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# In The Line of Fire: War Correspondents in Action

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## War Reporting (1)

As of the 1<sup>st</sup> of December of this year, 171 journalists and other media workers have been killed – most of them murdered – in 35 different countries across the world. Sixty four of this number were killed in Iraq. Many others were killed covering conflict in Afghanistan and elsewhere making 2007 the worst year on record for deaths among journalists and media workers worldwide.

Most foreign, development and war correspondents believe that a sea-change has taken place in the opening decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in the manner in which wars are being waged, with journalists being deliberately targeted by parties to conflicts from the Middle East to Asia and the African continent. This has fundamentally changed the way in which journalists are able to operate in conflict zones and has led to a tectonic shift in the manner in which we access information from these areas. This has led to a situation where many foreign correspondents believe that conflict zones have become ‘black holes’ with little or no real information making its way onto the western news agenda.

Patrick Cockburn of the London Independent has been a highly respected war correspondent for almost 33 years and has reported on war and conflict from Northern Ireland in the 1970s through to the civil war in Lebanon during the 1980s and most recently from inside Iraq. Cockburn agrees that in recent years, war reporting has become a more hazardous occupation. ‘It has got more dangerous. In Belfast for example in the 1970s and indeed in Beirut, all of the militias and factions were avid newspaper readers and they all had smart media personnel. So, it was reasonably safe for a journalist, until around 1984 when they started the kidnapping in Beirut. But, even then, being a journalist was probably safer than other professions’.

Cockburn points to the role of international ‘Jihad’ or a global ideological or cultural war that has broken out since the collapse of the Cold War and the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers in 2001 as inimical to the safety of journalists worldwide. ‘Part of the Islamic reaction in Iraq and the Middle East today is not just political, but cultural. They see western newspapers as part of the general problem of ‘the west’ and as a result they are quite antagonistic towards media. But, it’s not just the obvious places like Iraq that are very dangerous for journalists. Other countries, particularly former satellite states of the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, the North Caucasus including territories such as Chechnya, the southern Caucasus, Armenia, Georgia and Ingushetia are particularly dangerous for journalists. The majority of journalists killed there are locals. Throughout the former USSR for example, even in the Ukraine, powerful people just shoot journalists if they irritate or embarrass them. In Tajikistan for example, 92 journalists have been murdered since 1989. The danger levels have certainly increased for journalists in conflict zones, but more generally the world has become a more dangerous place for journalists’.

Despite the dangers posed to western journalists, Cockburn, originally from Co. Cork regularly travels to Iraq and operates outside the relative safety of areas such as the Green Zone in Baghdad. As a result, he has experienced at first hand many of the hazards that

confront journalists reporting on war today. In 2004, Cockburn and his driver were seized from their car whilst travelling to the predominantly Shia city of Najaf. 'I was wearing a Kefiya and got dragged out of the car by some guys on a checkpoint who were shouting 'American spy'. There was no discipline on the checkpoint and some of the guys wanted to kill us, myself and the driver, there and then, on the spot as it were. As they were preparing to shoot us, they got into a discussion as to whether or not they'd take us to their mosque and present us to their leaders there ... with a view to perhaps killing us there or thereabouts. I had a chance during that pause to show them my Irish passport. The Irish passport certainly saved us'.

Cockburn is conscious of the value – albeit diminishing - of the Irish passport for survival in many areas of conflict today. 'I'm not so sure that the Irish passport would make a terrible deal of difference to those in the kidnap business. But, definitely a UK or a US passport can be a death sentence. They [the insurgents] do know about Ireland though and the nuances of the Irish struggle against Britain. For example, in Fallujah, on the day the insurgents brought down a US Chinook helicopter, some of the locals were asking me about 'Michael Collins'. You know, they've seen the film. And they read a lot. And they know a bit of Irish history. So, the Irish passport is still a good thing to have'.

Cockburn acknowledges that despite the dangers inherent in war reporting, many young men and women, eager to fast track or kick-start a career in journalism are tempted to travel in a freelance capacity, to war zones. His advice is simple. 'The trick is to stay alive. Remember, you'll never blend in, so don't think you can disguise yourself. Everyone is watching you. That is a feature of a hostile environment. And always make sure your driver knows the way. All taxi drivers say they know the way. And bad things happen on the wrong road'.

Some journalists however have succeeded in blending in – if only briefly. Nir Rosen, an American journalist who has written extensively for Time Magazine and the New Yorker - and whose parents are Iranian - regularly operates deep within Iraq far from the security of the Green Zone. 'Speaking fluent Farsi and Arabic, in 2005 I persuaded Time magazine to send me to Iraq as a stringer. I felt that Iraq had become a black hole. Even now in 2007 it remains largely a black hole. We just don't know what is going on inside Iraq. I decided to get embedded with the Iraqi people and tell the other side to the story of the US invasion of Iraq'.

Rosen employed a simple but high-risk strategy to get beyond military and official US sources to tell the Iraq story. 'My Arabic was good. And ethnically the Iraqis were related to me by way of my Iranian heritage. So, I just got a taxi down town and hung out at the mosques in the Baghdad area and surrounding towns. It was a very successful technique for getting interviews. I spent on and off, two years in Iraq including a whole year in Baghdad'.

Eventually, Rosen's luck began to run out and one night, after taking a taxi to the scene of a shooting incident at a Sunni mosque in a Shia district in Baghdad, Rosen was seized by a number of armed Sunni militants. 'Suddenly, I was rushed into the Mosque by some

very angry men. And they were as mad as hell. And, I suppose, I shouldn't have been that surprised. Mosques are often not good places to be in Iraq at the moment. They can be places where militants gather and where bad things can happen. The guys held me there and started to argue about whether or not to kill me on the spot or wait for another group to come and film my execution. Meantime, I named every Sunni cleric I could think of who might vouch for me. And they started listening to me. And they let me go. Just like that'.

