

Journalists under Fire: Information War and Journalistic Practices

End of Award report

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Principle Investigator: Professor H Tumber (City University, London)

Co-applicant: Professor F Webster (City University, London)

RA: Ms. M Prentoulis

Background

The project was funded as part of the ESRC's New Security Challenges programme. The programme acknowledges that new security threats transcend conflict between nation states. Today the mobilisation of the public as spectators is an essential part of the military conflict (especially in democracies), and this is a complex task, involving parties that are often in extremely tense relationships. Front line correspondents are the major mediators between the public and the theatre of conflict. Their role, practices and experiences must be better understood as the epoch of Information War develops. This project contributes directly to an understanding of the elements of the programme identified as Technology, Security and Civil Society, and, especially, The Media and Psychological Dimensions.

Objectives

The aim of this project was to examine transformations in the roles, practices and pressures encountered by war correspondents in the circumstances of information war.

The original project aims were to:

- Examine demands placed upon correspondents in conditions of information war.
- Identify the working practices of journalists before and during armed conflict.
- Develop taxonomy of the motivations, beliefs and characteristics of war reporters.
- Explore identity construction amongst war correspondents.
- Investigate elements of the organisational (sub) cultures of correspondents in conditions of information war.
- Assess the significance and meanings of journalists' professional values and behaviour in circumstances of information war.
- Examine the relationship of journalists with their editors and news sources.
- Examine the safety provisions for journalists in conflict zones.

We believe that all the aims were successfully accomplished

Methods

The data for the research was derived from a number of sources. The principle method of data collection was the semi-structured interview. The original proposal envisaged conducting forty interviews with journalists and related media personnel. Our favourable location in London enabled us to extend the range of subjects and exceed the number of interviews originally planned. At the time of writing this report the number interviewed is fifty-five. One of the difficulties of interviewing journalists on assignment is the problem of gaining access. Because of the problems of location a number of interviews were conducted by telephone with correspondents working abroad. A further issue was one of gaining trust and ensuring confidentiality when requested. The experience of the principle applicant in field-work of this kind enabled us to fulfil this key objective of the research. There was a little difficulty gaining access to two prominent figures in the field because they tend to be shielded by agents and publishers, but we experienced only one outright refusal to cooperate. We achieved a mix of full time and freelance journalists, and those working for newspaper, broadcast and agency media companies. We also ensured that we interviewed reporters, cameramen and photographers. Our intention was to concentrate the research on journalists working for the British media but it was decided to expand the scope by interviewing several French, German and US correspondents. The interviews fielded a series of questions with a view to exploring knowledge of a particular occupational subgroup; the background and career progression of members of the group; and individual perceptions of their own motivations, ethics, work practices and relationships with colleagues. The interviews provided information on what it was like to report on conflict and how this may have changed over time. All interviews were transcribed fully and then analysed to identify major and minor themes.

Autobiographies

The second source of information was the autobiographies of foreign and war correspondents. The factor that plays a decisive role in the construction of the identity of a war or foreign correspondent is the forms of representation that permits them to communicate the central values associated with their identity to those outside the occupation. The importance of this communication is illustrated quantitatively, in the number of autobiographies by war and foreign correspondents. As part of the project and to complement the interviews we analysed a number of these autobiographies to examine 'after the event' reflections that the journalists make about their work practices. It is important when undertaking this analysis to eschew most of the narrative and to concentrate instead on the language of reflection. We had made preparation to use a software package for part of the analysis, but decided that this was unnecessary for our purposes. We also examined journalists contemporaneous reflections exhibited in both employer and personal web logs (blogs).

The third source of data was the increasing theoretical and empirical literature on journalism and its practice.¹

¹ Journalism is becoming an increasingly autonomous field of study and the development of theory and research on the subject can be witnessed through the formation of increasing numbers of University schools of journalism; the creation of two new international journals in the field; and the establishment of a Journalism Studies Interest group at the International Communications Association.

Advisory group

Rather than setting up a formal advisory group, we decided at the outset that it would be more productive and less time consuming to draw on expertise on an individual basis rather than a group one. Consequently we consulted with a number of prominent people in the industry for both their views and advice on the project. We established formal links with the Frontline Club², where we were able to circulate details of the project and conduct some of the interviews. We are especially grateful to John Owen, Chairman of the Frontline Forum for his advice and assistance. Links were also cemented with the Dart Centre on Journalism and Trauma and with its Director Europe, Mark Brayne³ and the International News Safety Institute (INSI)⁴. Other personnel consulted included Mark Wood, Chairman and Chief Exec ITN and Prof Stuart Purvis, former Chairman of ITN and now Professor of Television Journalism in City University's Journalism Department.

