

Dennis Redmont

Not a job for everyone

Journalism, in its traditional form at least, is no longer a money-making proposition. The onslaught of citizen journalism, content aggregation and on-demand media raises the question: is journalism as a profession gone for good? And is the journalist an endangered species? Certainly not. Professional journalistic skills are more valuable now than ever, as the voices of true journalists continue to rise above the tumult of the web.

Veteran journalist and media commentator Dennis Redmont is head of media and communications at the Council for the United States and Italy. He also lectures on international media at the RAI school of journalism at Perugia University.

Maureen McCarty, 23, graduated from American University in Washington in 2010 with a journalism degree. She makes \$25,000 a year before taxes as managing editor of The-NewGay.net, a blog focusing on gay issues. She has no benefits like health insurance or a retirement savings plan. Since the salary

doesn't cover her expenses, she usually babysits five nights a week for several families in the US capital.

Andrew With, 29, is the editor-in-chief of Groupon, the daily discount service called the "fastest growing company ever" by Forbes in 2010. With has no journalism or marketing background. On weekends,

With sings in a pop band, "mixing art and business to create our personal style." Groupon has its own style manual, called "The Voice". Even more than to the discounts it offers on restaurants and products, subscribers respond to Groupon's persuasive language. Writers follow Andrew With's manual and work to recreate the site's trademark offbeat humor: the witty words and images it uses to snare subscribers.

Groupon's director of recruitment says some applicants for writing jobs – which offer an average salary of about \$35,000 a year – had backgrounds working for the *Wall*

Street Journal or *Rolling Stone*. But they were turned away because “it’s easier to teach new talents than re-educate the old.”

The Groupon style handbook has a number of suggestions for making your writing more interesting, such as using the active voice or employing comedic mechanisms such as absurd comparison or “fake history”. The company has more than 100 writers, editors and fact-checkers on staff – more than many medium-sized newspapers. The company has said that “journalism majors should rejoice” because it is hiring and training writers.

THE CONTENT FARM BOOM. Content farms like Associated Content and Demand Media have been flourishing on the web for several years. They are staffed by writers who work like machines. Some have deadlines as frequently as every 25 minutes; others are expected to rewrite pieces by adding in interviews with several experts within an hour. Others compose, edit, format and publish articles in a single shift.

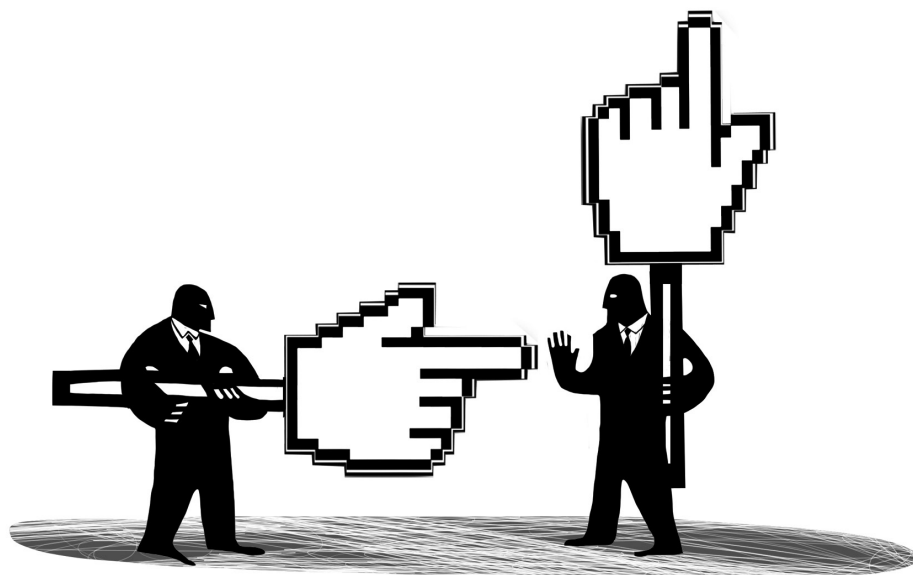
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Many journalists with decades of experience in journalism work 70-hour weeks for salaries of about \$40,000 a year, with no vacation time. AOL (America Online) tells its writers to use metrics to “identify high-demand topics.” The procedure is improved by Google with a special algorithm called “Panda”. And the entire process is later improved by “users”, which is code for freelancers.

