

23/11/2003

Meet Ali - the accidental newsman

PHILOSOPHERS, princes and prophets would have sworn that men enjoy the fruits of success because of the way they govern themselves. For Ali Aliman, ntv7's broadcast journalist, the story is slightly altered. He believes fate and luck played a big role in leading him to a fulfilling career.

After all, it was through a slip of chance that he found his passion in the television business.

"When I accepted a job as broadcast journalist at a local television station nine years ago, it never occurred to me that I would be retelling reallife dramas," Ali muses.

"I had spent four years in school as an Arts and Social Science student, poking fun at the studpuppet anchormen and ethical dilemmas of local TV news. Now, I've joined the other side and crossed the line into TV journalism. I should be laughing at myself!"

It's strange how things turned out for Ali. As a student, he had dreamed of doing so many different things. Decisions, decisions - the ultimate predicament that all school-leavers face.

At crunch time, he took a gamble and did what any 20-year-old would do after graduating from university. He redpenned all potential job openings in the newspaper recruitment page, sent out resumes to everyone, and prayed one of the companies would respond.

His prayers must have worked wonders because he was called in for an interview with a local television station and was engaged full-time as a broadcast journalist a few weeks later.

Those were heady days. Ali remembers his first on-air news assignment fondly: a community service event attended by the former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"It was a live report from a news van outside the Prime Minister's office. I had to describe the scene while a few hundred metres away crowds rocked a police car while trying to catch a glimpse of the former PM."

Since that fateful first assignment, Ali's life has been a rollercoaster ride. Teamed with a camera operator, Ali wanders around the country in a news van, eating vast quantities of fast food, linked to the assignment desk by mobile phones, walkie-talkies and beepers. In sharp contrast to print reporting, which is primarily a solo experience, TV reporting is like a hyperactive indulgence.

There are slow news days where he'll be looking for stories that won't drive viewers to push the button on their TV remotes. But when there's breaking news, everything speeds up and almost everyone drops anything else he or she is working on to concentrate on the big story.

"I've learnt to adjust my routine to the only two `speeds' in local television newsrooms - too slow and too fast," he confides.

When he's not on the streets, Ali is often in the ntv7 newsroom busy reading and researching story ideas for the next news clip.

"Breaking news is all that matters in television news; you never know when you're going to get pulled off a story about the little girl battling cancer and sent to East Malaysia to cover a fire," he says.

TV news is more volatile than the print medium. While a newspaper reporter might cover two or three stories a week, a broadcast journalist is expected to cover two or three stories daily.

It was through the daily assignments routine that Ali learned about the

TV business, including the cardinal rule of news reporting: "Always carry hairspray. You'll never know when you might be interviewing a reclusive CEO," he interjects. "Much like a Boy Scout, a TV reporter must always be prepared, which translates to carrying a warm jacket, a change of clothes, and your makeup kit wherever you go."

In Ali's world, a picture says much more than a thousand words. As part of his daily grind, Ali sieves through miles of tape to find appropriate footage to complement his stories.

Competition for scoops, says Ali, isn't always between reporters. Most times, it's between assignment desks.

At each station, the assignment desk is manned by a team of producers who choose story ideas for the reporters, make the contacts, schedule interviews and assignment crews. They're the scanner jockeys who listen to the police and fire radio frequencies day and night, hoping to hear something other stations don't.

"In the field, you constantly run into crews from other stations. As anyone who watches TV news knows all too well, the stations cover almost all the same stories. A sense of camaraderie develops, even within the context of the competition."

Among reporters and camera operators in the field, it's a cooperative competition. Stations routinely exchange pool video, rent transportation together, and return each other's lost equipment.

Over the years, Ali has discovered that there is a sense of shared endeavour in television. TV crews tend to hang out together, forging a united-we-stand union.

Ali recalls an assignment where the TV news teams stood up for their rights. "I was waiting in the rain with other news crews on an assignment involving domestic violence. A camerawoman, tired of being harassed by the police, balked when an officer singled her out and told her to turn off her light.

"Instead of following instructions, she crept to where the perpetrator was hiding and managed to capture few minutes of an exclusive interview. That night, she earned the respect of her peers."

It's those kinds of days that makes Ali's job worth going the extra mile. But whether it's a slow or fast day, Ali keeps busy on the job, learning new skills, tapping into the grapevine, and on the prowl for the next big story.