# Reporting War – why do they do it?

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lcc1.gif Polis has taken to the battlefield with three talks by journalists back from the frontline:
A multi-media man who has been shot in the course of his work for the Guardian and others; a top TV camera journalist who runs his own production company and has made films for the likes of Newsnight as well as a documentary feature out next year; and an Iraqi who has worked through the recent war and now trains a new generation of journalists.

All of them had strong motives for taking the risks and making the extraordinary effort that conflict journalism demands. Here's a report on their talks to students at the Polis course at the London College of journalism.

This article is by guest-blogger Molly Kaplan.

**John D McHugh**

mchugh.JPG Freelance photojournalist John D. McHugh has been covering Afghanistan for three years, embedding with British, American and Canadian forces. He has been into territory untouched by other journalists where fire exchange droned on for days. He has seen the Medevac helicopters fill with blood; he has listened to the cries of pain on those rides that bring him back to his own 2007 gunshot wound, but he resists the titillation of war reporting. "I try not to do a lot of bang bang" because war is as much about the months of iPod listening, card playing, and waiting for action. It is the boredom of war that has made him and the soldiers around him almost wish for something to happen. It was that very wish that led him into unsafe territory and a bullet to the chest.

Those quiet moments of waiting, of rest between battles, of saying farewell to fallen soldiers are as much of the story as the blown out shell of a bombed car. A soldier returning from battle sticks his face into a plastic bag that holds the perfume-scented T-shirt of his girlfriend. Breakfast by a burning feces camp fire. A makeshift memorial service to Captain Boris and Sergeant Hike.("the toughest assignment I have ever coverered") ; Those are the stories that newspaper headlines can't cover.

He uses technology to tell the small stories. Trained as a still photographer, he taught himself how to use a video camera. His routine emails home evolved into a blog. McHugh tells the sides not told, but in so doing faces the question: Does telling the story warrant risking your life?

McHugh acknowledges that "if you take a chance, and it works out, you're a legend. If you take a chance, and it goes all pear-shaped, then people say you got what you were asking for." McHugh had the chance to photograph a market place in Afghanistan near the Pakistani border, but he had to pass it up. He knew that even in the right clothes with the right people, he'd be a Westerner and a target. He winced every time he saw the traditional Afghan garb he would have worn for the occasion. A week later, bombs exploded in the very market place he would have been photographing. It was the rare case McHugh could see he had made the right decision. The challenge is all the times he can't know. To risk or not to risk?

**Vaughan Smith**

vaughan.JPG Vaughan Smith, founder of London's Frontline Club and independent cameraman covering conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Kosovo and elsewhere since the 1990s, warns future journalists at the London College of Communications that covering wars "is not going to solve your problems. It's going to give you more problems." ;
"You pay a price by being a war correspondent." "Your wife doesn't understand you. You start drinking." The industry can't help because it doesn't have the answers and is operating under the financial pressures of a broken business

model. “Nobody’s going to thank you.”

For Smith, there are the right reasons and the wrong reasons for becoming a conflict journalist. Ego, sense of self-worth, and glory are the wrong reasons: “If you’ve come to be different, you might not find yourself better.” “Most journalists think they have to be a part of the story. They didn’t get enough love as children.” They “go out there, see this, this and this, come back, and everyone’s worried about the credit crunch.” “They see a level of suffering that can’t be understood that needs to be understood,” but “people don’t want to see it in their comfortable lives.”

The right reason to become a war journalist is to be a professional; it’s about a job that makes sense given one’s skill set. Smith had a military background; he had a competitive advantage as a cameramean. He knew how to stay out of the way; he knew better how to cope with the violence.

The right reason can also be, for Smith, the conviction that an informed public makes better decisions than an ignorant one. Smith is not a pacifist because he’s not sure that’s the right answer. He doesn’t have the right answers. For him, the job is about putting the information into the hands of many so that collectively people can find the answers. “Journalism provides good information so that many people can make a decision that will be better than one decision.”

The purpose of the journalist to inform has been subjugated by the financially strapped media outlets struggling for commercial success. “We’ve forgotten that we’re supposed to educate and inform.” For Smith the BBC has become a populist outlet competing for the audience of commercial organizations. It is bound not only by commercial pressure but by its own inbreeding. The person running the BBC now looks a lot like the person before.¼br /> His parting advice to those entering this field of life-threatening risk in a time of financial and commercial crisis: “be professional.” “This whole thing just sort of chases you. Life gets very messy..Professionalism is the thing. It’s the thing that might save you; it’s the thing that keeps the information good.”

**Hiwa Osman IWPR**

hiwa.JPG On 8 April 2003, there were three newspapers in Iraq. On 9 April 2003, there were none. Hiwa Osman, Iraq Country Director for the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, has spent the last years since the fall of the Hussein regime building local journalism in Iraq. Before the invasion, the three newspapers in Iraq operated as an extension of the regime. Osman remembered that “everyone knew they’d see the same three pictures of Saddam in all three, the same press release that been aired on the radio and television the night before…People bought newspapers to clean windows.”

When foreign journalists flooded the streets asking difficult questions, many Iraqis thought they were CIA spies. “There was no such thing as reporting.” To be a journalist under Saddam Hussein. “you just had to be a typist.” Reliable information did not exist. On 8 April 2003, to be caught with a satellite dish, a computer or an unlicensed typewriter was punishable by prison or execution.

Now Iraq has over one hundred newspapers, fifty television channels, and numerous radio channels. Much of the media is still under political influence. IWPR has been working with local journalists to foster an independent journalism.
To do so, Osman and the team of IWPR trainers had to start from scratch. Literacy tests showed that practicing journalists lacked basic Arabic skills and knowledge of reporting. Ninety per cent of those who passed the tests were under 25.

As the force of local journalists grows and improves over the years of training, the question of risk versus fair reporting becomes more acute. “Why should we be fair to them when they are not fair to us?” students asked Osman after a colleague was killed trying to cover the war from the side of the insurgents. Osman tells them they

are cameramen. They take the picture and let the reader make the decisions.

This article by Molly Kaplan

And here's a link to John Owen's new book on International Journalism which is relevant to this topic.