

FOG OF WAR

The war in Afghanistan – and the accompanying escalation of conflict in the border areas of Pakistan – has journalists grappling with the basics of how to cover the story, particularly in instances of American airstrikes in remote villages or villages situated in insurgent/Taliban-controlled areas.

The challenge has been twofold: getting the basic facts right; and giving meaning to an unfolding story.

A controversial attack in a remote Afghan province of Farah in May this year perfectly illustrates the challenges (and victories) of reporting from a conflict zone. After a firefight between insurgents and local Afghan security forces, international occupation forces were called in as backup. They subsequently launched a series of seven airstrikes on the villages.

When reports started filtering out, the media quoted local authorities as saying about 100 people were thought to have been killed, a significant number of those being children, women and the elderly. (The Farah attack has one of the highest death tolls for a single incident in the post-2001 Afghan war.)

The response from the US Army was immediate. Firstly, it denied the high death toll, saying there had been a firefight with the Taliban. Then it responded that there was a minimum of civilian casualties – and that the fatalities were Taliban fighters. Then came the statement that, in fact, it was the Taliban who had killed the civilians. This was followed by the standard, military-issue statement, accusing the Taliban of using villagers as human shields, deliberately hiding in homes with women and children so as to discredit efforts of the coalition forces.

To an outsider, this looks like the classic “fog of war”. Farah is a very remote province in the Western part of the country, with a strong insurgent presence – factors that mitigate against journalists being able to cover the area effectively. And, with the insurgent Taliban made up of local people, with their stronghold in the country’s outlying districts, the Afghan police and authorities view villagers with mistrust.

With two seemingly opposing versions of the truth, it was up to journalists using the basics of reporting to bring to light the facts, and help establish one incontrovertible record.

The work of journalists also renewed the debate and pressure to stop using certain forms of warfare – especially airstrikes and unmanned drones – in Afghanistan.

Local reporters were first to air the stories, gathering testimony from local villagers. This was followed by broadcast and print reporters, who



interviewed locals and took photographs and video footage of the dead and the bombed homes.

Investigators were sourced from international organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Crescent (ICRC) and United Nations, as well as local medics and provincial authorities.

Despite the mounting evidence, the US military stuck to its version of events. And, without the attention from reporters, the story would have been buried. Instead, the sustained effort by reporters meant the story kept its focus and fuelled international responses, protests in Afghanistan as well as calls for an official investigation.

IRIN, the United Nations news agency, said an Afghan government investigation found that about 140 civilians, most of them children, had died in the airstrikes. Afghanistan Rights Monitor, a local human rights organisation, put civilian casualties at 117.

Finally, after pressure created by consistent news reporting, the US carried out an investigation and, a month after the attack, conceded that civilians had been killed in the operation. The US military said 26 civilians had died and its investigations had shown that American personnel had made “significant errors” in carrying out the airstrikes.

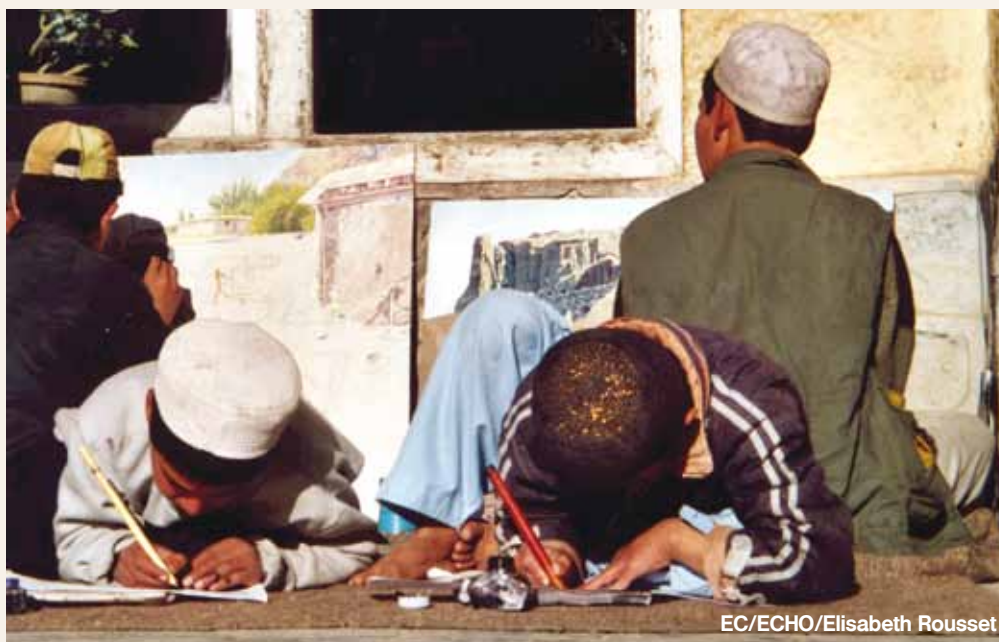
In instances such as this, the work of journalists serves a number of purposes:

- It brings facts and events to light – particularly in remote areas and areas where the Taliban are opposed to journalists.
- It establishes a public record, especially where there are human rights violations.
- Sustained reporting puts the story in context. In the case of the Farah attacks, investigations by the international media revealed that the airstrikes had been carried out by a special unit formed by US Secretary of Defence Donald

FOR JOURNALISTS, THERE IS SOMETIMES A BELIEF THAT EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES REQUIRE US TO ADOPT EXTRAORDINARY PRACTICES. BUT IT'S THE BASIC TOOLS OF THE TRADE – FAIRNESS, ACCURACY AND TRUTH – THAT WILL ALWAYS DELIVER WHAT GOOD JOURNALISM IS SUPPOSED TO BE, WRITES KAREN WILLIAMS FROM KABUL



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Rumsfeld – and that they had been implicated in a series of previous violations.

