

From: Marshall, Andrew M. (M Edit Ops)
Sent: Friday, May 27, 2011 8:57 PM
To: Cass, Amanda (M HR Ops)
Cc: Chalmers, John E. (M Edit Ops)
Subject: Appeal

Dear Amanda

As discussed with you yesterday, I am sending this letter to explain why I am asking Thomson Reuters to withdraw the formal written warning letter issued to me on April 13, 2011, by Bryony Heaton, head of human resources in ASEAN. I was issued the letter because of a comment I made in a Reuters internal chat room for journalists on March 19, which was deemed to be "insensitive and inappropriate". Thank you very much for taking the time to consider my appeal. The following represents all I feel I need to say, but if you have questions you would like to ask me, you can contact me on my Reuters e-mail or call me on my mobile number +65 9690 3040.

As you know, a respected colleague and friend of mine, David Fox, suffered a much worse fate as a result of his reply to my comment: he was fired, and was denied any opportunity to appeal, a sudden and shocking end to a long and exceptionally distinguished career with Reuters (he wrote his first story for Reuters 29 years ago as a stringer in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, and he has been working full-time for us for 20 years). I am aware that my appeal hearing is only concerned with whether the written warning I received was justified, and will not consider whether David's treatment was appropriate. However, because our two cases are inextricably intertwined, my appeal will refer extensively to both, in support of my argument that my punishment should be reconsidered.

My appeal is based on arguments and evidence that I was never given the opportunity to present at my original hearing, which in my opinion was cursory and unsatisfactory.

My argument will proceed in three stages.

First, I will explain that the exchange between me and David was typical of everyday behaviour displayed by journalists when dealing with situations in which we face direct personal danger, or are exposed to intensely traumatic scenes of death or human suffering. In David's case he was exposed to both - he was having to deal with the emotional impact of watching extremely distressing events, with the impact made far worse by the fact he has been traumatised and greatly damaged by having directly witnessed so many terrible things during his career, and he was also facing the possibility of being at direct personal risk from the radiation cloud heading towards Tokyo. The exchange that David and I had was a textbook example of the way in which journalists (and indeed people in all professions that involve great risk to personal safety and exposure to traumatic events) attempt to deal with stress and function effectively in harrowing circumstances. Such behaviour is widely recognized in academic literature and I will include some references to that.

Second, I will argue that the disciplinary action taken against me was the result of a genuine misunderstanding and a clash of corporate cultures which is entirely understandable in such a large and new company that is still figuring out how best to integrate all its different parts. The disciplinary decisions that were taken as a result of the chat room exchange were made in good faith but without full knowledge of the facts and the mitigating circumstances. This is largely because of failures in the way the disciplinary process was conducted, which meant that neither David or I were able to make an effective case for our defence that could be conveyed to those who decided upon the appropriate disciplinary action to take. As a result, the decisions that were made were wrong. I will argue that the content of our comments, taken together with the mitigating evidence, did not merit the severity of the penalties imposed, and that had we had the opportunity to explain these points earlier, a different decision would have been taken.

Thirdly, I will try to show why I believe it is so important for Thomson Reuters to find a way to put right any mistakes that were made.

BLACK HUMOUR AND TRAUMATIC STRESS

It is a well-documented fact that people working in high-stress professions involving danger and/or exposure to traumatic scenes often use humour as an essential coping mechanism. This is sometimes known as “black humour” or “gallows humour”. You will hear it not only in newsrooms covering stories about war and disaster, but also among doctors, nurses, paramedics, ambulance drivers, firefighters, police, soldiers, and so on. It is a phenomenon extensively documented in academic literature.

If you wish to do your own research, you will be able to very easily find many studies to support this point, but to save you time I will draw your attention to a few. One of the most recent studies directly relevant to this issue was published in January this year in the *International Journal of Psychology*. I have attached a copy of the article, [*Coping with traumatic stress in journalism: A critical ethnographic study*](#) by Marla Buchanan and Patrice Keats. The key section is this:

