to write for an audience to help them understand the complexities of their environment. Good journalism promotes a rich, nuanced, complex and diverse public conversation on contemporary affairs. This means good journalists are not mere transcribers, but translators and interpreters of issues and events.

This multi-layered description encapsulates what I consider to be the multi-layered dimensions of "best practices" in journalism. It is opposed to the mistaken notion of an exclusive "best practice" benchmark, which often is identified with the "Western" libertarian media form, or as Gunaratne describes it, the "Anglo-American one journalism concept" based on "individualism, negative freedom, commoditisation of news, and secularised Judeo-Christian values". Or as Iyer notes, "there is no single best practice standard: there are many. It is a rich field of individual pickings for the eager learner – it's an unmapped terrain for the trainer".

BG Verghese, former editor of the *Hindustan Times*, director of *Media Foundation*, founder of *The Hoot.org*, and adjunct professor at the Centre for Policy Research in Delhi in India, shares his observations on what constitutes best practices in journalism. His commentary is designed to prompt journalists and journalism educators to start a dialogue and think about how they can make a difference to the profession.

DEVELOPMENT JOURNALISM IN ASIA: BEWARE OF CYNICISM, KINDLE HOPE

BG Verghese

B.G. Verghese is a columnist, author and Visiting Professor at the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi. He entered journalism in 1949 and served on the Times of India until 1966. He was editor of the Hindustan Times (1969-75) and the Indian Express (1982-86). In between these assignments he was Information Adviser to the Prime Minister (1966-68) and a Gandhi Peace Foundation Rural Development Fellow (1977-82). He won the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Journalism in 1975 and was a member of the MacBride Commission, which produced the UNESCO report, "Many Voices, One World" in 1980. He currently chairs the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, India, and the Media Foundation. He served on the Press Council of India for two terms and led a Press Council team that reported on Media and Militancy in Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir (1992). His recent books are *Warrior of the Fourth Estate: Ramnath Goenka of the Indian Express* and *Breaking the Big Story*, both published by Penguin.

Journalism is a power for good, rightly practised. For information is power. The calling therefore carries with it a responsibility, social as much as individual, to hold up the mirror fairly and equally, without consciously hiding or unduly projecting events as if seen in a distorting mirror. Alas, many journalists and journals sometimes tend to pursue a narrower and more self-serving agenda. Not for nothing did Edmund Burke refer to the press as the Fourth Estate. More recently, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the celebrated Russian author, in "*The First Circle*", likened a great writer to "a second government". This might perhaps be equally or better said of a great newspaper or a great journalist.

There are those who would dismiss this as pompous. However, the "publish and be damned" (Hugh Cudlipp, the London Daily Mirror) school of journalism still flourishes. It assumes various names and guises, including peephole and chequebook journalism. In our own time, more dangerous for being insidious, there is much international journalism co-mingling with what is truly admirable that represents a genre of patriotic journalism for all its high sounding strategic jargon.

Asian journalism too must beware "Asian values", narrowly interpreted to suggest that "Western" concepts of human rights, freedoms and gender justice are inapplicable or too intrusive. Located in the developing world, it must necessarily be concerned with the complex and critical issues of development and social change. These stories do not necessarily make glamorous copy and gatekeepers are prone to keep them aside for a rainy day or to tuck them away inconspicuously on an

inside page. The reasons are not far to seek. Development is a process while social change occurs even more slowly. Neither has the dramatic impact of events that are more obvious and instant and can be seen, touched, photographed and graphically retold in the “I was there” manner. Development and the change it brings creeps along, its huge, dramatic consequences gestating in the womb of time. It takes patience, skill, and no less clever analysis, to anticipate an event yet to unfold, a seed working unseen to germinate, which has the potential to transform lives.

I am not a journalism teacher, nor have I taught any course. I am a columnist and have been a reporter and editor of two national Indian dailies. But I have had the opportunity of lecturing to young journalism students and write from that mixed experience. News must remain sacred, though comment is free. Both or all sides must be fairly reported. There is a duty to correct errors, even if inadvertent, and the right of reply must be conceded. Sensationalism and strong adjectives should be avoided and reportage on issues likely to inflame passions, such as communal incidents, should be treated with sobriety and due discretion while not masking events.

