

The War Correspondent

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Fully updated second edition

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Abbreviations</i>	x
1 Introduction	1
PART I: THE WAR CORRESPONDENT IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE	
2 The War Correspondent: Risk, Motivation and Tradition	9
3 Journalism, Objectivity and War	33
4 From Luckless Tribe to Wireless Tribe: The Impact of Media Technologies on War Reporting	63
PART II: THE WAR CORRESPONDENT AND THE MILITARY	
5 Getting to Know Each Other: From Crimea to Vietnam	93
6 Learning and Forgetting: From the Falklands to the Gulf	118
7 Goodbye Vietnam Syndrome: The Embed System in Afghanistan and Iraq	141
PART III: THE WAR CORRESPONDENT AND IDEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS	
8 Reporting the Cold War and the New World Order	161
9 Reporting the 'War on Terror' and the Return of the Evil Empire	190
10 Conclusions: 'Telling Truth To Power' – the Ultimate Role of the War Correspondent?	214

1

Introduction

William Howard Russell is widely regarded as one of the first war correspondents to write for a commercial daily newspaper. He became famous for his dispatches from the Crimean War, 1854–56, for *The Times* and he seemed to appreciate that he was blazing a trail for a new breed of journalist, calling himself the ‘miserable parent of a luckless tribe’. Charles Page, an American contemporary of Russell, also seemed to see the miserable and luckless side of the job. In an article entitled *An Invalid’s Whims...The Miseries of Correspondents*, he compared himself and his colleagues to invalids, ‘proverbially querulous and unreasonable. They may fret and scold, abuse their toast and their friends, scatter their maledictions and their furniture’ (1898, p. 143). The war correspondent, he warned, ‘will inevitably write things that will offend somebody. Somebody will say harsh things of you, and perhaps seek you out to destroy you. Never mind. Such is a part of the misery of correspondents’ (ibid., p. 146). During the Anglo Zulu war of 1879, a ‘Special Correspondent’ for the *Natal Witness* (19 June) complained that ‘[To] enthusiastic persons, the position of War Correspondent may be a very pretty one... but a little practical experience of such work will rub off a great deal of its gloss’ (Laband and Knight, 1996, p. v).

More recent and contemporary accounts suggest these impressions have changed little since the nineteenth century. In *Dispatches*, Michael Herr recalls some of the things political commentators and newspaper columnists called him and his colleagues during the course of the Vietnam War. They were called ‘thrill freaks, death-wishers, wound-seekers, war-lovers, hero-worshippers, closet queens, dope addicts, low-grade alcoholics, ghouls, communists [and] seditionists [...]’ (1978, p. 183). With the growth of media journalism in the 1990s, the media reporting the media, war reporting has become a story itself. Coverage of war is bound to feature articles and TV programmes looking at various issues that reporters face in the war zone. As the first bombs fell on Afghanistan

in October, 2001, the *Independent* carried a special feature item on 13 October, highlighting the conditions experienced by journalists who were not even in the country a week but were already missing their home comforts: 'Reporters live on bread, onions and water from gutter'; 'Foreign correspondents are down to one lavatory per 45 people'. The capture by the Taliban of the *Sunday Express* reporter Yvonne Ridley seemed to put these discomforts into perspective, if we were to believe 'a world exclusive' in the *Daily Express*, published just after her eventual release on 8 October 2001. The front-page splash highlighted Ridley's 'Taliban Hell', in which she lay captive in a 'filthy, rat-infested prison cell', 'went on hunger strike' and 'fought with vicious guards'. She even 'risked death to keep secret diary for *Express* readers' (9 October 2001). According to Ridley, the true story was rather less dramatic. She told the media that the prison conditions were bearable and that the Taliban treated her well.¹ In coincidence with Ridley's release, the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC's) chief news correspondent, Kate Adie, was being pilloried by the British popular press for allegedly revealing embargoed information about Prime Minister Tony Blair's itinerary in the Middle East, where he was undertaking a tour to drum up Arab support for the war in Afghanistan. In fact, she inadvertently confirmed a leading question from her news anchor about Blair's next stop. Amid furious complaints from 10 Downing Street, the BBC failed to protect her from the flak even in the wake of a full front page headline from *The Sun*: 'Sack Kate Adie!' (10 October 2001). Adie threatened libel action against *The Sun* and suggested that the original breach of security, such that it was, lay with 10 Downing Street for the way in which they briefed the media. Some critics suspected sinister government spin because it seemed all too convenient that the row helped deflect public attention away from difficult domestic stories.²

