

Propaganda versus professionalism

Harold Evans

War correspondents can be heroes – but can they be patriots? The question has tormented thoughtful war correspondents for more than a century; from Crimea in the 1850s to Kosovo in 2000. Put it another way: is the first duty of the correspondent to truth or to his country? The history of warfare suggests this is not a false antithesis. Governments, understandably, put a priority on nurturing the morale of the armed forces and the people, intimidating an enemy with the force of the national will. They have few scruples about whether they are being fair as their propaganda demonises an alien leader or even a whole population. The enemy is doing the same to them. That is the emotion wars generate, inviting a competitive ecstasy of hate. There is a duel in vicious stereotypes in propaganda posters, illustrations and headlines; populations would be astounded if they could see how they and their leaders are portrayed by the other side. Authority resents it when a newspaper or broadcast shades the black and white. Correspondents and their editors are not much inclined or able to do that in total wars of national survival, such as World War Two, where a common will has formed against an indisputable evil. But in the limited, more controversial wars of recent years, it has been possible for a correspondent to report from “the other side”, from Baghdad in the Gulf War, or Belgrade in the Kosovo conflict.

The technology of satellite television and satellite telephones is only the nuts and bolts of it; it is even more significant that nations at war have more recently tolerated resident alien reporters because they see them as a megaphone to world opinion. The paradox is that these independent reporters at times have been less at risk from their enemy hosts than from the wrath of their countrymen. Covering Israel’s war in the Lebanon in 1982,

seasoned British reporter Robert Fisk observed: “Those of us who reported the human suffering caused by Israeli air raids in Beirut were told we were anti-Semitic.” In the Gulf War, CNN’s Peter Arnett, reporting from Baghdad as U.S. missiles landed, was accused by members of Congress of giving “the demented dictator a propaganda mouthpiece to over 100 nations”. The BBC, for doing the same, was denounced in Parliament as “BBC Baghdad”.

The value of the independent correspondent was manifest in the work of Paul Watson, reporting for the *Los Angeles Times*. His Canadian passport enabled Watson to survive the expulsions in Kosovo and he operated throughout the conflict, free of censors, though not of danger from Serbian gunmen, KLA snipers and NATO bombs. This is what he had to say about listening on satellite TV to the voice of Jamie Shea, the Alliance spokesman at the daily briefings in Brussels:

“It haunted me at the strangest time, denying things I knew to be true, insisting on others that I had seen were false... The bombing replaced stereotypes with a more confounding reality: constant fear of my own country and its allies, and festering doubts about their claim to the moral high ground. It makes no difference that the bombs and the planes and pilots are from your own country when it is dark and you are lying in bed under a canopy of jet noise, tense and waiting for the sudden howling that says the blast will come in seconds and be close.”

Watson confirmed the judgment of the BBC’s John Simpson in Belgrade – much resented in NATO – that the bombing was hardening Serbian opinion behind Yugoslavia’s Slobodan Milosevic. But by staying in Kosovo, Watson was able to offer impartial testimony of the terror inflicted on the people.

Atrocity stories have been debased currency in the war of words. The other side’s are propaganda and should be ignored or discredited by patriotic correspondents; ours are an integral part of the cause, and should be propagated with conviction, uniting people in vengefulness for a cause higher than pedantry. Only after the conflict, the zealots’ argument runs, is there time enough to sift the ashes for truth. History knows now that the Germans did not, as charged in World War One, toss Belgian babies in the air and catch them on bayonets, nor boil down German corpses for glycerin for munitions – a story invented by a British correspondent being pressed by his office for news of atrocities. The French did not, as the German press reported, routinely gouge out the eyes of captured German soldiers, or chop off their fingers for the rings on them. Iraqi soldiers invading Kuwait did not toss premature babies out of incubators, as *The Sunday Telegraph* in London, and

then the *Los Angeles Times*, reported, quoting Reuters. The story was an invention of the Citizens for a Free Kuwait lobby in Washington and the teenage “witness” who testified to Congress was coached by the lobby’s public relations company. It was only two years later that the whole thing was exposed for the fraud it was. But the myth galvanised public opinion at a critical moment on the need to go to war, as it was intended to.

The justification quoted for such propaganda is invariably that of a one-time war correspondent who cut a corner or two himself. “In wartime, truth is so precious that she should be attended by a bodyguard of lies.” Winston Churchill’s epigram is a fair defence of deception in military operations such as D-Day where democracy as truth is engaged in mortal combat with a genocidal tyranny, but it is a frail vehicle for supporting the restrictions and fabrications that attend every conflict. Democracy, not less than autocracy, is ill-served when an administration, and its peoples, are blinded to what is really going on out there. And that has often been the case from the birth of independent reporting in the Crimea.

