Reporting Dangerously

Journalist Killings, Intimidation and Security

Simon Cottle, Richard Sambrook and Nick Mosdell

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Contents

List of Figures

About the Authors

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Nick Mosdell is Deputy Director MA International Public Relations and Global Communications Management in the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies at Cardiff University, UK. He teaches research methods modules to master's students and has written research methods textbooks. He has also contributed to a variety of research-based publications including media and military relations, for example *Too Close for Comfort? The Role of Embedded Reporting in the 2003 Iraq War* (2004); *Embedded Reporting in War and Peace* (2006); and *Shoot First and Ask Questions Later: Media Coverage of the 2003 Iraq War (2006)*. He was involved in the International News Safety Institute's Global Inquiry into journalist deaths that resulted in *Killing The Messenger* (2007), and has produced casualty reports for INSI every year since then.

Richard Sambrook is Professor of Journalism at the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies (JOMEC) at Cardiff University. He is Deputy Head of School and oversees the practice-based vocational training. Previously, he worked in BBC News for 30 years as a producer

and editor, culminating in a decade on the board of management as Director of News and Director of Global News and the World Service. His publications include *Are Foreign Correspondents Redundant* (2010) and *Delivering Trust: Impartiality and Objectivity in the Digital Age* (2012) both written for the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford. He is also Chair of the International News Safety Institute.

1
Introduction

Journalism is becoming a more dangerous profession. Reporters and editors are being targeted, murdered, and intimidated more regularly and in increasing numbers. Yet it is not an issue which in itself is often reported. Occasionally, there is an event, such as the murder of the Charlie Hebdo cartoonists in Paris, which brings to the fore the violent opposition journalism and free speech can face even in the West. And once a year the free speech and journalism non-governmental organisations such as the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the International News Safety Institute (INSI), or Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) report their annual tally of journalists and media workers killed. But the underlying facts and trends behind these figures are little discussed, and the wider impact on society little considered.

This book is an attempt to place into a wider context the dangers journalists face in conducting their work.[1] We will consider the statistics and look at the trends behind the rise in journalist killings and intimidation, consider what factors have led to this rise, and place them in an historical and global context.

We will look at specific case studies and draw upon first hand interviews to understand the different pressures faced by journalists around the world. We will look at the industry and political responses to these pressures. Finally, we will cast forward to the current international policy initiatives to consider what hope there is for addressing the problem.

Above all, we will argue that journalism has historically contributed an indispensable if under-recognised and insufficiently theorised role in the formation and conduct of civil societies – and continues to do so. This is why reporting from un-civil societies matters.

According to INSI, on average two journalists a week have lost their lives doing their job – week in, week out – over the last dozen years or

more. Most of those killed are not the international reporters who can make global headlines. They are local journalists investigating crime or corruption – seeking to stand by a professional commitment to free speech and inquiry.

Headlines from the first few months of 2015 give a sense of the problem:

'Kidnapped TV crew reported executed by ISIS'

'Kidnappers murder journalist in Mexico'

'Prominent pro-Russian journalist murdered by masked gunmen in the streets of Kiev'

(INSI 2015a)

But behind each headline there is a personal story. Take, for example, Daud Omar, who was shot dead together with his wife in their home in Baidoa, Somalia when their killer broke into their house. The local police commissioner blamed armed group Al Shabaab which had previously claimed responsibility for attacks meted out against journalists. Or Nerlita Ledesma, who wrote for one of the Philippines' biggest newspapers and was shot dead by a gunman on a motorcycle on her way to work in January 2015. Or Robert Chamwami Shalubuto, a journalist for state media in the Democratic Republic of Congo, whose body was found in a grocery store close to his home after he had been shot in the chest. There are too many others to list.

As the BBC's Chief International Correspondent, Lyse Doucet, has written:

Never have we lived in a time when journalists, their editors, and media organisations … spend so much effort and care trying to assess the dangers. But never has there been a time when journalists have faced such odds of being in the right place at the wrong time. In all too many places, we are no longer just taking calculated risks to report on the front line. We are the front line. Unresolved murders, kidnappings for ransom, beheadings are now happening at an alarming rate. Now, all too often, we are also the story. That's not the way journalism should be.

(INSI 2015b)

Journalists, by the nature of their work, have always put themselves in harm's way, and some have had to pay the ultimate price for doing so.

However, a number of factors have significantly increased the risks they face through the last years of the twentieth century and early years of the twenty-first.

First, the ending of the Cold War led to a different character of global conflict. At the peak of the Cold War, many conflicts were proxies for the East–West stand-off. As such, journalists worked clearly on one side of the line or the other, often alongside the military. Afterwards, frontlines became harder to identify; armed groups had uncertain or changing affiliations; journalists were left to fend for themselves. There were advantages to such independence – but also risks in operating in conflict zones with no clear affiliation or protection. And with the breakdown of societies in Libya, Syria, parts of Africa and beyond, journalists became more exposed.

Thirty years ago, journalists were acknowledged as neutral observers, with civilian status. Today, as Lyse Doucet described, they are too often targets. The increasing reach and status of the media and the rise of non-state violence has made journalists useful pawns in the asymmetrical conflicts following the September 2001 terrorist attack on New York and the West's military response in Afghanistan, Iraq and the wider Middle East. This has been accompanied by changing, and at times increasingly tense, relations between the military and the media.

