CREATIVE WRITING FOR JOURNALISTS
Supporting the Development of Business Journalism in Armenia

Support to SME Development in Armenia (SMEDA)
co-funded by EU and BMZ, implemented by GIZ’s Private Sector Development SC Programme

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Supporting the development of business journalism in Armenia

Elaborated by: Andrew Erskine and Amalia Iligner

tom fleming / creative consultancy /

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

EU4Business
The “Support to SME Development in Armenia” (SMEDA) Project is co-funded by the European Union and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and implemented by GIZ’s PSD SC Regional Programme. SMEDA is part of the EU4Business and EU4Innovation Initiatives.

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1. Introduction

About this assignment

This objective of this assignment, part of the “Support to SME development in Armenia” (SMEDA)¹, project was to train a group of Armenian journalists writing about business, start-ups, innovation and the economy to better tell the story of how business and economy are changing and growing. This in turn helps support the strength of SMEs by better telling their stories to potential investors, the government and a wider audience, helping to create a healthier and more robust sector. It was the first of four connected phases – the other three being to support start-ups in successfully gaining crowd funding and to provide strategic support and advise SMENDC and the wider support environment for small businesses in the country and to provide content and support for the SMEDA website.

This assignment was managed by Tom Fleming Creative Consultancy [www.tfconsultancy.co.uk] in partnership with Terry Kirby and Amalia Iligner from Goldsmiths, University of London with assistance of SMEDA staff.

1.1 The Round Table (Sept 27, 2017)

The assignment was started with a round table for local experts and journalists hosted by SMEDA to better understand the strengths, weaknesses, challenges and gaps faced by Armenian business journalism in telling economic, business and innovation stories. The key findings of the event were that journalists often lacked detailed knowledge and operated in an environment that was often not conducive to the production of high-quality business journalism. The overall conclusions of the session were:

Strengths:

- Ability to cover facts efficiently (esp.tech-journalists)
- Tech-journalists are experts in their field and have profound tech knowledge and a well-established network
- Journalists may bridge start-ups and connect businessmen with each other, inform about educational and information platforms
- There are examples of successful media projects based on human stories, such as “Made in Armenia“, IT-teens (itel.am project – with 60,000 readers in 2 weeks)
- Some good Investigative journalists e.g hetq.am

Weaknesses:

- Lack of detailed professional knowledge of the economy and IT as most of journalists received general education in universities and did not specialize in economics, statistics or IT

¹ SMEDA is co-funded by the European Union and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and implemented by GIZ’s Private Sector Development in South Caucasus Programme. SMEDA is part of the EU4Business and EU4Innovation initiatives of the European Union (www.smeda.am).
• Inability to present the context and meaning of Governmental policies and decrees to the audience due to a lack of specialist knowledge
• Challenges in reaching an audience not motivated to read technical articles

Opportunities:

• Knowledge exchange platforms should be established to facilitate exchanges between experienced businessmen and start-ups. These would help journalists to learn about topics of interest, concerns, and problems (e.g., www.bizprotect.am – where businesses may anonymously report violations, corruptions, or any other concerns they might have)
• Tech and IT people are flexible and open to sharing stories

Threats

• Many businesses (especially in the regions of Armenia) are afraid to share and publish information
• Sections of the audience find negative aspects in every journalist’s writing
• Monopolies hinder the growth of SMEs (a general issue in business)
• Some articles, even the well written ones based on research, fail to find an audience

The findings from this round table helped to steer the content of the training course.

1.2 Applications process and selection of participants

In the beginning of October 2017, the course was advertised openly to Armenian journalists online. The advert outlined the purpose and substance of the training they would receive and the criteria for selection:

“The Training on Creative Writing for the journalists aims at improving and enhancing the capacities and skills of the selected Armenian journalists who are actively engaged in economic, business, high-tech, innovation and start-up topics to enable them to better and more efficiently present economic topics to the general public and target audience. This should happen by creating interest towards new and rapidly growing innovation, high tech and start-up ecosystems through an engaging way of presenting relevant topics.”

The training is composed of 2 parts:

• Introductory day to reveal the existing problems, knowledge/skill gaps and define ways for improvement and enhancement of capacities (1 day)
• Theory and international best practice, experience/techniques on writing stories and articles of economic and innovative nature in media outlets to engage and attract readers from the general audience (2-day workshop)
• Practical training on creative writing with specific tasks for participants: each will prepare 5-10 articles within the areas of concern, followed by discussions and suggestions for improvements (2-day workshop)

Who can participate?

