

Journalism requires “Know Who” as well as “Know How:”

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

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Istanbul, Journalism is a business of know how—how to write or package a story, how to find information or an angle that can shed new light whatever you are covering. Knowing the craft and practicing its techniques is something you learn, sometimes in school, but often by doing, Your work reflects whatever skills and insights you can muster.

I believe I can be good at what I do, but in my case, on international journeys over the decades to more than 60 countries on many continents, there was always something else, an element that proved critical—know who!

Having friends, contacts and cultivating relationships always made the key difference. It always helps to find someone who lives there, who speaks the language, who knows their way around and who can take you into new worlds within the worlds you are trying to navigate.

Maps may help but mentors and mediators who can help you avoid making mistakes and provide the context and background you don't know are indispensable.

Learning the art of networking is crucial. Finding friends with friends is crucial and always makes the difference in fleshing out important stories. This is a way of connecting you to people you would rarely meet on your own

Know Who often allows you to get insider access

As I think back on the many trips I have taken overseas, some on assignment, some as a result of invitations and others by choice, it was always that *know who factor* that made the difference, that showed me places I didn't know existed or made for the most meaningful memories and unexpected adventures.

They gave our work at the company we called Globalvision the essence of what vision we had.

I have been so blessed to build a living rolodex of friendships far more meaningful than the many friend requests I get on Facebook. That may be fun, but it is never the same.

The online world, for me at least, is never like being in the world. Reading about it may be enlightening but doing it is far more personally impactful.

Take my most recent sojourn to Istanbul. I had been there twice before years ago, but I had heard how the city—one of the most beautiful in the world- had grown while Turkey as a

country was booming economically while the country I live in was in an economic free fall. It may be one of the largest mega cities in the world with 20 million residents.

Also Istanbul is in a country playing a new role in the region by challenging Israel and reaching out to the Arab world, a story that is making waves and making news.

I was pleased to be able to check it out for myself and happy that I was being steered by someone in the know.

I spoke at an Internet symposium in an ultra modern conference center linked to Sabanci University. The Turks who were there reported on attempts to by the government to censor the Internet. They had catalogued all of the challenges they face from Internet filtering and bans on 3700 websites.

Most inspiring was the efforts they are making to fight for more openness. I met the organizer of a demonstration that brought 60,000 Turks marching in the streets on this issue last May, the largest march for the right to surf in history.

An old friend who has lived introduced me to the real city. He works now at a university but years ago wrote frequently for Mediachannel, the now ailing website I helped create.

We had never met but were eager to do so. He's an American who has lived in Turkey for 13 years, drawn there by its literary traditions but now teaching history and getting a PhD. He is knowledgeable not just as a scholar but also as someone who had married a local woman and lived in a working class neighborhood. He is steeped in the culture and the country's shifting politics.

He showed me around, while explaining how religion and politics interact. He also knows alot about local foods, hot spots and the nuances of civic life.

He took me into the streets and the subway and even brought me along a day trip by ship to a nearby Island that allowed me to see the incredible expansion of the city with miles and miles of new constructions, with endless office and residential towers.

There seemed to be no end in sight even as the traditonal Islamic culture intermixes with the most up to date consumerism, sport and fashion.

My friend also teaches at a new local high school and he arranged for me to speak to a class of journalism students. Wow, were they impressive! They researched my writing on the Internet and each prepared a thoughtful question that they put to me personally.

The School is ultra modern with small classes and a high level of instruction. How many visitors get to have this type of one on one immersion with young people who represent the emerging Turkey? I have since been told that some of the students now say they want to become journalists as a result of my visit. How Cool!

We went to the offices of the new Al Jazeera Turk channel that is due to go on the air in October staffed by nearly 200 people. They are now in temporary quarters and were training 30 new staffers, some refugees from CNN's operation there. I had met some of their people at conference in their headquarters city of Doha earlier in the year and they were glad to show me their ambitious plans.

It's all part of Al Jazeera's evolution into a truly global network. They now broadcast in Arabic, English and are adding services in Turkish, Balkan languages, Indian languages and Swahili for a new channel in East Africa. I had a chance to lunch with and talk with some journalists who know so much more than I do about the local scene although they seemed approving of my recent reports from Istanbul.

I am thrilled, after all my years in American TV, in local news. Cable News, Network news and then as an independent filmmaker, to have even a small association with the network that is transforming TV news worldwide. (I am now a regular contributor to the Al Jazeera English website.)

We also checked out the famous Biennale Art exhibit that takes place in Venice and is now touring to the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art. There, in a small room, we watched the kinescope of a thrice weekly TV panel discussion from the early fifties called Chromoscope sponsored by the Longines Watch company.

It included the US Ambassador to Iran and an Oil Company executive discussing how important oil is to the US economy and foreign policy. You don't find such candid conversations on TV showing way oil imperialism works.

In the case of Iran, the Ambassador spoke about a politician named Mossadegh who he said he was very impressed by because of his brilliance of and good sense of humor, Information on the screen then explained that Mossadegh was soon overthrown by the US CIA that backed the Shah who was effusively praised by the panel. It offered great insight into how western diplomats and businessman try to infiltrate into local politics,

Finally, last and most moving, a friend in the US put me in touch with a brave publisher of books in Kurdish who told us about the escalating human rights abuses against the Kurdish people in Turkey, a subject that went unmentioned in my first few days there.

He took us to meet the lawyers representing Kurdish leader, Abdullah Ocalan, founder and leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). And public enemy #1 for Turkish officials. He is now in a Gitmo type prison on an island off Istanbul where he can get few visits. They say he is loosing his health but denied all human contact and the ability to communicate with his people. He survives mentally by reading. They told me he lives in a room with 1200 books and 2500 publications.

One of the two young lawyers we met has already been sentenced to 12 ½ years for aiding and abetting a terrorist and perhaps being one. He soldiers on as one of the few who can even see his client when the government permits visits, which they haven't for months.

When his attorney is with him, he can't take notes (even as a guard does), and cannot tape record comments. I asked about a TV interview. They shook their heads.No way!

This chilling conversation introduced me to another banned subject that is unfortunately ignored by most of the world—the fate of a persecuted Kurdish minority of twenty million people that is said to have lost 40,000 members in Turkey's brutal war on what it brands as terrorism. (The day I returned to New York, there was an eruption of terrorism with a bombing in the Capital of Ankara. Violent Repression always produces violent responses!)

Five days is hardly enough time to become an expert on Turkey but thanks to some "know-who" I was able to give two talks, meet journalists, artists, teachers and students. And also

sample Turkey's distinctive books of political comics and caricatures.

I didn't get to smoke shiska but I did acquire a taste for Raki, a liqueur that puts ouzo to shame and wrote three dispatches including this one.

Not bad for less than a week's work!

*News Dissector **Danny Schechter** writes a daily blog at newsdissector.com. Comments to dissector@mediachannel.org*

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