Results

Information War has two key dimensions: first, advanced weaponry that incorporates best-available computer communications technologies, and, second, an enormous emphasis on media. The weaponry is saturated with ICTs while the media massively promotes the role of information and communications. Information War weaponry is exemplified by smart missiles, by hugely expensive and virtuoso air power, by myriad forms of surveillance that involve satellites, intercepts and sensors, and by command and control systems of staggering sophistication; Information War media is manifest in the presence of hundreds, sometimes thousands, of reporters producing countless words and images round the clock, in the burgeoning growth and sophistication of military public relations personnel, in internet web logs (blogs) from sites of conflict, in independent websites that challenge more mainstream media coverage, and in the growth of publics watching, in real time and round the globe, the workings out of the most recent wars. Joseph Nye (2002) distinguishes these in terms of them being 'hard'

² The Frontline Club was established in 2003 to support those journalists, cameramen and photographers throughout the world who risk their lives in the course of their work. Membership is drawn from the world's leading foreign correspondents and operators, the wider media, aid agencies, the diplomatic service and those interested in frontline journalism (see <http://www.thefrontlineclub.com/>).

³ The Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma is a global network of journalists, journalism educators and health professionals dedicated to improving media coverage of trauma, conflict and tragedy. The Center also addresses the consequences of such coverage for those working in journalism (see <http://www.dartcenter.org/about/mission.html>). We are especially grateful to Mark Brayne, Director Europe.

⁴ The International News Safety Institute (INSI) is a non-governmental organisation dedicated to the safety of journalists and media staff and committed to fighting the persecution of journalists everywhere. The Institute is a coalition of media organisations, press freedom groups, unions and humanitarian campaigners working to create a culture of safety in media in all corners of the world (see <http://www.newssafety.com/aboutus/home-about.htm>).

and 'soft': Information War weapons are hard in that they disable and destroy identified enemies with unprecedented force and efficacy; Information War media is soft in that it deals with symbols that require interpretation and analysis. Any boundaries between the two are sure to be blurred: ICTs radically influence the ecology of media and Psychological Operations (PSYOPS), the attempt to win hearts and minds, is an integral element of armed forces. It should not be imagined that the 'hard' can do without the 'soft', even if on occasion it may take precedence.

Media plays an integral and vital role both in the conduct and even the commencement of Information War. There has long been a close association between media and war, but as a rule media has been harnessed to the war effort, being conscripted (generally willingly) to support the struggle of the homeland. However, in the changed circumstances that prevail today media play a more ambiguous and ambivalent part in war. For instance, journalists may file stories from the remotest regions provided they have power for their lightweight satellite transmission systems, the internet means that the accounts they construct are readily available to the subjects upon whom they report, and it is common to find reporters filing from locations on the receiving end of allies' attacks. In addition, there is such an extraordinary increase in media coverage of conflict zones, such a convergence of media practitioners from around the world on particular trouble spots, and such a diversity of reporters and their organisations, that it cannot be surprising that there is considerable uncertainty about the messages generated on rolling news services, on (blogs), and the internet. Information War profoundly implicates the symbolic realm, that the ties between media and combatants are far from clear, and that this involvement is something that stretches beyond the actual period of fighting.

News media are drawn to cover war for several reasons. One is the obvious appeal of newsmakers towards the drama of conflict. The enormously high stakes ensure that it is a priority for most news media. When war erupts, or when it is sensed that war is about to break out, then nowadays the world's media swarm to the trouble spot. The bigger the conflict, the more consequential the fighting, and the more involved are major powers then the more media will attend. An estimated two thousand journalists converged on the Balkans in 1999 during the Kosovo conflict when NATO forces went into action against Serbia and nearly double that number set off for Iraq in 2003 when the United States and its 'coalition of the willing' moved to overthrow Saddam Hussein. More than five hundred went directly with the military forces as 'embeds', but the majority were there either as freelancers, stringers or with media organisations but unattached to armed units.

Undoubtedly, many journalists positioned with the military forces are restricted to varying degrees in what they can and perhaps are willing to report. The very presence of so many and so disparate journalists drawn to war situations, the sheer volume of reportage, and the unmanageable character of so many aspects of war, means that undesirable stories will somehow get through, whatever the military authorities and politicians strive to do.

