

All the World's a Classroom For Knight Press Fellows

With challenges rising, Knight Foundation's biggest journalism program expands horizons.

by Donatella Lorch for News@Knight|



Knight Fellow Jacqueline Frank with trainees in Bangladesh.

Dressed in their holiday best, 40 journalists and students in Rajshahi, Bangladesh, lined up for hours hoping to be chosen for a workshop led by Knight International Press Fellow Jacqueline (Jackie) Frank. Toting degree certificates and samples of their work, they wanted to learn how to report and produce a television news story.

Only 16 were chosen, but the turnout was no surprise to Frank, even in the small city of 300,000 on the banks of the Padma River. Television journalism classes are scarce in the country's journalism schools because TV has taken root only in the past five years.

But TV viewership is growing, and the media is trying to become more independent despite a repressive government and growing Muslim extremism. Bangladesh, with 133 million people, is one of 69 countries rated "not free" by Freedom House, a nonprofit that promotes human rights, democracy and independent media.

With 83 percent of the world's population lacking access to truly free media, Knight Fellows like Frank are working to make a difference by teaching their colleagues how to produce the news that citizens need to run their countries and their lives.



Where to point the camera is just one of the many lessons Knight Fellow Jackie Frank offers would-be TV journalists in Bangladesh. Frank's students describe her training as "unforgettable."

Growing Program

The Knight program, administered by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) in Washington,

recently received a two-year, \$4.4 million grant from Knight Foundation to expand its broadcast and new media training and build strong regional journalism networks.

The program, begun in 1994, each year sends 20 American journalists around the world to work with local organizations, training and strengthening local media. In the past 11 years, the program has sent 195 print, broadcast, new media and media-management fellows to work with more than 130 partner organizations in more than 75 countries. Knight Fellows train thousands of journalists around the world every year.

Frank is one of them. Working with the Bangladesh Center for Development, Journalism and Communication (BCDJC), she teaches methods of non-fiction video production, emphasizing reporting techniques, use of equipment, planning, filming and producing. By the end of each of the 12 workshops she conducts, the trainees are expected to film and edit a three- to five-minute news story.

As Bangladesh nears elections, terrorist bombings and growing political tensions have Frank understandably concerned about her own safety. Yet the image of Muslim Bangladesh as an anti-American country is, in her eyes, far from the truth. "Bengali culture is famously warm and hospitable," said Frank, a striking, curly-haired blonde who is over six feet tall. "I find myself occasionally uncomfortable with the amount of deference and respect given to me simply because I am a foreigner."

Her students describe her and her training as "unforgettable." In fact, within two months of arriving, Frank had already gotten job interviews at a new television station for 12 of her graduated trainees. For Frank, working with her students on such topics as child labor, acid burning, cholera treatments and Eid festival cooking, has transformed her perspective on journalism.

"It is very different from reporting because I am giving people tangible, hands-on skills, which has very immediate satisfaction both for me and my students," Frank said. "The work I did before, while interesting and gratifying, had a more indirect relationship to the people on the ground: maybe it helped, maybe it went into the information void. But now I can see what my students gain: the ability to write a story and film it, and then edit it into a piece."

Knight Fellows come from all news media and generally have at least eight years experience in their field. The fellowship was originally coined the "Journalism Peace Corps." It is a means for American journalists to give back to their profession by training and motivating other journalists who work under ubiquitous threats, receive poor pay and face the monumental challenge of fighting for and maintaining high ethical standards in their countries. In Bangladesh, the government is wary and critical of journalists — and journalists, in turn, feel targeted.

"None of the investigations into the deaths of 23 journalists killed in Bangladesh has resulted in any convictions," said Mainul Islam Khan, the local representative for Reporters Without Borders and joint director of BCDJC. "That is called impunity."

Intensive Immersion

During a week-long intensive orientation at ICFJ, fellows are taught how to conduct workshops, teach topics from ethics to election coverage and are armed with pounds of training manuals. They head abroad for three to nine months, immersing themselves in the local cultures and working with media organizations, journalism associations, universities, newspapers and television and radio stations. ICFJ remains connected via phone and e-mail, providing support, advice, further contacts and even medical evacuation if needed. Fellows create their own unofficial network, sharing adventures and challenges through round-robin e-mails.