The competition is open to Armenian journalists who are actively engaged in writing about the private sector topics, such as economics, business, innovation, high-tech and start-ups, currently working for local media outlets or as independent freelance journalists.

The main selection criteria will be:
• Active article and story writing experience
• Good command of English language: speaking and writing
• Open to learning and advancing working capacities, team work and collaboration

Overall the applications were strong. A total of 16 candidates were shortlisted from which 13 were selected based on the strength of their applications and suitability. The selected candidates represented a diverse group of starting and established journalists working for national publications, television and radio a few with 10+ years of experience, many with 5+ years and some who were at the beginning of their careers.

1.3 The Journalism Training (19-22 October 2017)

The training was designed by Terry Kirby and Amalia Iligner from Goldsmiths, University of London. It was based on the highly successful MA in Journalism that Terry runs for the University (https://www.gold.ac.uk/pg/ma-journalism/).

The course was structured into two parts - theory and practice. The course in Armenia was delivered by Amalia – with first half run in Yerevan and the weekend half in The Arrarat Resort in TsagHKadzo.

A full breakdown of the course is in Appendix 1

Day one

Day one was an introductory day to reveal existing challenges, knowledge and skill gaps with clearly defined pathways to improvement. Each participant was invited to share two pieces of work beforehand - one which they felt was a strong piece of work, and the other which they felt was less successful. This gave the presenter a good understanding of:

• How the participants approached: structure, tone, facts, quotes, sourcing and news values.
• Their ability to critique their own work.
• Any similar strengths/weaknesses across the group.

Observations on day one

While there were some very specific strengths and weaknesses, there were certainly overall themes that were common to the group.

Strengths: There seemed to be a common desire to cover a wide range of topics, and the ability to file a large number of stories quickly on a daily basis. Some participants reported that they filed up to ten stories a day.

Weaknesses: These broadly fit into two categories: difficulties in working as a journalist in Armenia (e.g. a lack of objective data, difficulty in locating primary sources, time and budget pressures) and an approach to news writing that seemed to stray into the areas of editorial/comment and PR. There were many examples where in participants’ articles there were no quoted sources, a clear lack of expert opinion sought, and the writers’ own opinions presented as fact. Nearly all the stories submitted lacked a clear “news point” and were not structured in a way that helped the reader gain a better understanding of the subject.

Day two

The second day was a mix of theory and a real-world example of a news conference, to bring the theory to life. The “homework” for the second day was to research some up and coming Armenian start-ups and businesses and prepare well thought out interview questions. The presenter had interviewed each CEO of the businesses and had a clear idea of what “newsworthy” things they might say. The task was to approach the day like a real news event and write a short news story over-night. This would give the presenter an insight into how each
participant prepared and planned their stories.

**Observations on day two:**
Many of the participants questions revealed that they had not undertaken basic research ahead of time. However, many of the participants were good at thinking on their feet and asked very probing “follow-up” questions, demonstrating a natural flair for interrogation and confidence. This exercise demonstrated that a useful news story could be written in a short period of time but only when adequate “prep” had been undertaken.

**Day three**
The third day looked at finished news stories from the previous day, and then looked at UK journalism theory and best practice.

**Observations on Day three:**
- Nearly all participants successfully submitted a story in the allocated time. All used quotes accurately and many made good progress at structuring their stories well. The CEOs had each hinted at quite news worthy developments in their businesses and a few participants picked up on some very strong news angles.

- The near-uniform lack of adequate preparation research showed glaring holes in the stories submitted. There was very little context added beyond the direct quotes and - rather alarmingly - about a third of the stories submitted had not checked facts and submitted stories that read more like opinion pieces than reportage.

**Day four:**
The Final day looked at different formats - profiles, features, Q&As and ended with a pitching clinic to an external editor, Maria Titizian, the founder of Armenian online news organisation, Evnreport.com.

