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The Future Foreign Correspondent

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For all foreign correspondents who have risked,
and continue to risk, their lives to
tell the truth

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The Foreign Correspondent and Journalism Today

Abstract This introduction chapter explains the need for *The Future Foreign Correspondent* book, and how it was inspired through lessons and challenges experienced from the Foreign Correspondent Study Tour (FCST). It briefly explains the concept of the book as a volume that speaks to the future foreign correspondent, examining how they might take an important place in the future of journalism, and crucially, steps that could be taken to train them. It outlines the book highlighting the need to consider more abstract issues and concepts relating to the practice of foreign reporting.

Keywords Foreign correspondent · Fake news · Future of journalism

We are in the midst of a crucial era for journalism. The rise of nationalist and popularist politics in the West has coincided with a deep suspicion of journalistic practice. The basis of that suspicion is not our concern here, though it has thrust the discipline of journalism firmly in the spotlight. Do the long-held tenets of journalism, its status as an objective commentator, still hold? Of course, there has always been biased or partisan journalism, even propaganda, but now some would have us believe the line is blurred across all forms. 'Fake news', a concept that has really existed ever since we started reporting anything to each other at all (Newman et al. 2017; McNair 2017; Stecula 2017), can now be bandied about for political gain, to avoid scandal, or to obfuscate more generally.

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Journalists now not only need to find the truth and report it, they need to convince an audience they have done that without prejudice.

As a case in point, in 2018, a dissident Russian journalist, Arkady Babchenko, faked his own death by assassination in Ukraine's capital Kiev. In a complicated ruse involving Ukrainian security officials, make up and pigs blood, Babchenko's death was widely reported on the media with even those closest to him unaware of the contrivance. When he miraculously appeared at a news conference the next day, he had very serious allegations to make about being on a Russian hitlist and needing to undertake these extreme actions to avoid real assassination. This was about life and death for Babchenko. Now this is an incredibly politically charged situation given Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and predictably Russia hit back not only to deny the allegations but to cast scorn on journalistic practice. It was Babchenko himself who called out the ludicrousness of the situation: 'Everyone who says this undermines trust in journalists: what would you do in my place, if they came to you and said there is a hit out on you?' (Reuters, 1 June 2018). In our current mediascape, rather than focusing solely on the extremely serious allegations levelled at them, Russian officials merely deflected to the distrust of journalists' defence. As Matthias Williams (2018) pointed out, it was ultimately the Ukraine that went into damage control, 'seeking to reassure its Western allies'. One wonders if it wasn't a journalist at the centre of the charade whether the dialogue would have been different?

Running parallel to the distrust of journalistic practice has been the greatest technological upheaval since the Industrial Revolution. This has brought into question the necessity of journalists in light of technical alternatives. Already vast slabs of traditional reportage such as sports results, financial reports and the like are being churned out by 'robots' (Lecompte 2015). These algorhythmic reporters are able to synthesise vast amounts of information and present it in summary form for the concerned reader. They do this quicker and more accurately than humans. The reach of these robots constantly extends into more areas of journalistic practice and specialisation. We might question whether these robots are telling stories—more of that later—but combined with the suspicion of journalists outlined above, journalists find themselves in an increasingly precarious situation. It is within this milieu that this volume positions itself.

There are many fine books that retell the stories of brave, inquisitive foreign correspondents and the interventions they made. This is not such a book. The best of those volumes (Dahlby 2014; Greenway 2014;

Borovik 2001; Filkins 2009; Gellhorn 1994; and more) speak to the trials of circumstance, the discovery of information, the dangers of political situations and, of course, attempts to cover up truth. These are important examples of 'life in the field' and sometimes of pre-determined agendas. Obviously many of these accounts are focused around war coverage and use the platform as an opportunity to paint the absurdity of war (see Gellhorn 1994). Others, like Filkins (2009), focus on the collision of religion, culture and modernity, while Greenway (2014) took us to the front lines of politics and war in an unprecedented way. Does the latter still hold the same power it used to? With drones, citizen journalists and even embedded journalists on a 24/7 cycle, we see conflicts (quite visually) in a new way. Still, the canon of great foreign correspondent accounts confirmed what it was to excel in the craft, and what vital exposure they provided. In contrast to the retrospection of these accounts, our volume speaks to the future foreign correspondent, examining how they might take an important place in the future of journalism, and crucially, steps we might take to train them. It considers more abstract issues and concepts relating to the practice of foreign reporting.

To reflect the ideology of the future foreign correspondent, as we will outline later, this book has purposefully connected two perspectives. One of us, Bebawi, comes from experience as a journalist working for CNN and others. She subsequently has become a journalism educator and researcher in university settings. Importantly for this volume she has also established and delivered the Foreign Correspondent Study Tour (FSCT) which is both the inspiration behind the volume and the basis of many case studies throughout the book. The other of us, Evans, has a long history in university management (read thick bureaucracy) and acts more as a commissioning Editor, sending folks into the field for training. He has also turned his attention to examining the disrupted media sector and how various disciplines can reinvent themselves even more successfully within that. We also represent a female/male team and an intercultural one (from Middle Eastern and Anglophone traditions). This is not accidental, it is designed to draw out the tensions and advantages that are naturally present. It also reflects the ideology behind the FCST where an intercultural, inter-difference dialogue is essential to its success.

The FCST is at the heart of this volume. The tour inspired us to develop the lessons learnt and challenges faced into something concrete that could serve other journalists/institutions/educators around the world. In many ways the necessity of the FCST became the necessity for

this book. A chance to reflect on new approaches to intercultural reportage, to cultural difference, to creating opinions and understanding. This book covers a range of areas pertaining to the future of the foreign correspondent by revisiting various traditions that have been entrenched in the training and practice of international reporters. We focus on the need for a more diversified intercultural news sphere and the importance of straying away from tried and exhausted portrayals of issues and events occurring in the global South. We talk about the rise, and now abundance, of fake news and how the very existence and role of the foreign correspondent has become crucial in validating facts and reporting reality. We use the FCST experience to note the importance of educating future international reporters on the ground, and how through training there is hope that foreign correspondents might produce fresh and diverse news content. We note the importance of collaborations with local journalists, and even local investigative reporters, who could assist foreign correspondents in getting their facts correct and providing an in-depth account of news, in turn increasing further knowledge about parts of the world that go under-reported. We introduce the notion of 'happy news', to solidify various existing practices and concepts that call for the inclusion of news discourses that *also* offer positive stories of the global South—and not just those of tragedy, conflict and hopelessness—arguing that the role of the future foreign correspondent is to bridge those gaps that still exist between the global North and South. Therefore, this volume is not there is study certain foreign correspondents and their roles, stories and experiences, rather it looks into abstract aspects, issues and concepts relating to the practice of foreign reporting.

We discuss the concept and definitions of 'foreign correspondence' in more detail in Chapter 3, unpacking the pourous nature between the various practices, especially in a more globalised digital media environment. However it is necessary to note that there are various explainations and distinctions between 'foreign correspondence' and 'international reporting', one distinction states that '[c]orrespondents are those who regularly roam', whereas reporters 'tend to work in and around […] headquarters — either reporting from their desks, or returning to the office after a day in the field to type up their notes' (Lacey 2017). For our purposes, we concur with Kevin Williams (2011) who uses the term 'international journalism' interchangeably with 'foreign correspondence' and will do so in this book due to the porous and borderless nature of media flows today, which we also discuss in Chapter 5.