There are other impressions and depictions of the war reporter in the wider culture. The movies usually depict journalists as hard-boiled, cynical or dissolute scoundrels; but in films such as *Salvador* (dir. Oliver Stone, 1983) or *The Killing Fields* (dir. Roland Joffé, 1984), the war correspondent is depicted as a hero, risking life and limb to report the story and 'telling truth to power' (McNair, 2010; pp. 57–133).³ In Evelyn Waugh's newspaper satire, *Scoop* (1938), anti-hero William Boot of the *Beast*, goes off to report a war in the fictional African country of Ishmaelia, with no experience and for no other reason than he has

been sent there by his editor, Lord Copper. In a situation that many experienced war correspondents today would recognise as an example of ‘parachute journalism’, Boot recalls his big moment with blasé wonderment and naivety:

Two months ago, when Lord Copper summoned me from my desk in the *Beast* office, to handle the biggest news story of the century, I had never been to Ishmaelia, I knew little of foreign politics. I was being pitted against the most brilliant brains, the experience, and the learning of the civilized world. I had nothing except my youth, my will to succeed, and what – for want of a better word – I must call my flair.

The aim of this book is to provide a more complete, objective impression of the war correspondent than those available in personal memoirs and interviews or in fictional representations. Since journalism is often taken as ‘the first draft of history’, its claims to ‘make sense’ of reality with objectivity and authority would be of obvious interest to the critical media scholar. If the relationship between war reporter and military, from the Crimean War to the latest conflicts of the twenty-first century, is so crucial to the shaping of that same draft of history, and thus public understanding of war, then the scholar will want to inquire into the nature of that relationship in its historical, professional and political contexts. And, if ideology and ideological frameworks are so fundamental to how citizens perceive and make sense of war in a supposedly chaotic world, then those that construct and reproduce those frameworks, including journalists, are of obvious interest and concern to the sociologist and the cultural studies critic. There are two impulses, then, that drive this book: the need to inquire into and analyse one of the most interesting but controversial genres of mainstream journalism from a sociological and historical perspective; and to de-mythologise war correspondents, to get past the legends, the myths and cultural representations and get to the reality of who they are, what they do and why they do it.

This is the second edition of a book first published in 2002, and has been significantly updated and restructured to consider the various issues and debates that have surrounded the reporting of the major conflicts that have happened since then, such as those in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. It ends with an entirely new chapter that looks at the

implications for western journalism of two recent reporting paradigms: the 'war on terror' frame that defined our understanding of conflict in the first decade of the new century and a newly-emerging Cold War frame that heralds the return of the Evil Empire: Vladimir Putin's Russia. To that end, it is divided into three thematic sections.

Part I examines the various issues and debates that surround the role of war correspondents. It acknowledges the very real risks and dangers that come with the job and, in that context, explores the motivations and journalistic traditions that compel them to accept those risks (Chapter 2). It examines the ethical problems that come with the practice of objectivity in the war zone (Chapter 3), and the challenges and opportunities that each new media technology has brought to the job (Chapter 4). Part II of the book shifts the focus of inquiry from the work of the war reporter as individual and examines the vexed relationship between journalist and the military, perhaps one of the key factors that have shaped and defined war reporting since the Crimean War and William Howard Russell. It puts the relationship into historical perspective, moving from the Crimean War to the Korean War (Chapter 5); from the Vietnam War to the Gulf War in 1991 (Chapter 6); and into the twenty-first century with the 'war on terror' conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq (Chapter 7). It suggests that this controversial and problematical relationship has been one of evolution, leaving behind the traces of past practices and confrontations but also mutating and refining itself with each conflict. For the military, it has been about learning the lessons of the last war, fine tuning systems of control, censorship and propaganda in which war reporters and the media in general have a predetermined role: to sell war to domestic publics. Alas for the majority of war correspondents, it has been about forgetting the lessons except, perhaps, between the covers of their memoirs where they might express regret for how easily they conformed to the system for the sake of getting the story.