Black humor or gallows humor was described by several journalists as “nervous humor.” The majority of the journalists stated that they used gallows humor as a way to cope with events they were witnessing at the scene. “I do have a fairly black sense of humor . . . It helps me get through things.” “Black humor is a way of blocking it out.” “Others may see me as emotionally detached . . . we sort of have a weird sense of humor.” “You’ll just cut a joke just to change the mood . . . You do it just because you have to.” “You’ll find something funny and you change the topic so you are not focusing on what is there. It’s probably a mechanism to try to not focus on what’s bad.” These statements underscore the fact that gallows humor is a coping strategy used by journalists to detach or change the focus from the horror of what they are witnessing and is used as a way to get the job done without losing one’s focus on the story. Many reported that gallows humor was common. “You find it in every newsroom, just that kind of nervous humor because no one is really comfortable writing about it.” Others claimed that using gallows humor was better than showing that a journalist is struggling with what is happening at a traumatic event, substituting one acceptable emotion for other emotions that may not be acceptable to express at the time: “It’s about laughing instead of crying. I will laugh at some of the horrible things that I really want to cry about . . . I have to.” “We use it to lighten things up.” One journalist sums up this coping strategy:

“If a member of the public was eavesdropping on what we were talking about, they would think we were the most insensitive people around. This black humor is a defense mechanism because if you didn’t put something between you and what you’re seeing, the absolute horror . . . that is beyond belief to the average person, it would overwhelm you. It’s just a coping mechanism.”

A second study I have attached is about how ambulance workers cope with traumatic stress, [*What makes an incident critical for ambulance personnel? Emotional outcomes and implications for intervention*](#). The reason I added it is because its characterization of the value of black humour is closer to my own personal experience:

Black humour is another method of coping. It turns vulnerable feelings into a format which suggests that the speaker has mastered them, and in fact, they do become more bearable. It provides bonding among peers at times of emotional vulnerability, which is another important form of coping. However, it may also isolate them from non-peers, who respond to the uncomfortable feelings the ambulance workers are keeping out of mind:

“Because if you can’t laugh, you’ll cry. Because you, if you can’t brush it off, you’re going to internalize it and if you internalize it, you’re not going to be able to do the job.” “And if the public were to look at us going, God you guys are gory and ghoulish. No, we talk about it and that’s our, that’s our debriefing, without actually acknowledging that’s our debriefing.”

I’ll draw your attention to one more article, from the Australian Journal of Disaster and Trauma Studies, in 1997, *An Evaluation of Humour in Emergency Work*, by Carmen Moran and Margaret Massam from the School of Social Work at the University of New South Wales. You can view it at this link: <http://www.massey.ac.nz/~trauma/issues/1997-3/moran1.htm> The following is from the abstract of the study:

Emergency work can be distressful, but in recent years there has also been a growing number of publications which recognise the positive aspects experienced by emergency workers. This paper identifies humour as a coping strategy which contributes to emergency workers' adjustment to difficult, arduous and exhausting situations. We argue that humour enhances communication, facilitates cognitive reframing and social support, and has possible physical benefits.

In the unlikely event that it makes any difference to the result of this appeal, I would be delighted to send more articles and references. But I think you get the point.

To help you understand what happened, I think it is important that I give you some brief background about myself and David. This is mainly to show that both of us have suffered significant problems in the past because of the psychological damage caused by repeated and prolonged exposure to personal danger and to extremely disturbing scenes of death and suffering. And we have both had to learn coping mechanisms in order to function not just in our jobs, but in our lives.

I joined Reuters in 1994 as a graduate trainee on the editorial training scheme. I still regard this as one of the best things that has ever happened to me and I have never for a moment regretted the career path I chose. The positive experiences and personal growth that my career in journalism enabled far outweigh any negative consequences. But clearly, reporting from very dangerous or very dangerous situations has a damaging impact on those of us who do it. Over the years I have lost several colleagues who I also regarded as friends, and also lost several colleagues who reported to me as their manager. In an initial draft of this appeal I wrote about them, and this turned out to be a very emotional process, and what I wrote ended up being too long and too personal to be of much use in this appeal. For what it is worth I have included what I wrote [here](#). There is no particular reason you need to read it unless you think it is necessary to help you make a decision.

