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FROM IDEA TO STORY

*Hands-on television news
training in Bangladesh*

FOCUS!

Jacqueline Frank shows Bangladeshi journalists how to turn an idea into a story.

One of my main concerns as I headed out to Dhaka, Bangladesh, for a five-month stint as a Knight Fellow specializing in television-journalism training was equipment. What cameras would be available? What about editing and sound? Without proper resources how would I teach television?

My fears were mainly unfounded. Dhaka may not abound in equipment-rental facilities, but advanced planning and communication with my host organization, the Bangladesh Centre for Development, Journalism and Communication (BCDJC), prevented any problems. BCDJC is primarily a print-medium non-governmental organization. Its president, Nayeem Islam Khan, however, is a whiz at finding money for programs. He managed to get a generous grant that covered the rental cost for all the equipment needs for my workshops with BCDJC – cameras, microphones, tripods and editing systems.

Nayeem also provided me with my most valuable asset – his brother, Mainul Islam Khan, the local representative for Reporters Sans Frontières and joint director of BCDJC. Mainul knew everyone and remained calm, patient and good-natured throughout our time together. Although he had never worked in television, he was a natural journalist and soon became an invaluable asset in the key lesson of my workshops: learning the difference between an idea and a story.

In addition to BCDJC, I had also arranged to conduct some workshops for DRIK, a local commercial photo agency with a fledgling audio-visual department. They had their own mini-DV camera and edit systems, and knew where to rent additional equipment. I had met DRIK's dynamic owner, Shahidul Alam, at a South Asian Journalists Association (SAJA) conference in New York, where I had gone seeking Bangladeshi contacts and came away, to my delight, with a workshop client.

All my workshops would now be conducted with the cooperation of these two organizations.

BCDJC started trolling for students for my workshops shortly after my arrival in Bangladesh, and they were inundated with candidates. The response was so large that we decided to organize several short workshops to accommodate the demand. In the end, I held five two-week sessions for BCDJC (teaching a total of

80 students), two further sessions for DRIK (another 20 students), and a few shorter ones for other organizations in town.

Since I wanted the workshops to be as hands-on as possible, class size was limited by the number of portable edit systems and mini-DV cameras that we could find. The cameras are suitable for teaching beginners, with enough controls (image and sound) for the students to learn good basic skills. Each camera I could obtain went to a team of four whose members had to rotate positions, mastering the camera, sound, directing and producing. In addition, a technician from the rental company accompanied each camera but assisted the trainees only when absolutely necessary. The students were generally instructed to make short, two-to-three-minute news pieces.

The workshops kept the teams busy. They had to find their characters and interviewees, scout locations, learn to operate camera and sound equipment, practice shooting, write scripts, plan production schedules and create a production budget. Once that was done, they had a few days to film and a few more days to work with a professional editor to cut and finish their pieces.

The presence of local technicians was useful for their ability to teach and explain in Bangla. But more importantly, their inclusion ensured more sustainable television training in Bangladesh.

WHAT'S THE STORY?

I quickly discovered that learning what makes a journalistic story was the hardest and most important part of the workshop. It determined what would be shot, what questions would be asked, what the structure had to be. I assigned the general story topics, for example history, women, social issues and the environment. I also assigned Bangladeshi culture, admittedly for a selfish reason: I wanted access to a subject that on my own would be difficult to penetrate. But I soothed my conscience with the thought that the subject would be good for the class. It would allow a focus on an area that, unlike the usual pollution, corruption, domestic violence and labor-abuse stories that abound, would not be depressing.

"We want to do a story about the traditional *zamdani* (an intricate silk woven pattern unique to Bangladesh) sari weavers," announced one group from BCDJC. But what did they want to show? Why would it interest a news editor? What would be the focus? The final piece was to be under five minutes, so the focus needed to be narrow.

Initially, the group thought they could examine the competition from machine-made fabrics from India, changing tastes in fashion and the costs of the hand-

loomed fabric. It quickly became clear that that was too large a story to tackle for a short piece. After much team discussion, they zeroed in on labor exploitation within the industry. The story had thereby shifted from traditional weaving to its labor force, removing the focus on culture. I didn't mind the shift in story because it illuminated the basic journalistic tenet to "follow the money." The economic angle is always important, and their decision to focus on that would make a good story.

We filmed in an industrial area in east Dhaka, in a factory full of children working alongside their parents. The team interviewed the workers, the factory foreman, the factory owner and a labor expert. They also tried, but failed, to get a government representative to talk about child labor. Although we occasionally found a cooperative government interviewee, the teams learned early on to get images of Dhaka City Corporation (City Hall) or ministries to use as wallpaper for voice-overs explaining the absence of a government response.

