

Chapter 1

News and Follow-ups

Turning news into features

Susie Eisenhuth

In April 1996 a news story was filed from a Lebanon racked with violence. Like many others at the time it recorded in a few terse paragraphs the latest bloody incident to which journalists had been witness: a number of civilians had been killed in a rocket attack on their vehicle near the village of Mansouri in southern Lebanon. The vehicle was an ambulance, the rocket fired by an Israeli helicopter. The dead, two women and four children, were among a small group using the ambulance to flee the area under fire.

That was the news. The conflict rolled on. And the presses. Out here in reader land, most of us would have filed the incident under ‘Middle East conflict’, the ubiquitous news-speak label that so helpfully dissolves not only national boundaries and complex political issues but also the need to explain them. Another day, another shelling – and who knew what exactly was going on in those ‘Middle East’ killing fields so far away?

Yet on this occasion, the news item would not be the end of the story. As the UN peacekeepers were picking through the blast site for evidence, British journalist Robert Fisk, arriving from an assignment nearby, met a Reuters camerawoman with harrowing footage of the events on video. Fisk looked closely at the missile fragments the UN ordnance officers were collecting, one still bearing the name-plate and code that would ultimately identify it as a Hellfire anti-armour missile,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-70033-7 - The Writer's Reader: Understanding Journalism and Non-Fiction

Susie Eisenhuth and Willa McDonald

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 *The Writer's Reader*

manufactured in the United States and allocated to US forces. That discovery marked the beginning of a long journey for the veteran Middle East correspondent, which would lead to the remarkable feature story published in the London *Independent* over a year later.¹

In that feature, Fisk would convert the basic facts into a story that went way beyond the confines of a routine report from the front. It would buy into the bigger issues behind the headlines, about war and weaponry, soldiers and civilians, and the companies who profit from the weapons that can kill both indiscriminately. Tracking across the world to confront the missile makers in their US headquarters, Fisk would ultimately engage them in a debate about the morality of the war business, summoning up the shade of George Bernard Shaw, whose play *Major Barbara* gave us, years earlier, the character of Undershaft the armaments manufacturer, and his silken defence of might is right.

If this is so, then what?

The story of Fisk's Mansouri feature goes to the heart of what makes good journalism great writing. Revisiting the site of events that might otherwise pass us by, seeking out background, shading in context and exploring nuance, such writers at their best end up telling us important stories about the human condition, about the choices we make and the actions we take. About who we are. If news is history on the run – the frail first draft – feature writing follows at a more measured pace, examining the detail, chronicling the consequences, conjecturing about responsibility. If this is so, it asks, then what? If this happened, what does it mean, why does it matter, and to whom?

Such storytellers are part writer, part sleuth, part social historian. Their stock in trade is detail. With the bogus notion of total objectivity unlikely to be achieved by any mere mortal, their stories must proceed with the same honest push for accuracy, clarity, fairness and balance that good journalism brings to the simplest news story. But for the story to come convincingly to life they need the details. They need the wide shots *and* the close-ups, the small moments, the anecdotes – a depth of information that will layer meaning into the story. They need to supplement the who, what, when and where with as much contextualising how and why as they can muster.

Seeking out detail/taking us there

Good storytellers know they need to take us there – and the fuel is the power of the specific, showing rather than telling the reader what it was like, how it felt to be

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-70033-7 - The Writer's Reader: Understanding Journalism and Non-Fiction

Susie Eisenhuth and Willa McDonald

Excerpt

[More information](#)

there. The detail is what anchors us in reality and if we're lucky – and the writer's arsenal includes a touch of artistry, or even poetry – those details will resonate with deeper meanings that make us pause, make us care.

Fisk's eye for the indelible image – the kind of detail that brings real humanity to reportage – is always in evidence. The extended features that form the chapters of his recent book about reporting the Middle East, *The Great War for Civilisation*, read like on-the-spot history laced with incident, anecdote and detail. Reflecting on the 'titanic bloodbath' of the Iran–Iraq war, he singles out in one battle zone the image of the body of a young man 'curled up like a child', a wedding ring on his finger. 'I am mesmerised by the ring,' he tells us. 'On this hot, golden morning, it glitters and sparkles with freshness and life.' He wonders if the young Iraqi is Sunni or Shia, Christian or Kurd, and he wonders about his wife. 'Somewhere to the north of us, his wife is waking the children, making breakfast, glancing at her husband's photograph on the wall, unaware that she is already a widow and that her husband's wedding ring, so bright with love for her on this glorious morning, embraces a dead finger.'²

