FIGHTING TERRORISM? DEFENDING CIVIL RIGHTS? - WHERE THE MEDIA STANDS

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The task of being a journalist has never been easy, but today it is arguably more difficult than ever.

The challenges of a rapidly changing industrial environment and economic downturn coupled with a more dangerous and volatile political atmosphere in the wake of the so-called war on terrorism mean that it is likely to get even harder in the years to come.

Reporters live and work in the most productive communications environment ever known. They have access to technology that gives them unprecedented added value to their creative powers. They work in an industry that is immensely profitable and, even in the face of the recent downturn, is growing and will become an increasingly important part of the world economy.

But for all this, people in journalism are facing a profound crisis. That crisis is seen on the pressures currently being applied on reporters and editors from inside media and from the political world outside. It is a corrosive process that calls into question the traditional role of journalism to provide high quality news about the world in which we live with a rich pluralist mix of information.

Journalists, rightly, don't like to be too grand about this. Most of us don't think of our business as writing a draft of history. Journalism is very rough, often imprecise and unclear, and it requires many revisions before it can be regarded as useful material for reliable historical record.

Even so, democracy cannot function without it. For example, take the events of recent days in Palestine. The media have played a key role over the past three weeks in providing hundreds of millions of people around the world with vivid images of the unfolding tragedy in the Middle East.

There is a great hunger for news. And when it is accurate, professional and reliable reporting it makes things happen. No-one can doubt that the initiative to bring about a ceasefire has been induced by public opinion, heavily affected by powerful and professional media coverage.

Yet in this conflict, journalists themselves have been among the victims. Palestinian journalists and some foreign correspondents have been isolated, victimised and systematically persecuted by Israeli authorities.

The contempt of the Israeli military for press freedom was horrifyingly illustrated last week when soldiers ambushed a group of two dozen journalists throwing stun grenades and opening fire with rubber bullets. What was their crime? They were trying to get pictures of a US diplomat who was coming to meet with Yasser Arafat.

The fact is that these days journalists are routinely targeted, by governments and terrorists alike.

Journalists in this region have experienced the loss of colleagues who have been victims of senseless terrorism. The mindless brutality and cowardice of ETA terrorists who shot *El Mundo* journalist Jose Luis Lopez de la Calle outside his home shocked journalists throughout Europe as did the killing in Northern Ireland of my colleague Martin O'Hagan. Martin was killed by paramilitaries determined to stop his investigation of official collusion between the police and terrorists. He was the first media casualty in 30 years of terrorism in Ulster.

Last year more than 100 journalists and media people died, but the scale of the latest crisis facing journalists is made most vivid by the conflict in the Middle East, where four journalists have been killed and more than 60 attacked or censored since the latest Intifada was launched.

It should be obvious to anyone that attempts to censor and intimidate media in conflict zones will not bring peace but will, instead, lead inevitably to more ignorance, rumour and fear, but still the casualties among journalists grow.

The levels of violence against journalists and the violations of human rights are increasing everywhere and particularly where the war on terrorism is being fought.

In Sri Lanka and Kashmir, in the Philippines, in Colombia and Peru journalists are increasingly among those singled out for special treatment by one side or another. Even Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe recently accused journalists critical of his regime of being "terrorists" to justify expulsions and victimisation of reporters.

This trend has been evident since the 1999 attack by NATO on the Radio and Television system of Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia when 16 media workers were killed. Israel today uses the example of the NATO attack to defend its attacks on Palestinian media.

In the recent war in Afghanistan some eight journalists were killed and another was brutally targeted and executed by terrorists. At the same time the

United States still refuses to explain why it destroyed the Kabul officers of the Arab satellite station Al Jazeera.

While the hot spots are getting hotter, even the home beat is becoming hostile territory for reporters.

Since September 11th last year, the rights of journalists and citizens at large have come under increasing pressure in a wave of new legislation across the entire democratic world raising concerns about civil liberties.

The common features of these new laws are that many of them are full of vague and dangerously broad definitions, they include new policing and surveillance strategies, including monitoring internet communications and extensive monitoring of citizens. Many of them prohibit the publication of certain information.

In the United States more than 1,000 people have been detained, many of the held in controversial conditions in Cuba and those that will be tried will be examined in tribunals not courts. In the United Kingdom a new terrorism law is so extensive it has required the suspension of recognition of the European Convention on Human Rights and the imposition of a State of Emergency. In France controls are being tightened on electronic communications. Across the European Union there has been a wholesale revision of extradition law, a new definition of terrorism that could undermine tradition dissent and moves towards establishing a European FBI.

In many countries the war on terrorism is being used as a cover to introduce new rules and policies that enhance secrecy, strengthen the rights of authorities to monitor their citizens and which undermines established safeguards for privacy and fair treatment.

Journalists, whose professional responsibility is to scrutinise the authorities at work, are right to be nervous about these changes. They have been brought in with a minimum amount of public discussion, taking advantage of widespread public uncertainty and unease in the aftermath of the attacks on the United States.

This new political atmosphere contrasts sharply with the optimism generated a few years ago when, following atrocities in Bosnia and Rwanda, the United Nations, for the first time since the Nuremberg trails, established international tribunals to deal with war crimes. Ethnic cleansing in Europe and the end of the Cold War were crucial factors, but there can be little doubt that media exposure of these violations triggered the decision.

