6 Observing conflict

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Years ago, as a member of the National Youth Theatre, I recall watching rehearsals of *Richard III* from the wings as the Alarums and Excursions of Bosworth Field were being conjured up by an over-enthusiastic scrum of lads laying about each other with sword and mace at the back of the stage. The director was bellowing above the din, 'Boys and girls, please do not kill each other. This is drama. No one need die.'

Conflict of all kind runs through Shakespeare's plays, many of the plots turning on it – emotional, historic, martial. He knew how to keep the audience's attention. And at the final curtain, the audience left the theatre and returned to a world which they knew was uncertain and shaped by war, but was incalculably different to the world of the stage.

Television also presents a kind of stage. We can witness both comedy and tragedy. However, it is as if the back wall of the stage dissolves every so often – and the real life that is walking past is thrust centre-stage, on-screen. Such is the technique of television that it is not always obvious what is reality and what is fiction. I have only to refer you to the constant enquiries to the BBC of those people who wish to have a drink in the Queen Vic pub in *EastEnders*.

For many decades, television has encouraged and honed various types of programmes to exploit and fulfil its possibilities: outside broadcasts and sport, intimate drama, series and soap operas, discussion and documentary, so-called 'reality shows' and so on. The medium is young and still developing; change is inevitable. News and current affairs were not originally thought to be pillars of the broadcasting schedule, but from the 1960s onwards enjoyed a phenomenal growth in popularity and esteem.

The journalist's fascination with conflict is well documented. In the nineteenth century in America, the Mexican and the American Civil War first began to awaken publishers to the fact that increased circulation accompanied war reporting. In Britain, in the 1850s, William Howard Russell of *The Times* almost single-handedly inaugurated modern British war reporting from the Crimea. Subsequently, there has been a bumpy road through the battlefields, encompassing censorship, bias, patriotism, propaganda and courage, eye-witness description, gritty realism and historic record.

Each major conflict brings its own particular characteristics to bear on the press and media: just as every general knows that the lessons learned *after* a war are always enshrined in doctrine to be dusted off and used for the next one – only to be found hopelessly out of date and misleading – every journalist should know that 'lessons learned reporting the last lot' will be peculiarly at variance with the realities of the 'next lot'. However, this did not stop an editor bombarding me with messages that it was essential that I secure a 'serviceable boat' when heading for a civil war a couple of years after the Falklands War. I gave up trying to explain that the Chad in Central Africa had no discernible coastline and I was not in search of the source of the Nile.

And in the second half of the twentieth century, with the new-born television medium completely ignored during World War II, we have only had just over fifty years to learn how we can report conflict with what is, for the moment, the most powerful communication tool in the world. My business has been mainly television reporting, so I would like to concentrate on that area.

And so quickly is television changing in itself and altering in its relation to the audience, it is a challenge to pin down how it reports conflict now – and how it should. I have lost count of the students who have contacted me in the last few years as they embark on their thesis about the military and the media. A goodly number are looking for a set of hard and fast rules about conflict reporting. They assume that there must be absolutes. All I can say is that, in my experience, the fog of war extends right through the camera lens and into the newsroom.

Let us try and peer through the mists of battle and discern some shapes which loom large in most conflicts.

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I do not use the most common phrase much beloved of those who would disparage television. 'Dumbing down' suggests to me a conspiracy: a concerted attempt to deprive viewers of more intelligent and serious programming, under the guise of populism, accessibility and anti-elitism. I don't think there is any attempt to do this.

What seems to me to be happening is a swift move towards a more commercial view of the industry, after several decades in which – in this country – it had an automatic slice of serious and minority viewing embedded in the schedules, partly through regulation, partly through convention and tradition. Children's programmes, regional production, religious affairs, current affairs at prime time.

There is a 'lightening up' process in action. Culturally complex and serious current affairs and documentaries are being scheduled out of the main viewing hours. Programming style is leaning towards the more engaging; the overall move is towards the dominant strand of television entertainment. This has been happening for the past twenty years in American TV – and it's now the case in most of the developed world. Much of this is to do with ownership. The big deals in the media world are about profit and power; they are hardly ever about production values and creativity. Public service organizations from Canada to Australia, never mind the UK, are all feeling the pressure of the increased push for larger audiences, the competitive streak of commercial broadcasting. Television entertainment is now a highly exportable commodity; whereas for years only a few American programmes were promoted worldwide – I remember the oddity of watching *Dallas* in Bulgarian –programme 'formats', as they are now called, can be put together and sold very profitably as a template for production around the world.