Following the British rather than the American tradition, my contemporaries and I in India learnt on the job and not at any journalism school. Newspapers organised their own training in some manner or other, not always very satisfactorily, or recruited staff from smaller papers or the news agencies. Things have changed. Indian journalism schools have come of age. Journalism and communications are recognised disciplines in most universities and young people flock to take these courses to enter what they perceive to be the exciting, adventurous, glamorous world of the media, particularly television nowadays, or advertising and public relations. Nevertheless, whether schooled or in-house, training is important to learn the journalist’s craft. Learning the art still comes from experience, though theory helps - the ‘know-why’ reinforcing the ‘know-how’.

The old verities still prevail: the what, when, who, where and why of journalism. But life is now far more complex and society greatly influenced by technology, mobility, migration and the inter-disciplinary nature of most interactions, whether economic, strategic, social or cultural, not to mention globalisation. Borders remain but have been obliterated or softened in many ways. We live in an instant, interconnected world of virtual reality with actions and reactions taking place in real time, even as parts of our Asian society still plod along its weary way, striving to get there.

The MacBride Report, *“Many Voices, One World: Communications and Society Today and Tomorrow”* (UNESCO, 1980), spoke of the North-South information gap and

the inequity and danger this represented. Since then the satellite, computer and internet have further transformed the world and the nature of communications has changed with inter-personal communication becoming a norm. Every person, bloggers included, has become a communicator and Indian channels constantly invite “citizen journalists” to feed in to their circuit with news, pictures and opinion. Media polls are commonplace. Ideas are being marketed.

The world has truly moved into an information age. It is important to know, in order to be empowered, and participate and influence policies and decisions. Freedom of expression is now being more widely understood as the right to information, to know and to communicate across borders. What we are also learning is that there is a “north” and a “south” in every society and the information rich enjoy an unfair advantage over those who are information poor. The rise of the market in competition with the nation state has also led to the commodification of news. The reader (or viewer) is often treated not so much as a citizen but as a consumer. But man does not live by bread alone, important though that is.

This changing background needs to be understood to shape tomorrow’s journalism - learning from the past but preparing for the future. Old values remain eternal. It is the journalism curriculum and approach that merits change. New fangled notions that imply objectivity is outdated and that every reporter must take a position and be an advocate or crusader (and exaggerate or suppress as necessary) are dangerous and, in my view, a betrayal of good, professional journalism. Likewise, investigative journalism should not result in the reporter or journal becoming both judge and jury. Newspapers should refrain from playing God, inebriated by their own sense of power and importance.

Agenda setting role

The media has a dominant agenda setting role. “What’s the news” or “What’s new” is a common enough greeting when friends meet. Collectively, it is the media that offers the answer. News, like beauty, lies in the beholder’s eye. It may not always be there. One has to look for it or distil it from the ordinariness in which it resides. Too many journalists these days work the telephone – a most useful gadget but no substitute from going out into the field, seeing, smelling, and sensing other realities, rather than repeating what somebody chooses to tell you.

There is in India a huge economic and emotional gap between town and country, with bright urban youth ignorant of, and indifferent to, village India – which is where millions live in “another country”, even beyond the deep “south”. One country, two worlds is a recipe for disaster. On becoming editor of the *Hindustan Times*, I resolved

to run a fortnightly page on a village near enough to Delhi to be accessible, yet far enough not to have been suburbanised. Many, from the proprietor (initially), staff and readers, first yawned and then complained at the waste of space on “*Our Village, Chhatera*”. But it developed a faithful readership. Publicity galvanised the administration and service agencies into doing their job and doing it better. The villagers felt greatly empowered. Scholars eagerly measured social change over the seven year period the column ran. Ambassadors got to see an India on the other side of diplomatic protocol. And city journalists, who could not tell rice from wheat or initially gaped at Persian wheels, grew to become far better and more sensitive journalists, able to take a more holistic view of Indian realities. Chhatera was an education.

