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The media and the war: seeing the human

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Created 2007-11-20 15:42

In the days after 11 September 2001, the coverage of the attacks in the American press produced one notable innovation. The *New York Times* launched an effort to write individual profiles of each of the nearly 3,000 victims. By the end of 2001, the *Times* had reported and written 1,800 "portraits of grief". This was part of the coverage that went on to win a Pulitzer prize. It was striking, and deeply moving, as an attempt to transform a mass killing into a personalised, individualised event - to present the victims not as symbolic but as specific human lives destroyed in a specific crime. This seemed a noble and powerful role for journalism in the face of unprecedented facts.

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This article is the text of a talk delivered by Phil Bennett at a conference on Overcoming Extremism: Protecting Civilians from Terrorist Violence [2], held under the auspices of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS [3]) in Washington DC on 22-23 October 2007

For more details of the conference and video links to its main presentations, click here [4]

I mention this to draw a contrast. Today, there is no analogous project in the media to portray the individual civilian victims of the conflicts that have followed 11 September. Terrorism and violence against civilians seems ubiquitous in our front pages and on television almost every day. Yet its victims seem largely invisible.

I want to spend a few minutes today reflecting on why this might be.

I approach this subject from my own experience [5] as a journalist for more than twenty-five years. Although journalism has always identified with victims, the rise of the human-rights movement - focusing, to use the example of Amnesty International, on individual prisoners of conscience - converged in the 1970s and 1980s with narrative journalism that aimed to place the stories of real people at the centre of history. When done well, it turned victims into persons. I was reminded of this a few months ago by the death of Rufina Amaya [6], whose passing was marked by an essay on the front page of the *Post*'s Style section.

Who was Rufina Amaya? She was a peasant from the northeast corner of El Salvador who was the lone surviving witness of the El Mozote massacre [7] in 1981, when hundreds of people were killed by the US-supported Salvadoran army. Her testimony gave a name to the massacre and identity to its victims and perpetrators. As a young reporter in central America during the 1980s, I was always trying to find other Rufina Amayas; witnesses whose stories could be investigated. They were a way for us to get closer to the story, often closer to the truth, and to make your way onto the front page from a distant conflict.

Narrative stories and investigations that individualised violence against civilians became a staple of being a foreign correspondent. Profiles of victims routinely ran on the front page alongside a news story about an attack. This was true of victims of bus bombings in Israel. It was true in Bosnia. International military intervention in Kosovo was provoked in some measure by the photographs and stories of Kosovo refugees. These stories were so compelling that as an editor I can still remember the names of those who appeared in the *Post*, including Vjosa Maliqi [8], a young Albanian refugee whose story was captured by the Pulitzer-prize-winning reporter David Finkel [9].

The approach applied not just to victims. There was also an effort to portray the soldiers, the suicide-bombers, the guerrillas or civilian death squad members behind the killings.

This kind of coverage fitted perfectly with what most of us understand to be a central mission of journalism. Bearing witness is one of our richest and most vital public services. In the case of terrorism, it is a way of holding terrorists accountable. If terrorism aims to "indifferentiate" its victims, turning them into ciphers, then stories showing the opposite to be true is a way of challenging the arguments used to justify such attacks.

A new distancing

The attacks of 11 September 2001 and the war in Iraq have set us on a new course, or at least have introduced new elements into this picture. Who is the Rufina Amaya of Iraq? The Vjosa Maliqi of Afghanistan? No such iconic witness has emerged. The *Post* has published the photographs and names of every American military casualty in Iraq and Afghanistan; it is a moving tribute, but does not account for civilians.

I suspect this trend away from seeing individual victims of violence has many sources and consequences. One of them may be to place us even further away than we suspect from reaching a common understanding of what's happening in the world, especially in the middle east.

I can suggest a number of reasons why this has happened.

To begin with, the hazards and expense of reporting have compromised our ability to bear witness. The coverage of Iraq is the most dangerous and costly sustained commitment that we have ever made. We have paid a devastating price for it. On 14 October 2007, the *Post* lost its first reporter ever killed in a conflict, when Salih Saif Aldin [10] was shot to death while reporting in a Baghdad neighbourhood. In all, more than 100 reporters have been killed in Iraq.

The atmosphere of risk and danger has had the effect of separating us from the story, and from the civilians whose stories will ultimately shape the outcome of this conflict, and others. In the cases I cited earlier, even ones involving US forces, American journalists could stake out a position if not in the middle of the conflict, then at its margins. Although it was dangerous (dozens were killed in El Salvador) the parties in the conflict basically recognised our role, and saw some disadvantages in harming journalists. In Iraq, this is clearly not the case.