Our journey next takes us to meet Chris Suellentrop, former editor of *The New York Times Magazine* who left to become deputy editor of Yahoo!’s news blogs. Chris Lehmann, editor-in-chief of the blog collective (which includes *The Cutline*, *The Upshot*, *The Envoy*, *The Lookout* and *The Ticket*), says that Suellentrop’s background will benefit the site. In turn, Suellentrop has said that he hopes to bring “more long-form writing” to the blog network. “Online readers have a huge appetite for long-form journalism. There’s no reason why Yahoo News can’t swim in that pool.” So what is Yahoo!’s future? Its strength lies in its ability to pair advertising with content. Yahoo! is world-class in its ability to work with major advertisers to match their online ads with words and pictures that attract the people they want to target. “It’s not as sexy a business as search advertising (because the revenues and growth rates are not as good), but it’s a ‘real business’ and Yahoo! does it better than anyone else,” says Suellentrop.

THE TRIUMPH OF CITIZEN JOURNALISM. Stella Pende, 60, writes for *Panorama* and *Donna Moderna*. She uses an iPhone to shoot her stories and an iPad to write and send them off. She has no need for assistants or photographers, doing

everything with her smartphone and tablet. “Reporting is increasingly an intimate genre,” she says. “It’s about stories of real people and personal experiences, rather than analysis of history and politics.” All you need is a video camera, or even an iPhone, to work for Reuters and Yahoo!. Just upload your videos on the sites and the



editors will choose, paying for the ones they publish. If not, try again. Maybe you’ll get lucky next time. Operating costs are minimal, but stories manage to cross the border between news, gossip and the marketplace.

One example is the group of Volkswagen journalists who turned a promotional event (the Jetta TDI Cup) into a cult tv show in the US. The idea came from the manufacturer, who built a set with cars, racers and a track. In 2008, the documentary was broadcast on Discovery Channel, Science Channel, Planet Green and HD Theater. It was a new way of introducing “clean” diesel technology to the American market, while also promoting future racing stars. Welcome to the age of “company reporting”.

Another example is that of Mr. Examiner, the network of sites owned by billionaire Philip Anschutz, founded after the success of About.com. Examiner thrives on its army of anonymous contributors, “experts” on contract who cover specific sectors like politics, food, homosexuality or sport, giving an insider’s view of the community and a stream of genuine local news. Here, the mark of the editorial structure is “pro-am”,

or professional-amateur. Each city has a director heading a team of “examiners”: students, politicians, academics, local leaders and news buffs who communicate with their audiences through the site, which pays according to the number of hits per page.

LOCAL MEDIA, GLOBAL EMPIRES. Shannon Antinori, 28, is editor of the Romeoville, Illinois page of YourHub.com, a site created by the *Denver Post*. She has been a Romeoville resident for six years and is the editor of local and hyperlocal news for the respectable salary of \$40,000 a year. Shannon graduated with honors in 2002, landing her first newspaper job within six months. She spent eight years at *The Enterprise* in Plainfield, where she became passionate about community journalism. When a co-worker pointed her in the direction of Patch.com, she jumped at the chance to be part of the future of local news. “I’ll be there to cover everything that happens in local schools, at the Village Hall and in the business community,” she declares in her profile, which editors fill out, listing their personal interests, political opinions, religious beliefs and what they intend to contribute to the site.