In the years since I left Iraq I have struggled with some of the effects of traumatic stress. Trauma affects different people in different ways, and I never fit the textbook symptoms of PTSD. I was affected in three main ways. The first and most debilitating was periods of severe clinical depression. They all happened since I left Iraq, although of course I cannot be sure if they are directly connected to my experiences as a journalist. I had to take considerable time off work. Reuters gave me excellent support and in particular I would like to put on record my gratitude to my current manager, John Chalmers, for the graciousness and patience with which he dealt with my problems with depression. Secondly, at times my stress response has been very dysfunctional, and I have had a tendency to become panicked and anxious over the most mundane and unthreatening things. This was something that I sought to conceal, and at times I used alcohol to help me do this, which of course was a terrible idea and led to its own problems. Thirdly, I never used to be an angry person and I don’t think it is a natural element of my personality, but in the years since Iraq I have struggled at times with a lot of anger that I don’t quite know how to deal with and this has at times caused me to behave in inappropriate ways. I think I have made good progress in dealing with all three issues, but of course it is a lifetime’s work and I still have plenty

left to do. I do not think I am depressed or ill at the moment. I am, of course, bitterly upset and angry about what has happened, but that is not the same thing as depression.

To add a brief personal note on black humour – I have found it to be an absolutely crucial coping strategy throughout the times I have worked in stressful and traumatic situations. The academic literature has various theories about how and why black humour helps, and indeed different people may use it for different reasons. For me it is not a way to deaden my emotional response to trauma, or become numb. Numbing oneself, consciously or unconsciously, is very counterproductive. As I have discovered quite painfully, you can postpone feelings of intense grief, fear, anger or shame, but not forever. Eventually they all come back again, and you have to try to find a way to make peace with them. That is a very difficult thing to do, and some people end up despairing that they will ever be able to. That's the reason more U.S. combat veterans who fought in the wars in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan have committed suicide afterwards than died in combat. I would add that I think that to be an effective journalist it is essential that we avoid numbing ourselves to the emotional impact of what we are experiencing and seeing: to do our job we need to empathise with and understand the plight of those who are the victims of terrible events. Black humour has two main values for me. Firstly, I find I am able to experience the emotions of fear or horror without deadening them if I manage to find some frail embers of humour and irony somewhere in the situation. I don't mean to suggest that I try to find the whole situation funny – the situation is awful, but just finding some fleeting piece of humour seems like a small personal victory in the face of fear or trauma that helps sustain me. I don't know if that makes any sense or not. Secondly, as alluded to in some of the literature above, black humour plays a crucial bonding role when one is part of a team in extreme situations. It is a shared language that shows one is aware of the dreadful nature of the situation, and that you are acknowledging with the rest of the team that you are all aware of it, but that you are all in this together and that you can still find something to raise everyone's spirits. I believe that a key reason I was a very effective team leader in many traumatic situations, in particular Baghdad, was because I used black humour to help sustain morale. One final thing to note: during my periods of severe depression, one of the main symptoms was that I found it totally impossible to laugh. Conversely, I consider humour to be an essential way to beat incipient depression. That is another reason it is valuable to me.

David Fox has considerably more experience than I have and has covered many more conflicts: the list is, in alphabetical order, Afghanistan, Albania, Burundi, Djibouti, East Timor, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Kenya, Kosovo, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zaire and Zimbabwe. He has also covered natural disasters in Zaire, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and, of course, Japan. Some of the conflicts David has covered are notorious even among hardened war reporters as unfathomably horrific and disturbing - most notably, the genocides in Zaire and Rwanda. He has covered the wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan, where he has spent a combined total of more than two years. He too has lost many friends and colleagues. He had been due to accompany Harry Burton and Azizullah Haidari (mentioned in my personal note, 'Appeal3') on the assignment in which they were killed, but had to drop out after he contracted shingles. In 2004, David's wife Elizabeth Pisani, filed for divorce, citing the effects that trauma had had on David's personality and behaviour as the main reason for their incompatibility. As you probably know, Elizabeth wrote an impassioned blog post on David's dismissal, which can be viewed here: <http://bit.ly/epqGhh> Of course, a personal defence of David from somebody who still cares for him enormously is unlikely to sway any appeal. The reason I mention it is that what Elizabeth writes should dispel any doubt about the severity of the impact trauma had on David, and the consequences he suffered.

I am not sharing this because I want to elicit sympathy and use this to try to get lenient treatment. I don't generally like to talk about this stuff. I would never consider myself a victim of tragic circumstances beyond my control. In my career I have met and written about countless people whose lives were destroyed by conflict or natural disasters. They had no choice in what happened to them. Giving them a voice is an integral part of what motivates many of us who work as journalists. I had the immense privilege and good fortune to be able to choose to work in journalism, a career that I love. And it was my decision to go to all the dangerous and

heartbreaking places I have been. I could have said no at any time. I'm responsible for my choices, and I'm responsible for the consequences.