Telling the story, of course, is vital for the journalist on any beat, whether that be war, defence or diplomacy, and Part III examines the importance of historical and ideological frameworks for shaping and sometimes limiting the content and scope of the story as effectively as military censorship in the war zone. Of particular interest in this respect is the Cold War framework or paradigm (Chapter 8), with its meta-narrative of a bipolar world order of ideological oppositions, as well as the implications for journalism of its crisis after the fall of the Berlin Wall

INTRODUCTION

in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union just two years later. Looking at the much less coherent framework that apparently replaced it, that of a 'new world order', the book closes with two more recent and competing frameworks for making sense of international conflict: the 'war on terror' that followed the attacks on America in 2001 (9/11); and the 'new Cold War' story that seems to be coming into play in the western media as a means of reporting the return of a familiar old enemy: Russia (Chapter 9). It is unlikely that we will see again anything like the global, imperial and ideological conflict of superpowers that ended in 1991. But even an analysis of the Cold War hysteria and rhetoric that has characterised the western media image of Vladimir Putin, and the reporting of his approach to the crisis in neighbouring Ukraine, suggests that the power of such frameworks, to shape and perhaps distort our understanding of complex wars and civil conflicts, is still considerable.

Part I

The War Correspondent in Historical Perspective

2

The War Correspondent: Risk, Motivation and Tradition

Most war reporters are brave, selfless types – more interested in the news story at hand than their own physical discomfort and fear. Not me.

Chris Ayres, *War Reporting for Cowards*, 2005

The job of the war correspondent is defined by the risks and dangers involved with getting the story: death, injury, kidnap, harassment and imprisonment, among others. This chapter considers the real extent of these risks, the kinds of training courses available to journalists reporting in hostile environments and the variable level of risk that a war reporter might face, depending on the size and resources of his or her news organisation. In that context, it explores the motivations by which war correspondents rationalise risk and danger: from the candid (the thrill and excitement of reporting war) to the pragmatic (getting the story) or the idealistic (reporting the truth or the human cost of war). It suggests that whatever the motivations might be and however writers and commentators might define them, today's war correspondents have little sense of commonality, of being part of Russell's 'luckless tribe' or some 'fellowship of danger' (Lambert, 1987, p. 13) other than just being journalists.

RISK

According to journalist organisations such as the International Press Institute (IPI) in Vienna and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) in New York,¹ up to 1,400 journalists and media workers have lost their lives in the period 1997–2014, the majority of them reporting wars or conflicts of some description. The IPI was founded in Vienna in 1950²

and began monitoring death rates among journalists worldwide in 1992. Its definition of ‘journalist’ has always been a broad one and includes media workers such as producers, freelancers and local contacts. The CPJ was founded in New York in 1981 and began compiling data on journalists and risk in 1992. In its early life, it defined journalists as ‘people who cover news or comment on public affairs through any media – including in print, in photographs, on radio, on television, and online’; and it still campaigns today on behalf of ‘staff journalists, freelancers, stringers, bloggers, and citizen journalists’ around the world.³ However, in 2003, it broadened its definition along the lines of the IPI to include media support workers. The historical differences in methodology has resulted in various statistical discrepancies between these organisations, but a summary of their key data provides a vivid picture of the level and nature of the risks that war reporters and other journalists and media workers face on a daily basis.

The IPI’s Death Watch Survey reports that 1,461 journalists have been killed in hostile situations around the world between 1997 and 2014, 824 of these since 2006 – an average of over 90 per year. The CPJ takes a longer sample period and reports that 1,102 journalists have been killed between 1992 and 2014, 657 of these murdered with impunity, an issue on which both organisations campaign strongly.