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The experience of Mr. X is totally different. Mr. X writes a blog for the influential Greek-American columnist Ariana Huffington and is only paid if it is published. The Huffington Post, which was recently bought by AOL for \$315 million, has adopted a piecemeal system of payment which measures the amount paid by the number of hits an article gets. *Forbes* is experimenting with a bonus system for bloggers whereby a bonus is paid if a minimum number of hits is reached.

In March 2011, the Huffington Post Union of Bloggers and Writers, the National Writers Union and the Newspaper Guild led a strike and boycott against the Huffington Post. “In the short term,” the strikers stated, “we are trying to win a settlement for the hundreds of journalists who gave their work for free in order to bring more traffic to this ‘progressive’ blog. These were actually journalists, who worked on assignment, under editors. But, more importantly, we want to set a standard living wage for all online writers we can take to other content farms, like Demand Media, worth \$1.5 billion, which pays its 9,000 freelancers a penny a word.”

As in many other cases, the success of the Huffington Post is due to the unpaid writers who filled it with fresh content that made it stand out from the rest. Arianna Huffington has said that “writers should be glad to write for free in exchange for exposure,” as if her site’s success had not come thanks to the talent of these unpaid writers. “We are fighting to shape the future of digital journalism. Don’t cross the picket line,” Huffington’s former colleagues concluded in their manifesto.



A DYING WORLD? All of the above examples are taken from real life and involve people who call themselves “journalists”. The term is rapidly losing its value or, rather, expanding its meaning as cataclysmic changes roll across the media landscape. Traditional newspapers are withering away and disappearing, evening news audience ratings are dropping, and consumers are emigrating to internet, mobile and social networks. For someone who grew up in a traditional newspaper world, to visit a newsroom in the United States is to invite trauma. In a recent article “Gone with the papers”, former *New York Times* correspondent Chris Hedges writes: “Newsrooms today are anemic and forlorn wastelands. I was recently in the newsroom at *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and patches of the floor, even the size of a city block, were open space or given over to rows of empty desks.”

Perhaps even more symbolic is the scene at the iconic *Miami Herald* building, perched on the edge of Biscayne Bay, with spectacular views of the Atlantic islands. Seagulls and pelicans flutter in the air, and cruise ships glide by. The *Herald*, like most American papers, faced severe financial problems, deep newsroom cuts and reductions for other departments. Then, executives had a brilliant idea: attach a billboard to the east side of the building, blocking out the bay view for employees. The benefit? Several hundred thousand dollars a year in revenue, enough for a few journalists’ salaries. It’s ironic that the chosen advertiser is Apple – the company that controls business revenues and a publishing system crucial to the news business. The product advertised on the *Herald* building is the iPad, a device which may save or destroy the media. In 2001, the stock value of *Miami Herald*’s parent company was the same amount as Apple: 3.8 billion dollars. Ten years later, Apple’s valuation is 300 billion dollars. Knight Ridder, the *Miami Herald* publisher, no longer exists as an independent company.

Hedges comments: “We are losing a peculiar culture and an ethic. This loss is impoverishing our civil discourse and leaving us less and less connected to the city, the nation and the world around us. The death of newsprint represents the end of an era. And newsgathering will not be replaced by internet. Journalism, at least on the large scale of old newsrooms, is no longer commercially viable. Reporting is time-consuming and labor-intensive. It requires going out and talking to people. It means doing this every day. It means looking constantly for sources, tips, leads, documents, informants, whistle-blowers, new facts and information, untold stories and news. Reporters often spend days finding little or nothing of significance. The work can be tedious and it is expensive. And as the budgets of large metropolitan dailies shrink, the very trade of reporting declines. Most city papers at their zenith employed several hundred report-



ers and editors, and had operating budgets in the hundreds of millions of dollars. The steady decline of the news business means we are plunging larger and larger sections of society into the dark, opening up greater opportunities for unchecked corruption, disinformation and the abuse of power.”