Going beyond the givens

The best journalism is about going beyond the givens. That is, going beyond the information that is generated as news events occur, often speeded on its way by PR spin that pushes a particular line. That line, uncontested, can assume the status of a given. Like Fisk's story, Seymour Hersh's 2004 *New Yorker* features chronicling the occupation of Iraq went, startlingly, beyond the givens, revealing – as in the Abu Ghraib prison stories – deeper issues, darker secrets.³ Likewise John Cassidy's extended feature, 'The David Kelly Affair',⁴ went behind the givens strenuously asserted by the Blair Government when it was accused of 'sexing up' the issue of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. Cassidy's careful assembly of the detailed backstory not only put the lie to the government's denial, but also sounded a touching lament for the death of David Kelly, the British scientist caught up in the controversy.

In Australia, in 2005, several journalists – broadcasters, reporters and feature writers – went tenaciously behind the political givens, chipping away at the stony façade of the Immigration Department's denial of the casual cruelty and ineptitude – later officially acknowledged – in its handling of the people caught up in its system. Among them was the *Sydney Morning Herald* team of Marian Wilkinson and David Marr, whose feature stories – including the shabby saga of the Australian Wheat Board and bribes for Saddam Hussein – are characterised by a forensic examination of the record and a focus on the kind of good solid storytelling that makes complex issues accessible.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-70033-7 - The Writer's Reader: Understanding Journalism and Non-Fiction

Susie Eisenhuth and Willa McDonald

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 *The Writer's Reader*

The same patient accumulation of detail was in evidence when they took up the earlier story of the refugees caught up in the *Tampa* rescue and the 'children overboard' myth – when Australia's government nailed its colours to the mast on asylum seekers. Bit by resolute bit, their features provided a fascinating counterpoint to the spin gushing from the national capital. 'We love detail', Marr says. 'Complex details don't necessarily produce complex narratives. Often the reverse: from a blizzard of detail comes the simple, true story.'⁵

Courage under pressure

Going beyond the givens is not easy terrain in the post 9/11 world, where governments are often unnervingly eager to foster fear and lower a blanket of secrecy over public interest issues that are quite properly the domain of journalism. The pressure to toe the 'official' line can be fierce, as we saw when the spinmeisters closed ranks in the runup to the Iraq invasion. Journalists who begged to differ, discharging their ethical duty to question authority – to 'monitor the centres of power', as the courageous Israeli journalist Amira Hass describes it – were less likely to earn plaudits than to be labelled as biased and even unpatriotic.

Taking on the powerful in any arena is a tough gig, as the *West Australian's* Michael Southwell found when he pursued his news story about the mining giant Alcoa and the legacy of its toxic fallout. Southwell's lone investigation had all the makings of an Erin Brockovich saga as he tracked down the people behind the fears surfacing within the local community and then pushed for hard evidence to substantiate their claims. In the end, both the big corporate citizen and the government were forced to take action. The series of stories won Southwell a swag of national awards, including the prestigious national Walkley for news, yet the personal toll was heavy. Efforts to undermine him and pressure to lay off the story came from government and corporate sources and even from inside the paper and he resigned soon after to work independently. 'In the end it just got too hard, too much of a problem . . . It really opened up my eyes about how things work in the world and that you have to work outside the system if you want to challenge authority and challenge the status quo.'⁶

Telling it longer: turning features into books

Apart from the pressures that arise when journalists pursue volatile issues, it is dispiriting that the space for in-depth stories is increasingly shrink-wrapped across the media. Virtual pages are on offer via blogs and online publications of

varying sophistication, but more writers are also opting to extend their stories into non-fiction books. The Marr–Wilkinson features on asylum seekers grew into a powerful non-fiction book, *Dark Victory*,⁷ which flagged the seismic changes those controversial events presaged for Australia's image at home and abroad. *Dark Victory* joined the ranks of other stories that first appeared as features yet had an undertow that cried out for a longer telling: Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, Sebastian Junger's *The Perfect Storm*, John Bryson's Chamberlain saga *Evil Angels*, Margaret Simons' *Fit to Print*, Helen Garner's *Joe Cinque's Consolation*. In a fitting postscript to the problematic Alcoa series, Michael Southwell decided that the murky undertow of that story – and his fight to get it told – was worth more detail. He is writing a non-fiction book about the story. It is called *White Lies*. White, he explains, is the colour of Alcoa's prized alumina. The lies, he adds, speak for themselves.

