

❖ **Turner, Barry and Orange, Richard – *Specialist Journalism* – Routledge, Oxon, 2013, pp. 216 ISBN: 9780415582858.**

Reviewed by Josie Vine —RMIT University, Australia

Once, not so very long ago, young general news reporters aspired to be the epitaph rounds person. Being given your own round was a sign you were stepping up – more rights, more responsibilities and, most importantly, more power over the shape and content of your stories. But to become a rounds person, or specialist, you had to earn your stripes – sometimes years as a copy boy or girl, followed by years as a cadet, followed by more years as a general news reporter.

These days, with audience fragmentation and the growth of magazine-style sections and supplements, novice journalists are required to become specialists almost immediately. This means they are expected to graduate with a sound ability to concentrate on one area of expertise – its history, its culture, its lingo, its power-brokers, its allies, its enemies, its political complexities and, most importantly, how to create and sustain a network of trusted contacts – without, of course, becoming too intimate with any. The role of the specialist could almost be compared to that of a le Carré character, infiltrating a closed and secretive organisation. This is not an easy task even for the more experienced reporters, let alone those newly graduated.

Journalism education has come some way to the party; programs almost always have some sort of a course related to 'rounds' within their structure, and almost all Journalism 101 textbooks have a chapter on rounds. The new textbook, *Specialist Reporting* is one of very few that deals with rounds, and rounds only, within its covers. Editors and British journalists, Barry Turner and Richard Orange, have gathered an impressive assembly of specialists, experienced in both journalism and the scholarly reflection of it. This means the book is not only a 'how to' guide, but also a critical contemplation on the place, pleasure and pitfalls of each specialist field.

As the editors point out in their Introduction, subjects such as sport, crime, health and politics could each fill the pages of a 'substantial' textbook. Rather, the object of *Specialist Reporting* is to provide a 'taste' of key topics (2). Authors have drawn out common themes within their disciplines, considered some of the ethical and practical dilemmas facing working journalists, and shine a spotlight on positive and negative aspects of the profession.

The book is structured in chapters that start with the traditional specialisations (all journalists are expected to be able to turn their hand to crime, business or politics) right through to the more demanding (war reporting for example). Bizarrely, or maybe tellingly, the final chapter is dedicated to wine journalism – perhaps the most challenging round of all!

Chapter 1, 'Sports Reporting', written by experienced journalist, Wimbledon Tennis website editor and information specialist for the 2012 Paralympic Games, Nick Spencer, deals with the relevance of sport to the journalism industry. Sport, according to Spencer, 'unites populations' in the way that 'few' major events 'aspire to'. And yet, as with journalism in general, the 'void' left by the decline of on-staff reporters, is being filled by 'well-informed fans and opinionated bloggers' at 'minimal costs'. Of course, how to provide relevant, professional copy in the digital era is one of the major modern journalistic dilemmas, and is a running theme throughout *Specialist Reporting*.

Chapter 2, 'Business Journalism', written by Ulster University's Media, Film and Journalism Head of School, Colm Murphy, also deals with the digital age, but more from the challenges presented by its ability to provide real-time news, 24-7, and the 'fierce' competition this has created within the business industry – including among its journalists.

The ongoing GFC is, for financial journalists, according to Murphy, the 'equivalent of covering a war'. But the credit crunch has also raised 'serious issues' for financial reporting; he questions how financial journalism may have had a role in creating the credit bubble internationally. Here, Murphy delves into the history of financial journalism, and how it created a similar phenomenon in the 1929 Wall Street crash, and the Depression that followed. Interestingly, Murphy's chapter ends with 'A day in the life of' contribution from *Sunday Times* Business Editor, Dominic O'Connell. This adds interest and further information. Peculiarly, such case studies appear to be added to only a select few chapters: 'Environmental'; 'Automotive'; 'Fashion'; 'Food'; and 'Media'. There appears to be neither rhyme nor reason why these chapters should be so privileged!

