The resourcefulness of fixers

THE ETHICS of working with fixers were discussed at June’s LFB meet- ing. Our speaker was Dr Dawood Azami, World Service multimedia editor and former BBC Bureau Chief in Kabul.

Dr Azami gave examples from Pakistan of the “resourcefulness of fixers”. One unnamed Western journalist arrived “with a story in mind,” seeking a fixer to assist on his story about the feelings of parents of Paki- stani Talibanis killed on the battle- field in Afghanistan.

The journalist went to a father of a son killed in Afghanistan. The fa- ther told how his son had “wanted to fight for Allah, now he’s dead, I’m fine with that”. The next father of a “martyred” Talibani said much the same. But the journalist was looking for a sad story featuring a devastated parent. So the fixer “found a fake fa- ther for him,” who told him what he wanted.

Another journalist went to Paki- stan seeking Talibani training camps. These “don’t exist in the open… they’re underground”. Fixers can’t find them for you.

The fixer said, “let me find some- thing, give me some time.” He later took his client into the hills to see “five or six people in turbans, look- ing like they are being trained”.

Fixers have “skills, they have local knowledge, they can arrange your transportation, be your interpreter; can give you story ideas if you have an open mind,” says Dr Azami. But “the job is very risky,” made worse by the fact that there are now more “taboo topics”.

Critiquing “politicans or their policies” is taboo. Human rights are now something “you cannot cover in South East Asia”. India is “getting worse” for off-limits subjects. Af- ghanistan is “freer” than most of the region in terms of what government tolerates, as long as you don’t offend the “more dangerous” warlords.

“Many fixers were killed in the past years in some of these coun- tries,” notes Dr Azami. When fixers help journalists “they are in trouble”. They are not recognised as a profes- sion, but “recognition brings more trouble for fixers – anonymity is sometimes useful”, in some cases “required”. Then there’s “not having insurance... a major problem”. Fix- ers are “paid on a daily basis – nobody knows what happened to them after the correspondent leaves.”

Another risk for fixers is to men- tal health: “they face dreadful things.” For journalists, medical help should be available. Fixers are abandoned. Despite initiatives by the Front- line Club and others to support fix- ers, Dr Azami hasn’t heard of fixers being helped. It’s hard to identify or find them – “they don’t know who the fixer is… they are not registered, they have no job title for fixers, they are hired for a few days, they work for a local NGO or are “unem- ployed youth, students” or a new fixer demographic, “activists turned journalists”, who are more at risk.

Corporate cost-cutting means the role of fixers is changing. Many news organisations have “closed lo- cals bureaus”, with “just one or two (local) journalistes sending… mate- rial”. This leads to many becoming “proper journalists: they now work for the New York Times or CNN”. Now there are “many local journalistes who started as fixers”.

LFB Committee member Erica Dezonze also introduced a video by “my dearest friend”, Brazilian photo- journalist Felipe Paiva, who de- scribed live for fixers in South Amer- ica. Felipe says it’s “hard to measure how the profession as a whole is doing… fixers are a very disorgan- ised group. You go to the square, if you are lucky somebody hires you, if not you go home.” This is done via a “very informal mechanism”.

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Quality Management System? Eh?

SOME local authorities put their me- dia and PR work out to tender – of- ten via an outsourced operation. In some cases, local authorities or their media contractors require journal- ists taking on such work to complete a very general tender – in at least one case it seems as if the tender was originally designed for large or- ganisations, not freelances who are sole traders.

The NUJ’s Freelance Office has come across a tender document for work on behalf of a local authority that demands the freelance detail the following: quality management and assurance system; environmental management system; business continui- nity plan; and complaints proce- dures. The freelance in question tried to explain that such organisational procedures aren’t built into their sole trader small business model.

But this point was rejected, with a reply claiming that the tender docu- ment had already been “adjusted” for small businesses.

If you have any experience as a freelance of dealing with such oner- ous demands by local authorities for detailed policies and systems such as those above, please let Freelance Organiser David Ayrton know (see page 6). Intelligence in this area will help the Freelance Office to advise members what to do in such cases.

One freelance suggests that in response to a request for detail on their “Quality Management and As- surance System”, a suitable reply would be to say that you undertake all the work personally, that you have so many years of undertaking such work, that you can provide refer- ences for former clients.

In response to “requests” for detail on your Business Continuity Plan, the same freelance suggests telling them that you have a network of experienced associates – other freelances you know who can take over the job if needed – and offer to provide their contact details.

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Transcription! Aaaaaaaargh…

“What I enjoy is writing not transcribing! Transcription, I’ve always hated,” says feature writer Sheryl Garratt – and a mul- titude of journos sigh and moan: “Ooooh, me too!” It’s many writer’s worst part of the job. But growing awareness of recent developments which just might ease the pain got a bunch of us exchanging recommendations in e-networks.

Sheryl is one of several fans of hiring a (good!) transcription service, in her case provided by individuals not an agency.

“When I was really busy I found the most amazing transcriber and it changed everything. I was so much more productive, liter- ally doubled the number of commissions I could take.”

“Left to myself, I’d do an interview, come home and next day start putting off the transcription: clean the house, do chores, over-research… This could go on for at least two days on a long deadline and then I’d end up doing it at 10 at night.”

“So the transcriber saves me procrastination time.”

Defence and music freelance Angus Batey reported discovering an international transcription agency: “In the middle of doing some work that’s paid on a per-day basis, I was at a conference which I was going to have to write about tomorrow, and my edi- tor suggested I try an online transcription service called www. rev.com to save time.” The editor would pay – “it would free me up to be more productive while I’m on his dime”.

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Much more: www.londonfreelance.org/fl/1907tran.html – and more on the meeting on 9 September on page 6.