

“Making the Foreign Familiar”

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It’s funny. I never expected to be a foreign correspondent, so I’m sitting here listening to him talk about this guy, and I’m like, “Who is he talking about?” It couldn’t be me.

I was thinking we would start by taking you a little bit through my learning process as a foreign correspondent. The most difficult thing that I had to understand, as I said in class this morning, is what I don’t understand. In other words, nothing can be taken for granted when you work abroad. Everything has to be seen in a local context. You have to know to ask that. Let me give you some examples that happened when I first went to Moscow. My first assignment in Moscow was fairly easy because the ruble had just crashed. The people who lived there, their life savings were worth nothing. They were papering their walls with old rubles. How do you tell this story? Well, you don’t have to be an expert on anything other than street reporting. So we go out to the food market, and the first old lady that I interviewed had gold teeth. Now, where I come from, gold teeth is “bling.” You know? And, I’m interviewing her thinking, “God, how stupid. This is ridiculous.” And I turn around to my translator, and I said to her, “What’s the deal with the gold teeth?” And she explained to me, actually, that it wasn’t what I thought at all. It was during Soviet times, they didn’t have access to porcelain, and gold is a very soft metal. It was the only material they had access to and probably underneath those gold crowns were rotting gums. So, you see, I’m going to write a story about this old woman. Now imagine my mother is in the Bronx, sitting there reading the story, and I talk about how she has gold teeth. To my mother, that’s going to mean something totally different than it does to this woman in this context.

There are other moments like that that happened early on that reminded me always of that first scene in *Star Wars* where you see two suns. It just seemed so disorienting, because you were so accustomed to seeing one sun. I said to my translator, “Russians don’t smile when you take their picture. They’re always kind of ‘grrr’.” I said to Lena, “Look, I want to take a picture of you, and would you smile? I don’t understand why you people don’t smile.” And she said, “Really, because we don’t understand what you’re laughing about.” I said, “Lena, these are small things, and I apologize, but it’s the minutia of life that matters.” When you talk about making the foreign familiar, it’s about connecting it to things that you understand.

On the easiest level are shared values, so when we did the series in Egypt about young people, we spent a year. The *New York Times* took me, and they said “We want you to spend a year getting to know young people in the Middle East.” Fundamentally, values are the same. They want a job. They want a family. They want a home. They want opportunity. Those things are

common values. When the values are different, I find that to make the foreign familiar, what you have to do is at least relate them to those values that you have.

I'm going to jump around a little bit, because I think this makes the point best. I left the Middle East, where I had spent eight years, to go to Germany. Western Europe – wow, everything looks so familiar. The cars look the same. People look exactly the same, though they speak German. It was very disorienting. You know why? Because nothing, absolutely nothing, is the way you see it. What you see is not what you get. Let me tell you what I figured out very quickly in Germany: It's the complete opposite of the United States in almost every basic way. First of all, it's very orderly. There is a real sense of communal responsibility, so that everything runs fine. That's why you get a ticket if you don't lock your car. You're expected to wash your car. You don't cross the street if it's three in the morning, the light is red and there's no car anywhere. Most people won't think of crossing the street. There are rules. You have to do it a certain way. Everyone is expected to, because order is valued most. It's a very orderly place. There are a lot of rules, except when it comes to morality.

Now, this is again the opposite of the Middle East. You can go naked in the parks, you can drink alcohol anywhere, prostitution is legal, and there are casinos all over the place. It was a very different world. The foundation of values is so different, that when I sit down and start to write about Germany, I have to explain to people the social context. I was invited to give a talk before the foreign ministry to talk to journalists about a proposal to set up a set of guidelines for journalists, professional guidelines. The idea was that during the controversy over cartoons for the prophet Muhammad, journalists in Germany behaved badly and incited violence. It was mostly journalists in the room. I assumed I was speaking to a home crowd. They're with me. No way is a government going to set down guidelines to censor journalists. I'd say about 85 percent of the room supported it. A guy from Deutsche Welle got up and said, "It's essential that we have it." I was totally perplexed, until it was explained to me that unlike in the United States, where basically our Constitution and our values were based on casting off a strong king, theirs were all based on never having a Gestapo ever again, never allowing the Nazis power ever again. The whole concept of the information was seen completely different by journalists than Americans. The United States, I bet everyone here would say they're a First Amendment supporter and that sunshine is the best disinfectant. Put it out in the open and then let people discuss it. Not in Germany. You do not have the right to have information. Privacy is paramount. Again, a very difficult concept, I think. It's not a difficult concept to understand, but what you have to understand is that what you see is not what you get. Not necessarily in the context if you're familiar with it.