Certainly there are several impressive political journalists who could have been invited to provide 'A Day in the Life Of' for

Chapter 3. Author Kevin Rafter has an impressive CV including political journalist for the *Irish Times* and *Sunday Times*, as well as covering Tony Blair's 1997 victory. But, with his delving into political journalism history, and his critical reflection on how the political PR system and relationship subtleties affect reportage, you can tell he is also a journalism scholar – according to the book's list of contributors, as senior lecturer in political communication and journalism at Dublin University.

Chapter 4 covers one of journalism's most in-demand roles – that of crime reporting. As author Barry Turner points out, the subject of crime 'features large in our media', and is 'one of the oldest'. The University of Lincoln senior lecturer in Media Law and Public Administration deals with theoretical issues such as crime reporting's ability to create 'moral panic', as well as how relationships between police and the press can affect coverage. But curiously, Turner does not touch on any of the snares and stimulations of court reporting – a natural extension to crime reporting, and a subject all journalism graduates would be expected to have an at least rudimentary knowledge.

With this in mind, a chapter on court reporting would appear to be a natural progression into Chapter 5. This, however, is not the case. The following chapter is on 'International Reporting' – a somewhat more sexy, albeit less practical, subject. Authors Ben McConville and Kate Smith discuss the dominant cultural hegemony in international journalism; the Anglo-American model, how it came about and its uncertain future, as well as the universal framing of news and news values. This is all very important and interesting, but this chapter lacks the practical 'how to' guide of previous chapters.

In comparison, Sarah Lonsdale's chapter on 'Environmental Reporting' is very much focused on 'how to'. This ranges from the importance of a basic scientific knowledge, through to which environmental stories are of most interest to editors, as well as the most relevant sources to relevant medium.

Chapters 7 through to Chapter 12 deal with the popular rounds, or those which (at least in my experience) in which many first-year students want to specialise. These are automotive, fashion, food, music and media reporting. All are a sound mixture of theory and practice. In other words, they talk about how to get into the specialisation, and how to deal with common ethical issues such as freebies and other advertising influences on editorial content.

The final third of the book is a strange mixture. Chapters 12 ('Science'), and 13 ('Medical'), appear to be a natural fit. Even Chapter 14 ('Legal Affairs') can, at a small stretch, be logical in progression. But then, quite suddenly, one is faced with a chapter on 'Travel Journalism'. Given its issues with freebies, perks and its relationship with advertising dollars, a travel journalism chapter would sit more comfortably alongside Fashion. Even so, if one was to use *Specialist Journalism* as a textbook, one's course need not be bound by its chapter sequence.

The reader is then presented with the chapter on 'War Reporting'. Written by experienced war reporter and *Eastern Daily Press* defence rounds-person, Mark Nicholls, this chapter is a no-holds-barred realistic assessment of perhaps the most sexy – and scary – of rounds. Nicholls first deals with war reporting's history, then its practicalities, followed by a theoretical discussion on the conundrum of embedding. What is really attractive about this chapter, however, is its logical sub-chapter on defence reporting. It is almost as if Nicholls is saying old war reporters never die, they just live on as defence correspondents.

The final chapter, as already mentioned, is on 'Wine Journalism'. Although this chapter is written by an experienced wine critic and journalism PhD candidate at Lincoln University, Geoff Adams, and deals effectively with the tough ethical issues involved with this job (as well as many other rounds), it is an odd fit and should logically sit with 'Food Reporting', rather than 'War Correspondence'. It is, however, well written and informative. I have not yet come across any students who aspire to become wine critics, but hopefully there is still time for this to happen!

In general, *Specialist Reporting* has the potential to make a useful textbook, although tutorials and lectures would take some tweaking to ensure this British publication could fit into the Australian (or indeed, any other national) context. Its foreword by high-profile journalist, and undoubtedly qualified specialist health/ business reporter, Philip Knightley, adds interest for the academic, and its an extensive bibliography and useful websites makes it of use for both the aspiring novice and the experienced general reporter wishing to specialise.

#### **About the reviewer**

Dr Josie Vine is a journalism lecturer at RMIT. Dr. Vine's research interests include regional reporting, and the sociological development of newsroom practice. She is currently researching for a new book on Australian journalism culture and history.

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