**Observations on Day four:**
Many of the participants had incorporated some key learnings from the previous days of workshops and came with good ideas, without exception each participant had thought carefully about their idea and showed real enthusiasm about how to turn it into a story. However, after a few hours many of these initial “seed ideas” had not been sufficiently fleshed out. A few participants had used the time to undertake desk research that added context to their initial idea, but many had not used some basic research tools to make their stories compelling. This uncovered a weakness that had been present in the previous days: a lack of preparation and planning before starting to write an article.
2. Recommendations for further activity and support for journalists

Based on the roundtable and the training workshop there are a set of recommendations for how journalists could be better supported in the future if Armenian business journalism is to thrive. One of the overall challenges the media in Armenia, as in other countries, is the challenges of adapting to the continually changing business environment for journalism. With a few exceptions, printed newspapers, magazines and online news sources, struggle for revenue and sustainable business plans, which in turn puts pressure on journalists. There are fewer opportunities for serious journalism of technical and complex subject areas, including business and economics. The small size of the internal market in Armenia means these pressures are more keenly felt.

The key recommendations for improving the quality of business journalism from the experience of the course are:

- **Basic skills can be rolled out:** Many of the participants revealed the challenges of working as reporters in Armenia, such as lack of editorial support, resources and time pressures. However, some fundamental journalistic skills such as the planning and structuring of news stories can be implemented straightaway.

- **Role of the journalist:** Although “time pressures” were frequently cited as key challenges, it must be underlined that a journalist’s job is not to “churn out” stories by number, but to deliver story that readers will find valuable, the key is to get original newsworthy quotes/statements and contextualise these with sound research. The key recommendation here is for local journalists to critically analyse their own work against “gold standard” English-language publications such as The Economist and The Financial Times.

- **Differentiate between news and opinion:** This is a tricky area to advise on, as there are cultural interpretations about what makes news distinct from opinion. British reporting is built on the distinction between news and comment and a series of workshops outlining the importance of the distinction and the role each plays for readership and civil society could help individual journalists see their work as part of a “professional field” with a vital function.

- **Pitching work:** There are a number of seminars and online tutorials that look specifically at how to pitch to editors. These are invaluable, because they force reporters and writers to critically appraise their ideas, undertake necessary background research, identify potential sources and data and craft a compelling news hook that interests readers. Some form of specific “pitching clinic” would be strongly advised, as this would help develop reporters’ news sense and force them to get into the good habit of undertaking thorough preparation before starting to write.

- **Networks and events for business journalists:** A series of events connected to a network for business journalists might help raise their profile and that of the importance of journalism to the economy.
Annex 1: Course Structure

WORKSHOP SCHEDULE - Proposal

Training for journalists for private sector and start-up topics 19 - 22 October 2017

As outlined in the brief, the training is composed of two parts - theory and practice. An introductory day to reveal existing challenges, knowledge/skill gaps with clearly defined pathways to improvement. The second day will centre around UK journalism theory and best practice. The final two days will focus on interactive exercises and real-world examples to bring the theory to life.

We suggest the following schedule:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day one</th>
<th>Thursday 19 October: 2-6pm</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objective</strong></td>
<td>To identify the current challenges in news gathering and news writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pre-preparation</strong></td>
<td>Attendees to send two examples of their recent work ahead of the session. One which they feel was successful and another which they feel could be improved. They should be prepared to talk briefly about their writing process and news gathering techniques.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Session structure</strong></td>
<td>The presenter will give attendees an overview of the four days, and give a brief summary of her experience in print and online media. (20 mins)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>She will begin the session showing a piece of her own work, which appeared in the international press and was successful. She will share her newsgathering process and how the story was commissioned. She will show a story that was problematic/weaker and ask the class if they can identify where it could be improved. (20 mins)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Then she will select three participants to introduce their chosen pieces of work to the class (these will be identified ahead of the session and each story will be viewed on the monitor) and the group will have a discussion about the strengths and where</td>
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<tr>
<td>improvement might be made. (60 mins)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The presenter will write a list of challenges, which appear to be common to many of the participants. (10 mins)</td>
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<tr>
<td>We will have a short break (10 mins) and resume by putting the group into pairs, with each pair talking about their chosen pieces of work. We will add to the list of “common challenges”.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The class will then discuss these challenges and together we will split them into: news gathering, process and writing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>We will discuss some ideas about how best to overcome these and talk about those which can be more readily overcome and those which are the result of factors outside of an individual journalist’s control.</td>
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**Takeaway exercise**

| To put some of these ideas into practice, an “at home” exercise to be completed in time for the second session is recommended. |
| The participants will be given the details of this tech conference that happened in Armenia. |
| They will be asked to do some background research, find the names and titles of the key people they would interview, and prepare a list of questions, and suggest an angle. |

**Day two**

**Thursday 20 October: 2-6pm**

| Objective |
| To share UK best practice and to deconstruct how news stories are found and written |
Pre-preparation

Overnight task

Session structure

*Balance, 'right to know', the need for journalists to be tenacious and ask questions which are sometimes not appreciated by the recipient.*

She will share how she approaches UK businesses, politicians and the challenges she faces.