But surely, news is exempt from these pressures? The news is the news. Why should it be exempt?

Nearly two decades ago I remember driving past large billboards in Los Angeles from which four impossibly glossy people with terrific teeth smiled engagingly and promised to bring me 'All the news you

can use'. It'll never happen back home, I thought. In between the three major networks entertainment programmes, up popped little ads from the newsroom urging the viewer to 'join us for the latest'. Surely not, I thought. And newscasters were not distant, rather anonymous readers, but mega-personalities promoted vigorously by their stations.

It is the power of entertainment: the fact that television – unlike the theatre – deals with this extraordinary mixture of the real and the fictional, and entertainment values are inescapable in the hunt for audiences. Someone in the industry once said that television always wanted to smile at the viewer – after all, you've just been asked into their living room. However, the game show or soap opera will dissolve to give way to the news bulletin – or, to use the more recent term, the news programme, or now, the news show. And although the content is real conflict, real shock and surprise, genuine significance and sometimes unpalatable fact, the framework is that of the news presenter urging the viewer to 'Stay with us', a smiling 'Join us after the break' – as if the hard diet of news was something you'd like another helping of. And conflict is often on that menu. For most television news organizations still stick to an agenda of significant events as defined by broadsheet newspapers, and have not yet gone down the tabloid road – though there have been some experiments, as in BBC 3's *Liquid News*.

How to report conflict within this framework?

The tools available to a reporter these days are truly wondrous. The mobile phone and the satellite systems have worked miracles. Information can now speed round the world in a fraction of a second and sometimes deliver stories as they happen, in real time, as the expression is.

To give you an example: going to sea with the Navy up to a decade ago usually resulted in a reporter severing all links with the newsdesk – splendid stuff: you didn't get badgered by nervous editors, and they didn't have you whingeing every day. What communications the Navy had went to weird shore-stations and were labelled 'journalists, not for the use of'.

All that changed when the BBC trialled satellite equipment on board the aircraft carrier *Illustrious* in the Gulf during the no-fly operation in the late 1990s. With a little tweaking of the ship's course, we managed to broadcast live pictures from her flight deck.

However, during the 1999 Kosovo crisis, we were flown out to an American Cruise missile destroyer in the Adriatic; and because US ships have different electronic systems which tend to interfere with TV cameras and satellites, we expected only to be able to record limited pictures with difficulties – and would have to fly them off for transmission a few hours later. We stood on the deck near the ship's bow, the engines not turning, no light to be seen, as the ship waited for the moment of firing: the huge Cruise missiles were stored vertically in pods across the deck – not a great distance away from us. The signal to fire is generated not by the captain, but hundreds of miles away at a NATO headquarters in northern Italy.

Without warning, there was an explosion as the compressed-air apparatus pushed the missile out of the pod and up into the air in less than a second, before the rocket engine fired in a singeing blast and the missile hurtled up and curved towards the horizon. The stills photographer standing next to us pressed his button and hoped. He went below into the wardroom where he plugged his camera into his computer and was relieved to see that his picture was good: he cropped and captioned it – 'first Cruise missile fired at Serbia'. The computer was connected to his satellite phone, on which he dialled the computer layout of a New York newspaper. He pressed a key, and the picture was embedded in the front-page layout of the newspaper before the rocket hit its target.

It's obvious to anyone that live cameras and digital satellite communications systems challenge the elements of secrecy and surprise in warfare. The military are not unaware of these developments. They quite frequently see the press able to communicate faster than they can and they have concerns about operational security. Depending on the status of the press within a society and understanding of freedom of information, armies around the world vary in their reaction to journalists in a war zone. Add in the *casus belli* and the nationality of the journalist, and issues arise immediately of press freedom, patriotism, responsibility for fatalities and the right of people to know what is being fought for in their name.

The instinctive historic reaction is for generals to suggest that the press stay away and gratefully receive an official military report of

victory at the end of the unpleasantness. At the other end of the spectrum, many of the public do not wish to know about the horrors of war.

Somewhere between these views are the majority of the nation and the press.

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And I have mentioned 'nation'. For all the claims made for a 'global village', television news remains determinedly nationally based; the BBC and ITN and Sky News are British in outlook and ethos; CNN is a very American channel, though it does not wrap itself in its country's flag like FOX News. AI-Jazeera is based in Qatar and sees the world from a panArabic standpoint.

