



The Internet & Foreign News, Part 1: How We Report

Frank Viviano (September 15, 2008)



The Internet has been a significant part of our lives for for less than 15 years, and the final verdict on what it will mean for news, for a deeper understanding of the world, has not yet been rendered.

There were no fax machines or cell phones. Conventional long distance telephone calls were nearly unknown. Above all, there was no Internet: no email, no search engines, no news forums.

This was foreign reporting in much of the world three decades ago, when I was a young journalist in China and Southeast Asia.



News gathering today has been transformed beyond recognition. It is less costly and far more efficient. But something crucial has been lost along the way, something essential to our ability to find meaning in a confusing universe.

Thanks to the Internet and its tools, more knowledge lies at the disposal of more people today than at any moment in history. Yet the paradox is that we appear to be growing more ignorant, more indifferent to broad knowledge and serious inquiry, with each passing day – a crisis that is at its most perilous in the realm of foreign news coverage, born of our technology-driven withdrawal from the lonely, insistent pursuit of direct experience.

Lost in China

China, prior to the mid-1980s, was a voyage to another planet, the acid test of a reporter's ability to weather loneliness and think outside of the proverbial box. To cover China then meant severing the ties that bound you to the world you knew, and like an infant learning to walk, confronting another one step-by-step.

At any given moment in those years, there were probably no more than 25 fulltime western journalists in the country. A few – the correspondents of the New York Times, Agence France-Presse, Reuters, Der Spiegel and other media giants – were based in Beijing, the capital, and had official press credentials, which took forever to arrange and only made reporting harder. The accredited elite were walled up in a prison of carefully limited assignments, monitored by government "information officers" whose actual role was to suppress information. For that reason, most of us remained uncredentialed, wandering China on tourist visas in search of our stories. If we got to know each other, to exchange contacts and ideas, it was in chance encounters on the road.

The only research bank was the one you carried in your head, augmented by facts acquired on the spot. You wrote in longhand -- a typewriter would have announced your profession and attracted the Gong An, the security police. Then you smuggled your copy to Hong Kong, Beijing or Shanghai, where friends at a press agency discreetly shipped it out by telex, a technology that had scarcely changed since World War One.

You hoped the story would be legible when it arrived, if it arrived. You hoped the editors would use it. It might be several months before you spoke to them, after dozens of articles had been sent into the void.



By today's standards, our efforts were inefficient, unscientific and primitive. But at their best, those 25 reporters, working blind, produced 25 utterly different stories every week. Slowly, and with the kind of ground-level journalism that rests on gut instinct and full immersion, the contours of Planet China took shape in the western press.

The Failed Revolution

This, by contrast, is reporting in 2008, not only in China but worldwide: Connectivity writ large. The buzz of the Blackberry. The eyes trained on emails or text messages. A constant surveying of what is on the Net today, and what has been there over the past couple of weeks. Effortless visits to Wikipedia and Google for research and reassurance.

Almost everyone is accredited because there isn't much choice. Visa requests are googled by consulates nowadays, and if your name turns up on newspaper bylines, forget about a tourist visa. There is no hiding your profession in the Internet Age.

Nothing would more foolish than to dismiss, across the board, the value of the new technology and the immense possibilities it opens. But where, in practical newsroom terms, is the revolution it ought to have ushered in? Where is the globalization of knowledge promised by a globalized media network?

The dirty secret of Internet news is that it generates a microscopic proportion of the original reporting it offers. The rest is plucked whole from the archaic, shuddering conventional press, which is in precipitous retreat from international coverage.

Between 1983 and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, according to a University of California media study, the space accorded to foreign reporting by U.S. newspapers declined by 80 percent. Over the same years, the ranks of fulltime foreign correspondents diminished to a shadow of what they had been prior to the Internet.



In 2006, the Christian Science Monitor's Jill Carroll contacted 20 leading U.S. newspapers and two large press syndicates, asking how many of their reporters were based abroad. The total came to 108, responsible for covering the entire world, with 60 representing just two publications, the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times.

Time Magazine had 33 foreign correspondents in 1989, and 24 in 2001. In the same period ABC News cut the number of its foreign bureaus from 17 to seven. In 1970, CBS News had 24 foreign bureaus and correspondents in 44 countries. Today it has eight foreign correspondents working out of three bureaus.