6 *The Writer's Reader*

Michael Southwell

Michael Southwell joined the *West Australian* in 1988. He later worked as an investigative reporter on the *Sunday Times* and political reporter for Nine News in Perth before re-joining the *West* in 1999. In 2002 his two-year pursuit of Alcoa on pollution, despite heavy pressure to drop the story, won the Munster Prize for Independent Journalism and the national Walkley Award for News. The Walkley citation called the stories (three appear here) ‘a courageous series of lone-hand reporting that relentlessly pursued allegations against a very big corporate citizen’. It noted the lasting impact Southwell’s crusading series had on public policy and the community. Southwell left the *West* soon after and is writing a non-fiction book, *White Lies*, about the story behind the story.

TOXIC FALLOUT NEAR ALCOA

Michael Southwell

West Australian, September 22, 2001

Alcoa Incorporated denies emissions from its alumina refinery are causing health problems. Its claim is supported by the Western Australian (WA) Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), which has taken part in a working group along with Alcoa and community representatives.

The group’s interim report states alumina dust is found two kilometres from the refinery and abnormal levels of heavy metals occur up to six kilometres away. Air samples contain sulphur dioxide above the World Health Organization’s recommended limits and aldehyde gas levels are higher on adjacent farms than at the refinery. The report, however, recommends no further testing.

A University of WA community survey concluded there is a mucous membrane irritant in the atmosphere. Chemistry Centre senior chemist, Doug Ingraham, says there is definitely a link between emissions from the refinery and health problems among Wagerup residents.

CANCER SECRET

Michael Southwell

West Australian, November 29, 2001

MINING giant Alcoa has known for years that pollution from its Kwinana and Wagerup alumina refineries could cause cancer, leukaemia and other health problems, according to confidential company documents.

The documents, provided to a parliamentary inquiry yesterday, reveal the company was aware as early as 1990 that its liquor-burning units produce large concentrations of compounds known to cause cancer.

A memo written in July, 1990, by Alcoa research scientists said several cancer-causing compounds had been found in the liquor-burner smoke stack at Kwinana. 'We should do some homework on how we communicate this information since many of these compounds are known carcinogens, some of them potent carcinogens,' the memo states.

Alcoa spokesman Brian Doy yesterday acknowledged some emissions from the refineries were known to be cancer-causing, but said air samples taken around the plants had shown these were not present at harmful levels. 'The levels found are within every health and safety standard,' Mr Doy said.

The first liquor-burner was installed at the Kwinana refinery in 1989. Another bigger one began operation at Wagerup in late 1996. Since then, there has been a dramatic increase in complaints from Wagerup workers and surrounding residents experiencing headaches, nausea and burning eyes, nose and throat.

The documents were produced by Australian Manufacturing Workers Union health and safety representative Bill Vanderpal as part of his evidence to the Legislative Council's environment and public affairs committee, which is probing Wagerup refinery emissions and health impacts.

Mr Vanderpal, who has worked at the Wagerup plant for 17 years, told the committee he had been warned several times by Alcoa staff that if he made the documents public, he would face legal action.

'I've been sitting on this, waiting for an opportunity to bring it forward,' Mr Vanderpal said.

Mr Vanderpal produced an Alcoa document prepared for a presentation to Kwinana refinery employees which suggested workers should be told that the liquor-burner produced emissions including an alkaline dust, a caustic mist and benzene, which was known to cause cancer.

He said the information was never given to employees. The committee was also shown a report prepared for Alcoa in 1997 by occupational health consultant Brian Galton-Fenzi.

It detailed strategies to overcome 'outrage' about the liquor-burner emissions in the community around the Wagerup refinery.

The report said the burner reduced impurities in alumina and was imperative for improved productivity and reduced overall costs of aluminium production.

8 *The Writer's Reader*

Complaints from employees and nearby communities had the potential to threaten this process.

‘Any unusual diseases (lymphomas, cancers) and possibly the more common ones (asthma, bronchitis) may have to be defended in court, again likely to be costly in time, resources and public relations,’ the report said.

‘Cancer is a major concern to all communities. This is best managed by legitimising the dread. Take the dread seriously and discuss the likelihood of the disease, which could arise from exposure to high concentrations of the gases/chemicals, and have them put in context.’

Documents attached to the report detail various long- and short-term health effects known to be associated with liquor-burner emissions, including leukaemia.

Dr Galton-Fenzi is now the chief occupational physician at the Department of Minerals and Energy.

ALCOA TOLD OF HEALTH ISSUES

Michael Southwell

West Australian, May 24, 2002

A LEAKED internal memo shows Alcoa knew in January 1998 that emissions from its Kwinana and Wagerup alumina refineries appeared to be harming workers.

It discusses the possibility that liquor-burner emissions at the Kwinana refinery are 'hurting our people' and compares the situation to the Wagerup refinery where a liquor-burner had been temporarily shut to minimise the impact on workers and nearby residents.