ITALY: FROM MARTEMIX TO PULITZER. Many new forms of journalism are developing in the shadow of struggling traditional empires in Italy as well. One example is Martemix, an agency that “rents out” journalists who have honed their skills with years of experience and are now applying them to communications. Martemix customers include businesses and organizations of all kinds: anyone who needs a journalist for quality reporting.

Equally innovative is on-demand journalism, where no middleman is involved. All that’s needed is the journalist and his or her final editor: the reader. Martemix does investigative reporting for its customers (agencies, businesses, or citizens’ groups) upon request. This kind of journalism is based on crowdfunding, where the readers themselves cover the costs through individual contributions in the form of membership fees. Content can be on national, international or local issues, ranging from corruption to pollution to social inequality. Typically, it can be anything that is not treated as news by the official media. Stories are written after careful initial investigation by journalists. They are edited and paired with photos and then sent off to the media or sold as an exclusive.

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Pulitzer is another example: the platform, set up by Italy’s telephony giant Telecom, is based on community-funded reporting, which covers the costs of journalistic investigations. This is all part of a far-reaching trend visible even in countries with a traditionally solid press.

Thought Leader, the platform of South Africa’s *Mail & Guardian*, is a perfect combination of blogging and quality journalism. An editor moderates the site and carefully scrutinizes every posting before it is published online. The site’s *Tech Leader*, *Business Leader*, *Media Leader* and *Sports Leader* are also part of the editorial process, providing information from their sectors and counting on the loyalty of a core of readers.

There are also experiments to bring traditional investigative reporting online, such as the New York site Gothamist.com. Set up in reaction to the massive flow of news circulating on the web, it refutes the idea that long-form reporting, calling for time and dedication, cannot be well paid. The site offers \$5,000 an article, as long as the site’s target (New Yorkers, aged 20 to 36) would find it interesting.



In spite of the lively interest in these kinds of experiments – and the fact that examples of “traditional” journalism are increasingly under threat – in Italy, the sole route into the profession is still through membership of the Journalist Association Register. In his magnificent monologue at a recent edition of the Perugia International Journalism Festival, Luca Telese of *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, described the harsh reality of anyone starting out as a journalist: mirages of apprenticeships, short-term contracts, regional registers with a vague feudal air and journalism schools that cost more than a journalist’s average pay during the first ten years of a career. “I always had short-term contracts; they had the shelf life of yogurt,” Telese recalled.

By law, apprenticeships can only take place at editorial offices and must last at least two years. The rules are years behind the changing reality of the world of journalism, and do not take into account the new forms created by the web and the spectacular transformation of mass media that has taken place. Over the last decade, regional registers have established their own schools of journalism that guarantee students the coveted apprenticeship in their own editorial offices. This has created an excess of aspiring journalists that the traditional market cannot absorb. In opposition to those who call for the abolition of journalism apprenticeships, deemed old-fashioned and protectionist, there are those who do all they can to keep the system intact, ironically adding to its obsolescence.

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But internships are only part of the problem. Today, Italian journalism is still regulated by a law dating back to 1963. Under that law, journalism can only be practiced within the structure of a newspaper, news agency, national periodical or for public radio and television. If the law were not interpreted liberally – to include the so-called new media, starting with the internet – a majority of Italy’s journalists would be excluded from the profession. The Journalists Association and its register has ignored the problem, an approach that reflects how unprepared it is for new developments in the field. And the evolution of journalism does not only include the web; there are also the new multimedia platforms created by integrated news organizations, where more and more specific know-how is needed.