Desperate fighting men

History is a mausoleum of errant emotions: Who is the more patriotic – the government that conceals the blunders its soldiers endure, the cruelties they may inflict, or the correspondent who exposes them so that they might be rectified? Didn’t Russell in the Crimea deserve a medal, instead of suspicion, for describing how desperate the fighting men there were for medicine and clothing, leading eventually to the dispatch of Florence Nightingale? Was it not absurd that Henry Villard went in fear of his life from a mob after reporting the truth that the censored First Battle of Bull Run was not a Union victory but a rout? What good did it do the British army to deceive itself about the Boers in South Africa? Churchill, at 25, was a correspondent who carried a Mauser pistol and didn’t hesitate to fire it when the Boers derailed an armoured train he was on – an engagement in which he was lucky to be taken prisoner and not shot out of hand as a combatant. But even he, wearing his patriotism on his sleeve, was not heeded when he wrote about the new kind of guerrilla warfare in which “one individual Boer mounted in suitable country was worth from three to five regular soldiers”.

The atmosphere in Britain was too jingoistic, nurtured by censorship and fed by a press only too willing to inflame opinion by announcing an atrocity on the flimsiest of evidence. In World War One, the same censorship,

and the same perverted sense of patriotism, had a devastating effect. The men in the trenches knew that the portrayal of the war by the coddled and pliant correspondents was a travesty; the soldier, said G H Mair of the *Sunday Chronicle*, had “a much larger detestation for the institution of the war correspondent than he even had for the [General] Staff”.

It would be wrong to imply that on all these professional issues there is or has been unanimity of opinion among war correspondents. In the freewheeling Vietnam war, says Ward Just, of *The Washington Post*, “you were your own Jesuit”. Harrison Salisbury went to Hanoi and wrote a factual account of the effect of American bombing. To some – including this editor – he was fulfilling the proper role of the independent; he afforded a perspective we would not otherwise have. To others, he was aiding the enemy. Tom Wolfe, reporting from the aircraft carrier Coral Sea, wrote:

“To the Americans who knew the air war in the north firsthand, it seemed as if the North Vietnamese were playing Mr Harrison Salisbury of *The New York Times* like an ocarina, as if they were blowing smoke up his pipe and the finger work was just right and the song was coming forth better than they could have played it themselves.”

[Ward] Just, meeting freelance Martha Gellhorn in Saigon in the mid-1960s, was struck by the difference between her attitude and his. She identified with the Viet Cong as she had identified with the Loyalists in the Spanish Civil War 30 years before – and she contrived her stories that way. Robert Capa made no bones about it. His biographer Richard Whelan says he was unwilling to risk his life covering any war in which he did not love one side and hate the other. To Just, Gellhorn and Capa expressed attitudes that “seemed anachronistic in the cool world of 1967 where reporters of my generation prided themselves on a professional detachment. The compulsion was to tell it like it was, even if the way it was told was ‘not helpful’ to the effort”.

You can't be neutral

But in the 1990s, one of the most admired of foreign correspondents was Christiane Amanpour of CNN, who was so sympathetic to the sufferings of the Bosnians that refugees chanted her name as a mantra. “In this war,” she says, “there was no way that a human being or a professional should be neutral. You have to put things in context. For me, objectivity does not mean treating all sides equally; it means giving all sides an equal hearing. It does not mean drawing a moral equivalent for all sides. I refuse to do that because I

am going to report honestly.” CNN was uneasy about this. Her editor Ed Turner agreed there was a place for analysis and commentary but insisted it should always be identified as such. “Her editorialising,” he added, “was not wilful. Any good reporter caught up in a big story will occasionally go a step too far. That is why everybody needs an editor.”

There are infinite gradations here. At one extreme there is Claud Cockburn, of *The Week*, who lied imaginatively in his dispatches, down to inventing one wholly fictitious battle to induce France to reopen supply routes to the Spanish Loyalists. Arthur Koestler, of the London *News Chronicle*, mixed fake and authenticated atrocity stories. Such distortion is a betrayal of journalism, and there is no justification for it. Herbert Matthews, who was just as sympathetic to the Loyalists, made his bias clear and gave all the facts. The problem in his case was a Catholic pro-Nationalist desk at *The New York Times*. When Matthews reported the important truth that Mussolini had sent Italian soldiers to fight with General Francisco Franco’s Nationalists—Matthews talked to them, saw the dead Italians being buried—the editors in New York insisted on substituting the word “insurgent” for “Italian”, even in Matthews’s sentence, “They were Italian and nothing but Italian”.

How far should professional detachment be carried? It is a violation of the Geneva Conventions for a reporter to participate directly in military actions. Clearly, Churchill was out of line, and so were James Creelman of the *New York Journal* who took part in a bayonet charge in the Spanish-American battle at El Caney; photo journalist Jimmy Hine, who carried out espionage in Cuba on the eve of the Spanish-American War; and Hemingway, who made himself the de facto commander of a group of French resistance fighters in 1944 and took a tommy gun into operations against German troops.

There are harder calls in weighing professional detachment and humanitarian impulses. Was Don McCullin taking part in a military action when, in the battle for Hue in Vietnam, he carried a wounded marine to a first-aid station? In Cambodia, he made himself unpopular by giving two newly captured Khmer prisoners some chocolate and water. “None of the real world judgments seem to apply,” he said. “What’s peace, what’s war, what’s dead, what’s right, what’s wrong.” James Nachtwey has a rough rule that when he encounters people who have been wounded or are about to be attacked, he’ll help if he is the only one who can, otherwise he does his job, which is to photograph the scene. But he has saved victims from mobs in Haiti and South Africa, “rather than stand around to make great pictures of

this person getting lynched". Nachtwey says he would draw the line at carrying ammunition.

