

Copy editors in exile

As the Worldwide War on Copy Editing escalates, distant shores beckon. Go for it, but be prepared

By Phillip Blanchard

I recently returned from seven months in the United Arab Emirates, where I was an editor for the National, a daily that was launched only last April. I won't be going back.

The opportunity to move overseas to help make a real newspaper in a culture unaccustomed to modern media practices was too good to pass up, after four months of not-entirely voluntary retirement. The experience nonetheless was disappointing.

The National, I knew, was state-owned. Abu Dhabi Media Co. hired Martin Newland, an experienced British editor, to assemble a staff and start a quality English-language paper.

That staff was largely British, with a number of Canadians, Australians and New Zealanders thrown in. There were even reporters from South Africa and Uganda. There were very few Americans, and it soon became evident why.

The National is run on the British model. I have worked under British-trained editors in the United States, with mixed results. But that experience did not prepare me for the National.

The British have different standards,

and they are not up to ours. It's routine for them to make up stuff, especially quotations, which copy editors feel free to alter. Headlines with "claim quotes," which are lazy and misleading, often displaced straightforward headlines. Information from other sources was lifted without attribution. And so on.

There may be a place in the world for British-style journalism, but there is no place in it for me.

The National, in addition to being state-owned, is essentially state-controlled. The paper is filled with positive stories about government initiatives, of which there seems to be four or five a day. No criticism of the rulers is tolerated. News stories generally have a positive spin; for example, Abu Dhabi's \$10 billion bailout of Dubai was turned into an "investment." An entire emirate was sealed off as police and military allegedly searched for illegal immigrants and the single, sketchy story about it was not followed up. And so on.

There may be a place in the world for state-controlled media, but there is no place in it for me.

The National unfortunately broke financial commitments it made to lure staff overseas. This affected many people in the 200-plus-person news department; some left as a result, and many more stayed because they need the work. I left for a scheduled vacation on April 2 and, once I was safely in the U.S. I resigned effective today. (There were reasons for this subterfuge, which I'd be happy to explain.)

Many editors at the National deserve credit and respect for their earnest efforts, most notably Daniel Beaulieu, the Canadian head of the copy desk; and the American Nick Stout, formerly of the International Herald Tribune. I'd love to work with them again. Young reporters



I liked the décor of the National newsroom. You can't go wrong with a black ceiling.

like the Canadian Jessica Hume and the American Hugh Naylor give me hope for the future of journalism, if not for the National.

On a positive note, let me endorse the UAE climate. When I arrived on the first day of Ramadan last year, the daily highs were usually well above 100°F but from mid-October to mid-March, it felt like San Diego. This past winter was the most pleasant of my life from that standpoint, and I am thankful for a season of sunshine.

I don't regret a minute of my too-brief Middle East experience. If I were 30 years younger, I might have had more patience.

Phillip Blanchard, formerly of the Washington Post, is ... available.

The basics of editing in a foreign environment

By Nick Stout

A copy editor's first loyalty is to the reader. His job is to make sure the written message is not only literate, but also communicated efficiently and accurately, without ambiguity. The job is demanding enough at home, but when it is done abroad, an additional set of challenges come into play.

An expatriate editor needs to keep a number of things in mind:

Foreign readers may not be completely at ease in English.

Puns are often not understood, and idioms like “step up to the plate” make little sense. (Even native English speakers have trouble with that one. A former British editor of mine once complained, amusingly, that someone was not stepping “onto” the plate.)

While it may be frustrating to avoid plays on words when writing headlines, which so often call for cleverness, remember that the deft turn of the phrase is wasted on readers who cannot catch its beauty.

Don't assume that foreign readers understand all the abbreviations that native English speakers take for granted; Lt., Cmdr., Prof., Gov., Sen., Co., FL, and so on. These might more effectively be written out in all cases. The same goes for acronyms, which can easily turn a story into alphabet soup.

Foreign readers may have unfamiliar zones of reference.