I entered journalism in 1949 when the process of nation building was still young. The five-year plans were central to this effort. It was one thing to read and report on plan debates, budgets, tussles over *inter se* priorities, training and leakages. It was altogether another thing to journey through the length and breadth of India – twice for weeks on end – sending back despatches day after day, from the field. That too was another India. An India on the move, a positive India, faltering and falling along the way, but yet heading onward. The readership response was enormous. The “plans” seemed to come alive. Cynicism and gloom were pushed back.

Journalists tend to be cynical as they are close to the action and see the seamy side of things and the turf battles and petty ambitions of those they make larger than life by their stories. Yet cynicism is the acid of discontent. Mindlessly scattered around it can burn hope – a great catalyst and spur in any society, especially of the poor and disadvantaged. This is not to suggest propaganda or sycophancy, of which there is plenty, but the ability to provide context and perspective. Reporting the things that go well – and there is much of that too – makes known that there are achievers and achievements, despite incompetence and despair. When a previous government went to the polls in 2003 on the slogan of “India Shining”, a lot of people knew that hunger persisted, disparities were growing and indebted farmers were committing suicide. The media pollsters and political pundits got it wrong. The ruling coalition was ousted. The unvisited “field” knew what too many news desks did not or only perceived, through a glass darkly.

Beware of cynicism; kindle hope

Development reporting is not as exciting as investigative reporting, exposés of corruption and malfeasance, for many editors, reporters and readers. The latter get huge ratings even as those in authority or otherwise famous tremble. But objectivity, verification and sourcing are important so that sensation is not fanned by conjecture,

mendacious leaks or malicious rivals. Individual and institutional reputations built over years should not be lightly undermined, even destroyed, in hours through mindless reportage. Nevertheless, carefully documented reports that expose sleaze or undue preferment render a signal service by furthering accountability and good governance. At the same time, character assassination, failure to issue corrections or permit the right of reply, trial by the press and undue invasion of privacy or personal grief remain among the deadly sins of good journalism.

The complexity of modern life entails some degree of specialisation by every journalist if they are to do justice to their story. This calls for training on the job, and diligent reading and research so as to understand the intricacies of, for example, World Trade Organisation (WTO) negotiations, oil diplomacy, bio-medical trends or whatever. Reporting the market is not for the innocent. It can be corrupting, with temptations, even threats, held out to tell the story to suit the national or commercial advantage of concerned actors. Professional and personal codes must provide the necessary armour.

Disinformation has been a potent beneficiary of the information, communication and multi-media revolution. The media can be and is used by governments, intelligence agencies, corporates and the mafia. It requires knowledge, courage and principle to avoid falling into a trap or being strung along. Gatekeepers and, above them, editors can be a most valuable filter.

Nowhere is disinformation more zealously employed as in the fields of diplomacy and security, especially when the stakes are high. In young nations, the "my country right or wrong" syndrome tends to play out as it did in India during the early years after Independence. Nationalist fervour, even jingoism, is not unknown elsewhere with the former US vice-president, Spiro Agnew, once famously asking a reporter which side he was on! Truth, it has been well said, is often the first casualty of war. This need not be so. Technology has multiplied the seeing eye that will expose blatant untruth. Saddam Hussein found it advantageous to allow Peter Arnett of CNN to report from Baghdad during the first Iraq War. Al Jazeera did that very effectively during the second Iraq War.

The nature of war too has changed. Positional, conventional warfare with trenches along a "front" is now part of history. Newer wars are diplomatic, economic and psychological as much as military, and call for an altogether different kind of reporting. Insurgency and terror operate to completely new rules. The "enemy", even if he can be named and located, often lies within. 9/11 is good shorthand but speaks of a completely wrong and self-serving history and geography. Fear

has bred hysteria and stereotyping and Great Walls or Maginot or Siegfried Lines of the mind.

India has been prone to communal, caste and other tensions and multiple insurgencies. Analysing and reporting these honestly, yet discreetly, without sensationalising them, taking sides or encouraging divisive or extreme tendencies, is a duty cast upon the media. Riots and unrest must be reported but so also their causative factors without partisanship or bowing to pressure. The national and even regional media came through creditably during the terrible Gujarat killings in 2002, though elements of the local media were manifestly part of the problem. Reporting the aftermath and the slow healing process, while monitoring due process and the delivery of justice even while fostering reconciliation, is a delicate responsibility cast on the media.