I also don't believe that journalists who have risked their lives deserve some kind of special treatment in Thomson Reuters. We don't. There are a great many ways to contribute to our company, and none of us has any right to claim that our way is superior to others, or that our contribution is worth more. I am fundamentally opposed to double standards. The reason I think it is important to know about some of the experiences David Fox and I have had during our careers, and the way they affected us, is because it is very important that everybody in management and in human resources in Thomson Reuters is fully aware of what working as a journalist in extreme situations involves, and what it does to us, and what the implications are for company policy. That's equally true of course for every job role in the company. We need to recognize that different jobs make different demands of people and impose different strains. And when people behave in a way that is absolutely necessary to enable them to function properly in the jobs that they do, quite clearly our company policy and code of conduct need to make room for that. So while journalists who regularly work in life-threatening and immensely distressing situations can't expect to just behave however we please, I don't think it is unreasonable for us to ask for a little understanding.

That concludes the necessary background to what happened.

MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND BREAKDOWNS IN COMMUNICATION

On the night of March 18/19, 2011, I was the overnight editor for Political and General News on the World Desk Asia in Singapore. The desk usually closes each evening before midnight but switched to 24-hour operation on March 11 when a massive earthquake followed by a devastating tsunami hit the northeastern coastline of Japan and triggered an escalating risk of a deadly radiation leak at several crippled nuclear reactors. Over in Tokyo, David Fox was working overnight, after flying in at short notice from Jakarta where he had recently been appointed bureau chief. His job was to write successive updates of our main Japan story through the night; my job was to edit them and send them to Reuters customers worldwide.

I was not in any personal danger, sitting at my desk in safe Singapore. But it was still upsetting to be sitting alone in the middle of the night watching the footage of the Japanese disasters. I'm sure everybody who watched the images – including you – found them upsetting. I don't claim I have some right to be more upset. But of course, watching that kind of footage brings back difficult memories for people who have been damaged to some degree by previous traumatic incidents. I guess you could say that we have our personal ghosts to deal with. I knew that David would be feeling something similar, and also that it must be stressful for him – and stressful for everybody in Tokyo at that time – to be dealing with the additional risk of a radiation cloud heading towards Tokyo. Even though the risk was thought to be probably small, radiation is an insidious threat which tends to provoke particular stress in those who fear they may be exposed to it.

At 2:47 a.m. I sent the following message in the internal Reuters chat room used by journalists around the world to coordinate on the Japan disaster story:

2:47:42 AM Asia_top_story_2 Andrew Marshall thomsonreuters.com So how is the radiation situation mate? Has your hair been falling out?

It was without question the most disastrous attempt at humour I have ever made, setting off a toxic chain of events that caused great damage to several people and to Thomson Reuters. It goes without saying that I bitterly regret ever having made the comment.

The reason I made the comment was that I was feeling upset about the images I was seeing, and I knew David would be feeling the same, plus he had the radiation cloud to worry about, as did all our staff in Tokyo. My decision to post the message in a chat room for several journalists, rather than as a personal message to David, was a grave error of judgment. The reason I did so was

because, as I said above, black humour is also a way of bonding a team and lifting their spirits – we often make a joke to one person in earshot of others, in order to make them smile too. Had I thought about it more clearly, I would have realized that doing so in a chat room when one does not personally know all the participants was a serious mistake because it meant my comment could be misconstrued. I fully recognize that now.

I also don't consider radiation an inherently funny subject – it terrifies me. Before the 2003 Iraq war I received full chemical, biological and nuclear warfare training from former military officers, because of the possibility that we could be exposed to such dangers during the invasion of Iraq. I was given a special chemical warfare suit and boots, which I was told I would have to wear at all times in the combat zone, along with a gas mask. If we received warning of imminent attack we had seven seconds to put on the gas mask correctly, a surprisingly complicated process when wearing the thick rubber gloves that one also had to have on at all times. I spent weeks afterwards worrying incessantly about whether I would be able to do so in time, and the chemical warfare suit and gas mask that I stored in my apartment were a constant reminder of the possible risks ahead. I never had to use them in the end, to my great relief.

David's reply came a few minutes later:

2:50:16 AM Asia_top_story_2 David Fox thomsonreuters.com Lets hope it affects all those cute jap girls who do have a strange tendency to grow their pubes ...

