War journalism & Peace journalism

(or where the borders of good journalism lie when covering conflicts)

by Meritxell Martínez*

The media coverage of armed conflicts was a source of controversy during the last two thirds of the twentieth century, due to its ability to mobilise audiences either in favour of or against wars and the tempting power this implies. Journalistic ethics and ideology are unique, remaining unchanged whatever the story being covered. Nevertheless, applying them to the context of a war is problematic. In addition to the practical difficulties associated with checking military sources, guaranteeing the safety of reporters, obtaining access to the civilian population and the avoidance of spreading propaganda from one of the two sides, there is a specific factor which arises: the media's role in increasing or decreasing tension.

Over the last twenty years we have seen examples of the media's role both in inciting violence and in aiding in its prevention, reduction and reconciliation. A striking example is the Rwandan radio station *Radio-Télévision Libre des Milles Collines* (RTLM), better known by the nickname *Radio Machete* with its daily dose of programmes inciting genocide. Another opposing example, is *Facing the Truth*, the BBC series presented by the Nobel Prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He brought together victims and executioners from the Northern Ireland conflict to sit down at the same table with the objective of mutual forgiveness, dialogue and providing an impetus to reconciliation in Ulster.

In Catalonia, international affairs have formed part of the agenda for both the public and private media in Catalan since they began at the end of the seventies. Recent wars and conflicts have therefore had Catalan reporters and foreign correspondents to report on them in person. As a result, a score of journalists have gained in expertise over the years, leading to a reflection in academic circles in the country's faculties of communication and the Catalan Council of Information, the self-regulating body in charge of ethics in professional journalism.

The Observatory for the Coverage of Conflicts of the *Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona* (OCC-UAB) began a new line of investigation in 2008 when it brought together Catalan experts in mediation and peace journalism, reporters and academics in order to jointly define the framework of good reporting in order to promote peace and responsibly use the inherent influence the mass media possesses. The main fruit of this research were the Guidelines for Journalistic Practice in the Treatment of Violent and Armed Conflicts.

Summary of Guidelines for Journalistic Practice in the Treatment of Violent and Armed Conflicts:

1. Give a voice to and promote understanding and dialogue between the parties involved.
2. Do not dehumanize either side, whether victims or perpetrators.
3. Avoid using the language employed by the parties involved.
4. Show the grassroots groups which work for peace and the efforts made by civil society.
5. Explore conflicts in all their complexity.
6. Avoid sensationalism and the broadcasting of pro-violence, xenophobic, racist or sexist messages.
7. Report on conflicts before violence breaks out.
8. After a ceasefire deal, report on the resolution, reconstruction and reconciliation.
9. Take advantage of the similarities between conflicts to seek paths to resolution.
10. Always acknowledge sources of information and specify whether there was any censorship or impositions.

'The Guidelines originated from the observation that, although there are many positive practices, there is still room for improvement in the coverage provided by journalists and the media', explains the director of the Observatory, Xavier Giró. The starting point for this work were the workshops 'Challenges Facing Journalism in Conflict Situations', held in Barcelona in October 2008. 'They were two very productive days, with interesting contributions and a rich debate, but it's a bit early to draw hasty conclusions', recalls the professor. In order to summarise the conclusions drawn in the form of

guidelines a smaller commission was created with a dozen experts and representatives: veteran correspondents, academics, members of NGOs and the Catalan International Peace Institute, the Office for the Promotion of Peace and Human Rights, the Commission of Solidarity Journalism of the Journalism College of Catalonia, a representative of the dean of the latter and the president of the Information Council of Catalonia. Moreover, the resulting document has been adopted by the College of Journalists as the Fifth Amendment of its Declaration of Principles and Code of Ethics of the journalistic profession in Catalonia.

The group's leader, Xavier Giró, also advocates the demystification of journalistic objectivity: 'the first thing journalists can do for peace is to become aware of the fact that when we cover a conflict we not only explain, we act'. 'Although the extent to which we do so varies widely, we always intervene in some form or another, since to explain is to influence what ends up being known and decided', he points out. 'If we practice journalism with a concern for reducing the suffering of those who experience conflicts, we will necessarily look at places, people and what is happening in a different way compared to if we simply want to explain who said what', he says, adding, 'we always have concerns when we go to places, even if they are implicit, and I am convinced that if we make them explicit we can work more coherently'.