Competitive sensationalising of acts of violence and body counts, inflammatory headings, strong adjectives and giving credence to rumour and unverified claims must be avoided. The truth must not be suppressed, else rumour will take over, but coverage and comment must be objective and sober. Criminals must not be glorified and fair reporting can surely avoid what Margaret Thatcher evocatively called giving any undue "oxygen of publicity" to terrorists.

UNESCO warns that "wars begin in the minds of men". So the nature of education, school textbooks, curricula, and cultural censorship are part of the "slings and arrows" of a new kind of warfare. These are societal trends that need to be watched and monitored, more so in plural societies.

India is undoubtedly the most plural and diverse society in the world. Uniquely it adopted democracy not as an end product of education and social change, but as an instrument of change. Lack of understanding of this is widespread. It has celebrated multiculturalism while others are learning to live with it. The United States, for instance, is only now beginning to turn away from the stereotype of the melting pot one size fits all.

Yet India's diversity, though very real, is latent and gradually becoming increasingly manifest with growing social and political consciousness. This is leading to a massive upwelling from below from the ranks of a submissive and submerged mass, to that of empowered citizens asserting multiple identities and rights, demanding a place in the sun. The management of this bewildering diversity through many local transitions within the greater transition through which India is passing, constitutes an unprecedented challenge for the Indian media.

Some do argue that objective journalism is dead and at best old-fashioned theory. All journalism is subjective. Campaign journalism is necessary to combat what is seen to be evil and that it is therefore legitimate to editorialise and propagate the "cause" in the news columns. The old adage that news is sacred but comment is free is passé. This is an unacceptable view as what readers and listeners want is objective news and analysis and fair comment, on the basis of which they can formulate their own views. Adulteration of news is as bad as adulteration of food or polluted air or water. It must be given no quarter.

India has a Press Council that has served to adjudicate complaints pertaining to standards and taste. It has done some useful work and has codified its rulings in "Norms of Journalistic Conduct" (2005). The intention, quite sensibly, has been to build up a code through peer review and case study rather than impose a set of rules from above. But regrettably the council does not command quite the respect it deserves, partly for structural reasons. Nomination of different categories of newspaper representatives (editors, managers, small papers, Indian language papers) by election through relevant associations, which then want to "own" their "representatives", has detracted from the quality and credibility of membership. Some larger newspapers too have scorned the jurisdiction of the council and have been remiss in not publishing its findings.

However, *The Hindu* of Chennai has done well to appoint an internal but independent ombudsman in the form of a readers' editor. He issues daily corrections and publishes a monthly report on quality and standards on the editorial page. This is a fine innovation.

The training of journalists or honing their professionalism remains central to good journalism and democratic practice in an information age. Norms will keep evolving with changing times and circumstances and there will not be any one eternal standard of "best practice". As in other walks of life, "best practice" will keep evolving. Training may be given in schools of journalism or at the workstation.

The role of the editor remains undiminished as the conscience of the paper, the mentor of its social or public mission and the custodian of its ethical values as leader of the collective. He or she must have integrity, experience, vision and the ability to delegate and lead a team. Unfortunately in India, market forces have tended to give primacy to managers (often as proprietors) over editors and other professionals. This is a regressive trend and will hopefully be reversed.

CHAPTER 5

JOURNALISM IS ONLY AS GOOD AS READERS EXPECT IT TO BE

REPRESSIVE media laws and authoritarian governance have weighed heavily on the work of journalists in parts of Asia. In this operating environment, journalists have tended to be overly cautious to steer clear of persecution. This learned apprehension in a climate of fear – compounded in a newsroom culture of “cue journalism”¹ – is extended to the people, where critical information on “sensitive issues” is generally withheld from the media. It is easy to see why the media in many countries offer their public a daily diet of safe business, sports and social news (and trivia), while neglecting the need for enterprising reporting of critical issues such as environmental degradation, rich-poor disparity, public corruption and public health.