"The situation is as bad, if not worse, in Europe," a former high-ranking editor at Agence France-Presse says. "Hundreds of experienced foreign reporters have lost their jobs in the past few years alone."

In 2000, the industry-funded Project on the State of the American Newspaper found that one third of all foreign correspondents worked for a sole publication, the Wall Street Journal. A Project for Excellence in Journalism survey of 16 major dailies in 2004 concluded that the percentage of front-page stories on foreign affairs was only half the figure for 1987 – notwithstanding the explosive increase in terrorism and the war in Iraq.

Is it any wonder that the West was unprepared for the shock of September 11, or unable to make sense of its continuing ripples? Is there any question but that we will be even more unprepared for the shocks to come?





Internet Incest

The crisis isn't simply a matter of numbers, the shrinking ranks of foreign correspondents and the declining space accorded to foreign news. Of equal concern is the way that news is gathered and reported, the "how it's done" that leads to the "what we know" – and more, what we don't know.

For reporters 30 years ago, the China beat – or its equivalent in Latin America, Southeast Asia or Africa – was an all-encompassing, all-consuming reality. Lost in the mysterious intricacies of another land and culture, cut off from all that was familiar, we stumbled haphazardly toward our own, independent conclusions. "Home" was the distant void where our stories were telexed.

Today, many chroniclers of the foreign scene "travel" without ever leaving home, literally as armchair bloggers or figuratively as hyper-connected correspondents glued to their cellphones and laptops. In either case, the source data, the substitute for raw experience, comes mostly from the same place, the virtual universe of the Internet.

The results are also nearly the same: journalists who picture the rest of the world from within the confines of their own frame of reference, a frame that is often more vividly present, thanks to 21st century communications, than the physical landscape beyond their hotel room door and the smells and sounds in its streets.

The powerful tug of the familiar isn't new; it reflects a natural human impulse, summed up in the adage that "all journalism is a form of autobiography." What is new, however, is the ability to move about in the larger world without severing those autobiographical constraints or stretching them.

Indeed, the Internet has given birth to a kind of collective media autobiography – I don't know what else to call it – as reporters everywhere are trained in the same technological environment, employ



the same self-referential research tools, and consult each other's work online before committing their thoughts to virtual paper.

Reporting, in its Internet guise, is incestuous. The entire transaction is conducted within the same family of interests, facts and preconceptions.

Take a spin through Google News, which is now the chief provider of information for millions. The articles featured on its site are selected by a robot editorial program that trolls the web, picking out the most frequently repeated stories and angles – the concerns that already monopolize our attention.

The appearance is a vast expansion of the media gene pool, with Google's robot editor directing us to hundreds of articles on a single major event, extracted from newspapers and magazines on every continent. But the reality, on closer inspection, is incest.

The vast majority of those stories are clones of each other, with mind-numbingly scant differences in the range or content of what's reported in Beijing or Moscow, Buenos Aires or Chicago, Bamako or Riyadh. The scope of our potential interests is trimmed down to the barest of common denominators: what we already know, and more alarmingly, what we already think about it, endlessly repeated.

Reporters, no less than their readers, are faithful disciples of this system, even as its free supply of information whittles away the circulation of their newspapers – and with it the money that finances their own budgets. They learn, if they want to survive, that the articles meeting the robot's approval are invariably brief, shorn of independent analysis and skimpy on background.

As far back as the 1950s, the Canadian communications theorist Marshall McLuhan argued that each new generation of technology imposes its own inherent limitations and possibilities on the content of news. "The medium," he insisted in his most celebrated observation, "is the message." Although he died in 1980, before the triumph of the Internet, McLuhan would surely have noted that speed, brevity and the short attention span are its defining hallmarks.



One consequence is that the story as story – a narrative, in which reporters aspired to put their readers at the center of an event, to confront them firsthand with its terrible complexities – is in danger of vanishing, overwhelmed by a tidal wave of short takes and oversimplification.

The jury is still out on the longterm prospect. The Internet has been a significant part of our lives for for less than 15 years, and the final verdict on what it will mean for news, for a deeper understanding of the world, has not yet been rendered. But at the moment, the outlook is profoundly troubling.

Coming: PART TWO: HOW WE READ

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