She will present her suggestions of ways to overcome the challenges that were discussed on the previous day.

The next part of the session will begin with a classic newswriting exercise, which shows news values. This is taken from one of the leading news educators Anna McKane.

We will look at a short video by leading business journalist Robert Peston: http://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/journalism/subject-guides/business-and-the-economy/article/art201307021112133659

The presenter will talk about the news pyramid and how to write a classic news intro using UK style. And talk about “finding an angle”.

During the afternoon we will have a live panel with real co-founders of Armenian startups, we have had volunteers from: http://hexdivision.com
7smarts.com, www.buymie.eu, localzapp.com

Each co-founder will do a 5-10 minute presentation about news from their company, and the participants will have the opportunity to ask questions, just as they would in a press conference.

They will be allowed to take pictures on their phones, record the presentations and take notes.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Takeaway exercise</th>
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### Day three
Saturday 21 October: TBC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>To consolidate theory with practical newsgathering, writing and editing exercises</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-preparation</td>
<td>Overnight task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session structure</td>
<td>We will look at best practice examples from the UK press: including the Financial Times, The Evening Standard and The Economist.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The class will split into pairs and each one will be given an example from the UK and an Indian business publication. They will discuss the differences and which they feel is more effective. The presenter will ask them to look at how each one uses numbers.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The presenter will give a short talk on how to effectively handle numbers and statistics.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Participants will be given a printed brief with a press release written from information taken from the World Bank:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><a href="http://www.doingbusiness.org/data/exploreeconomies/armenia">http://www.doingbusiness.org/data/exploreeconomies/armenia</a></td>
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<td></td>
<td>They will be asked to come with a list of people they would want to speak to if they were writing a story about it. (the idea is that this will encourage writers to think about talking to private sector businesses who</td>
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</table>
contribute to these “macro” figures, and to personalise what's going on in business).


We will talk about its use of numbers, quotes, its structure and its intro.

Three participants will be asked at random to share their interviewee suggestions about the story.

We will make a list of all potential interviewees. The presenter will have a list of all the people that she would approach if she were writing this story in the UK. We will also talk about verification of facts, and how we approach this in the UK.

Next participants will re-write the World Bank news story intro using the principles they have learned. And suggest how they would use numbers and who they would quote.

We will have a short discussion on the exercise before the participants split into pairs.

Each pair will discuss the exercise and share their approach. One participant from each pair will present the similarities and differences.

The presenter will write down a list of potential interviewees and a list of possible angles.

Participants will be given a press release from the same event as the overnight exercise and be given one hour to write a 500-word news story, with a clear angle.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Break</th>
<th>BREAK - during the break the presenter will select a few stories to present to the class.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Takeaway exercise</strong></td>
<td>Suggest five stories ideas from the press conference. Including: the news angle and sample quotes, and pictures.</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Day four</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Sunday 22 October: TBC</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objective</strong></td>
<td>To consolidate theory with practical newsgathering, writing and editing exercises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pre-preparation</strong></td>
<td>Overnight exercise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Session structure</strong></td>
<td>We will have a brief discussion about the news conference and talk about how they found it.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Each participant will present their strongest idea to the class.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The presenter will choose a few ideas and we will talk about how these ideas could work across different media.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● How do words and pictures work best together?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● What makes a good headline?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Why picture captions are important?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Why we always fact-check</td>
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<td></td>
<td>We will look at how we would pitch these ideas in the UK. The presenter will talk a little bit about how she pitches stories, and how different publications such as The Economist and The Guardian vary.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>We will look at how material from a press conference can give rise to a number of “follow-up stories” and how these events are useful ways to build contacts.</td>
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<td>We will look at examples of how to build more news and features from this initial event. Such as: Q&amp;As,</td>
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profiles, “ghosted interviews”, photo galleries, stories that are parts of a series.

Takeaway materials:

Each participant will receive a take-home pack which contains:

- Examples of best practice from UK press
- Explanations of news pyramid, intros, structure
- Robert Peston’s rules for business writing
- The Economist Style Guide’s rules for numbers, stats and percentages
- A list of top tech and business blogs