There is a competitive atmosphere amongst the journalists but this is tempered by camaraderie between correspondents who often work in pairs or threesomes because there is greater safety travelling in two or three vehicles. There is frequently a sharing of information:

'Often we would share.. there is competition but necessarily what one paper would want and the way it's written and presented will be very different to another. Sometimes...there are certain situations and certain stories that yes, I'm the first person or yes, I've got that story, I've got that interview, we found that victim, this hero soldier, we've found him or her. But on the whole you would be with other journalists and in situations where you would exchange information.' (No. 27)

Generally the spirit of co-operation is stronger than that of competition.

The social identity of war correspondents is constructed around three main axes: service to the public; their professionalism (which may exhibit different peculiarities compared with journalism in general); and the internalisation of the values associated with reporting conflict.⁵ Most of the journalists covering conflict that we interviewed do not consider themselves as 'war correspondents' but as journalists who report on war. It is a subjective distinction and on delving further into their experiences we discovered that many of them had covered numerous conflicts. They tend to travel out to conflicts for relatively short periods of time and then return to the home bases.

As one interviewee told us: ⁶

'I'm a journalist. .. I think some people glory in the term war correspondent. Yes, you cover the conflicts, but I do much much more than that. I'll be covering the news side of the Olympics, I covered the last four or five Olympics on the news side, so I wouldn't term myself a war correspondent. Yes, if there is a major conflict, the chances are that I will be sent there but I'm far more than just a war correspondent' (No. 27).

This is different from the 'old' style foreign correspondents who may be assigned for up to three years in a particular country or region. Due to the changes in media technologies and practices of news organizations, and the competitiveness of the industry, the increase in news outlets and 24/7 news transmissions, this type of foreign correspondent is a dying breed. Although not based permanently abroad many of those to whom we spoke viewed themselves as foreign correspondents and were rather dismissive of 'war junkies' as they called them. One senior broadcasting correspondent outlined the distinction:

'If somebody describes themselves to me as a war correspondent I would instinctively mistrust them because I think if you specialise in covering wars, almost by the definition, you lose connection with ordinary life and ordinary people. War, thank goodness, is abnormal. It is something that happens when all else fails. And I have

⁵ Tunstall's pioneering study, on British specialist correspondents in 1971, showed that foreign correspondents exhibit certain peculiarities when compared with other specialisations such as political, crime or sports correspondents (Tunstall, 1971). Although many of the trends identified thirty plus years ago may have undergone significant modifications, nevertheless, they still illustrate that the ideal of the 'service to the public', the importance of professionalism and of the values associated with specific news gathering, all contribute to foreign/ war journalists being a peculiar if not deviant group among correspondents (Tumber & Prentoulis 2003).

⁶ All quotations in the report are derived from the interviews conducted as part of the project.

met, and I met them last year when I was covering the war in Iraq, people who just go from one conflict to another. And often they're very damaged people and they're damaged principally because they cannot disconnect themselves from the unreality of war, and war I think delivers great highs to those who are covering it, partly because of the risk, the thrill of escaping danger, but it is an unreal existence. And I think, to my mind, the very best reporters who cover wars are those who cover them with a certain degree of reluctance, and that connects them to most ordinary sane peoples' view of war that at best it is a painful necessity. So the idea of being a war correspondent is not a term that I would want to be used about myself" (No. 28).

Despite the fascination and addiction to war, and the excitement and glamour that is associated with the profession, many war correspondents refer to the crucial social values of their work. 'Truth'-seeking and a sense of making history are primary motivations, leading to the elevation of the profession as a vocation. As one correspondent commented to us:

'I did some very good work as a war correspondent because I believed passionately in the role we had to play, and I believe that particularly in Bosnia that we had a role to contribute in ending the war and enforcing a halt, which in the end journalists did contribute to, and I'm very proud of that. So there's that element of that which is it's definitely a vocation. The second thing is that it's a hugely exciting way to live your life, which is seen as adventure and fun, and you can't deny that' (No. 11).

Other journalists we interviewed spoke of the 'need' to be at the heart of events – compelled to be present at moments of history. And this inevitably means that there is an element of risk inherent in the occupation whether it is in gathering the story, or editing the material or transmitting it back to their news organizations. While the physical and psychological welfare of all journalists is to some extent at risk, war/foreign correspondents face the most severe conditions and demands. The identification with their specific practice is therefore re-enforced.