To tell a foreign reader that a particular area is “about the size of Rhode Island” is not doing him any favors. To note that a candidate's speech was “Lincolnesque” is not going to register with someone unfamiliar with American history.

To say that a pupil “in the tenth grade” is a whiz in geometry may confuse someone in a country where school begins in Grade 12 and ends in Grade 1.

It is also important to be sensitive to historical interpretations.

What the Americans know as the Vietnam War has quite a different name in Southeast Asia. The word “terrorist” requires care in any part of the world, but perhaps more so in the Middle East. Is it the Persian Gulf or the Arabian Gulf? The Sea of Japan or (as the Koreans insist) the East Sea? Burma or Myanmar? Seemingly arbitrary deci-

sions at home may have wider ramifications abroad.

Foreign readers notice when the English-speaking world is insensitive to, or mangles, their own language.

It is prudent to resist the temptation to sneak foreign words and phrases into English copy because Murphy's law applies. An accent mark will inevitably be misplaced, or the gender of an article rendered wrong, or the sense of a phrase misunderstood because of a double meaning (I might have written “double entendre,” but I resisted!).

Any language is full of nuances, and it is therefore presumptuous for an editor to think he can work effectively in a language other than his own. If foreign words are necessary, every precaution must be taken to get them right. Proper dictionaries and an in-house translator seem indispensable.

Extreme diligence is required when it comes to personal names.

When a prominent international newspaper once experimented with eliminating accent marks, the reigning French prime minister, Alain Juppé, was reduced to Juppe, thereby taking the same pronunciation as “jupe,” which in French means “skirt.” After bearing much ridicule, the newspaper resumed using accent marks.

Beware of multiple transliterations. There may be no single correct spelling for a name in, say, Arabic or Russian or Chinese. Qadhafi or Gadafi? Yevgenev or Evgenev? Mao Tse-tung or Mao Zedong? In Asia, it is important to know that Burmese names are entire entities, no first, last or middle. Thus, Aung San Suu Kyi should never be rendered as simply Suu Kyi. Indonesians frequently have only a single name, e.g., Sukarto, which may legitimately be rendered as Mr. Sukarto on second reference. In Spain, men frequently add their mother's maiden name after their own surname. (Felipe González Márquez, but Mr. González). Expatriate copy-editors need to know their territory.

Even some forms of English usage may come across as offensive to the non-native speaker.

A general knowledge of readers' native language can be enormously helpful and



prevent embarrassment. For example, we may think nothing of reporting, in English, about a “female judge.” But in France, it might be more considerate to speak of a “woman judge.” Why? Because the French word “femelle” is reserved for animals, not people.

Pay attention also to the variants of English itself. The expression “to table,” for example, means one thing to Americans, but quite the opposite to Britons. There are dozens of examples of usage variation in the English-speaking world. A good expatriate copy editor will be familiar with as many as he can.

Local reporters usually need help, and lots of it.

The expatriate editor may be faced with unintelligible prose that local writers try to pass off as English, or quotations from people who do not speak English well. This requires deft rewriting based on what the editor thinks he understands -- a situation ripe for the inadvertent insertion of errors. Even if the prose is intelligible, it may need recasting.

Here are examples of sentences that recently passed my desk in Abu Dhabi by writers professing to be fluent in English:

Squatting behind a petrol station, the ramshackle shed on a dusty road to Bur Dubai would not normally raise a second glance.

The new rules, together with the fact that until recently immigration officials appear to have still been using visa stamps that said they were valid for 60 days, has led to many visitors and their embassies being unsure of the rules.

Upon his appointment-ship, he received advices and tips from all the other Crown Princes in the UAE, but the one advice that really hit a cord came from his father, Sheikh Saud bin Rashid Al Mua'lla, Ruler of Umm al Qaiwain.

The only thing to do is roll up one's sleeves and have at it.

Nick Stout, a longtime editor at the International Herald Tribune, is now an editor at the National in Abu Dhabi.

