

Foreign Correspondent 2.0

By Tony MCNICOL



Author Tony McNicol

For Japan-based foreign journalists, 2009 was a tough year. As we all know, media everywhere are in big trouble. Once hallowed organizations are laying off staff in droves or even going out of business. Here in Japan, foreign bureaus were already reducing staff and upping sticks to Beijing even before the economic downturn. There can hardly have been a worse time for Japan correspondents.

Or perhaps it isn't all that bad? As full-time correspondents find themselves grounded, freelancers may get a chance to spread their wings: especially if they are ready to experiment with a plethora of new media; audio, video, blogs, social networking, to name just a few. As they say in Japanese, *"pinch ni chance"* – opportunity in adversity. As a Tokyo-based freelancer with five years' experience writing and photographing Japan, here are some suggestions: mainly for myself, but also for other foreign writers in Japan.

Photos: Tony McNicol



A sake maker shovels steamed rice into a barrel at Terada Honke sake brewery in Kozaki, Chiba Prefecture, Japan, June 15, 2009. Terada Honke sake brewery has been brewing sake in the town of Ozaki since 1673. They make sake using organic rice, natural sake yeast, and traditional sake-brewing methods.

Say Bye-bye to the Bureau

The roaming correspondent dispatched to far-flung outposts across the world several years at a time has gone home and probably won't be back. In his place is the freelancer or stringer on a modest retainer. While correspondents would have been given time and assistance to acclimatize and learn about their new postings, freelancers need to hit the ground running. Journalists doing the work of correspondents will be in the country for long-term assignment, if not actually Japanese nationals with English skills.

Learn the Lingo

Few magazines and newspapers have the money to pay for interpreters and Japanese researchers any more. If freelancers don't speak Japanese, or don't plan to learn, they will be in trouble. Stories based on English wire stories and other English-language media are not going to pay. Monitoring the local media is a key skill. All journalists will need enough Japanese to interview local sources with ease.



A worker adds a layer of paper to a "yonshakudama" 420 kg firework made by Katakai Fireworks Co. in Katakai, Chiba Prefecture, Japan, April 6, 2009.



Picking Koshu grapes in Katsunuma, Yamanashi Prefecture, Japan, October 12, 2009.



Shoichi and Chisato Uchiyama prepare "insect sushi" in their kitchen at home in Tokyo. Shoichi is the author of "Fun Insect Cooking." His blog on the topic gets 400 hits a day. He believes insects could one day be the solution to food shortages, and that rearing bugs at home could dispel food safety worries.

Use Your Legs

Media have responded to shrinking revenues by reducing their expense budgets and leaving less and less space for thoroughly researched foreign news. Correspondents have been offering too many short undigested stories that barely scratch the surface of the complicated societies they cover. No wonder they face harsh criticism and stiff competition from locally based bloggers and writers with ample knowledge and time.

So what can journalists do to compete with an army of amateur reporters? Well, the main thing is to leave their office, go places, talk to people, photograph them and video them. They will have to BE THERE. Luckily, new technology offers ample scope for doing just that (see below).

Will publications pay journalists for such in-depth reports? That remains to be seen. But if they don't, will those media won't be around for much longer anyway?

Multimedia, Multimedia, Multimedia

The specialist writer or specialist photojournalist is increasingly a thing of the past. Reporters are carrying cameras with their notepads, photojournalists are carrying video cameras with their SLRs, and cameramen are editing their own stories on their laptops and uploading the footage to the Internet.

This change is coming especially fast for Japan-based journalists as foreign correspondents were always expected to operate in the field with little backup. Today's journalist needs to get there, collect information in a variety of media, process it quickly, and edit it to tell their story well. Advanced computer and media skills are becoming as essential to the job as spelling and grammar.

Tell the Story

The market for straight news – reporting events with little commentary or analysis – is disappearing fast. In a change that is endangering the very existence of the world's newspapers, readers are getting their news on the Internet, instantly and free. The only way to compete is surely to go deeper. That takes time – and money – but journalists without the determination to tell those stories will find themselves with little to do in the new media.



Inside a train on Tokyo's Yamanote circle line. Tokyo has one of the most extensive and efficient transport networks in the world – but also one of the most crowded. Rail companies calculate crowding by the percentage of standard capacity (i.e. 100% when all the seats and standing spaces are occupied). Some trains reach 220%+.



An exhibition promotion girl dressed as a character for a fantasy console game at Tokyo Game Show 2008

Meanwhile, speed is going to be of the utmost importance, hence mastery of the technical skills; not necessarily to scoop rivals – none of us can compete with the wires, never mind Twitter, on speed – but to process more material for less money.

Make Friends with Google

Google is the freelancer's best friend. Once it was possible to sell a story to one, maybe two generously paying outlets. With budgets shrinking across the board, journalists need to find ways to offer their work to multiple media. That takes time, but journalists who know how to use Google will find that clients come to them.

Likewise, blogging has become an essential tool for freelancers. By posting stories they can increase their search engine rankings, sell their work, and even build a readership among editors and other journalists.

Give Your Work Away

To paraphrase Chris Anderson, the author of *Free: The Past and Future of a Radical Price*, the problem that journalists face is not that people don't pay for their work, but that people don't know about it.

Many journalists wonder why they should be putting their work on the Internet without payment, but in today's media environment, anyone reading your work online effectively "is" payment. Write a blog and maybe you'll resell work, sell photo stock, attract new assignments, or just gradually raise your profile.

And the Future?

No one knows how the current media crisis will end, but one thing is clear: journalists face a time of huge change. Can reporters still make a living from news? Yes, but only if what they provide is new. And that means utilizing new media as much as finding new stories.

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Tony McNicol is a Tokyo-based freelance writer and photographer. He has worked for many publications based in Japan and abroad and covered topics ranging from Internet technology to food and drink to sumo. Right now he carries a computer, a Nikon SLR, an electronic dictionary and an IC recorder. He is looking for space in his bag for a microphone and a video camera. His work can be seen at www.tonymcnicol.com.