Meanwhile in neighbouring Indonesia, since the fall of President Soeharto in May 1998, journalists have been practising in an environment of unbridled newfound freedom. Former President Habibie’s first six months in office saw hundreds of publishing licences issued, most of them to tabloids, so that each city or town in the vast country of about 203 million people² had its own newspaper. Many of the licences were taken up by former journalists, some of whom had fought for press freedom during the Soeharto era. But they soon found that getting the licence was the easy part. Setting up and maintaining a credible newspaper was a far tougher job, which gave rise to the phenomenon of “senin-kamis jurnalisme” (translated as “Monday-Thursday journalism”).³ Most overnight publishers did not have the required financial backing to hire good journalists. Inexperienced journalists who ended up working for these newspapers found themselves writing largely sensational unsourced stories.

¹ See Mustafa K. Anuar’s commentary earlier in this book.

² In July 2007 estimate, the population rose to 234,693,997.

³ “Senin-kamis jurnalisme” refers to the proliferation of commercialised newspaper publishing after President BJ Habibie deregulated the media industry. With a lack of professional code of practice and driven by quick profit-making schemes from advertisements, many fly-by-night publications were short lived. Thus, the notion of publishing on Monday and ceasing on Thursday – the “Monday-Thursday journalism”.

Nevertheless, some of the new licensees did find a niche – trading in ‘tabloideses’ and smut journalism - where they could make money in a fast liberalising Indonesian society. Before the end of the first year of media reforms, during Habibie’s time in government, the gutter press in Indonesia thrived. This tested the tolerance of the predominantly Islamic society. That attracted calls from community groups for some controls on the publication licences approved by the government.

The Philippines experienced a similar reformist era in media freedom after the 1986 “people’s power” overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship. It faces challenges in protecting these hard-won freedoms.

With Thailand, the media broke off the shackles of state control at about the same time, which led to a thriving private media industry in newspapers, radio and television. The Thai problem then was a glut of information in the media. The past years have seen reports of eroding press freedom in Thailand. In early 2002, the then government of Thaksin Shinawatra alarmed free-media advocates when it moved to stem criticism of the government in the broadcast media. At the same time, the Thaksin government also moved to deport two long-serving foreign journalists in the country for writing an article that hinted at a rift between Shinawatra and the King. The government argued that the journalists were a threat to national security. The issue was resolved with an apology from the journalists, and the government withdrew its deportation proceedings. The new military government since the September 2006 coup has imposed tighter controls on the media.⁴

In India, the media have for many decades enjoyed a high degree of freedom relative to other parts of Southeast Asia. For a long time, the growth of the Indian press has been restricted due to low literacy rates in the country, especially in rural areas. The Indian press was mainly urban-based, with most of the well-known publications printed in English. In the 1990s, that started to change. With literacy rates increasing in the countryside, native-tongue publications have recorded strong growth. Today the Hindi press accounts for more than a third of the newspaper market in India, followed by the English press. With television now reaching most of India’s rural people, this has also created a market for news in local languages.

One can see that the “Asian” media environment is as diverse as its demographics and development phases. The “Asian” explication of the media function is understandably varied. It ranges from a commitment to the libertarian value of the

⁴ See report “Press Freedom Day - Thailand: Media Landscape Worries Activists” by Lynette Lee Corporal, May 3, 2007 in InterPress Service, <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=37592>

press as a “watchdog” of government, to the communitarian value of the media being a “partner of nation building”. The latter harks back to the partnership-in-development genre of the early 1960s when the idea of “development journalism” was mooted.

Implicit in the criticism by governments of the “watchdog” function of the press, are questions like: Why should the press always see contentious news of government activities as “investigative scoops” and news supportive of government policies as “government propaganda”? Most notable here have been the former prime minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad, and Singapore’s former senior minister, Lee Kuan Yew. Is this contentious journalistic operational framework the most effective mode for gathering the news and informing the people? Why should the press feel that its natural function is to act as adversary to the government? Why should the press not work together with the government for the common good?

Despite the mixed views of what comprises fundamental best practice, professional journalism across politico-cultural systems does share common inherent characteristics of news. Human curiosity and demand for “news” and information transcends culture and politics. Where the Asian media and their Western counterparts diverge is in their respective interpretation of the media’s social, economic, political and cultural role in the society they are reporting.