WELCOME TO THE WILD WEST. In the face of this rigidity, the Italian journalism job market resembles the Wild West, and the overall number of fully employed journalists is falling. A report by LSDI.it (Freedom of the Press and the Right to Know), entitled *Journalism: the Hidden Side* – a study on the condition of Italian journalists, by Pino Rea – describes a fragmented profession with varying economic status





and often significant differences between professional groups. Not even freelancing, which is common, provides a respectable living: one out of three journalists with fixed contracts earns less than 30,000 euro a year, and over half of freelancers (55.25%) declare a yearly income of less than 5,000 euro. Since freelancers and journalists with fixed contracts make up half of all registered journalists, it would be interesting to know what the remaining 49.24% actually do since they clearly have turned to work that gives them more substantial incomes.

The fact that the number of fully employed journalists tripled between 1975 and 2009 (while there were five times the number of freelance journalists in the same period) points to significant changes towards more flexible jobs, and less protection from Italian labor laws. “Freelancers are not only news commentators, but analysts and editorial writers, experts who contribute to the news media in addition to working elsewhere. They also work at gathering the news and checking facts, duties once performed in the newsroom,” the report states.

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In 2009, there were signs of a surge in Italian journalism. And since the Aearanti Corallo industry agreement among the country’s local radio and tv stations, there has been a substantial increase in the number of contracts, which rose from 127 to 2,020 between 2000 and 2009. Hiring has also increased at public agencies (+160%), and at national tv and radio stations (+67.13%). Hiring at periodicals has risen a more modest 28.5%, the rise at newspapers was 18.4% and at press agencies 8%. RAI has been more or less stable (just +2.25%).

TRUE OR FALSE. That is not a picture of a dying profession. Instead, it indicates that journalism is undergoing constant change. But how do these trends affect traditional journalism? Let’s try to list some of the implications. The first has to do with the quality of the journalistic product. The amount of traffic any given content receives has become all-important, resulting in sensationalism and big headlines, rather than a desire to cultivate a niche of readers or to concentrate on quality.

Another implication for journalists is job insecurity: full-time journalism, requiring diligence and dedication, turns into a sideline when another job pays the bills. A regular monthly salary, with benefits, is replaced by on-demand bonuses and fees, where the reader decides how much a journalist earns. Work schedules are also affected: instead of the former long, grueling daily task of choosing suitable news, we have a much faster aggregation of content and an ongoing correction process. As for commentary, exclusive journalism and editorials have been supplanted by citizen journalism



where every reader can comment on a journalist's opinion. One crucial aspect is the reliability of increasingly anonymous sources. A recent survey showed that a growing number of editors are refusing anonymous sources (over 90% of the total). Accuracy is a related problem: who verifies the news that comes in? The case of Representative Gabrielle Giffords from Arizona (shot by a gunman in January 2011), who was erroneously reported as killed at first, has focused attention on hasty, unchecked reporting. The Associated Press was the only news agency that broke the story of the shooting without reporting her death.

Then, there is the growing problem of fake identities. The events in Syria during the Arab Spring demonstrated how everything on the internet can be taken as true, even if the article is by a fictitious person. The case of Amina Abdallah, the supposed Syrian lesbian blogger (who later turned out to be a married heterosexual couple from Edinburgh) is proof of how fragile the system really is.

We should not be discouraged by these problems. In the long term, true journalists will prevail to make themselves heard above the sea of voices on the web. Whatever form newspapers take, they will continue to supply high quality content. However rapidly it can respond, the chaotic world of the internet will remain an ocean where – in the absence of accurate fact-checking – information will be repetitive, often irrelevant and even less reliable.

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THE STRENGTH OF “REAL” JOURNALISM. The initiatives described above work well in the world of news, especially from an economic point of view. But they will never substitute journalism. There are still brilliant journalists out there, who invest great energy in producing high-quality reporting. In Italy, for example, the book by Sergio Rizzo and Gian Antonio Stella on the corruption and scandals of Italian politics *La casta: così i politici italiani sono diventati intoccabili* (How Italian politicians have become untouchable) contains excellent reporting, with a wealth of news unknown to the man on the street.