Risky, to say the least

By Jennifer Amur

Going in, I knew that I wanted something different from the 4 to midnight, the eight to 10 stories to rim, the dozen or so pages to proof. Just how different, I wasn't so sure, which meant that accepting a copy editing position at an English-language daily in Istanbul, Turkey, as my first job was, I thought, a bit of a risk.

I underestimated. Badly. In addition to the expected culture shock and the initial housing and language struggles that accompany a move to anywhere foreign, I was met with different journalistic standards, poorly translated English (or Turkish, as I came to call it, lovingly) and a stubborn insistence on the status quo. It wasn't quite what they taught at the University of Missouri's journalism school or what I had been exposed to at my internships at metro dailies.

There were, of course, a few redeeming qualities in the mix, but we'll leave the best for last.

The first hurdles that I ungracefully overcame were, in retrospect, ones I should've seen coming: No anonymous source policy, no time to fact check (and no top-down expectation to do so), no observance of the benefits of multi-source stories and little concern for legal issues such as libel. As the locals like to say, this is Turkey, after all.

What that left for us "copy editors" was language, and that wasn't an aspect of the job the translators or the non-native English speaker-reporters were particularly good at. My job was a rewrite position, 10 hours a day, six days a week.

We're talking 140-word, one-sentence ledes paired with incomprehensible phrases in a story with little to no news value.

Even to a certain point, all of those things — combined, in one setting — were somehow bearable. What made me consider packing my bags and jetting back across the Atlantic to find a "normal job" was the higher-ups' firm resolution to keep things the way they had always been. One-source story that reads like an advertisement in the business section? "That's how we do things." Banner headline on the front page essentially convicting the 40-odd people on trial for trying to overthrow the government? "That's how we've always done things." Copying and pasting from Wikipedia for boilerplate text in a story about Nagorno-Karabakh? "That's OK. This is Turkey." Sticking to a strict slant that favored fundamental Islamism? You get where I'm going with this. The problem is a widespread one. Turkish-language news is plagued with the same faults and inconsistencies, which seep into English-language news sources.

But there are still benefits to working amid the integrity crisis that I see in Turkish media. As a new-ish country, Turkey is undergoing rapid change and



Jennifer Amur, right, won a 2008 ACES scholarship. Her first job was on a copy desk in Istanbul.

development, and the same goes for its news organization. Despite the boss-men's adherence to all things unchanging, there are a few people who see what could be. They see opportunity on the Web; they strive to push past the barriers that indirect censorship creates. They also recognize the importance of journalism as a watchdog, which pushes their work leaps and bounds beyond what most people here are doing. Transition like this is exciting for me. It means the absence of stability, and dullness, and predictability. I spent four months at my first job and have since moved on to the other English-language daily in town, where things are exponentially better — for now.

Jennifer Amur is a copy editor at the Hurriyet Daily News.



Testy Copy Editors has been the world's No. 1 forum for newspaper copy editors since 1992.

<http://testycopyeditors.org>

On the personal side

By Karen Willenbrecht

When I moved to Tokyo, my new colleagues took me out for dinner and karaoke. I sat quietly in the back of the karaoke box, politely declining all entreaties to sing. I'm not very good, and I dreaded the thought of inflicting my voice on anyone.

After six months in my new home, I was singing, but only if I could talk someone else into a duet, in the hopes that they'd drown me out.

After 18 months, my singing voice hasn't improved one whit, but my outlook has. I've abandoned any reluctance to publicly humiliate myself, and I'll never turn down an invitation to karaoke. I recently got the ultimate compliment when the Japanese staff at our office invited me to their monthly karaoke party, saying they'd heard I was a lot of fun to sing with. I even have a membership at a chain of karaoke parlors.

My transformation from shy wallflower to karaoke queen is just one way being an expat has substantially altered my personality. Here are some of the others:

It's like being a kid again, but with better bladder control: The first few months in a foreign country – especially one where English isn't the primary language – are simultaneously terrifying

and exhilarating. Every day presents dozens of new challenges to master, and while there's plenty of potential for disaster, when you DO master them, there's a huge feeling of accomplishment that day-to-day life in your native country can't possibly provide. I rode a train! I figured out where to buy bread! I learned the word for Tuesday!