Western journalists commonly articulate their operational values in terms of: “we report the news as it’s happening; we don’t take sides; a good story – that’s all that matters; we’re independent; we let the facts speak for themselves; and we know what interests our audience”. While not disputing the market-oriented, altruistic democratic values of Western journalism, journalists in parts of Asia are inclined to imbibe the value of using the press as a catalyst of education, economic growth and national development. It is a value not necessarily shared by journalists acculturated to the Western tradition.

As a Malaysian editor once alluded to me, Malaysian journalists differ from their Western peers in that the former knows when to throw its punches and when to pull them back. This throw-and-pull momentum marks a unique Malaysian approach to reporting and writing between the lines.

It is simplistic to attribute the *modus operandi* of Asian journalists as a function of “Asian” cultural values. In view of the coercive controls on the media, it is difficult to see how journalists working in the excessively regulated environment in some Asian countries could operate otherwise.

Despite the fact that governments in Western democracies do not overtly engage in directing and controlling media contents (as happens in parts of Asia), the potentials and mechanisms for coercive measures have always existed. The emphasis in the West is on informal restraints and suggestions by appeals to altruistic values, or at worst, through threats of expensive defamation suits, withholding of critical information, refusal to cooperate, and withdrawal of advertising and funding support. The difference is that political interference in Western media is more understated than in parts of Asia.

Holding the media accountable

It was only “yesterday” that journalists wrote from the security of the newsroom and perceived authority of the profession. “I report, you accept.” Readers were somewhat invisible. Today, with easy access to diverse online news sites and journalists’ email addresses, readers are increasingly saying: “You write, we react”. And so it should be if we are to see excellence in reporting standards evolve.

Journalistic standards, once defined by fraternal recognition, are now significantly framed by online interactivity and collaboration between the storytellers, their sources and readers. What is read online is easily compared and contrasted with other credible news outlets. The power of journalists – and their editors – to filter information is diminishing. Meanwhile, readers are becoming influential players in media discourse, which means that standards of journalism are only as good as the readers expect them to be.

I was asked at a lecture with a group of *Antara* news agency journalists in Jakarta (14 November 2006) what “new” skills journalists should acquire in reporting for societies ruled by communal politics such as in Malaysia. How can journalists give readers the value-added information they need to make the choices in their lives as responsible citizens?

“Journalistic skills that would never go out of fashion”, I said. They were/are, critical thinking and clear succinct writing; and habitually asking “why” and “why not”; “so what” and “what now” when one examines issues.

Lest we forget, journalists are readers’ eyes and ears. Journalists should be asking the hard questions, understanding the issues, and seeking out the right answers. Good journalism essentially relies on one’s capacity for critical observations, reasoning, and the ability to write for an audience to help them understand the complexities of their environment.

Journalism is more than setting up interviews, getting the story and transcribing the answers. Ultimately, good journalism comes from thinking journalists. Journalists who would claim pride in the papers they represent. Papers that have a tradition of publishing stories and commentaries of significant depth, which a new generation of reporters will emulate as a model of excellence. I hope the collection of commentaries and interviews with journalists in Asia, and my speculation of the elements of best practices in this book, will prompt further dialogue between journalists and journalism educators.

A SURVEY OF BEST PRACTICES IN JOURNALISM

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Supported by Media Programme Asia -
Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Singapore**

(Appendix to Chapter 3)

Dear Respondent:

Thank you for participating in this survey, which aims to gather information about how journalists in Asia think about "Best Practices in Journalism". The survey comprises questions specific to professional journalism. Your frank assessment of your work will provide us with useful insight into Asian journalism practice. The survey results will be included in a book to be published by Media Program Asia - Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Singapore. We estimate it will take you about about 15-20 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Once again, thank you.

Q.1 If you come across an important story, which of the following actions would you do or would not do under any circumstances?

(Please select your approval or disapproval of the actions according to the following ranking scores).

1 – Definitely WOULD DO.

2 – Might do if it doesn't harm my sources.

3 – I have no opinion.

4 – Definitely WOULD NOT DO under any circumstances.

- A) Pay for confidential information.
- B) Using leaked information from business or government sectors without confirmation.
- C) Agreeing with source to keep information off the record, but then used information as story background.
- D) Going undercover to get inside information.
- E) Break journalistic code of ethics to get the information if it is absolutely unavailable in any other way.