In America, Paige St. John of the *Sarasota Herald Tribune* won the 2011 Pulitzer prize for investigative reporting for “her examination of weaknesses in the murky property insurance system vital to Florida homeowners, providing handy data to assess insurer reliability and stirring regulatory action.” Also, for the first time, there was a surprise win for reporters from the non-print ProPublica, a website of independent investigative journalism headed by Paul Steiger, former managing editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, which focuses on journalism in the public interest. The prize for international

reporting was awarded to Clifford Levy and Ellen Barry of the *New York Times* for their stories on the “faltering justice system in Russia”, a demonstration of courage and professionalism that is a credit to the profession.

A SURVIVAL GUIDE. We might argue that these are exceptions to the rule and that journalism on the whole is subject to pressures that have changed it beyond recognition. Is journalism’s role as an objective window on the world and a watchdog of power due to end? Are journalists obsolete, condemned to oblivion? Absolutely not. The secret of a good journalist lies in the rigorous application of standard, timeless rules. Italian schools of journalism, like those in the United States, need to effect drastic changes to their curricula. They currently teach traditional and even obsolete aspects of reporting. They must adapt the training they give to reflect the new galaxy of reporting jobs that have come into existence over the last few years. There are benchmark standards that should still be maintained, although schools need to apply them to the changes and challenges in the profession today. So, here is a list of cardinal rules for anyone who wants to be a reporter.

56 First, high school is where journalism education ought to start. Students need to know a number of things: that facts are absolute and not determined by how many people agree with them; that opinion should be rooted in reality; that news judgment depends on a story’s importance, not on its popularity; that nothing replaces the value of “being there”; that a story must be accurate and fair; and, finally, that there are two skills: newsgathering and writing – and both need to be on display.

Unfortunately, many students learn the opposite. Journalists should go to schools to teach students these principles, explaining the basic rules listed above, with concrete examples. At the same time, however, journalists need to develop a “reality check” to suit the changing media landscape.

In a Columbia University journalism report released in May 2011, Randall Rothenberg, the head of the US Interactive Advertising Bureau, said that many sectors of the traditional news industry have been slow to embrace changes brought about by digital technology. This report is based on several months of visits to news organizations, and it concludes that journalists must rethink their relationships – and their audiences’ relationships – with advertisers.

THE COST OF ADVERTISING. Reviewing relations with advertisers does not mean yielding editorial control to sponsors, but it might mean coming up with alterna-

tives to impression-based pricing, thereby creating higher-value content for the web by tapping into page view data. The report, by outlining these and other recommendations, intended to help newspapers, magazines and television stations compete better in the online marketplace. “We are not suggesting that journalists get marching orders from advertisers,” said Bill Grueskin, the academic dean for Columbia University’s Journalism School and a co-author of the report. “We are suggesting that journalists get a much better understanding of why so many advertising dollars have left the traditional news media business.”

A better understanding of what the news media can do to bring the dollars back (by studying the online coupon craze, for example) might seem unconventional. However, this is exactly what Columbia and some other American journalism schools are now doing: they are offering courses on the economics of journalism. The conclusion section of the report, “The story so far”, opens with a quote from Randall Rothenberg. He told the report’s authors, “Here’s the problem: journalists just don’t understand their business.” The report also recommends that journalists “gain a fuller appreciation of how advertisers now reach their customers, via social media, new media ads and search engine optimization,” adding that larger news organizations should consider creating or re-creating separate digital staffs, “particularly on the business side.”

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One of Columbia’s case studies of advertising adding value is KSL.com, the website of KSL, Salt Lake City’s NBC affiliate. Thanks in large part to a robust classified ads service, the site now registers about 250 million page views each month – a staggeringly high figure for a local market of that size. Steep declines in classified advertising have affected countless newspapers and other news businesses, but KSL.com has bucked the trend. Its classifieds section benefits from its ownership by the Mormon Church and from the fact that it started up before Craigslist, the real estate and multi-commerce site, in Salt Lake City.