From the murder of American journalist Daniel Pearl in Pakistan in 2002, through to the murders of James Foley and Steven Sotloff in 2014, it is clear that terrorist groups now see journalists as useful targets. Their graphic murders are a way to command global attention and horrify the wider public.

Increasing competition in the media has in some areas led to increased stridency. The advent of social media has promoted opinion over factual reporting – again contributing to a perceived loss of neutrality. In states such as Egypt, attempts to report the views of the opposition are no longer accepted as necessarily legitimate – as illustrated by the arrests of journalists reporting the views of the Muslim Brotherhood. Political instability and extremism can lead state actors to move against independent journalism in the interests of maintaining influence. Today, political divisions can mean there is a battle for minds as much as for territory, which means independent journalists can be regarded as, or confused for, political opponents.

With the decline in perceived neutrality has come a rise in impunity for attacks on journalists, the blatant intimidation of journalists and the craft of journalism. When journalists and their sources are seriously threatened and there is no adequate protection, self-censorship is

inevitable. If violence and intimidation are intended to silence awkward journalism, they work.

The growth of organised crime in Asia, South and Central America and the Caucasus placed local journalists at significant risk in reporting drug cartels or corruption. Mexico has become one of the most dangerous countries in which to report as the drugs trade has moved north from Colombia towards the US border. As crime and corruption hollow out the democratic institutions of some states, the rewards for organised crime grow – and the level of threat to anyone seeking to report it increases too. With very few murders of journalists ever solved or prosecuted, it has become an effective form of censorship in some societies.

Finally, the development of technology has allowed journalists to reach more places than ever before – but that has included places with significant risk. Today, with a mobile phone and laptop, journalists can report from anywhere. But their movements can also be tracked and they can be targeted – which seems to have happened with Marie Colvin, the *Sunday Times* correspondent killed by targeted mortar fire in Homs, Syria, in 2011 after a series of powerful reports about civilian casualties. Technology increasingly allows reporters to be live on air on the front lines – but with a commensurate increase in risk alongside frontline fighting. In addition, digital technology allows journalists and citizens to report more openly – but also leaves them more publicly exposed. And the technology of reporting is subject to widespread surveillance by states and other actors inhibiting investigative journalism. Digital security is increasingly important in journalism safety. Often, weak digital security can compromise journalism. Occasionally, it compromises the safety of the journalist.

Further, the widespread availability of media technology means armies or terrorists are no longer dependent on the media to report their side of the story. They can do it for themselves. So Israel's Defence Force (IDF) has its own YouTube channel where it posts training videos, and reports and explanations of operations – no longer reliant on local or international media's interpretation. Equally, terror groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have used social media to influence media coverage of their cause, and to recruit new members.[2] In these circumstances, where media were once afforded some protection in order to ensure accounts reached a wider public, they are no longer seen as essential to military, or terrorist, communications.

The changing backdrop of societal violence, political and technological change, is therefore important for a deeper understanding of the risks and dangers confronted by journalists and media workers around the world.

The killing of journalists is clearly used not only to shock, but also to intimidate. As such, it has become an effective way for groups and even governments to reduce scrutiny and accountability, and establish the space to pursue non-democratic ends.

Civil Society and the conduct of daily, ordinary 'civil life' can only flourish within recognised, democratically organised and protected societies. Journalism's 'responsibility to report' places journalists and their craft at the centre of established, emerging and collapsing societies around the world. Journalists witness and communicate conflicts, injustices, and social and democratic failure. As such, journalism and civil society are indivisible and mutually constitutive, mutually dependent.

This means all of us, journalists or not, have a stake in the ability to report freely and openly, and in ensuring journalists can continue to do so. The protection of journalists reporting in and from dangerous places cannot be regarded as simply a matter to do only with them or as only about journalism. It implicates us all. This is even more the case in an interconnected, interdependent, globalised world. If there are territories or issues which become effectively unreported or unreportable, it affects all of us, not only those directly involved.

In a globalised world, in which the UN's 'responsibility to protect' doctrine urges the international community to recognise its shared responsibility to protect the lives of those confronting genocide, atrocity and mass killings, the world's journalists also deserve increased international recognition and protection when throwing a spotlight on collective injustices. Indeed, there is a case for the current lexicon shifting from 'protection' and 'security' (practically aimed at keeping individual journalists safe) to 'safeguarding' and 'prosecution' (seeking to create legal contexts and international conditions) designed to counter the seeming impunity with which so many murders of journalists are carried out. Wider institutional and legal frameworks must be brought into play and robustly enforced if journalists in the future, as well as those currently reporting form uncivil societies, are to be properly recognised and safeguarded. Journalists need this not only when seeking to alert the world's conscience to gross acts of inhumanity around the world, but also when reporting on the everyday violence, intimidation, crime and corruption that insidiously threatens and undermines their own and other people's 'civil society'.

This issue also sits at the heart of global concerns about freedom of speech and whether governments, aid funders and the development community should recognise it as a primary right (from which it follows that independent journalism must be protected) or a secondary