Journalists try to grab the attention and sentiments of their audiences in order to make them aware of conflicts around the world. This personal commitment is enhanced when journalists see themselves as 'witnesses' to atrocities and gross injustices. The public is perceived as more or less ignorant about world affairs, and the journalist-witness has to open their eyes to the world's brutal reality. As one correspondent who covered the conflict in the former Yugoslavia related:

'I wanted to be covering what was the main story of the day. ... you want to bear witness to what has happened. I felt that there was an obligation. I wanted to tell the story of the people who were suffering in this way. I certainly didn't get any thrills out of the danger... I was never reckless, and neither were my colleagues, it was a case of covering a historic event, a world story, and making sure that people in Britain knew what was going on. At the time, there was a lot of misinformation, about this war. There was a lot of feeling that each side was as bad as one another. And as always happens in war, it's the innocent civilians – the women, the children and the elderly –who get caught up in it and who suffer the most. And I thought that it was important that these people were heard. I don't wish to sound pompous or arrogant about it, but you hope that by opening people's eyes to what is happening, that maybe something will be done to stop it from happening. If enough journalists are telling the

story, the politicians will see what's happening and will actually do something to stop it continuing' (No. 25).

The prioritisation of the moral and ethical duties of the journalist towards the public and the world in general is part of the professional values framework within which contemporary journalism operates.

Amongst the most revered journalists covering war are those with reputations for seeking 'truth', however much that might displease powerful interests. For instance, James Cameron's reportage for *Picture Post* of ill-treatment of prisoners from Korea in the 1950s, Seymour Hersh's exposure of the Mai Lai massacre in Vietnam in the late 1960s, of Robert Fisk's thirty year history of filing reports from Northern Ireland, Lebanon and Afghanistan, of Maggie O'Kane from the Balkans in the 1990s, of John Simpson's defiantly independent reports from Baghdad (where he was wounded and one of his team killed in 2003) for the BBC.

Wars are inherently hazardous locations, so it is not surprising to see those who report from them described by a former editor as 'an unacknowledged aristocracy of journalism' (Marr 2004, p.327). The Committee to Protect Journalists (www.cpj.org) lists some 300 journalists killed in conflict zones (excluding those who died in accidents such as car or plane crashes) over the past decade. In Afghanistan late in 2001 eight journalists were killed, actually more than US troops in action, and three dozen or so have died in Iraq during the year following the 2003 war. Behind the deaths are many more instances of shrapnel wounds, threats and frightening episodes in places as varied as Israel and Sierra Leone. ⁷ War reporting undoubtedly has its rewards, but it requires an ethical calling from journalists prepared to risk life and limb.

The need for safety measures is becoming a major issue in war reporting. The deaths of two journalists in Sierra Leone in May 2000 led many news organizations (Reuters, The Associated Press, CNN, BBC, ITV, and the big American networks) to sign a code of practice on safety. The International Code of Practice for the safe conduct of journalists requires media organizations to provide risk-awareness training, social protection (i.e. life insurance), free medical treatment, and protection for freelance or part-time employees, coupled with the public authorities' respect for the rights and physical integrity of journalists and media staff (IFJ 2000). Although this Code of Practice was accepted by some leading media organizations, an industry-wide response that would enable all media workers to benefit from risk-awareness training has not yet been established. The broadcasters and agencies have kept their pledge to extend training to all of their local stringers and 'fixers' but the newspapers have not made a similar commitment so far. Furthermore, the deaths of journalists killed in Gulf war II have led to more urgent demands for a better understanding of the reasons behind those deaths (see Tumber and Palmer 2004: 37).

⁷ Indeed, there is a stage at which dangers to life are so acute that reporting becomes impossible for even the most dedicated journalist. As the conflict developed in Iraq late in 2004, and with this Western journalists found themselves targeted (some 20 were killed by insurgents), so did it risk 'becoming a story too dangerous to cover' (Beaumont 2004). Those remaining in Iraq were pushed increasingly into the fortified Green Zone which meant that reportage – for instance of the massive US assault on Falluja in November 2004 – was severely circumscribed, presented on the terms of the US forces, so precise figures on death and injury of American forces were available, but nothing of Iraqi casualties or the degree of damage once populated by over 200,000 people.

The contrast between broadcasting and print organisations is also evident in preparations for reporting. Whereas the big broadcasting companies have the infrastructures to look after most of the logistical support that their journalists may face, the newspaper journalists tend to have to do all the organisational arrangements themselves.' As one newspaperman reeled off his to do list:

'Often the story is the easy part of it and living is the hard part of it, i.e. where do you find a safe area to bed down, who are you working with, who are your fixers, do you have a soft-skin vehicle, do you have a hard-skin vehicle, do you have to take a lot of money in with you, how are your communications going to work, do they make you vulnerable, are you able to fire from a certain area, do you need to carry all your petrol, do you need to carry all your food, do you need to carry all your water, all those things become part of the job' (No.27).

