

Who'd be a reporter?

HND Broadcast Journalism student Travis Maxwell meets veteran newsman Dr. John Coulter who tells him about a career where undercover meetings with secret sources in remote cemeteries was once all in a day's work.

The job of a news reporter is often unpredictable, but what about interviewing terrorists? What dangers might that present, what meeting places were optimal, how could they be reached out to and why would they let someone in particular into their circle?

“During my 43 years in journalism I covered loyalist paramilitaries, republican paramilitaries, paramilitaries from the far right, organisations from the far left and Islamic radicals”. The pedigree of Dr. John Coulter, a lecturer on the Sports Journalism Level 3 course at our Springvale campus, who has these answers from first-hand experience.

Coulter starts by referring to his background as a facet behind his interest in this field, explaining, “The reason I got involved in reporting on paramilitaries and terrorists was because I come from a Christian background.”

He added, “as a Christian I believed in peace, as Jesus Christ believed in peace. I became fascinated as to why people would need to use violence to express their particular point of view.”

When prompted on why he'd take on such a dangerous occupation, he reminisced about how the importance of the story, the rush of adrenaline and the pressure to do the job was at the forefront while working in a Troubles-era Northern Ireland.

Such a job required proficiency in several skills and Coulter's multi-vocational course trained him in taking notes and photographs.

This came to the interest of various extremists who would invite journalists out to take photos of their people, in what was noted as a show of strength; they understood this would be broadcast or published.



Dr. John Coulter

A vital aspect in this kind of reporting is confidentiality. Coulter went on to explain that he'd never know who he was going to meet, merely being told a time and location. He elaborated further by stating, “Obviously if you knew the name of your source, the security forces may move to arrest you, as you're in possession of delicate information.” Comparatively, “If terrorist organisations knew you were revealing the identity of their sympathisers, I don't think you'd be around too long.” He refers to Rule 14 of the Editors' Code of Practice, stipulating anonymity must be ensured of sources, and revealing a source not only destroys credibility and trust but in this context also puts a life in danger.

Journalists must ensure their safety as well as that of their source. Whenever the mobile phone era came in as a very useful journalism tool, certain sources would have told Coulter to not bring the mobile phone to the interview, as they're able to be used as a tracking device. Another way to ensure secrecy is to choose a private location. Coulter revealed, “I used to find old cemeteries, particularly ones with old buildings in them, like a disused hut or church.” “I would never meet any terrorist source in a restaurant or in public view, where somebody could recognise them”.

With the ethical and legal minefield that a journalist must traverse, the dangers to one's own safety are numerous. Coulter experienced doxing, and threats of violence, describing one time where he was physically assaulted.

“I can recall on one occasion I did some research into the Ku Klux Klan in Ireland and activities of fascist organisations, and they sent a threat to me, telling me to take my ‘holidays’”.

Journalists can face imprisonment and even death in some cases, which shows that even today a journalist's life is never free from danger.