- It focuses debate on the types of warfare used by the international forces.

The fall of the Taliban in 2001 has seen a return of local media to Afghanistan. But under the current occupation and anti-insurgent war, the challenges for Afghan reporters are many:

- Gaining access to or building relationships with both sides is hard, if not impossible. It is difficult, for example, for Afghans to make meaningful contacts within international military forces. At the same time, local journalists are under threat from being killed by the Taliban.
- In remote areas, numbers are hard to verify.
- Unless journalists travel to the areas, the events themselves are hard to verify. But the country is remote and conflict areas are sometimes too dangerous to access. Local reporters and radio stations in the provinces can go some way to getting information, but they are often not well trained, leading to unreliable and patchy information. The majority of the pressure groups and NGOs work in Kabul, the capital – but conditions are extremely difficult, and these organisations are under threat from the Taliban. The UN has some access, as does the ICRC – but insecurity is a constant threat.
- An insurgency means it is not a formal war, with the insurgent side made up of combatants who live among the civilian population. Anti-insurgent operations and anti-insurgent rhetoric run the risk of criminalising civilians.

Independent reports have consistently shown that the majority of conflict-related fatalities and casualties in Afghanistan can be attributed to the Taliban. A recent report from the UN sets the number of civilian deaths in Afghanistan between January and May

this year at 800. It said that at least 55% of recorded deaths were attributed to insurgents; 33% were caused by international and Afghan forces; while 12% could not be attributed to any of the warring parties.

Civilian deaths resulting from armed hostilities had increased by 24% when compared to the same period last year, according to the report.

Even though shocking, statistics and percentages do not portray the grim realities on the ground, nor do they

raise the issue of greater state responsibility for action. The statistics do not talk about the daily reality of air strikes, gun battles, suicide bombings, Taliban beheadings and murders, as well as the general climate of fear in the country. And the credibility of the government is also tested when it – along with the international forces – is unable to protect civilians. Statistics cannot answer the question of whether the authorities are a dynamic in the violence.

Context, in this instance, is everything.

The legal black hole of the war on terror – supported and abetted from countries across the globe – has extended to an information black hole.

While the American war on terror has resulted in trying to put a legal face on illegal global actions, it has also resulted in the almost complete absence of information of the extent of atrocities and abuses committed. This is not coincidental. The absence of information provides a cloak for repression and abuses to thrive, become institutionalised and to continue.

The value of reporting can never be underestimated: it exposes atrocities, provides facts and context to events as well as narratives that challenge official-speak and humanises victims.

In this and most other conflicts, news reports have, in the most basic sense, brought information to light. Whether these reports have been on secret prisons or global torture regimes, they have humanised issues by giving campaigners, readers and families specific faces and case histories to relate to. They have also framed the debate – by explaining the legalities of governments' actions and also how they relate to international law.

Similarly, the work of reporters has brought the implications of the war on terror to citizens around the globe, with the media driving the debates around the implications of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, as well as the history of human rights abuses associated with it (including detention camps,

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“black hole” secret prisons and the international co-operation of developing countries in the torture).

The result of reporters' work on the Farah killings meant Lt General Stanley McChrystal, the new US commander in Afghanistan, ordered a review of airstrikes and instituted new guidelines as his first action in taking over his post. This debate has now extended to the use of airstrikes and drones in Pakistan.

This is a small step, but one of the ways in which reporting events and atrocities shines a light on them, informs public debate and pressure – which often results in policy change. The work of local reporters, in turn, fuelled national coverage – which extended to international pick-up of the story.

Reporting also contributes to an irrefutable public record. The Vietnam war is a good case in point, with reports on the My Lai massacre creating a permanent, pivotal public record – one which even naysayers cannot refute.

The reporting of individual stories can also establish a pattern of systematic abuse. In Afghanistan, this is of particular importance. After three decades of war, there are many public figures with blood on their hands who still wield considerable power. Sustained conflict has meant that warlords and people who have been responsible for violence and atrocities exist in an environment in which they can be continually reinvented as the new circumstances demand.

The sustained violence has also meant that the fear and threats have been renewed across at least two generations and instilled in public life and debate. All levels of public accountability have been destroyed.

For journalists, there is sometimes a belief that extraordinary circumstances require us to adopt extraordinary practices. But it's the basic tools of the trade (fairness, accuracy and truth) that will always deliver what good journalism is supposed to be.

Extraordinary circumstances may force journalists to be more circumspect, or be more rigorous in verifying information and pursuing facts, but journalism is a profession made to tell the story of historical events – often awful events.

The international “war on terror” presents new challenges to journalists to tell a good, accurate and fair story. And it is our commitment to telling the truth – and telling the truth about all sides – that is being challenged in new ways.