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Tom Clonan

Dublin Institute of Technology, tom.clonan@dit.ie

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Tom Clonan Dr
DIT, tomclonan@gmail.com

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Truth and War Reporting: Journalism in Hostile Environments

Author: Dr. Tom Clonan (Captain Retired)

Affiliation: Senior Staff Lecturer, School of Media, Dublin Institute of Technology, DIT,
Aungier Street, Dublin 2, Ireland

E Mail Address: tclonan@irish-times.ie

Title of Abstract

Truth and War Reporting: Journalism in Hostile Environments

Many journalists, whether reporting on domestic matters internally or on assignment abroad as foreign or development correspondents, may at some point find themselves reporting on violence and hostilities in a hostile environment.

This paper examines the professional and personal dilemmas that confront journalists when reporting on violence and within hostile environments both at home and abroad. The author of the paper has participated in armed conflict as a professional soldier in Ireland, Lebanon and the former Yugoslavia. He has also reported on conflict and hostilities as the Irish Times Security Analyst since October 2001.

In the last two years, the author has formally interviewed dozens of Irish, British and US foreign correspondents including Martin Bell, Orla Guerin of the BBC and Nir Rosen of the New Yorker in order to fully explore the dilemmas confronted by journalists reporting in volatile and dangerous environments. The paper will draw on the author's considerable experience as a soldier participating in violent struggle and as a journalist reporting on such events by way of the print and electronic media. The author will demonstrate the manner in which violence and hostilities are mediated by the various political, ideological and practical factors that underpin the news gathering and news making process.

The author will incorporate this analysis within a theoretical frame encompassing the political economy of news production, news values and news agenda.

Key Words

War Conflict Hostile Environment Reporting Journalism Foreign Truth Political Economy

Truth and War Reporting – Journalism in Hostile Environments

Theoretical Perspectives

There are an abundance of academic literature sources that deal with the hypothesised relationships between journalists and powerful 'elites' in society such as corporate, state and government entities. These linkages are dealt with comprehensively in the canon of literature that comprises the political economy of communications. Over the last two decades or so, authors such as Schiller (1992), Boyd-Barrett and Newbold (1995), Chomsky (1996), Mc Chesney (1998), Keeble, (2000) and Kellner (2001) have identified the manner in which powerful interest groups in society shape or frame news stories through key interactions with journalists in the field.

This body of literature examines the mode of production of news and the manner in which powerful 'official' sources can intervene in the news-making process in order to give effect to a re-statement or re-iteration of the status quo in society. By controlling access to invaluable information against the backdrop of increased competition between media organisations and the time-sensitive nature of the news deadline, the literature in this area identifies a hypothesised 'symbiotic relationship' between journalists and powerful and conservative forces in society. In other words, powerful interests in society trade timely access to information, copy and images in return for 'primary definition' – or 'their side of the story' as the 'first draft of history'.

The framing of news stories around conflict and war is particularly vulnerable to manipulation by powerful vested interests. Most journalists who report from hostile environments world-wide report that it is increasingly difficult to get access to global flashpoints or 'trouble spots' without the explicit permission and assistance of domestic or international military actors. This has led to a situation where 'embedding' with military units has become a key feature of coverage of 21st century conflict in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Embeds rarely get access to competing 'eyewitness' accounts of war and conflict and tend to rely on a version of events that is heavily nuanced by co-location with the military and the consequent circumstantial lack of a fuller, more rounded range of sources and points of view. Where formal or informal 'embedding' is not possible or permitted, coverage of conflicts such as those in Tibet or Chechnya is highly fragmented and incomplete.

Despite these difficulties, reports on war and conflict remain 'high status' news products across both print and electronic media. In terms of the type of copy and images they provide, war stories are rich in colour and high in 'News Value'. As such, they are usually high on the news agenda, often front-page news stories and the leading bulletins on radio and television newscasts. (For 'News Values', 'News Agenda', see Hodgson, 1993:9; Allen, 1999:62-3; Fiske, 2001: 283-4)

Informed by these theoretical perspectives and informed by his own professional formation as a former soldier and journalist in practice, the author, for the purposes of this paper, will conduct a simple content analysis of Sky News World Review 2000 (01st January 2001) coverage of conflict between the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) and Palestinian resistance groups in Ram Allah in the West Bank and the British Army and local rebel groups in Sierra Leone.

Practical Perspectives

As an adjunct to the theoretical perspectives outlined above, the author is keen to point out that he does not believe that most foreign, freelance or development correspondents deliberately or consciously subordinate themselves to the diktat of state or military interests. Rather, the author takes the view that the current reliance on 'official' sources to obtain access to zones of conflict and or informants and contacts in such locations is a pragmatic rather than philosophical response on the part of journalists to the current particulars of the 'Global War on Terror'. The author would contend however that journalists need to heighten their awareness of this dynamic as it impacts on their reportage and would encourage journalism educators and professional associations to focus on journalism education in this area as a means of limiting bias in the reporting of war and conflict.

