Breaking Through the Fog of War:

The Challenges and Responsibilities of Reporting Under Fire in 2023

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Missy Ryan is a reporter covering diplomacy and national security for *The Washington Post*. She has reported from Iraq, Egypt, Libya, Lebanon, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Mexico, Peru, Argentina, and Chile.

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Tracy Wilkinson is a Foreign Affairs Correspondent at *The Los Angeles Times* Washington Bureau. She has covered wars, crises and daily life on three continents.

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Deborah Amos is an award-winning international correspondent for National Public Radio. She has recently covered the Syrian and Iraqi refugee crises, the economy in the Middle East, and the Arab youth surge. She previously reported for ABC's *Nightline* and PBS's *Frontline*.

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Brief Analysis

Four veteran journalists offer their insights from the frontlines of different combat zones, including Middle East conflicts and the Ukraine war.

On March 16, The Washington Institute's **Aeder Family LINK Program (/node/16545)** held a hybrid event with Missy Ryan, Tracy Wilkinson, and Deborah Amos, moderated by Hanin Ghaddar. Ryan is a reporter covering diplomacy and national security for the *The Washington Post*. Wilkinson is a foreign affairs correspondent for the *The Los Angeles Times*. Amos is an international correspondent for NPR Ghaddar is the Friedmann Fellow in the Institute's Program on Arab Politics and a veteran Lebanese journalist. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Missy Ryan

More women are reporting on the frontlines than a generation ago, and there are advantages and disadvantages to being a woman in these situations. On the one hand, it can act as an entry point. When I was reporting in Afghanistan, for example, I found that Western women could gain access to areas and people that men could not. On the other hand, this was not the case during the Arab Spring uprisings, where women journalists were often targeted. Women in all fields have a certain vulnerability and are targeted and harassed in ways that men are not. Additionally, in a place like Ukraine where civilian infrastructure is being targeted, there is an equal opportunity risk of being wounded or killed.

Safety guidelines for journalists are dictated by the different news organizations, which have dramatically different thresholds for what journalists can do. Some employ security advisors to travel with journalists and dedicate specific staff to advise and track reporters in the field. These measures are extremely expensive, and most news organizations cannot afford them. As a result, many journalists do not travel to conflict areas, or they do so in a way that has less oversight. Even with backing from major institutions and proper safety training, they still face great danger. Regrettably, the local journalists, "stringers," and "fixers" hired by Western media outlets do not get the same training and support; this is an area that demands improvement.

Journalists working in conflicts can become psychologically distressed after witnessing the horrific realities of war, and news organizations have started to take their mental health into consideration. Reuters, for example, offers a voluntary program where journalists can request therapy sessions upon returning home.

It is a difficult task to achieve objectivity while reporting from conflict zones because of the intensity of what journalists see and hear. In these situations, a journalist should focus on one person's experience and provide context for the larger conflict. Like other journalists, war reporters must use their judgment and analytical skills while always double-checking the story for information that could be dismissed as "he said, she said."

In some countries, journalists are often denied access to the story and its players. Saudi Arabia restricts access for American journalists, Egypt has been steadily increasing media restrictions, and parts of Syria are highly restricted due to government repression and the ongoing civil war. As a result, the conversation is much less informed. As always, local journalists face more barriers and assume more risks than their foreign counterparts, especially in places like Egypt. This includes foreigners being more sheltered from the legal ramifications of their reportage. For example, years ago a team of international journalists with Al Jazeera was arrested and later released, yet many local journalists remain imprisoned in Egypt.

The Washington Post has invested in strong, robust coverage of Ukraine and maintains a small bureau of rotating staff there. However, this is certainly not the case for other conflicts around the globe such as in Yemen, Libya, or parts of Africa. This puts the onus on reporters covering prolonged conflicts to up their game by finding stories that are compelling enough to bring people back to these topics. This is to some extent a result of what news organizations think their readers care about and what the U.S. government is currently focusing on. Personnel shortages and grave safety concerns affect coverage as well. For example, during the war in Syria, foreign journalists were not on the ground regularly, and news organizations often relied on activists in the region. Social media can sometimes help bridge the gap in spaces that major news outlets do not cover.

After covering insurgent and irregular wars for many years, I have recently been reporting on the large-scale conventional war in Ukraine, where Russia is brutally attacking civilians. These actions, much like Syria's use of chemical weapons a few years ago, are shocking at this late stage of human history.