Many of the broadcasting organizations now insist that all their journalists reporting from conflict zones attend safety courses. Most of the journalists we interviewed, whilst accepting the necessity of broadcasting organizations to insist on participation were rather dismissive of the programmes apart from the first aid element.

Some journalists though, expressed concern about the development of the safety issue:

'I think the big danger now for journalism is not that it should be made safer but that it's perhaps become too safe, perhaps too obsessed with making journalists safe. It's only in the most extreme situations that a journalist should put on anything which is going to set them too far apart from the people that they're interviewing, like a helmet, a flak jacket. But now in Iraq, at least one major newspaper, on at least one occasion in the war, decided that it was appropriate to travel to an assignment with its own armed guard, not just one person with a gun but, a van containing security personnel. If you really-really-really-really feel that the only way you can go to do that story is by doing that then you should not go and do it because if you turn up as a journalist and interview people with a handful of armed men, then you're not a journalist anymore, you're something else, I don't know what you are. It's intimidating and it's wrong and that is the way that this sort of obsession with safety is pushing us. (No. 1).

The culture of war corresponding is not only constructed around rules and values associated with the end product of the process, but also with the internalization of the occupational values and the way it defines the very existence of the war correspondents. Furthermore, the internalisation of the ethical and moral duties places enormous pressure on journalists. The axis, upon which the ideological framework of war correspondents depends, is further re-enforced by a set of cultural forms unique to the specific subculture. These may include myths, language, ritual and taboos, all of which are part of the subculture of war/foreign correspondents.

Activities

Conference and seminar papers presented include:

Tumber

Researching the frontline: Interviewing journalists, Social Research Methodology Centre seminar series, City University, September 2004.

'*Prisoners of News Values?*' International Communications Association Conference, New Orleans, May 2004.

'*Media at War*', Spinning Hutton: in search of the big picture Conference, ESRC Securities Programme, European Research Institute, Birmingham University, February 2004.

Webster

'*War in the Information Age*', Brighton University, November 2004.

'*Globalization and Information War*', University of Tampere, Finland, September 2004.

'*Information War*', International Communications Association Conference, New Orleans, May 2004.

'*Information War, democratisation and human rights*', University of Surrey, Department of Sociology seminar series, October 2003.

Prentoulis

'*Journalists under Fire*', Athens Institute for Education and Research, Greece 2004.

Outputs

The main output will be a monograph. This will be a lengthy joint work, completed by summer 2005. We are currently negotiating with two well known academic publishers.

A contract has been signed for a chapter commissioned for 'Globalization and Information and Communications Technologies: The Case of War' in George Ritzer (ed), *Blackwell Companion to Globalization* 2006. A number of other journal articles are currently in preparation.

Other related outputs

Published

Tumber H. and J. Palmer (2004) *Media at War*, London: Sage.

Tumber H. (2004) 'Prisoners of News Values?: journalists, professionalism, and identification in times of war', in S. Allan and B. Zelizer, *Reporting War: journalism in wartime*, London: Routledge pp190-205.

Tumber H. and M. Prentoulis, (2003) 'Journalists Under Fire: Subcultures, objectivity and Emotional Literacy', in D. Thussu & D. Freedman (eds.), *War and the Media: Reporting Conflict 24/7*, London: Sage pp. 215-230.

Webster, F. 2003, 'Information War in an Age of Globalisation' in D. Thussu and D. Freedman (eds), *War and the Media: Reporting Conflict 24/7* London: Sage pp. 57-69.

Accepted and in press/forthcoming

Tumber H. (2005) 'Journalism and the war in Iraq', in S. Allan (ed.) *Journalism: critical issues*, Maidenhead: Open University Press, in press Feb. pp 370-380.

Tumber H. and M. Prentoulis, (2005) 'Journalism and the Making of a Profession' in H. de Burgh (ed) *The Making of Journalists*, London: Routledge in press May.

Impacts

The research provides:

Greater understanding of ways in which war correspondents operate, their working practices, (sub)cultures and professional values.

Appreciation of the difficulties encountered by war correspondents under conditions of Information War.

Fuller understanding of the significance and character of Information War.

Future research priorities

Deepening the research by constructing a larger and more mixed group of frontline journalists in terms of nationality and type.

Exploring the policies of news organisations in covering international conflict by conducting extensive interviews with news editors.

Exploring the ethical dilemmas faced by frontline correspondents in covering international conflict.

Examining the news coverage of recent conflicts through a content analysis of broadcasting and print media.

Examination of the influence of war reportage on policy and conduct of conflict.

Examination of audience reactions to media coverage.

Examination of relations between anti-war/peace movements, reporters, and new media environments

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