The most important point that needs to be made about David's comment is that he made in the chat room by accident. He is fully aware that what he said was entirely inappropriate as a comment in the chat room. He had been working for many days with insufficient sleep on a highly stressful and distressing story, it was the middle of the night, and because he (unlike me) was aware that my joke about his baldness and about radiation was inappropriate in a chat room, he assumed it was a personal message, and he thought he was replying only to me. He made a genuine mistake. It was not an error of judgment – it was an accident.

As soon as it happened, David and I realized his mistake. We both cut-and-pasted several Japan-related messages from earlier back into the chat room, to push David's message off the screen. In my discussions with some of those involved in deciding our disciplinary penalties, I later learned that this behavior was regarded as an effort to stage a "cover up". All I can say is that of course we were trying to get the message off the screen, but that was because we were trying to prevent anybody seeing the message and being offended. David made immediate steps to seek technical help to remove the message but was told this was not possible. This quite clearly shows that David made a genuine mistake when he made the comment in the chat room – that was why he immediately began trying to get it removed.

I also need to say that I wholly support the policy of Thomson Reuters to take a very strong stance against any prejudice or harassing behaviour in the work environment. I do not think it is in any way acceptable. I know it is a serious problem that we must do everything to stamp out. Furthermore, one of the things that motivates me as a journalist is my awareness of the destructive consequences of prejudice and bigotry and my belief that responsible journalism can help expose and prevent such behaviour. I know that David feels the same. I am aware that there is a view that what David said revealed gender prejudice or represented harassment and I think that needs to be re-examined. I apologize for having to raise and for perhaps belabouring the following point but I am not sure if it is widely understood – it is well known among men and women certainly around East Asia that Japanese women generally do not follow the trend of waxing prevalent in many other areas of Asia and elsewhere. It is something I have heard discussed in a variety of contexts during my time in Asia, by both men and women, and it is not considered a shocking thing to discuss in cosmopolitan social circles in Asia, along with the wider subject of waxing in general which in my experience is a fairly common theme these days for light-hearted dinner party conversations in Europe and the United States too. I genuinely do not think discussion of the subject is offensively sexist or prejudiced. But quite clearly it is clearly inappropriate in a Thomson Reuters chat room. Some of the discussions I've had over the years

have involved Japanese women, and they have explained that the reason is that in Japanese families there is a tradition of family members of the same gender bathing together without clothing in onsen hot springs, and that many younger Japanese women would feel their mothers would disapprove to see that their daughter waxed. I genuinely don't say this to try to be funny or mocking, but because I think there may have been a knee-jerk reaction to David's comment that overestimated its offensiveness, particularly if the context I have just given was not known. I would add that I have had a great many messages of support from a large number of women in the company, and I know David has too. The widespread view I have heard from them, including some who are prominently involved in Thomson Reuters initiatives to combat gender prejudice, is that David's comment was juvenile and regrettable (David and I would agree) but that it was not egregiously offensive or shocking. I have also found no evidence that our comments caused widespread offence within Thomson Reuters.

David's joke was a typical piece of male bravado and an attempt at black humour in response to my own joke. It was intended only for me. The element of bravado, I should add, is another sign that David was feeling distressed and anxious dealing with the situation in Japan, and was trying to use humour to make me and him feel better. Many people, of both genders, make bawdy comments to their friends in private frequently, even if they are not in an extremely stressful setting. This is not a sign of prejudice, it is pretty normal. And of course, such comments are not appropriate in a public setting. But if they are shared in public by mistake, should that really lead to instant dismissal?

It seems very clear to me that a genuine misunderstanding lies at the heart of the destructive chain of events set in motion by my ill-advised comment. Some of those who saw the exchange in the chat room did not know me or David, and were not familiar with the banter that helps journalists cope while working in traumatic situations. When they read the brief exchange between us, what they saw was two senior journalists making juvenile and inappropriate wisecracks that seemed to display sniggering indifference to the tragic story they had been entrusted to cover. And some of them complained, and they were quite right to do so. I would like to state very clearly that I bear absolutely no animosity towards those who were offended by our exchange and who made complaints. On the contrary I would like to sincerely apologize to them, and ask for their understanding. My view is that had they been aware of the full context of the exchange that I have been setting out in this letter, they would have realized that our actions did not demonstrate that we were being insensitive and didn't care about Japan's tragedy. Quite the reverse. We do care, we were very upset by the situation, and by the risks that David and other colleagues were facing, and this was the reason for our behaviour.