It happened all the time in the Middle East. There was child labor, another perfect example. It's very easy to me to walk into a factory in Egypt and see little kids making carpets and write this story that makes them look atrocious for letting the children, instead of putting them in schools, go work in a factory. There were neighborhoods where you would see children who were 11 years old working on sanding machines to polish aluminum, getting dust in their face. It's very easy for me to go in as a journalist from the United States and write a story about how terrible this is. And then it was explained to me that the kids, their homes are terrible. It's not like the alternative would be to be in a nice air conditioned house watching television with running water. That's not the case. They're struggling to get by. Secondly, the schools in Egypt had

completely broken down. There was no viable alternative for these young children. Now, I'm not advocating child labor, don't get me wrong. I'm not saying this was a good thing. But to understand it in their context I think is important. The guy who did the gardening on my property came by one day with his 9-year-old, and his kid was raking up my lawn. And I was like, "Look. I can't have a 9-year-old working in my garden." And he said, "Well this is great for him. He's outside, he's gardening, he's learning a trade, and he's got eleven brothers and sisters living in a shithole living back on the other side of the Nile." So the way I came to terms with it was I said, "Okay. He can play, but he can't work." I gave him my kid's scooter. And every now and then, he'd pick up a rake, and then he'd see me, and he'd throw the rake down, because he didn't want to get in trouble. What you see is not always what you get, and that is the challenge I think of explaining foreign news to local people, to our readers.

It's harder now, because I'm not just explaining to Americans, I'm explaining to the world because of the website. There are times when an explanation for someone in San Francisco won't work for someone in Hong Kong. But nevertheless, it's our job, our obligation, our duty to try to be cultural translators. I used to jog around my neighborhood. This is a perfect example of what I mean by what you see is not what you get. There was a flyover, and underneath the flyover was a huge ravine filled with trash. And it used to make me crazy, because people would throw their household trash, just like out of the kitchen, into the ravine. The ravine would fill up, and I'd jog by in my sneakers, and I would seethe, because, why do people want to live in this filth? And after a couple of weeks, I realized, it's actually an informal recycling system. What would happen is the ravine would fill up, and then the neighbors would come down, rip open the plastic bags and take everything – every scrap, every metal, anything that could be reused. All that was left was the organic material. Then, all the sudden, these ladies would show up with their goats and sheep, and they would literally sit in middle of this trash, the goats and sheep would eat the trash, and then somebody would come along and sweep the plastic bags into a pile. It wasn't just a pile of trash.

In Egypt, one of the things anyone who visited or spent any time there will discover is that if you ask for directions, you often get the wrong directions. It's almost inevitable. So finally, I'm like "You know, I've lived here eight years. We've got to figure this out." My colleague and I went out, and we asked people for directions to a place where I knew how to get. I wrote about this, but I think it was something like 80 percent of the people we asked gave us the wrong directions. We would go back afterwards and say "Okay, if you didn't know, why didn't you say 'I don't know?'" Every one of them explained the values that led them to send me in the wrong directions: you're obviously a foreigner, you're asking for my help, it would be a shame on me not to offer help. So, I figure, I'm sending you in the right direction. You'll ask the florist, and you'll get there eventually." Now, where I come from, there's no shame in saying, "I don't know." In the Middle East there is. All these little things matter on a macro scale. When the president of the United States or when the Secretary of State sits down the Egyptian official, you have to understand people's contexts. Look, the foreign minister of Egypt told me he was very upset because when he was in the White House, they wouldn't allow him to have tea. Tea is a very important part of how people do business in the Middle East. You sit, you have tea. They wouldn't allow it in the office, and he was very upset. There was a cookie, but they wouldn't allow tea. There was a friend of mine who worked for the US embassy, and they cut staff. They didn't have a tea boy. He was a department head at the United States embassy in Jordan who had

to get up and make his guests tea. Now, it sounds like a little thing, but it matters, it really matters. It sets the whole tone of the discussion. If yes doesn't mean yes, then what the hell are we talking about. That's the problem. You have to understand each other's contexts. And that's what I have tried to do with my reporting. I tend to focus on the ordinary. It's not as exciting maybe as fighting in Libya or occupation in Gaza. But to me, it's the little things that matter the most. It's not a top-down phenomenon. It's a bottom-up phenomenon. All these little things we're talking about ultimately came to matter so much, they're changing the course of history in the Middle East.

Now, there's two other points that I want to make. I know I'm going a little long, but I want to get these points in. First of all, the context of what you see is not what you get. Words don't mean the same thing to everybody. The most obvious one that I have written about is the word terrorism. Now, we all agree that violence against individuals is bad. I think we would say we all agree that terrorism is bad. I've never really personally met anybody who would say they're an advocate of terrorism. The problem is, what's behind terrorism? The United States considers Hamas, the Palestinian group that controls Gaza, a terrorist organization. The United States considers Hezbollah a terrorist organization. It runs the government. It is a social, political, cultural organization that basically dominates the country and could take it over if it chose to. Now, setting aside for a minute whether or not you like Hamas or Hezbollah, I can tell you they don't consider themselves terrorist organizations. They consider themselves liberation groups. They consider what they do as resistance. Now, again, without advocating a position, isn't it important if we're going to have a dialogue to at least find words that we can agree on? Or at least understand the definitions behind those words? I wrote a story about this, about the challenge of the word terrorism, not the concept. The word, the label.