And so few journalists could or would claim a purely 'international' outlook, which raises the dilemma in times of conflict of, for example, loyalty and patriotism. Or, the espousing of one cause against another. Or support for the freedom-fighter. Or the reporting of terrorists' aims and objectives. Or encouragement for the human rights demonstrator. Reporting which calls into question the traditions of detached, objective, non-involved journalism.

It is so much easier to write despatches when you have decided that one opponent has right on their side. The cruelties and violence, the loss of life, the sacrifices, all can be more easily described when you do not have to balance your report. My country, right or wrong. For many journalists – though not all of course – consideration of objectivity goes out the window if your country declares war. Reporters – those seasoned, international, cosmopolitan creatures – discover that they have roots. And allegiances. And perhaps an editor or proprietor firmly behind the military venture. Or an audience fired up with patriotism. The idea that nationalism is something which belongs to history disappears overnight to the sound of drums and bugles, and gunfire.

Nothing is new in this. Reporters have always followed the flag, and it is a test of a country's liberal principles and freedom of expression if reporters' voices raised in dissent continue to be heard during the battle. And there may be a considerable problem for the press who wish to keep their audience informed of everything that is happening. A nation at war has no desire to see the press helping the enemy. And the satellite phone is certainly going to do that.

And the last fifteen years have seen considerable growth in the kind of conflict where one country intervenes in the affairs of another – not as an aggressor, but as an agent of the United Nations, or of regional groups. It became a regular observation in former Yugoslavia by journalists, that loyalty to the United Nations was an unknown emotion among the press. On the other hand, with dozens of journalists killed in that conflict, it had to be noted that the UN didn't kill them and so the question of loyalty was complex. And the actual complexity of the fighting, with at least three warring factions, produced very uneven journalism with the foreign press sometimes aligned with one faction, sometimes detached from all of them. Put crudely, some journalists had great difficulty reporting a war which didn't divide simply into good guys and bad guys. They could never decide what to do about the third lot.

Let me dispel one myth that features frequently in discussion about coverage of modern warfare: the idea that 'war is now seen "live" on television'. Only the occasional action is witnessed 'live' – and it is very limited and defined, for the moment. Even lightweight TV transmission equipment still needs carrying and running with and taking cover with in hostile situations. House-to-house fighting, civil warfare, battlefield close-quarter combat – these are situations in which the military neither tolerate media teams coming in among them nor can the teams operate coherently, though it may be possible in the future as developments deliver cameras and transmission equipment no larger than the weaponry carried by the infantry.

Set-piece attacks, on the other hand, favour the media: bombers taking off, missiles being fired, artillery in action, troop transports and armoured columns moving forward, can all be delivered to screens at home 'live' – as long as there is no sustained or overwhelming incoming fire from the enemy. This was the kind of footage which came in from the invasion of Iraq in 2003. And much of the 'noise of battle' – on analysis – turned out to be overwhelmingly *outgoing* fire, though it was mistaken for *exchanges* by many in the American forces at the time.

To be alongside in such situations raises the question of official tolerance of the media on the battlefield. In the Gulf, there had been a

decision at the highest political level to allow the media to be there – under restrictions. Delivered in a manner which suggested an openness and transparency – an invitation to witness the war – the so-called 'embedding' process was always intended to limit and control access to much of the conflict. Additionally, there was definite disapproval of any media who wished to operate independently; in the event, several journalists were illegally arrested and detained by US forces for not concurring with the official policy. The British media reported much of the invasion from a neighbouring country – Kuwait, only being ferried across the border when the military decided the time was right.

No one should be surprised at these strictures. Soldiers will always feel an overriding need to protect their own troops from the consequences of uncontrolled publicity about their movements – and detailed scrutiny of the viciousness and bloodiness of real fighting. And politicians – ever more conscious of public opinion shaped by media images – are nervous of taking responsibility for the ghastliness of war and the sacrifice of civilians in its prosecution. You only have to look at the language which has evolved to place a sanitized screen between the brutality and the audience – 'collateral damage', 'smart bomb', 'precision weapons' and so on – to realize that the realities of war are unpalatable.

And if the set-pieces of attack are available 'live', there is also tolerance – up to a point – of set-piece defence. The Iraqi authorities placed limitations on reporters, but allowed cameras on rooftops to deliver pictures of distant flashes as bombs exploded. It suited the Iraqis to have these images disseminated throughout the Arab world and to those they wished to sympathize with them (Western audiences are often unaware of the growing influence and sophistication of media sources which are not based in their own capitals). However, an orange glow on the horizon is an image which does not properly convey the damage done by modern weaponry. And dying and death were notably not on screen.