We have pushed very hard against the limits. In the week that Salih was killed, our Baghdad bureau, led by Sudarsan Raghavan [11], assembled detailed eyewitness accounts of the killing of civilians by Blackwater security personnel. This was classic accountability journalism that contradicted earlier accounts and also gave identities to the victims.

Examples like the Blackwater reporting [12] are important exceptions, but exceptions still. Violence against journalists enables violence against civilians. Add to this the fatigue of readers,

the overpowering urge to avert the eyes, the numbness caused by repetitive exposure to violence, scepticism of the press and accusations about credibility or bias, falling overall readership - all these have contributed something to the distance we have from civilian victims.

There are other, more complex factors at work.

The general lack of deep understanding in the United States and the US media of Islam, or Arab cultures, can lead to a shallow level of identification with civilian victims.

We've been aggressive in reporting about the scandal of Abu Ghraib [13], the secret CIA prisons for terrorism suspects and the practices used in their interrogation, the killings of civilians by US troops. Have these events or our coverage dulled our appreciation of outrage? I don't know, but I would suggest that to some extent public discourse is confused about what's right and wrong, legitimate and illegitimate, moral or immoral.

Jihadist propaganda has found an audience, and tried to shape [13] a warped vision of perpetrators and victims. This counter-narrative, often celebrating violence against civilians, can bleed into more traditional media. At the very least, repetition of images from the insurgent media network in Iraq provides its own self-serving context.

The title of this workshop [14] - "Arab and Western Media Perspectives" - suggests that there are differences between two frameworks on these questions, and no doubt there are. There are also differences of perspective within the western media. I would suspect that one difference has to do with the tendency in the US press to create balance or parity between civilian victims in a conflict. We heard much criticism during the war in Lebanon [15] in July-August 2006 that we were creating a false balance between the suffering of Israeli civilians and the much wider material and humanitarian destruction [15] in Lebanon.

I am not an expert on Arab media [16], but I wonder about the pressure to present accepted, officially-sanctioned points of view or facts and exclude others. We live in a world where there are not two sides to a story, but many, many sides.

I would like to come out of these discussions [17] with some sort of an agenda for strengthening our mission as allies of civilians who are otherwise powerless to have their views heard and experiences shared. One thing we've learned already this century is the power of what people carry in their heads. As journalists, the search for truth begins and ends with the facts. But it takes us through the space where thoughts, beliefs and experience converge.

Against forgetting

At the *Post*, we've tried to be faithful to the tradition of portraying real people in the midst of hardship. Our correspondent Anthony Shadid [18] won a Pulitzer prize for writing about everyday Iraqis during the invasion. His courageous reporting from Lebanon in last year's war did chronicle the suffering of Lebanese civilians in agonising detail.

We are wrong to think that there is not an audience for this kind of journalism.

Anthony told me this week that one of his recent stories that drew the largest response from readers was about a man named Mohammed Hayawi, the owner of the Renaissance Bookstore on Baghdad's storied Mutanabi Street. Hayawi was killed in March 2007 in a suicide-bombing that destroyed his shop. Anthony's appreciation [19] of this life ran on the same page where, two days later, we were to publish the essay marking Rufina Amaya's death; the two died within a week of each other.

Here's what Anthony wrote:

"Unlike the U.S. soldiers who die in this conflict, the names of most Iraqi victims will never be published, consigned to the anonymity that death in the Iraqi capital brings these days. Hayawi was neither a politician nor a warlord. Few beyond Mutanabi Street even knew his name. Yet his quiet life deserves more than a footnote, if for no other reason than to remember a man who embraced what Baghdad was and tried to make sense of a country that doesn't make sense anymore. Gone with him are small moments of life, gentle simply by virtue of being ordinary, now lost in the rubble strewn along a street that will never be the same. "

Last week we held a memorial service at the *Post* for Salih Saif Aldin. One of the young correspondents who served with Salih [20] in the Baghdad bureau, Nelson Hernandez [21], eulogised his colleague by reminding us of the Greek word for truth, *aletheia*. It means the truth as it is revealed or uncovered, but also unforgotten, and unforgettable.

Our vocation as journalists involves both meanings. Journalism should be an act against forgetting, and no place more than where violence tries to erase the lives of innocent people.

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