Another BCDJC group chose to do a piece on rickshaw painters. My selfishness kicked in again. I was thrilled at the prospect at seeing rickshaw artists at work (and hopefully find the place to buy rickshaw art), making the most notable visual features of Bangladesh. In addition to being completely painted, the bicycles sport tinsel medallions, movie-star portraits and fantasy scenes. They are the primary mode of transportation outside of Dhaka, and in the capital, with its poor public transport, rickshaws provide the middle class with its chief means for getting around. They cause innumerable traffic jams, but during the monsoon season rickshaws are frequently the only vehicles able to navigate the flooded roads. In some sections of old Dhaka, rickshaws are also the only vehicles able to pass through the narrow streets.

The idea was great. But again the question was: What would be the focus of the story?

By this time, however, I had devised a new exercise to help the students learn the difference between idea and story.

During the first class of this second workshop, I quickly grouped the class into teams of three or four. I gave each team a topic and asked them to propose three relevant stories. For each one, they also needed to provide a list of the three essential interviews they would have to find to tell the story.

I had discussed with them the importance of creating a dialogue and finding opposing points of view in their interviewees. As we discussed each team's proposals, the exercise proved successful in demonstrating the distinction between an idea and a story.

The rickshaw team now decided to focus on growing attempts to counter Dhaka's traffic problem by prohibiting the bicycles. They wanted to investigate the effects of the potential ban on the rickshaw industry and determine if a ban would just cause other problems.

The team found a great rickshaw painter near a large rickshaw factory. As Bangladeshi laborers often work outside (except during the rainy season), our filming quickly drew a crowd. A camera always attracts passers-by, but a camera crew in Bangladesh with me, a six-foot blonde, in tow draws an *enormous* crowd. People hung out of windows and perched on ledges. We even caused a traffic jam. Realizing my presence was causing chaos, I regretfully left the team to its own devices.

The trainees discovered a huge industry revolving around rickshaws: builders, painters, *wallahs* (drivers) and factory owners. With over 75,000 rickshaws in Dhaka, a ban could cause significant unemployment. And a traffic expert whom the students found and interviewed suggested that better traffic regulation was the solution, not a rickshaw ban. That soundbite, coupled with vox pops from rickshaw riders, resulted in a terrific piece that included wonderful visuals, strong characters and surprising revelations about the importance of the rickshaw industry.

For a third BCDJC team, the chosen subject was the threat to the production of traditional pottery. The team decided to explain in picture how the role of the potter had changed because the products he made had changed. From providing necessary household implements (dishes), which earned the respect of the community, potters now made ornamental objects (vases, flower pots, etc.) and felt **increasingly marginalized**.

To my delight, the team found a gorgeous village, reached only by rowboat, with wonderful characters. It was situated in an area about an hour west of Dhaka that contains a number of villages in which everyone is engaged in the pottery trade. In addition to the potters, the team interviewed shop owners selling metal and ceramic dishes, and did vox pops of consumers and their preference for dishes. They even found a cultural expert at Dhaka University to talk about the decline of traditional crafts in Bangladesh. Again, the combination of good story, strong visuals and appealing characters made for a terrific piece.

My fourth and last team, from DRIK, chose to highlight a threat to traditional flute players. Changing public tastes, the advent of television, CD's and cassettes had turned a popular art form into one relegated to special cultural events.

These trainees had the advantage of filming during *Bashonto*, the first day of spring (which occurs in February in Bangladesh). It is a wonderfully colorful

holiday on which people traditionally dress in marigold and orange, wear ropes of flowers, sing traditional folk songs and dance. Music is everywhere in the air. But this team would not be celebrating all day.

Their flute player did not show at a festival at the appointed time. He was hours late and then didn't perform with his troupe, as promised. The team was frustrated, but it provided them with an excellent opportunity to grapple with unexpected problems and come up with solutions, which they did. They combined an earlier interview with the flutist at his home with pictures of the festival, vox pops, shots of another flutist and soundbites from an expert on traditional music. They also got lucky when a truck, laden with huge speakers blaring rock music and festooned with posters for a popular Bangla rock band, pulled up outside the festival. They shot the visual of pop alongside traditional music and produced a strong and beautiful piece.

My *Bashonto* turned into an equally enjoyable day. Having been alerted to the custom, I was dressed in yellow splendor, enjoying all the festivities when someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned around to see one of my guest lecturers from a local television station with his camera crew. He asked for a vox pop about the festival, and I obliged. I was on that evening's news program.

As exciting and fulfilling as my workshops were, the true reward came shortly thereafter with the greatest compliment any trainer can hope for: A number of my students were hired as television reporters, producers and newsroom editors at several start-up broadcasters. The Fellowship couldn't have been a more rewarding experience.



We're proud to fund the Knight International Press Fellowships and Fellows like Jacqueline Frank.

“I am giving people tangible, hands-on skills, which has very immediate satisfaction both for me and my students. The work I did before, while interesting and gratifying, had a more indirect relationship to the people on the ground...But now I can see what my students gain: the ability to write a story and film it, and then edit it into a piece.”

— *Jacqueline Frank, documentary maker and Knight International Fellow in Bangladesh*

Read more about Frank's experiences in News@Knight at www.knightfdn.org.



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