And I got a lot of attention. Some people thought that I was naïve. Some people thought that I was foolish. I wasn't even advocating a position, because I think that's a mistake people make when they put on reporters. They get information they think you're an advocate for a particular side. What I was saying is if you want to come to the Middle East and have a discussion, at least understand where people are coming from. This guy at commentary magazine wrote a whole column. He wrote, "Finally, Slackman conveniently ignores the primary reason why the US still refers to Hamas and Hezbollah as terrorist organizations, namely because the groups have refused to renounce terrorism." You know, I mean, he's a PhD candidate at the University of Pennsylvania. He's a very bright guy, but did he miss the point. This is one of the saddest things about writing. A lot of times, it's not just intercultural. People just don't hear what you're saying. They receive things in a prison of their own experience. No one understands that a journalist's job is to give them information so that they can make their own judgments. They think that what you are doing is advocating a position. Now he actually said to me in a follow up email, "You know, I bet you would report that a lot of people are Holocaust deniers in the Middle East and deny that the Holocaust has occurred." And I said, "Actually, I did. I did report that. Don't you want to know that?"

I wrote a whole story that said people in the Middle East are not convinced about America's story about 9/11. They're not. It's very widespread. The idea that 19 guys who were hiding in caves pulled this off, a lot of people don't believe it. They still think sincerely that it was an Israeli and American plot. Ridiculous. But don't you want to know it? If your team is winning or

losing, don't you want to know why? A lot of people don't. Unfortunately, I think that the spirit of the discourse in the United States today tends to be where people want to hear what makes them feel comfortable. It's not just the United States, it's the world over. They don't want to be confronted with hard truths, hard realities that contradict either their preconceptions or the way they'd like to think the world should be. Is Hamas a terrorist organization? Is Hezbollah a terrorist organization? Maybe. Maybe not. That's not the point. The point is if you're going to have dialogue with Iran—remember President Obama came in and said he wants to have dialogue with Iran—it's a non-starter for them if you use the word “terrorist.” Now, the punchline or the kicker or the final result was President Obama did come to Cairo, he did give a speech, and guess what: He did not use the word terrorism. If you read my story or Eric's, I don't know. But I do know that he didn't use it, and everyone noticed it. He delivered the message, “We do not stand for killing innocent people.” But he didn't use the word. I suspect that somebody in his speech writing team understood that in order to have dialogue, it's not just about talking. It's about understanding people's contexts and how people hear what you're saying.

It also happens at times not as serious as the word about terrorism. Being misunderstood as a reporter is a hazard of the trade. The last story I'll tell you, I did a piece in Iraq right before the last invasion, in 2003. And I wanted just to remind people that there were a lot of regular people there, so I did a story about ice cream. Because of sanctions, they couldn't get the components that they needed to make soft ice cream machines. So they were very proud of themselves because they made ice cream. This is another cultural moment here. This huge fat man came over—huge, humongous—to let me try his ice cream, and I asked him, “Do you have low fat?” And he said to me and he looked at me literally like, “Are you an idiot? We add fat.” So I did a story about ice cream and how Iraqis have struggled to preserve the elements of a normal life. There was no politics involved. I got—this was when I was at the Los Angeles Times—tons of hate mail. Why? Because how dare you make them look human. I really to this day am slightly puzzled by it. But I got a lot of hate mail from people who were saying they felt that I as a journalist was trying to say that they United States was victimizing them when it was their own leaders. I just wrote about ice cream. That was it.

Anyway, I think the key that I would like to leave you with is to make foreign news familiar. What I have always tried to do is connect it to something that matters to people here. Sometimes those are the same things: hope, opportunity, the desire for a job, respect—respect is a big one. Sometimes it means explaining where we are different. If you don't mind, I will tell you one more story. I met a guy in Iran who was one of the people who taught me the most about democracy in my life, democracy in journalism. His name is Ibraheim. He was very close to Ruhollah Khomeini one of the first people back in Iran after the shah fell. He's now considered an ally. He studied in Houston, and he actually practiced in Morristown, New Jersey, where I'm from, which is totally bizarre. Anyway, he said to me that democracy is not the mechanics of an election. It's values. It's diversity. You have to have a diversity of population. It's tolerance for a diverse population, tolerance for a diverse set of views, and then the key is being able to compromise so these different views can continue to function, this diverse population can continue to function in a functioning society.

I used this as kind of a guide for my reporting: diversity, tolerance, compromise. It seemed very basic, and it seemed to me to be something we could all understand and all relate to on a very human level.

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