Tracy Wilkinson

One of the advantages of being a woman reporter is special access. For example, when reporting from Bedouin areas of southern Israel, I was able to meet with all the women in a family and get the real story. Yet women reporters can also be obstructed, harassed, and threatened in ways that men cannot. Last week, the U.S. State Department gave an International Women of Courage Award to an Ethiopian journalist who

covers gender violence issues in the Tigray region. While her gender might allow access to certain sources or spaces, she is also fighting incredible discrimination. Over time, however, these conflicts often evolve, and gender becomes less of a barrier.

Safety measures and training have evolved because media companies are doing more on this front. In the 1980s, these institutions offered almost no safety training, but most now provide first-aid training, and some provide lessons in evasive driving and how to protect your ears from airstrikes. The introduction of cell phones and other technology has also helped journalists become far better prepared and safer than they were a few decades ago. At the same time, the massive firepower that combatants now possess is posing new dangers, as is their frequent refusal to recognize rules of war.

As for mental health and medical assistance, I witnessed a deadly suicide bomb attack while reporting in Iraq, and the organization I worked for not only required that I see a therapist afterward, but also ensured that our Iraqi employees received medical care. Foreign correspondents are lucky enough to have major institutions behind them, but local and freelance journalists often do not. *The Los Angeles Times* previously had thirty bureaus all over the world and a much larger footprint overseas. Today, limits on time and resources have forced it to pick and choose the places it covers. Yet wherever it goes, local journalists remain extremely important to its work. Over time, Western reporters develop a relationship with a group of people who inform them about the local situation and the sources they can trust.

Regarding potential bias, I had been covering the Bosnian war for years when Christiane Amanpour famously questioned whether journalists can remain objective in a war zone. Journalists have a duty to show the civilian experience, including the plight of people who are suffering.

Efforts to seek justice for the victims of these conflicts have been a mixed bag, however. Although more information is available today, there is also more disinformation, and the abundance of both has slowed justice in some cases. During the Bosnian War in the early 1990s, mass graves were hidden, and it often took years to get enough evidence for a case. Today, evidence is being published in real time, but it is more than the system can handle, so countless victims are still seeking justice.

Deborah Amos

Reporting from combat zones is inherently dangerous and requires a unique combination of courage and skill. It is not necessarily more or less dangerous to be a woman in these situations because the style of warfare has changed drastically.

Unlike when I began my career almost two decades ago, training for combat reporting has become more common, largely because insurance companies pushed for it. NPR focuses on first aid training, and domestic reporters are now required to have the same type of training as those going into conflict zones overseas—a response to the increased risks they face at home.

To support mental health, the Dart Center—a project of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism—now publishes the names of trusted therapists on its website, included the specialized therapists required for war reporters. Post-traumatic stress remains a significant risk. Photographers tend to have the worst reactions because they do not have much opportunity to process what they have experienced, whereas writers often process things by making a narrative out of what they see.

Headquarters staff do not always understand the problems that local journalists face; in fact, correspondents often have a better grasp of what goes into protecting local reporters than their bosses back home. Much of this protection is subtle; in many cases, a foreign reporter must stand back and let the local journalists take the initiative, because they are the only ones who know what is safe and what is not.

Unfortunately, one longstanding fact remains true: in the business of news, the story must be new. Important stories may receive a great deal of coverage at first, but they inevitably become part of the "day to day." For example, the 2022 Syrian war crimes trials in Germany marked the first time that Assad regime officials were prosecuted, and the first trial received great coverage. Yet the stories and public attention diminished as more officers were tried.

Hanin Ghaddar

Being a woman journalist in Lebanon was extremely difficult, particularly due to the ubiquitous harassment—a problem that is shared by women reporters all over the Arab world. Another problem is that women in the field are often not taken as seriously as their male counterparts. For example, people sometimes would not believe that I was the editor-in-chief of a prominent news site simply because I was a woman.

Even if a news organization provides some training and assistance to local journalists, it is often not enough—especially in situations where they may be in danger. Many local journalists do not feel safe unless they become a part of the major institution that hires them to help cover a story. Indeed, the way that officials and militias treat local journalists is vastly different from how they treat foreign journalists. Therefore, major news organizations must commit to protecting local journalists from backlash, even after a story is published.

This summary was prepared by ***Shaina Katz (/node/87)***. ❖

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