From theory to practice: Catalan coverage of the Iraq conflict (2003-2010)

Almost all of the general public and private media organisations sent journalists to cover the Western invasion and the first year following the invasion of Iraq on the ground. None of them established fixed foreign correspondents, however. The declining security situation, mainly due to the insurgency and the kidnapping of journalists, prompted the majority of media organisations to rule out returning until the last general election on 7th March 2010. As a result, there was a combination of long periods with information largely coming from agencies issuing reports from 'war correspondents' who had spent between a week and a month in Baghdad, Latifiya, Kurdistan and Kirkuk, among others.

Cases of journalists being embedded with military units (as the Pentagon dubbed them) were rare, with the majority of coverage coming from unilateral journalists. The debate as to the existence of intrinsic bias in embedded coverage is fierce, not only in international academic journals, but also among reporters themselves. 'I am totally against it; you have to sign a twelve or thirteen-page discalimer where you agree to abide by military censorship and to be under the orders of the commander of the unit. It's too restrictive', argues Joan Roura, TV3's Middle East correspondent. 'What's more, what interests me about a conflict is what the civilian population are going through. I find that reporting on military tactics and weaponry is of little or no interest as you can get that from the news agencies', he adds.

Marc Marginedes, who covers the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus for *El Periódico* newspaper of Catalonia, thinks precisely the opposite, that being embedded allows you access to privileged, valuable information: 'the first report on extrajudicial killings by US troops was filed by an embedded photo-journalist'. 'They filmed an American soldier shooting a wounded Iraqi lying on the ground; without this journalist we'd never have known'. For Marginedes, the conditions imposed by the military (Spain is one of the few European nations not to allow embedded reporters) are not unreasonable:

'there is no direct censorship, but neither can you cite anonymous sources: everything has to be on the record'. He adds: 'This means, however, that the journalist has to be mature enough, if necessary, to report on unlawful behaviour by soldiers they are living with and with whom they may even have developed a friendship.

Guidelines 7 and 8 (to report before violence breaks out and to continue after a ceasefire) do not create much controversy among journalists. Nevertheless, they are seen as economically unviable for media organisations. There are exceptions, however. The situation in Iraq had some unique political connotations for the Spanish media market, which encouraged the media to devote human and financial resources to cover the months leading up to the conflict, when the Spanish government considered sending troops as part of the search for weapons of mass destruction. Such cases are very infrequent because the media is preoccupied by multiple sources of world tension, prioritising those which have already broken out and those of national interest. 'It's not only due to the scarcity of resources, it's because the scriptwriters for the news can't handle it, they have only half an hour to explain what's going on in the world!', points out Maria Alba Gilabert, editor of *Catalunya Ràdio's* international section for over 25 years. 'Until blood's been shed, no one's interested', she adds ruefully.

Tomàs Alcoverro, a veteran correspondent for *La Vanguardia* (who has lived in Beirut since 1971) argues that the information industry, 'misinterprets the current state of affairs', which leads to 'the public being anaesthetised' and 'enormous frustration' among diplomats and Western journalists working in the region. 'All you hear about the Middle East is car bombs, genocide and people being killed. The day-to-day reality and the spaces for culture and entertainment, and there are a lot of them here in Beirut, hardly ever appear'.

Guidelines 2, 4 and 5 (not to dehumanise, to cover the grassroots pacifists and to explore complexities) is in fine print. They concern 'fixers', a group which has received little attention from the academic world , being hidden from the audience, while essential nonetheless. A fixer is someone who was both born in and resident of a country being covered. They function as both a producer and translator. 'They're indispensable, they're your passport to a world that is closed to you, that you can't access on your own', explains Marginedes, of *El Periódico*. 'For this reason I always mention their name in my articles or file them under both our names if an interview has been particularly good', he adds. According to Marginedes, 'it's not a problem if your English isn't so good as long as you have contacts with everyone and you can talk to both sides; but if you're a language major and you're shy, if you find it hard to speak to people, then it's hopeless'.

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Gilabert, the *Catalunya Ràdio* reporter, emphasises the importance of the selection process: 'You have to know how to instantly detect whether someone is Sunni or Shia, if they're of one political hue or another, both for the reliability of the information they give you and your own security, because if you don't you won't be able to enter certain neighbourhoods or regions'. Most of the time fixers are chosen on the strength of a colleague's personal recommendation, but often contacts are made through embassies or media

organisations and NGOs based in the country. 'Often they're local journalists who have an extensive list of contacts, know people, the place, the political class and they earn extra money', explains Joan Roura. 'Sometimes they're people from local organisations, with the interest and the enthusiasm to explain their country to the foreign press', he adds. According to this TV3 reporter, they do much more than make the journalist's job easier. In 2004, on a highway between Karbala and Baghdad, the fixer saved their lives by changing to an alternative route: 'He was questioning people all along the route and he found out there was a bogus check-point; a few days later we found out that they had kidnapped an American TV crew right there'.