How can journalists and media combat this new mood of secrecy and the emergence of the security state?

We can start by being better at what we do. We need to improve journalists' knowledge of the laws of war and human rights.

It is shocking that despite the killing of more than 1,000 journalists over the past decade, most journalists currently covering some of the dangerous regions of the world have little or no direct knowledge of the protection that they are given under international laws.

Every journalist on a foreign assignment should carry a copy of the Geneva Conventions with him or her. They should be ready to confront any official or soldier with the clear evidence that journalists have rights under international law.

Media organisations need to invest more in making journalism safer. Journalists should have access to risk-awareness training, including first-aid, and they should be provided with proper equipment, including flak jackets and helmets.

The IFJ itself has provided training for around 200 journalists in Afghanistan and Palestine in recent weeks. We have also distributed medical kits, flak jackets and helmets to journalists in these crisis regions.

We are also planning to open up a journalists' safety centre in Colombia in a few months thanks to support from the Region of Cantabria and UNESCO. But much more needs to be done.

Of course, this work is expensive and so far only the large media – Reuters, Associated Press, the BBC – have implemented comprehensive journalism safety strategies. The IFJ and its unions believe that the international community should provide urgent resources to help small and medium sized media enterprises and freelances journalists to have access to safety training.

We should consider an industry-wide initiative to establish an international fund to which media and journalists can apply to receive help to train and equip staff for work in hostile environments.

Above all, we need to be aware that every side in a conflict will try to use journalists and to manipulate the media message. As part of their training, journalists need to be wary of the terms they use. (In Colombia, for instance our colleagues have prepared a dictionary of terms to suit the complex political conditions in the country. None of us should forget that the term terrorist is itself pejorative; the British in Kenya and the French in Algeria not so many years ago used the term liberally to describe people who today are proudly acknowledged as freedom fighters.)

Our aim should be to make journalism safer and, at the same time, to enhance the quality of reporting and improve public awareness.

But attitudes within journalism are only one aspect of the change that we need. We also need better protection under international law and a system of

international accountability that will give journalists and media the opportunity to challenge governments that violate our rights.

The new international criminal court to be established in Rome may provide an answer, but we should not expect too much. Many governments – even the most democratic – will exercise undue influence on media where they can get away with it.

Too often people who speak of democracy are ready to impose censorship or spin a story to avoid public scrutiny, and when they do they make a mockery of the language of peace and human rights.

For this reason we should not have great expectations of the political world, but we should expect more solidarity among social partners within media in defence of our rights and professional values.

The problem is that today's media obsession with low-quality entertainment; sensationalism and excessive commercialisation are squeezing the life-blood out of professional journalism.

It should be obvious to anyone in media – particularly after the last six months – that high quality news and current affairs are crucial to success in the fight for audience and market share, yet news media are still engaged in editorial cost-cutting exercises that downgrade the work of journalists and undermine the social conditions of all media staff.

The process of blurring of the roles of the advertising and editorial work creates a deep unease within journalism that standards will fall and as ethics are compromised we will further lose the trust of readers and viewers.

Today there is widespread cynicism within the business and the political world about journalism.

There is no better example of the cynical corporate face than Silvio Berlusconi in Italy – a powerful politician and a voracious media magnate – who has made his country's media a political battleground. He has compromised the traditional independence of media and, in the process, has made a mockery of the European Union's long-time demand that politicians should keep their hands off the controls of mass media.

The silence from Brussels over the Berlusconi affair reflects expediency and dangerous complacency. The fact is that if Italy were applying for membership of the European union today, it would not be entitled to join. It is unthinkable that any Eastern European country whose Prime Minister controls the lion's share of the private media market and who exercises undue influence over the public media could ever be admitted to the European Union.

Given this political and industrial landscape there are not many reasons to be cheerful. But there are some.

Firstly, journalism is still needed. As I said at the outset, people need and desire quality news. The interest in quality journalism – whether it is war in the Middle East or the horrors of terrorism as we saw last September – shows that good reporting, lashings of informed analysis and well considered opinions command respect within the public at large.

But we should not fool ourselves that this simple fact is enough to secure the future. We in journalism and the media trade union movement have to fight for our rights. We have to campaign to save public service values in media. We must defend public service broadcasting and campaign for editorial independence in all media.

We cannot rely on others to do save journalism for us.

We have many heroes in journalism. Many of them are reporting every day from dangerous and hostile zones.

But we need more heroes.

More of us at the home base, working in offices or studios need to fight for our professional rights and to demand that our profit-obsessed employers and complacent politicians respect the fundamental need for independent journalism.

We also need more heroes to root out unprofessionalism and expose unethical behaviour and corruption within journalism. We cannot hope to win public support unless we are seen to defend ethics upon which journalism depends.

Journalists sometimes do not appear to be the most community-minded of professionals. Their individual spirit does not fit easily into corporate structures, but more and more of them recognise that the collective spirit of trades unionism is crucial to the future of professional journalism.

Certainly journalism has a future. There are more jobs than ever in media and despite the fact that working conditions are under attack, journalism schools are congested with bright, energetic young people competing vigorously for the limited opportunities to get into the profession.

The resolve and spirit that trade unions and associations of journalists and media staff show in confronting the current crisis will, I am certain, inspire the next generation of journalists to take up the challenges of change and to do so cherishing the professionalism that makes journalism a job worth doing not just for individual reward but for democracy itself.

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