Sky News World Report – Ram Allah West Bank **(01 January 2001)**

In terms of the manner in which this *Sky News* report is presented, an analysis of the footage aired to viewers demonstrates quite clearly that the TV crew has entered the West Bank with an Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) unit. Repeatedly and consistently throughout the piece, the camera position and camera angle – usually a few meters to the rear of IDF personnel – ensures that the visual representation of the West Bank conflict is that version of events as seen by IDF personnel. In other words, what the viewer sees on screen is predicated upon the access afforded by IDF troops. In a semiotic sense, the viewer becomes embedded with the IDF unit featured and moves through Ram Allah with them.

This visual ‘embedding’ is reinforced by the language used by the *Sky TV* news presenter in the accompanying commentary. In the opening scenes the viewer is informed that two Israeli soldiers were ‘lynched by a mob which overran the police station where they were being held’. The use of the word ‘lynched’ to describe the killing of the Israeli soldiers clearly signals to the viewer that their killings were more than merely unlawful – but murderous, even heinous in nature. The use of the word ‘mob’ to describe Palestinians at the scene further implies that they are, as a collective, without exception intent on wrong-doing. By extension, any gathering of Palestinians, particularly angry Palestinians cannot be legitimized and such gatherings carry with them the semiotic import of gang violence or criminal intent. The following sequence shows an IDF attack helicopter firing TOW missiles into a densely populated Palestinian residential area. The accompanying commentary simply states “The Israelis attacked the town with helicopter gun-ships”. This clear breach of the Geneva Conventions is reported in a matter of fact manner, as though a natural and inevitable consequence of the preceding scenes of ‘mob’ violence. The proportionality of this response is not examined by the presenter, nor is any active agency or value-laden term applied by the presenter to describe IDF acts of aggression.

In the next scene, over images of Palestinians throwing rocks and bottles, the presenter states that “The peace process collapsed under the weight of renewed hatred”. The clear implication here is that hatred is a Palestinian phenomenon, a notion underpinned by the semiotic functioning of images of rock throwing Palestinian youths edited with emphasis to coincide with the word ‘hatred’.

In his next sentence, the presenter, with a received pronunciation (RP) accent, states that “Hundreds died and most of them were Palestinians”. The deaths of hundreds of Palestinians here is stated in a passive manner with no agency assigned to the IDF. The narrative does not imply that the IDF ‘murder’ or actively ‘kill’ Palestinians. Rather, the import of the narrative – reinforced by the authority vested in an RP accent – is that the deaths of Palestinians is an inevitable and just consequence of ‘street battles’. It is also interesting to note, that from the point of view of British and Irish aid to the civil power operations (ATCP Ops), the ‘street battles’ depicted in the footage shown would be considered consistent with public disorder on the lower end of the scale. Hundreds of Irish and British citizens did not die in similar disturbances in Toxteth, the Falls Road or the Shankill Road during the 1970s and 1980s. The fact that hundreds of Palestinians die in such circumstances in the West Bank is not contextualized by the presenter.

The *Sky News* piece then goes on to feature the tragic death of twelve-year old Mohammed al Dura. In showing the footage – which is high in news value – the presenter describes the footage of Mohammed’s killing in the following manner. “The last minutes of life of a twelve year old, as he cowered against a wall with his father, were recorded by a cameraman who was covering the daily battles”. As before, the killing of this Palestinian is reported without the assignation of agency or blame to the IDF. Rather, his ‘death’ is reported as a consequence of “returning home from a shopping trip when they found the bullets flying around them”. Unlike the Israeli soldiers whom the narrative informs us by use of the word ‘lynched’ were ‘murdered’, the presenter would have us believe that this boy died of ‘natural causes’, as though ‘finding the bullets flying’ was a natural state of affairs that might confront any 12 year old boy returning from a shopping trip with his father.

On a semiotic level, from the point of view of images and words, the *Sky News* coverage of the Ram Allah incidents reinforces the view that IDF actions in the West Bank are legitimate and defensive and that Palestinians have a greater propensity for violence and hatred than the other parties to this conflict. The semiotic import of the reportage seems to flow naturally from the reporter’s co-location with IDF personnel. The news piece shows that in this case, the institution giving access – that is to say the IDF – get primary definition, or their ‘version of events’ as it applies to incidents in the West Bank.

Sky News World Report – British Army in Sierra Leone **(01 January 2001)**

This news item opens with images of British troops arriving in Freetown, Sierra Leone by helicopter. The footage, from close ups to cut-away shots, clearly demonstrate that the camera crew are working with and among the British army unit that has deployed to Sierra Leone. The presenter opens his narrative with the introductory line, “British troops went into the West African state of Sierra Leone, once a British colony to supervise the rescue of UN staff caught up in the middle of a vicious civil war”. In this first sentence, the presenter, speaking with the pseudo-authority vested in an RP accent, reminds the viewer that this part of Africa was once a British colony. The relevance of this fact to the story as it unfolds is unclear. However, it does serve to situate Sierra Leone neatly into a hierarchical view of such a country as somehow ‘inferior’ to that of Britain. The fact that British troops are there to ‘supervise’ the ‘rescue of UN staff’ further reinforces the image of Sierra Leone as part of the ‘white man’s burden’ that Britain has inherited as a former colonial power. The opening sentence of the news narrative firmly places Sierra Leone within a patriarchal and colonial discourse which would represent the West African state as an ‘inferior’ nation requiring direction and assistance from the British.