At this point, I'm pretty much out of those "look-ma-I-did-it-all-by-myself" moments, but now I have something even bigger to feed my ego: learning Japanese. I was an early reader, so I don't recall the process of learning to read English – it's just something I've taken for granted as far back as I can remember. Consequently, learning to read Japanese fascinates me. It's admittedly not easy, and I have a long way to go – out of the 2,000 "daily use" kanji characters in Japanese, I know about 300, along with their two other alphabets. But it's a thrill to look at those alien characters and suddenly see, not random squiggles or chicken scratches, but *words*. Words I can *understand*.

Let me tell you where you can shove that "Welcome to America, now speak English" sign: Living in a place where I barely speak the language has given me a new perspective on the debate over immigration in America,

especially the way America treats newcomers. I'm incredibly grateful to the Japanese, who understand that their language is difficult for foreigners and go out of their way to help. People have drawn maps and pictograms for me, pulled out English phrasebooks, summoned co-workers to help translate. I've yet to encounter anyone who was rude or mocked my broken Japanese, and Tokyo's expat magazine runs dozens of ads each week from Japanese people offering to help foreigners improve their conversation skills over coffee.

"Give it to Karen, she'll eat anything": OK, not *anything*. But months of having unidentifiable food put in front of me has put a big dent in my notorious finickiness. I still draw the line at raw horse.

I realize I've been incredibly lucky in my expat experience. I have a great group of friends who've helped me learn the ropes, and a lot of balls have bounced my way. But I also realize I've done a lot of the heavy lifting – forcing myself out of my comfort zone, learning to embrace it, seeing how many clichés I could cram into one sentence. If you get the chance to work overseas, I highly recommend it.

Karen Willenbrecht is a copy editor for Stars and Stripes.

Moving, money and taxes

By Gary Kirchherr

If you need a job and have the opportunity to work at newspaper overseas, you should take it if you can. Copy editors need to be world wise, and living in a different culture for an extended time will broaden your horizons, enrich you personally and be a lot of fun. It will stay with you long after you return to the U.S., if you do return.

I accepted a position at what was then the Asian Wall Street Journal in 1999 despite the challenges of moving myself, my wife and toddler daughter because I saw it as a once-in-a-lifetime chance. (Given the current job market, I apparently was right.) Because I had been overseas before, I underestimated how much I needed to know. Here are some tips for avoiding the mistakes I made:

Take only what you absolutely need. When I moved, Dow Jones covered most of my expenses. I doubt you would have the same luxury. Shipping stuff overseas across an ocean can easily cost thousands of dollars, especially if you throw in everything but the kitchen sink, as I did. You may find that your living quarters are much smaller than you are accustomed to, and there is no place to put all your stuff. And if you end up returning after a few years, you'll face the dilemma of another expensive shipping bill, or leaving it behind.

Before accepting any overseas job, make sure you can afford the housing. And be aware that your home may be both

smaller and more expensive than what you're used to. I was stunned to find out that what I considered a small Hong Kong apartment would cost me two and a half times what I was paying for a two-bedroom townhouse in Anchorage, which is by far the most expensive U.S. housing market I've lived in. Ask your prospective employer about decent neighborhoods where other copy editors live, and then research their rents on the Internet.

Keep open at least one U.S. bank account. Transferring money to them can be a hassle, but PayPal handles many foreign currencies.

You may also want to investigate how much you will have to pay in taxes overseas, and when. You will have to pay income taxes in most countries. Be aware that you might get hit with a tax bill for everything you owe at the end of the year. Unless you're making big bucks, you may not have to pay U.S. taxes, although everyone has to file. Check with your tax preparer.

Anyone with questions about my experience may e-mail me at erie@kirchherr.com.

Gary Kirchherr is a former assistant news editor at the Wall Street Journal-Asia. He currently is a copy editor and columnist at the Erie (Pa.) Times-News.