

Andrew Sheets

Keck Center, International Journalism Fellowship

Report on my summer 2016 internship for the South China Morning Post in Hong Kong.

### **What I did-**

While in Hong Kong I worked for the South China Morning Post, the largest English-language newspaper in the region. I was a reporter intern for the culture section of the newspaper, so my writing focused on cultural news/events. This work would often involve interviewing, phone calls, and attending press conferences and cultural events. It also involved a lot of time on the computer, researching and writing for articles.

### **What I learned-**

I found it particularly interesting to see the inside of a newsroom and how print media is changing with the rise of the internet and technology, as the SCMP is going through this transition right now. Part of the journalistic craft has always been witty headlines, but now the emphasis is on those headlines with search-engine optimization, to get as many visitors from google as possible. With a print article you are limited to how many visual elements you can include, but in online articles there is an emphasis on graphics as a way of helping the reader better understand the story. Even something as simple as looking up the location on Google maps and taking an image saves the reader the hassle of doing it themselves.

A lot of the revenue came from print ads, but nowadays fewer people read the physical paper so they need to find new ways to be profitable.

I had the chance to write for a magazine that comes out in the Sunday paper several times, and learned some of the differences between news and magazine writing. With news you are sharing the details as concisely as possible, but in a magazine the goal is to write an interesting story that people will want to read, more along the lines of writing general nonfiction. I much prefer this style of writing to hard news as there is more room for creative input—in the style, in the topics, etc.

The news never really stops, so most of the journalists end up staying late to work on stories often. I am not so passionate about the news that I would want to stay late at the office working, so I really do not feel that it is a career for me.

Though I did learn this a bit in Mr. Jones' class and in any writing class, it is essential to limit yourself to sharing only the most important, relevant information, and I received plenty of practice doing this.

In order to be a media outlet with a quality reputation you need to have high standards and take your code of ethics seriously. You do not want to write about something just because people will read it. As the one writing the stories, you have the freedom to give your own ideas, and in my thoughts a sort of responsibility to make sure what you write is benefitting others to read and not wasting their minds with nonsense.

Having the chance to work with photojournalists and a workshop on photojournalism I learned how to take quality news photos. One important part of this is

capturing enough in the picture to give the context of where and when something is happening, its not as simple as photographing the subject.

Seeing the entire process of how an article comes to be in the newspaper has been revealing. I have more respect for and trust in well-established news organizations, however I am more critical of what I initially read and realize that many news sources are quite as credible.

### **Evaluation of the experience-**

First of all I would not recommend a journalism internship to anyone unless they are extremely passionate about a career in journalism. But if they are, this internship or a similar journalism internship would be a wonderful experience. Even then, newspaper (print) journalism seems to be a dying field; I think it move in an online direction that is very different both in quality and the experience of working in the field. Overall it has been a huge learning experience for me, both in terms of personal and professional development. As far as working as a journalist goes, it has helped lower some of my social inhibitions. You really need to be annoying to be a good journalist. When you get used to reaching out to others, calling, and talking to people all the time it becomes a lot easier to talk to anyone.

Living in Hong Kong was a huge part of the experience that I found valuable. I have never spent time living in the middle of a hugely crowded city or in Asia, so it was a new lifestyle for me. Because the journalism fellowship and most internship programs do not have a lot of structure you might be on your own finding housing and activities. If you don't have family or friends in Hong Kong it can be a little difficult to get set up

living there or find activities and friends. I would recommend it to the adventurous but it is certainly a challenge.

To be honest, working for a city's newspaper is one of the best ways to get to know and experience the area's culture.

### **3. How my participation in the lab and in Mr. Jones' class helped the internship**

At CMC we have no journalism program and no real journalism classes aside from the new international journalism class. I was surprised to find that all other interns working with the SCMP studied journalism at their universities, but I did not find that I was very far behind them in terms of ability as a journalist, and this was largely thanks to the combo of the class and lab. The class taught the essential skills for a journalist- how to take information and write it concisely and in proper journalistic style, with the important information near the front and in a way that will catch the attention of the reader. There is more detail than that, but I felt like the single class was more than enough preparation for a career in journalism (or at least an internship). The skills the lab developed were more for interviewing, which I had to do often, but I similarly felt prepared. As I already had practice spending time coming up with interview questions and dealing with the flow of conversation I felt like the interviews I did with the SCMP went very well, and I was able to ask questions that were relevant, interesting and to which the responder would be able to give a good answer. It also taught the importance of doing research beforehand. No one appreciates it if you call to ask them questions without knowing any detail about the topic beforehand, and I found that similar to getting up to speed on political situations for the lab, I would need to research whatever I was going to be interviewing about.

#### **4. Suggestions to the new journalism fellows based on your experience.**

If you're hoping to work in Hong Kong it will help tremendously to know Cantonese or Mandarin.

When you're interviewing someone it will usually be on something they are passionate about and eager to talk about, but if you're only asking them basic questions you won't get that passion out of them. When you set up the conversation well, seem interested, and ask knowledgeable questions that get them to think you'll get a lot more out of them.

Pay attention to the news! You want as many people as possible to read your work, and that requires you to know what's on the mind of the public. For example, around the time Pokemon Go came out I wrote a story about the first time Pokemon had appeared in the SCMP when the anime gave several children seizures. This is one of the most viewed stories of the week in my section, and I timed it to coincide with other news about Pokemon when people were eager to read more related stories.