Most deadly countries

The IPI and CPJ websites also feature breakdowns of these statistics by country. The IPI’s ten most deadly countries for journalists to work between 1997 and 2013 were:

1. Iraq (203)
2. The Philippines (122)
3. Colombia (85)
4. Mexico (81)
5. Pakistan (76)
6. Russia (64)
7. Syria (56)
8. Somalia (53)
9. India (49)
10. Brazil (39)

The CPJ includes figures for 20 countries but for sake of comparison with the IPI, its ten most deadly countries for journalists to work in the same period were:

1. Iraq (104)
2. The Philippines (75)
3. Syria (63)
4. Algeria (60)
5. Russia (56)
6. Pakistan (54)
7. Somalia (52)
8. Colombia (45)
9. India (32)
10. Mexico (30)

The interested reader may explore this data in detail on the IPI and CPJ websites, but it is worth considering here some of the most dangerous assignments and the different kinds of hazards they present to international and local correspondents alike.

Iraq's number one billing in both surveys is hardly surprising considering that since 1991 the country has suffered two major wars and following the US-led invasion in 2003, an insurgency against western occupation as well as sectarian warfare between the country's Sunni and Shi'a populations. Included in the high death toll among journalists are those killed in so-called 'friendly fire' or 'blue on blue' incidents, where military forces accidentally fire upon and kill or injure allied military forces or civilians. Independent Television News' (ITN's) Terry Lloyd was killed in such an incident on 22 March 2003 when reporting the early stages of the invasion as an independent, or what the military call 'unilateral', correspondent; in other words, working outside of the military's 'embed' system of media accreditation (for an analysis of the embed system, see Chapter 7). The circumstances of Lloyd's death and that of his cameraman, Fred Nérac, and Lebanese 'fixer', Hussein Osman, are still disputed. Were they simply unlucky to run into crossfire between the American and Iraqis, as official versions claim? Or was he deliberately targetted as an example to all foreign journalists of the dangers of working outside of military restrictions? In a film to mark the tenth anniversary of his death, his daughter, Chelsey, and ITN colleague,

Mark Austin, question the official version and also ask why, after a coroner's ruling in 2006 of 'unlawful killing', no one has been prosecuted or held accountable for his death.⁴

Similar questions have been asked about the deaths on 8 April 2003 of news cameramen Taras Protsyuk (Reuters) and José Couso (Telecinco), killed when American forces fired at the Palestine Hotel in Baghdad; or that of the Al Jazeera reporter Tariq Ayyoub, killed earlier that day when an American missile struck the network's Baghdad office. The BBC's veteran foreign correspondent, John Simpson, himself a victim of American friendly fire in the north of Iraq just before the US ground invasion, suggests that the targeting of journalists has become a new feature of American military operations around the world. What is disturbing for Simpson and many other journalists is the impunity enjoyed by those who do the targeting, whether deliberately or by accident.⁵ Chris Paterson makes a strong case for seeing these incidents as part of US military strategy since the attacks on America in 2001, 9/11, designed above all to ensure a compliant media response to US military operations (2014, pp. 9–12, 21–22).

In cases like these, the US military insists that it does not target journalists and that it operates according to official rules of engagement but that accidents sometimes happen.⁶ Such 'accidents' might include the killing by an Apache helicopter gunner on 12 July 2007 of Reuters photographer Namoor Noor-Eldeen, his driver Saeed Chmagh and ten civilians who tried to rescue their bodies; two children were wounded in the incident. The cockpit video (with crew audio) from the helicopter gunship was later leaked to WikiLeaks, but to date no one has been brought to account for what happened. In a strong address to an anti-war conference in 2010, US Ranger Ethan McCord explained the difference between the *official* rules of military engagement in Iraq and what soldiers were told *off record* to do when they came under fire:

If you feel threatened by anybody, you are able to engage [fire upon] that person. Many soldiers felt threatened just by the fact that you were looking at them so they fired their weapons at anyone who was looking at them. We were told that if we were to fire our weapons at people, and we were to be investigated, officers would take care of you. We were given orders for 360-degree rotational fire whenever we were