The suggestion that Sierra Leone is an ‘inferior’ nation is reinforced in the presenter’s second sentence in the news item in which he describes the military situation in Freetown, “The ill-disciplined Sierra Leone army and mostly Nigerian UN troops had been barely able to keep a rebel army at bay from the coastal capital of Freetown”. The presenter obviously takes a dim view of the military capabilities of African forces who have in effect, successfully secured Freetown from attack and have secured the airport in order that British forces can deploy. These facts are masked by a re-telling of events, using words such as ‘ill-disciplined’ in order to depict African troops as incompetent or ‘inferior’ to western, predominantly white, English speaking troops. The language used is also accompanied by prominent images of armed African males in various states of undress interposed with images of heavily armed and well equipped British soldiers moving in tight formation through the streets of Freetown.

The presenter then describes the capture of Foday Sankoh as “the rebel leader ... technically a member of the government after the latest of many peace agreements”. The use of the word ‘technically’ here qualifies the legitimacy of Sankoh’s status as a member of Sierra Leone’s government and serves to undermine his credibility as a political figure in that country. It is unlikely that a Sky News presenter would have described Tony Blair or George Bush as ‘technically’ members of their respective governments. The presenter also fails to mention, explicitly, that Sanko was captured by African troops. On a semiotic level, the opening words and images of this news item would appear to reflect the likely political, philosophical and cultural attitudes of the British Army towards a former colonial African state. On a theoretical and practical level, the patronising conservative and colonial attitudes employed by the journalist in the news narrative, would appear to be those of the organisation providing access to the story. In other words, the news item would appear to be a classic example of the hypothesised ‘symbiotic’ relationship between journalists and societal elites as articulated in the political economy of communication.

This symbiotic relationship is dramatically illustrated in the middle and closing sequences of the news item. As the narrative develops, the presenter reveals that the British troops deployed to Sierra Leone had in fact been roundly humiliated in the field by rebel elements that had been referred to in word and image as ‘vicious’ and ‘wild’. According to the presenter, “Eleven British soldiers who had been captured and held hostage by the rebels were rescued by their comrades in a desperate gun battle”. By international military standards, the capture – alive – of twelve heavily armed soldiers represents evidence of an ability to plan, coordinate and execute complex military operations. Such an incident would not automatically suggest that an enemy force was ‘ill-disciplined’ or ‘vicious’. The use of language and images throughout this news item masks the true capabilities of African troops in Sierra Leone and papers over the cracks of the British Army’s own incompetence in Africa by mobilizing racist discourses which would seek to reinforce received notions about Europeans and Africans based on prejudice and bias. The positioning of *Sky’s* journalists with the British Army would appear to have robbed them of their critical faculties and one could argue that in return for access to Sierra Leone and security, the British Army would appear to have traded such access for uncritical, positive exposure.

Conclusion

The theoretical and practical considerations outlined at the outset of this article point to the manner in which war reporting and the re-presentation of conflict is vulnerable to manipulation by powerful actors in society – in particular military and political elites. A simple semiotic analysis of Sky News coverage of incidents in Ram Allah and Sierra Leone in 2000 would appear to provide conclusive evidence that this is the case. The author would argue that as alternative methods for accessing hostile environments are being developed, journalism educators ought to facilitate a more critical view of the dynamics of news production so that in their professional formation, foreign or ‘war’ correspondents, be they freelance or staff, become reflective practitioners who are capable, by insight, of insulating their work against bias in reporting war and conflict. The author would also argue, as a professional soldier who at the behest of the military authorities was directed towards formal study of the media in order to better engage in information warfare – journalists who wish to specialize in peace and war reporting should engage in formal study of the military industrial complex. In conclusion, one would expect an agricultural correspondent to understand the difference between, say dairy farming and dry livestock rearing in the same way one would expect a financial correspondent to know the difference between a bear market and a bull market. Similarly, one would expect a fashion correspondent to know the difference between Prada and Jean Paul Gaultier. It is amazing however to note the numbers of so-called ‘war correspondents’ who do not understand the basic principles and dynamics of warfare – the very subject upon which they are called to report. As a result, in the sound and fury of warfare and conflict, in the high stakes, high status news genre that is war reporting, very often, colorful copy and images are generated at the expense of proper analysis and truth telling. Journalism education, with an emphasis on specialist training for foreign and war correspondents, may go some way towards addressing this imbalance.

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