

War reporting – Where does a Journalist’s Duty Lie?

This was the theme of a conference organised by the International Communications Forum on April 9 2008 at St Bride’s Church, Fleet Street, London, introduced by the **Rev George Pitcher**, and chaired by **Magnus Linklater**, Chairman of the UK chapter of ICF. Linklater is columnist with the Times and the paper’s Scotland Editor.

Phillip Knightley, author and veteran commentator, gave the opening address, with the comment that ‘only in UK did I encounter a debate about journalism and its ethics, what are journalists for, what is their duty, what is objectivity?’

Today’s reporters are subjected to an amazing variety of pleas, pressures, seductions and temptations to wander from the path of public service journalism that demands that they inform their readers and viewers as quickly, truthfully, fairly and entertainingly as they can of what is really going on around them

War remains the most difficult, dangerous field in which to do this. Why? Every modern war is really two wars. There is the real war in the battle zone, where real people fight and die. And there is the war perceived and presented by the media. The problem is that the two rarely coincide.

War reporting arouses emotional resonances in martial nations. Max Hastings said of his role in the Falklands war, ‘None of us can be neutral in his war. When one’s nation is at war reporting becomes an extension of the war effort’.

War is big news for the media because governments want it to be. Robert Lichter president of the Centre for Media and Public Affairs in Washington, says, ‘To sell a war in a democracy when you are not under attack means that you have to demonise the leader, or show that there are humanitarian reasons for going in. George Bush demonised Saddam Hussein. We did something of the same with Milosevic’.

Two of the best journalists of our time, Martin Bell and Robert Fisk, make the case that not to cover war would be a negation of duty. Before he was wounded, Bell said that the war in Yugoslavia was an important story and that he loved covering it. Fisk says, ‘recording human suffering on an epic scale is worth the risk’.

Knightley summed up his conclusion with the words of Burchett, Australian born war correspondent. He believes in ‘engaged’ journalism. ‘If in your role as a journalist you have the opportunity to help things move in the right direction, then it’s not only OK to take it; it’s your duty to do so’.

Panellists in the first session on ‘*War and Peace*’- *the impact war reporting has on events*, were **Martin Bell**, war correspondent during the Bosnian war, **Martin Huckerby** and Angolan journalist **Rafael Marques**.

Panellist in the second session on ‘*Truth and Lies*’- *the challenge journalists face in managing sources and the influence of media technology*, were **Jonathan Baker** of BBC News, **Yvonne Ridley**, and **Stuart Allan** Professor of Journalism, Bournemouth University.

Martin Huckerby, specialist in training journalists overseas, emphasised that we need to recognise how much the media can be tools in the hands of the combatants. Watching events in Afghanistan, after his experience helping launch a news agency

there, he pointed out how Prince Harry's presence was attacked as a publicity stunt, but commentators ignored how the Taliban were fighting a similar propaganda battle, seeking to accentuate allied casualty figures and emphasise civilian casualties. Their targets are western audiences, not just western troops.

The younger generation of readers and viewers are more media-savvy, and will appreciate when reporters point out that the information they are passing on could be exaggerated or even invented by the combatants. He asked reporters to offer more caveats in their reporting - in the fog of war, precision can rarely be achieved. He asked from editors a little less omniscience and a little more humility in their coverage of wars - they should not pretend they know everything; however clear it may appear at first. Confusion will grow, and war invariably brings unintended and terrible consequences.

Rafael Marques spoke about his experience of civil war in Angola. He commented on the clash between war reporting by the independent media on one hand and state propaganda on the other. The independent media generated debate against the war on the grounds that it was pointless. The result was the emergence within civil society of a coalition of forces creating a strong independent media campaign against the war.

Martin Bell pointed out that traditional war reporting has totally changed. With reporters having limited access to the scene of action their view of the reality is partial.

Jonathan Baker spoke of the complexity of filtering and evaluating news from the BBC's own sources, wire services and many other sources, increasingly including bloggers, and citizen journalists. The face of war reporting has changed out of all recognition. He identified three principal drivers of this change.

Technology – The emergence of the satellite phone, the videophone, the portable satellite dish, non-linear laptop editing of television news reports in the field and their despatch to London via file transfer. The result is that we are now able to broadcast live and to send back edited television and radio packages from any spot on the planet.

The military embed. More journalists are given closer access to the frontline. The result: a profusion of very powerful images in words and pictures.

24 hour news channels In 2003, for the first time in a major conflict, broadcasters had the airtime and cyberspace to put most of this material in front of their audiences.

This sounded like a virtuous confluence of factors. But of themselves they did not guarantee that the quality of war reporting will be any better.

More graphic, vivid and immediate certainly. But better in the sense of explaining exactly what is happening on the battlefield and how it fits into the context of the wider conflict? Not necessarily. The frontline pictures were of limited value unless we were able to put them into a wider context – they were but one element in a bigger effort to offer as fully-rounded and impartial a picture as possible. The availability of first-hand material made it even more important than ever to weigh sources carefully and be open with audiences about them.

In this confused and cacophonous world, information rich, technology driven, credibility and trust are at a premium. Trust can never be assumed but must be earned daily. Without trusted sources of information, the benefits of technological progress for democracy will be diminished. Even though people can get information from a huge range of sources, the BBC and other media can still play a valued role as a trusted guide.

British-born, award-winning journalist Yvonne Ridley is well known in the Muslim world for her outspoken views and defence of Islam. She converted to Islam 30 months after making international headlines when the Taleban captured her on an undercover assignment in Afghanistan. 'No journalistic presence on the ground means that terrible people in positions of power will do terrible things in the knowledge that they will not be reported.'

In Iraq where there is a propaganda war for the hearts and minds, there were 500 embedded journalists and another 700 journalist's spoon fed from the so-called Podium of Truth in Doha. First hand reporting is difficult. Many journalists are restricted from venturing beyond Kabul and Baghdad's green zones. There are less than half a dozen western freelance journalists operating outside the Green zone in Iraq today.

Baker summarised this difficulty well. 'The embed is clearly here to stay. On the face of it, to be able to show what is actually happening on a battlefield in almost real time should be as close to pure truth as you can get. But it is only a snapshot of what is happening to one group of people on one side in one small part of the battlefield, and does not necessarily tell you much about the wider picture.'

Professor Stuart Allan gave a fast moving power point presentation on the variety of news gathering and presentational methods available to broadcasters today through modern technology. He focused, in particular, on the US-led invasion of Iraq, showing how familiar approaches to war reporting are changing, sometimes in surprising ways. Among these approaches was the 'warblog,' a type of news blogging he argued deserves particular scrutiny.

Allan suggested that warblogs written from within Iraq could be divided into three types - those produced within news organisation (e.g., BBC and CNN); those produced by freelance journalists (e.g. Christopher Allbritton's 'Back to Iraq'); and those produced by Iraqi civilians (e.g., Salam Pax and Riverbend). Despite the risks of unedited reporting, news organisations appeared to welcome the greater immediacy of this form of reporting. Freelance reporters saw in the blog a 'raw', independent and more intimate alternative to other news forms, while Iraqi civilians offered personal eye-witness accounts which challenged Western ways of representing the conflict.

In concluding, Allan argued that warblogs have the potential to help overcome the 'culture of distance' (and thereby certain 'us' and 'them' dichotomies) characteristic of more traditional types of war reporting.