Alcoa is considering ex-gratia payments of \$350,000 to several former Wagerup workers who developed multiple chemical sensitivity after exposure to fumes from the liquor-burner. Alcoa says only one Kwinana worker has been diagnosed with the condition.

No compensation has been paid.

The memo from Alcoa Kwinana's then head of research and development, Peter Forster, was sent to company doctor Steve Ormonde and six other Alcoa executives including refinery manager Hamish Petrie.

Mr Forster says he has been told by a union representative that about 30 Kwinana workers claimed to have suffered adverse health effects from liquor-burner emissions.

'Given the extreme sensitivity at Wagerup with liquor-burner emissions and alleged adverse health effects, I thought it wise to alert you . . .' the memo says.

'If these are genuine (in that a link to liquor-burner emissions can be established) then I believe that this is a serious concern, in that we may be hurting our people as well as having a deficiency in the reporting and recording of these incidents.

'Obviously, we don't want to hurt people from exposure to emissions but we don't want to get into the Wagerup situation where liquor-burner availability is severely restricted (i.e. completely offline) to minimise the impact of the emissions on our people or the surrounding community.'

Other Alcoa documents show that in 1998, the liquor-burner at Kwinana was emitting more than 3 kg per hour of cancer-causing benzene and other toxic compounds. The concentration of benzene was almost five times the recommended maximum occupational exposure limit.

A former shift foreman at the plant, Dave Thompson, has taken Alcoa to court over chemical injuries he claims were a result of exposure to refinery fumes in early 1998.

Mr Thompson said he knew of about 35 other past and present Kwinana employees who had illnesses, including cancer, which could be attributed to chemical emissions.

'The company should have investigated what was making those workers ill and told the rest of us about the concerns,' he said. 'They should have come clean with us.'

Australian Workers Union organiser Henry Rozmianiec said he was not aware of any workers injured by emissions at Kwinana, apart from Mr Thompson.

Alcoa spokesman Brian Doy said an AWU site representative had raised concerns in 1998 about liquor burning. These were investigated and resolved to the union's satisfaction.

Robert Fisk

Journalist and author Robert Fisk is the Beirut-based Middle East correspondent for the *Independent* newspaper in London. He has lived in the Middle East for almost three decades and holds more British and international awards than any other foreign correspondent. His last book, *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at war*, a history of the Lebanon war, was published in 1990 and revised in 2001. He is the author of *The Point of No Return: The strike which broke the British in Ulster*, and *In Time of War: Ireland, Ulster and the price of neutrality 1939–45*. His latest book, *The Great War for Civilisation: The conquest of the Middle East*, which chronicles his three decades of reporting the Middle East, was published in 2005.

IS THIS SOME KIND OF CRUSADE?

Robert Fisk

Independent On Sunday, May 18, 1997

All morning, the Israelis had shelled Mansouri. Thirty-two-year-old Fadila al-Oglah had spent the night with her aunt Nowkal, cowering in the barn close to the village donkeys and cows. But on Saturday morning, 13 April 1996, she came out of hiding because there was no more bread in the village and the Israeli artillery rounds were landing between the grimy concrete houses. Abbas Jiha, a farmer who acted as volunteer ambulance driver for the Shia Muslim village, had spent the night with his 27-year-old wife Mona, their three small daughters – Zeinab, Hanin and baby Mariam – and their six-year-old son Mehdi in the family's one-room hut above an olive grove, listening to the threats broadcast by the Voice of Hope radio station (which is run by Israel in the 10 per cent of Lebanese territory it occupies north of its border). 'The Israelis kept saying over the radio that the people of the villages must flee their homes,' Abbas Jiha recalls. 'They named Mansouri as one of those villages. They were telling us to escape. They were saying that they wouldn't attack the cars that were leaving the villages. And when I opened the door, I saw that the shelling was coming into Mansouri.'

Across all of southern Lebanon on that spring morning last year, towering clouds of black and grey smoke drifted towards the Mediterranean as thousands of Israeli shells poured into the little hill villages. The sky was alive with the sound of supersonic F-16 fighter-bombers, while several thousand feet above the hamlets and laneways hovered the latest and most ferocious addition to Israel's armoury – the American-made Apache helicopters whose firepower had proved so deadly to the retreating Iraqi army in Kuwait five years before. Just four days earlier, a 14-year-old Lebanese boy had been torn to pieces by a booby-trap bomb hidden beside a wall in the nearby village of Bradchit; the pro-Iranian Hizballah militia, accusing Israel of responsibility, sought revenge by firing Katyusha rockets across the border into Israel, wounding several civilians. In response,