Peter Arnett had a camera with him when another Buddhist monk started to immolate himself outside the Saigon market. He recalls: "I could have prevented that immolation by rushing at him and kicking the gasoline away. As a human being, I wanted to. As a reporter I couldn't." So he took the picture. Timothy Baker, who reported the Bosnian war, has a homely justification for the photographer sticking to his trade in such circumstances. "On a farm in California I saw a dog savaging a sheep. I could have stopped it. I didn't. I took a photograph and the picture convinced the dog owner to restrain his dog and compensate the sheepherders – so that more than one sheep was saved."

The provocative camera

Photographers have the special dilemma that the presence of a camera may affect behaviour. Television cameraman Sorius Samura cannot bear watching a street scene he filmed in 1999 in the Sierra Leone civil war of a young man pleading unsuccessfully for his life. Samura torments himself that his camera may have provoked the soldier to kill: "I still can't forgive myself." In the India-Pakistan war in 1971, a dozen or so photographers were present when Bengali soldiers dragged four Bihari prisoners before an angry mob on the Dhaka racetrack and began stabbing them with bayonets. Marc Riboud walked away in disgust. He and others felt that their cameras were inciting the soldiers. Horst Faas and Michel Laurent stayed to photograph the bayoneting, which went on until all four prisoners were dead. One picture ran on the front page of *The New York Times*, and Faas and Laurent won the Pulitzer Prize.

When I wrote my book *Pictures on a Page* in 1972, I criticised these awards. I thought the Pulitzer committee had erred because their awards to Faas and Laurent might induce other photographers to linger in circumstances when their presence incited violence. In his 1998 book, *Get the Picture*, John Morris, the photo editor of *The New York Times* at the time, told us that he, too, had been disturbed by the ethics of publishing the picture on the front page. Many years later, says Morris, Marc Riboud told him that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi said the publication of the murder photos had so shocked and embarrassed Indian authorities that severe orders had been issued to stop such incidents. "Faas and Laurent," said Morris, "performed a public

service.” I am an admirer of those photographers. I respect their professionalism and admire their courage. Still, I remain troubled that the Pulitzer board was, by inference, criticising the photographers who walked away.

Pulitzer Prize-winner Kevin Carter convinced himself that he was right to photograph the first known public execution in South Africa by “necklacing”, setting fire to a gasoline-filled tire around someone’s neck. “I was appalled at what they were doing, I was appalled at what I was doing. But then people started talking about those pictures... then I felt that maybe my actions hadn’t been at all bad. Being a witness to something this horrible wasn’t necessarily such a bad thing to do.” Carter later took his own life.

Many correspondents have responded to their humanitarian instincts. Legendary photographer Eugene Smith said his private thought was that he would use his photographs to make an indictment of war. When he was challenged that that sounded naive and unprofessional, he responded that there were some things you had to attempt even though you knew you were going to fail. He gave a compelling example of what might be achieved by a professional with a conscience. He was preparing to photograph another Pacific landing in World War Two when the Navy asked *Life* to let him photograph an American camp for Japanese who had surrendered. The idea was that the Navy would drop the magazine on other islands and on Japan itself, so that the people would see how well captives were treated and more would surrender. But Smith knew the place and told an admiral: “It’s a terrible place, a stinking hole.” The admiral said he just had a report that morning that conditions were good, which provoked Smith: “‘All right,’ I said, ‘I’ll show you your concentration camp, your stockade.’ And I went out and photographed it with a great deal of anger, because there were six people dying for every one that should have. Fifteen thousand people had access to only one or two water supplies. It was a terrible mess, badly run by our own people. I brought the pictures back and the censors were furious. For once, they were angry at the pictures and not me. They took it to higher authority and the concentration camp was completely changed around.”

[Philip] Knightley, [author and defence expert], tells the story of an even bolder intervention, by Alan Dower, who reported the Korean War for the *Melbourne Herald*. Dower, reporter Rene Cutforth and cameraman Cyril Page saw a column of women being marched off to jail; many were carrying babies. The journalists were told the families were all to be shot because someone in the street had identified them as communists. Dower, who was a commando

before he was a reporter, was carrying a carbine. He bullied his way into the jail, where the trio of journalists found that the women had been made to kneel with their babies in front of an open pit, two machine guns at their backs. Dower threatened to shoot the guard unless he took the trio to the prison governor's office. There Dower aimed his carbine at the governor and threatened: "If those machine guns fire, I'll shoot you between the eyes." Dower, making another threat, that of publicity, secured a promise from the United Nations command in Seoul that it would stamp out such practices.

Did Dower break the normal limits of journalism? Yes, and he was right to do so. One's first duty is to humanity, and there are exceptional occasions when that duty overrides the canons of any profession.

From War Stories, by Harold Evans (Bunker Hill Publishing Inc., £9.95). Sir Harold Evans edited The Sunday Times and The Times and was president of Random House, 1990-97. Among his other books is The American Century.