Another prospect is payment of subscriptions for mobile access to news. The report states: “If publishers really hope to expunge the ‘original sin’ of giving away content free online, they may be best positioned to do so not on the computers where they first gave away their wares, but on mobile devices that offer a more welcoming environment.”

THE GOOD JOURNALISM MANUAL. A recent book by Mort Rosenblum, *Little bunch of madmen: elements of global reporting*, summarizes the qualities still necessary for the twenty-first century journalist. Rosenblum is a Paris-based reporter, author, and journalism professor at the University of Arizona in Tucson. Since 1965,

he has covered stories on seven continents. He has been editor of the *International Herald Tribune* and special correspondent for Associated Press.

According to Rosenblum, “Whatever shape news media may take, reporters can master their essential skills, and citizens can learn how to evaluate reporting. As newspapers languish in the United States, they boom in other places. Technology brings global reporting to anyone anywhere with just a few keystrokes. Newspapers from Barcelona to Beijing translate their websites into English. If newspapers as we know them eventually fade away, it does not really matter. The real question is whether reporters can survive out there. And that is up to the rest of us.”

“Early America,” Rosenblum continues, “was so eager for fresh facts that reporters rowed out to arriving ships for a scoop. Today, with our infinite word flow, we’ve forgotten what news is. News comes from reporters who use their eyes and ears and trusted sources. Pontificators who whip up froth from others’ work are something else: we might call them ‘churnalists’. Journalists are vital. Churnalists push us toward folly that kills millions, costs trillions, and shames us among the other 95% of humanity on our small planet.”

58 He then formulates “Mort’s Rules” for any good journalist, even today:

- see it for yourself: find the next best vantage point for the stories, and do so from as wide a viewpoint as possible;
- find your “fixer”, your source: journalists cannot be experts in everything, so “good local stringers are the backbone of global reporting”;
- think particular, not general: your descriptions have to be as detailed as possible;
- be where luck happens: stay updated and “analyze how events are taking shape”; that will keep you from being caught unprepared;
- check back and keep at it: checking twice is better than checking once; check on the web and then double check with your source;
- make notes: to make a story pertinent, take names and write down numbers, geographic references and quotes;
- show interest: “if you don’t feel it, feign it”; a show of genuine interest can open many doors.

And also...

- stay safe: there is no need to take unnecessary risks;
- listen carefully to words and to silences (according to Steven Erlanger of the *New York Times*, “Silence contains a lot of information, some of the best quotes come from silence.”);

- learn foreign languages: reporters must communicate with the people they cover; the use of linguistic nuances is a means to cross cultural bridges;
- be impartial, honest and accurate: reporters on a story must do the work of police investigators and attorneys as well as the judge. No one else can sit in to replace them on the bench;
- write well: nothing kills the credibility of a reporter (and his agency) faster than misspelled words, malapropisms, and mangled syntax;
- stick to deadlines and stay in touch.

Finally, Mort lays down the golden rule: tell great stories. These are the rules that make real journalism irreplaceable.

A JOB FOR THE MANY, BUT NOT FOR EVERYONE. Even with a solid foundation, journalists are disoriented in the face of the profound changes in their world. We are all part of a new era of information, and we are all practitioners, in a sense. But that doesn't mean that we're reporters. Is writing about health centers, boat rides or candlelit dinners on Groupon really a good school for new journalists? The goal of journalism is a long way from the profit-oriented model of the new media. Journalism was not born as a venue to sell products. It is a way of spreading and selling information per se, for itself and its readers.

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It is therefore necessary to develop new story-telling skills, to search meticulously for the story details, to carefully verify the accuracy of information from sources, to travel and to relish talking to people from all over.

Ultimately, it is the audience which will decide the future of journalism. When readers understand that the work of a reporter requires dedication, fatigue, study, time and money, we'll know that journalism is indeed a job for the many, but not a job for everyone.