The academic literature that I cited at the start of this letter explicitly notes the danger of black humour, and I wish I had thought about it more during my career before making my disastrous joke. It only works among a peer-group that knows how to interpret and understand the humour. People outside the group can be outraged and offended. And this, of course, is exactly what happened.

From what I understand of the process that led to the disciplinary decisions, nobody among those who made the decisions was fully aware of the way journalists use black humour as a coping mechanism to deal with stress and fear, and this has clear implications for whether the penalties decided upon were appropriate. It is my view that had they been made fully aware of the context, they may well have come to a different decision.

Unfortunately, problems with the way our disciplinary process was handled meant that we were never able to convey back up the chain of command the arguments and evidence I have set out in this appeal. My initial hearing lasted only seven minutes, and I was asked two questions. David's experience was similar. There was no effort to investigate or discuss the fact that black humour is commonplace among journalists, no attempt to examine our working hours over the preceding days to see that we had been working with very little sleep; David in particular was exhausted. The system did not function as it should have done.

David was also given no indication that his offence was considered so serious that it might warrant dismissal. This in itself was a breach of the disciplinary guidelines used in David's case, which state that the possible range of penalties should be outlined to him. Had he or I had any inkling that he was in such great potential trouble, we would have made every effort to strenuously make the case for our defence. I cannot know if this would have made a difference, but I suspect it would have. Unfortunately we both rather naively assumed that everybody would understand that journalists' banter in extreme situations was commonplace and a necessary coping strategy, and that the penalties imposed would take this into account, and so we lost the chance to defend ourselves properly.

Most senior and management editorial staff in Asia were equally oblivious of how serious the situation was, and many were shocked and dismayed when they learned of the severity of the disciplinary measures that were taken. Unfortunately, none of them felt able to intercede or make their views known to their own managers. At a different time, I believe they would have done so, and tried to appeal for more lenient treatment, using the same arguments I have used here. But because a new editor in chief had just taken over, and a review of all senior positions was going on, senior management staff who might have intervened in other circumstances were feeling anxious and risk-averse and did not do so.

For all of these reasons, an error of judgment on my part that led to David's reply was compounded by the fact that those who misunderstood the context and intent of our exchange were never given all of the facts they needed. A mistake and a misunderstanding became a disaster for David. And in turn, what happened to David blighted my own 17-year career with Reuters irretrievably. David has very graciously never sought to blame me for what has happened, and he accepts that his dismissal was a consequence of his comment. But I cannot help but be distressed and ashamed that the key error of judgment was made by me, not by David; he made a genuine mistake which is surely a less serious offence. Despite this, he was the one who suffered by far the worst consequences. And unlike me, he was never even given the chance to appeal. For all of those reasons, I just feel that I could never be happy and motivated again working for a company that I have always loved.

My intention was to leave if I was not able to put things right, and this appeal is my last chance to do so within Thomson Reuters. In the meantime another entirely unrelated issue has arisen over which I feel strongly, and I have decided I need to leave as a result of that issue, so I will resign once I hear the result of my appeal, whatever it is. I hope this is not seen as an attempt to sway your decision – in fact it is absolutely the opposite because my decision to leave is a direct result of an unrelated issue and not connected to the appeal. In the final section I will explain why it is still important to me that my appeal is heard.

WHY IT MATTERS

I apologize for having made so much reference to David's case when you explicitly told me it was not under consideration. The reason I did so should, I hope, be clear by now. I do not believe the cases can be separated. In particular, I think we all realize that even if you feel that the penalty imposed on me is too harsh, you would not feel able to change the decision because the same arguments and evidence that are relevant in my case would also be relevant for David. And David has already been dismissed, and unlike me he does not have the chance to appeal.

That is why I am making a sincere and heartfelt request that, if you see any merit whatsoever in any of the points I have made above, you seek to escalate this to see whether Thomson Reuters might also reconsider the way it has treated David Fox. Of course his dismissal cannot now be reversed, but one thing that could still be done would be seek an amicable settlement with him that prevents further anguish and draws a line under this episode so that everybody can move on.

The events since March 19 have just been deeply sad and unfortunate for everyone. Nobody has benefited from them, and many people have been damaged. The morale of staff in Asia has been

dealt a serious blow. David was known and liked across the region. The great majority of staff are shocked and bewildered about his departure over one small mistake.