- F) Take angles and narrative structure from similar stories on the Internet, and then adapt them to my own.
- G) Even if story conflicts with dominant position of my organisation and editor, I will write the story.
- H) Re-angle story to align with my personal values or what I think is right or wrong.
- I) Select my sources, and frame my story to influence public policies.

Q.2 How important to you are the following tasks in journalism?

(Please rank the importance of the tasks according to the scores below).

- 1 – Extremely important.**
- 2 – Quite important.**
- 3 – Neutral (or No opinion).**
- 4 – Quite unimportant.**
- 5 – Not important at all.**

- A) Explain, analyse, and interpret complex issues for my readers.
- B) Write stories to entertain my readers.
- C) Represent my readers in asking the hard questions.
- D) Write stories to inspire and help my readers solve their community problems.
- E) Hunt for stories that will attract the widest possible audience.
- F) Explain and make people aware of national development issues.
- G) Write stories to develop intellectual and cultural interests of my readers.
- H) Set the direction and agenda of public discussion of community issues.
- I) Comply with the editorial policies of my news organization.
- J) Compromise my personal beliefs and values to fit in with the editorial policies of my news organization.

Q.3 I'd now like to ask you about your most recent story which you think is one of the best work you have done. Please briefly describe what the story is about.

Q.4 Why do you think this story is particularly good?

Q.5 How does this story differ, if at all, from the more routine work you do?

Q.6 What questions did you ask yourself when you wrote that story?

Q.7 What does 'best practice in journalism' mean to you?

Q.8 What journalistic traits do you think one should have to become an 'award winning' journalist?

Now, I'd like to ask you about your professional background:

Q.9 Which country are you from?

Q.10 What is your gender?

Q.11 What is your age?

Q.12 What is your highest educational qualification?

- A) High school
- B) College
- C) University

Q.13 About how many years have you worked as a journalist?

Q.14 Which media did you first work as a journalist?

- A) Newspaper
- B) Magazine
- C) Radio
- D) TV
- E) News agency
- F) Online news site

Q.15 About how many years have you worked at your present organisation?

Q.16 What is your main job responsibility? (Tick only ONE answer)

- A) News reporting
- B) Feature writing
- C) Opinion / column writing
- D) Sub-editing
- E) Editorial management.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME.

Please type your postal address below, name and email (you may remain anonymous if you wish) to receive a complimentary copy of the Asia Pacific Media Educator.

BIO OF DR ERIC LOO

Dr Eric Loo has worked as a financial journalist, features editor, production editor, and media educator in Australia, the Philippines and Malaysia. He currently writes a column on media issue for Malaysiakini, an independent online news outlet in Malaysia.

Eric has conducted numerous editorial training workshops in Australia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Hong Kong, and Laos. His research interests are in development journalism and information technology application in the media in Indochina. He is founding editor of the refereed journal Asia Pacific Media Educator, and has co-edited books in international journalism and cross-cultural communication. Eric left Malaysia for Australia in 1986 to work as a journalist. He now teaches journalism at the School of Journalism & Creative Writing, University of Wollongong, New South Wales.

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While journalism adheres to an assumed universal ethical code and methodology, its goals and functions are essentially framed by local factors, and to an extent, existential imperatives. Discussions on what constitutes best practices of journalism in the Asian context are ideologically polarised. For instance, governments in new industrialised countries and socialist bloc see the media more as a state apparatus and a prime mover of national development. Which conflicts with civil societies' conception of professional journalism as a public trust, a representative of the 'fourth estate' – the common people – that keeps a close check on those in power. 'Best practices' is thus perceived and understood according to divergent expectations of what functions the media ought to serve in different societies.

This book eschews direct references to the Pulitzer-type criteria as the exclusive benchmarks of journalistic excellence. Instead it canvasses the scattered literature on best media practices for a cultural context and gathers the opinions of working journalists in Asia to grasp at these elusive benchmarks. The eclectic achievements of Asian journalists featured in this book shows the varied – and at times notional forms of 'best practices' in the region. This book concludes that best practices in journalism are essentially culturally defined and best understood from within the realities that influence the socially transformative work by the Asian journalists who have built their professional career and won awards for their enterprising coverage of human development issues.