In addition to training, Knight Fellows build local web sites and student newspapers and nurture regional journalist networks. In the early years, the program focused on Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. It has now expanded its scope and created regional footprints and repeat fellowships in Central and South America, Africa, the Middle East, Mongolia and Vietnam.

Adaptability and flexibility are the core values of Knight Fellows, along with strong professional expertise. Open-mindedness is another. But ICFJ also stresses that each fellowship is unique. No two experiences are alike. And no matter how prepared Knight Fellows are, they will face challenges on the ground.

In Rwanda, Michelle Betz found herself teaching radio reporting at first with only a cracked slate blackboard and a few pieces of chalk. She improvised, sharing her own equipment and any other she managed to obtain. In Vietnam, Rick Hornik doubled as ambassador-extraordinaire, endlessly discussing the merits of business-reporter training with the country's top editors to try and get permission for more training workshops. And in Egypt, John Smock banded together with local reporters to free his Egyptian co-trainer who had been detained by the secret police.

A Bonding Experience

Whether fellows have little or no international experience or years of reporting overseas, they return to the U.S. bonded by the life-changing experience of journalism training. Karen Rothmyer, the managing editor of *The Nation* in New York, recently finished a five-month stint in Kenya. She taught journalism at Nairobi University and conducted workshops at newspapers such as the *Kenya Times* and *The Standard*. After nine weeks working with the business reporting staff at the *Kenya Times*, analyzing the weaknesses of their coverage and dissecting earning statements, her payback came when reporters used what they learned. "They were adding REAL people to their stories," she wrote victoriously in an e-mail. "I will come away from this taking satisfaction in what I've accomplished, not just feeling that I learned a lot. It's been the opposite of a vacation — I've never worked harder in my life."

To her surprise, Rothmyer discovered she had entrepreneurial skills. She tracked down seed funds for an oral history project overseen by the school of journalism and a Nairobi city magazine, modeled after *New York Magazine*. "I can honestly say that after my first full day here, when I was desperate and wondered what in God's name had caused me to think this was a good idea — knowing no one, having no idea what I was going to be doing, etc. — I have been truly and deeply happy."

Donatella Lorch, a former New York Times reporter and foreign correspondent, is director of the Knight International Press Fellowships.

[Sidebar]

It's a Fact: Knight Fellows Make a Difference

Less than half of the world's population lives in a free press environment. Since 1994, Knight International Press Fellows have tried to help improve press freedom by going abroad to teach their colleagues how to produce the news that citizens need to run their countries and their lives.

The fellows have "left behind stronger host institutions that continued to serve journalism after the fellows had returned home," said evaluator Lee Becker of the University of Georgia.

Examples of the impact of Knight Fellows' work:

- Besides training others, Knight Fellows have written more than seven journalism training manuals, used by the International Center for Journalists and future fellows. They have built regional web sites and founded journalism school programs in Ethiopia, Georgia and Botswana, a media

center in Moldova and helped establish community radio stations in Mongolia.

- In 2005, Knight Fellows trained Syrian (and Iraqi) journalists in Syria, a first for an American media training organization.
- Under the direction of a Knight Fellow, Venezuelan journalism students founded “Búsquedas,” the first investigative publication devoted exclusively to students’ work in their country.
- Sierra Leonean publishers founded the Association of Newspaper Publishers, an organization designed to address management and marketing issues.
- South African journalists learned how to better manage and market their fledgling news service so their in-depth stories on poor and neglected regions would reach a wider audience.
- Cambodian newspapers, with advice and guidance from Knight Fellows, published their first voters’ guide.
- “While many organizations parachute in and are gone after a week or two, Knight leaves a lasting impact,” said former Knight Fellow Timothy Spence. “Knight Fellows live where we work, and our commitment gives us special insights into the problems and potential of journalism in these countries. We educate, we train, we gain a lifetime of experiences, and hopefully we inspire.”