Rosen, like many war correspondents was conscious of how dangerous an American passport can be in such circumstances. According to Rosen, 'The Irish passport would be a good thing to have for a correspondent. It is definitely still considered sort of neutral by the Iraqis. But it only goes so far. The Iraqis though have a strong identification with the Irish struggle against colonial powers and the Irish cause and fight for freedom. That still resonates in Iraq today. In my experience, these guys are well educated and well up on history and Ireland'.

Rosen, like Cockburn warns would-be western war correspondents of the many dangers and challenges of reporting from conflict zones. 'Even if you're well set up. And Iraq can be expensive. With a driver and a fixer and an interpreter. I've seen translators and interpreters tell lies to western journalists. They can be very subjective and interpret stuff in a very uneven way. Many of them are actively filtering information. Telling journalists what they think they ought to hear as opposed to telling the truth. They are being relied on as interlocutors. And they are not objective'. Rosen also warns about the capricious nature of the dangers of war reporting. 'In spite of all your training and briefing. No matter how experienced you are, it is always the irrational thing that kills you. The unpredictability of incidents in Iraq stick out in my mind. When something bad happens, it happens real quick. There is no warning. No knowing'.

Veteran reporter Martin Bell has reported on a variety of conflicts over four decades from Vietnam in the 1960's to the present day. He also agrees that war reporting has become extremely hazardous of late. 'In Vietnam it was nothing like as dangerous as it is today for reporters. I mean, there were a number of isolated cases where one or two journalists were cornered in Saigon and killed by the Viet Cong. But it wasn't very common. Nowadays, if you tried the free-ranging type of journalism that we practised in Vietnam, you wouldn't last a week. You probably wouldn't last 48 hours. And it is not just in Iraq. It is the same for Africa, vast swathes of the former Soviet Union and large parts of Asia'.

Bell, in common with many war reporters, in addition to the instability created by the collapse of the former Soviet Union cites militant Islamism as one of the main threats to 21<sup>st</sup> Century war reporters in the field. 'It [the threat to journalists] goes with the phenomenon of international Jihad and the perception of the media as being infidels who are part of the great Satan's effort to thwart Islam. I did most of my war reporting in Vietnam, the Middle East in the 1970s, Northern Ireland and Bosnia in the 1980s and 1990s. The worst thing that could happen to you would be to get caught in the cross fire.

There was no real danger of being targeted. Of being assassinated for who you were. But, that's all changed. And it's changing all over the world'.

As a consequence, Bell feels that conflict zones such as Iraq are almost impossible to report upon using traditional journalistic methods. 'I don't think we're getting any picture at all of what's happening in Iraq. I think that most western reporting out of Baghdad is pretty useless now because the reporters can't leave their compounds for more than about fifteen minutes. So we have what I call roof-top journalism. Very inauthentic. It is usually a well known bloke, very smartly dressed, standing in front of two of the most famous palm trees in the world on the roof of whatever hotel the media pack are lodged in. But, he doesn't know anything because he hasn't been outside the compound for more than 15 minutes'.

Bell is also critical of the 21<sup>st</sup> century news agenda as policed by foreign editors in both the print and electronic media. 'I mean, look at the BBC's 6 O' Clock News now. It used to tell you what was going on in the nation and in the world. Now it tells you what's going on inside the editor's head. There has been a change in the news agenda since the early 1990's, starting in the UK with ITN. A definite dumbing down, with celebrity journalism and fashion and health stories and whatever was required to keep the figures up. We don't take the world's news seriously any more. And that is true for most of the newspapers, including the broadsheets also'.

Even though Martin Bell was seriously injured when hit by a mortar round in Bosnia, he is philosophical about the incident and does not equate this experience with the threat posed to war reporters today. 'I had an armoured Land Rover in Bosnia which used to belong to the RUC. We used to call her Miss Piggy. I wasn't in her the day I got hit. I wasn't targeted either. My field craft just failed me. If you are in a hostile environment, things like that are going to happen. Someone is going to get killed or injured. I got hit because I was in a war zone, not because I was a journalist'.

As a result of the risks posed to journalists today in an ideologically charged conflict environment which sees journalists as 'legitimate targets', Bell sees the embedding of journalists with the military as a 'necessary evil'. 'In 2003, I believe there were 2000 journalists kicking their heels in Kuwait. Now, you can't have these people swarming all over the battlefield. You can't run a proper war like that. Which is one of the reasons why embedding systems seem inevitable. It is the sheer number of journalists from so many television and radio stations and newspapers. And, apparently, journalists inflict this pack mentality on themselves. So, it is no good complaining about it. That would be a bit like complaining about the weather'. Bell however, does note some serious drawbacks to the system of embedding.

'With embedding you're trading freedom for access. And you've got to avoid the staged media event. If you're in the first wave, if you're with the commander, then I suppose you're only a few hundred metres from the real action. So you can see stuff from the soldier's point of view. I think that is fine in so far as it goes. So long as it is not the only information that the network is getting'.

Martin Bell also emphasises risks posed by war reporting to today's budding foreign and war correspondents. 'You know, when you get back to your editor, he or she's going to be looking for signs of PTSD. And you can't win this. Because if you are affected by what you've seen, then they'll probably think it is time for the men in the white coats to come and take you away. But, if you are not affected by what you've seen, it really is time for the men in white coats to take you away'.

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