The degree to which a reporter should be involved in the suffering they witness is typically the other major point of disagreement

'Good news is not news', as the journalistic motto goes. In Iraq, portraying the efforts of the civilian population to reconstruct the country carries an additional cost. The American embassy in Baghdad publicly announced that gathering the media for opening ceremonies was counterproductive and often irresponsible as they turned into veritable magnets for attacks by insurgents. In the same way, reporting on a citizen or group of residents' modest struggle to return their neighbourhood to normality or explain to the foreign media what is really going on in the country could put them in the extremists' sights. Should journalists cover these stories, therefore? 'With a camera the line is very clear', according to Roura, the TV3 reporter, 'if people agree to be filmed and explain their story it's their choice. What you can never do is trick them with hidden cameras or reveal their identity if they've chosen to be remain anonymous'. For the *Catalunya Ràdio* reporter, Gilabert, what puts their lives in danger is not the risk of appearing in the media as such, but the job itself: 'In Iraq they can kill you simply for going down the street, or because you're Shia, or because you have running water and I don't; so imagine if you're 'asking for it' by making political statements in the neighbourhood, being well known, making enemies...'.

The quality of reporting is usually related to the reporter's training. One cannot explore the complexities of conflicts or look for paths to peace in previous cases if the journalist does not have a solid understanding of the country they are visiting. Nevertheless, the veteran reporter Alcoverro warns that the prejudices and 'the perceptions' one may have of the Islamic world further complicate the work of documenting what is happening: 'Conflicts in this area are very complicated, there's a lot of wild speculation and all viewpoints quickly get labelled as Pro-Palestinian or Pro-Israeli'. Roura and Gilabert agree that the media has to encourage training and aprenticeships, to prevent inexperienced correspondents going into an area. 'It's not just about whether they'll report well or not, it's if you send someone to a dangerous place and they don't know how to get around they might get themselves killed!', warns Gilabert. For this reason he is in favour of specialisation, something which happens less and less: 'Having someone with good contacts and lots of experience is a good investment for a media organisation, they can make a lot of money out of it'. What is more, according to Roura, if they are inexperienced, 'they end up saying nonsense and throwing petrol on the fire, only talking about shooting and bombs, without explaining the background or

the vested interests that are behind the whole conflict'.

All four journalists agree that following the guidelines leads to higher quality journalism, but that it does not necessarily contribute to bringing peace. Their main point of disagreement is the media's ability to influence political and military decisions. Tomàs Alcoverro is the most pessimistic in this regard: 'I don't believe that we can ever influence the course of a conflict, I don't see anything changing in the Middle East after so many years of reporting', he argues. Roura and Marginedes see it differently. 'If there's a camera crew, or reporters in general, less barbarities are committed because there is less of a feeling of impunity', Roura believes. 'And even more so if it is the media from a country that is actively participating in the conflict, because they portray the suffering that war creates, the public are shocked and they apply pressure on their government', he adds.

The degree to which a reporter should be involved in the suffering they witness is typically the other major point of disagreement. It is a decisive component of emotional resistance during a reporter's stay in the country and forms part of their risk of suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome once they return home. Marginedes and Gilabert hold two widely opposing views on the issue. 'If you become too involved, you cease to become effective as a journalist and become more of a campaigner, you end up behaving strangely and taking risks that should be avoided', says the reporter for *El Periódico*, who recommends that empathy is limited to, 'only when you're actually speaking with your source'. Gilabert, on the other hand, considers that there are, 'small gestures that don't put you in danger' and that furthermore allow you to put up with the tough conditions of being in a war: 'By helping someone you get some comfort, when you hug a victim in order to console them, she is also hugging you, and this makes you feel less alone, less frightened and it refreshes you in some way. You're a person, not a machine; you have to do your work professionally, of course, hide your emotions when you're on camera; but on the ground, if at any time you can help someone, I believe you have to do it', he argues.

Although there are disagreements and a whole host of nuances, the Catalan journalistic community has favourably received the Guidelines for Journalistic Practice in the Treatment of Violent and Armed Conflicts. 'They won't be followed just because they're written down, and journalists didn't fail to respect them because weren't there before', concludes Xavier Giró, 'but it is a good way to change what isn't being done well while also being a reference point for journalists who are sent to cover a conflict for the first time or those who haven't examined their role in depth'.

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