It has also been a great shock and grave disappointment for the women and men who work as journalists for Reuters in the world's most dangerous places and on the most distressing stories. We are a fairly tight-knit group of people, as you can imagine, and while I don't believe we deserve special treatment, our ability to take the risks that we do depends fundamentally on our faith that the company recognizes the dangers we face, and will do its best to look after us and do the right thing if we find ourselves in trouble.

If that faith and trust is broken, it will in my view be devastating for the ability of Reuters to attract talented and committed people willing to work in extreme situations. There is simply no way I could have worked for two years as bureau chief of Reuters in Baghdad, or covered any of the other many conflicts I have reported on, if I had been afraid that if I made one small mistake I would be flung out of the company with no chance even to appeal. The pressures and stresses that I faced covering conflicts were immense, and as I have explained they left lasting scars. But it was worth it because I was doing a job I consider extremely important, for a company that I believed in. The support and reassurance I received from the most senior managers both in editorial and the wider company were absolutely vital to me. Without them, I just could not have gone on. I know that a great many people feel the same as I do.

Thomson Reuters failed in its duty of care towards David very grievously. In particular, the company should have known about the importance of black humour as a coping mechanism for journalists, and taken this into account in the disciplinary process. If coping mechanisms are to be penalized, then we should not be sent into situations in which we rely on them to enable us to work. Secondly, the way David was treated after he was told of his dismissal was a further serious failure in the duty of care. Two senior editorial managers flew to Jakarta to inform David of the decision. Seeing how shocked he was, they suggested he go home, and they never saw or contacted him again, and never provided him with any support. This makes one wonder what they were doing there in the first place. They should have known about David's history of PTSD. Even had they not known, a counselor who had known and treated David for many years wrote a letter in which he explicitly stated that David's comment was a direct result of the extreme stress he was under. David shared this by e-mail with his managers and with HR. It was ignored. Despite his shock and distress, David was treated callously by the head of HR in Asia, who tried to bully him into agreeing to resign within 24 hours with the threat that if he did not do so, he would be fired immediately with only one month of severance pay. After all that David has done for Reuters, there is simply no excuse for such behaviour.

If David had left the Tokyo bureau one morning after working an overnight shift, got into a hired car to drive to his hotel, and as a result of stress and exhaustion been responsible for a traffic accident that killed somebody, I imagine that Thomson Reuters would have regarded it as a tragic mistake, helped him deal with the emotional consequences, and tried to keep him as an employee. But because he accidentally made a slightly bawdy comment in an internal company chat room, he was thrown out of the company and treated as if he had committed some grievous crime. I just find that incomprehensible, and I really don't see any sane human reaction to how he was treated other than to be shocked and disgusted.

David has not asked for me to use my appeal to argue for him too, and I have not told him that I am doing so. He does know that I regard it important to go through the appeal process because it helps highlight another indefensible aspect of what happened – the fact that I had the opportunity to appeal while he did not. I am aware that Thomson Reuters is insisting that David's homebase was Singapore. I am also aware of a lot of evidence that his homebase was still London, and that a mistake by HR in Asia when they drew up his Jakarta contract may be responsible for confusing the issue. But in any event, on a case of such seriousness, it was clearly a mistake by Thomson Reuters to treat the two protagonists in this case according to a different set of rules. It is deeply unfair, and cannot be defended on any ethical grounds. The only possible defence – that this was simply the unavoidable result of a bureaucratic quirk of fate – is just not adequate at all.

I don't know what David's plans are in terms of taking this further. That will be his decision. I'm just asking, with the last opportunity available to me in Thomson Reuters, that the company makes every effort to do the right thing and prevent this saga causing any more damage to anyone.

The company frequently stresses its gratitude and respect for the sacrifices made by our war correspondents and the bravery they show. I believe that these sentiments are sincere, but it should be clear how the events since March 19 could suggest quite the reverse, to the considerable future detriment of the company. If Thomson Reuters can find a way to prevent that happening and bring closure to this affair, it would restore a great deal of faith that is at risk of being lost. So I ask you, please, to try.

Many thanks again for taking the time to consider this appeal.

With best regards

Andrew

Andrew MacGregor Marshall
Deputy Editor, Emerging & Frontier Asia

Thomson Reuters

Phone: +65 6870 3814
Mobile: +65 9690 3040
andrew.marshall@thomsonreuters.com
blogs.reuters.com/andrew-marshall