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The arguments as to what is acceptable on that small-screen stage in the living room reflect the culture within a community. There is no universal norm for the amount of violence and extent of suffering which

can be tolerated on television. Conflict presents particular problems in this respect: should the full impact of violence appear on air? Shredded corpses and screaming victims? Fighters delivering death-blows? Napalm and fragmentation weapons hitting civilians?

The borderline between what is acceptable and what is not is regularly shifting. Even during a conflict there are inconsistencies: dead Allied soldiers were treated with the respect of distance when shown. The mangled corpses of Saddam Hussein's sons were considered OK in close-up.

Even in the Bosnian conflict in the early 1990s, where there was very limited live coverage, the increasing speed and internationalization of TV coverage began to impinge on the highly sensitive area of military information about casualties being communicated before their own authorities had informed relatives at home.

It's usually considered proper by most countries that the families should be informed properly and privately of a death. In Sarajevo a young French soldier was shot in the head while building an anti-sniper barricade. His death was recorded by an agency cameraman who'd been watching the barriers being put up. There were close-up pictures. Less than ten minutes later, the time it took to drive down Sniper Alley in the centre of that city to the local TV station where the satellite dishes were located, the pictures were transmitted over the Eurovision network. That was how the soldier's family learned of his death, before he had even been pronounced officially dead. All conflicts now – even civil disturbances and riots – have the potential to involve families and friends while the action is in progress. Those families and friends may well subsequently constitute a considerable influence as to the conduct of the conflict. However, other than an on-the-spot appeal to the camera crew, there is little the military can do, and it's reasonable to expect these days that much of frontline action is recorded by agency crews rather than national organizations.

It also has to be noted that armies in the West are now mostly volunteer, and relatively small compared to the forces of World War II. This leads to the military being more isolated from the majority of society, and fewer viewers feeling a direct link with those putting their lives on

the line in a foreign land. A poll in America last year showed that two-thirds of those surveyed had no relative, friend or colleague serving in Iraq. The structure of the US army and its recruitment also lead to a disproportionate number of black and Hispanic Americans serving, along with poor white Southerners. So the link to the forces which might be assumed in the majority of TV viewers is weaker than usually supposed. Add to that the Administration's dislike and discouragement of coverage of returning body-bags and pictures of wounded troops in hospital and rehabilitation – all essential elements of reporting conflict and its consequences – and there is a reinforcement of the notion that the 'entertainment-led' medium does not find it too difficult to avoid certain aspects of journalism.

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There is the underlying argument that really appalling images will chase the viewer away – for good, so destroying the *raison d'être* of the news. Coupled with this is the fear that continuously grisly pictures eventually produce indifference. And the suggestion that if the news shows nothing but carnage, then it produces a generalized misanthropy, as Michael Ignatieff has said, 'the feeling that the world has become too crazy a place to deserve serious reflection'.

All of this has been exacerbated by the arrival of twenty-four-hour news. It is replacing that sense of occasion which used to occur when the newspaper dropped on your mat at a set time in the morning, and in the evening you made an appointment with the serious half hour of the nightly news bulletin. Instead, there is now a continuous stream of variable information – some of it factual reporting, now interspersed with comment, opinion, discussion and a presentation style that owes more to advertising than to lecturing.

Conflict – of all kinds – does not run according to television scheduling patterns. I tuned in at a very early hour during the Iraq invasion and watched a camera near an infantry dug-in position trained on half-a-dozen men lying in sand, doing very little. The horizon showed no action. The reporter had a hard time finding much to say. One of the presenters in the studio memorably turned away from the back-projection screen with the words, 'Seems there's not much going on in the war this morning – let's leave it and look at today's sports prospects'.

Such coverage can trivialize and also minimalize conflict, suggesting that cameras are surely placed at all the main events and big theatres of action – which is, of course, not true. But the emphasis given to 'going live' tends to reinforce the idea.

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Twenty-four-hour news also puts immense pressure on reporters to deliver something new and different far more frequently, usually from a so-called 'live-spot'. That, in essence, has to be a relatively safe location, in which it then becomes possible to deliver a large number of reports to various outlets, updated every quarter of an hour, if desired. A highly economical use of resources, but one which restricts the eye-witness reporting capacities of the reporter. It has led in both Afghanistan and Iraq to reporters rarely, if ever, leaving the building and relying on news copy sent by e-mail from Washington or London. The reporter then delivers information gathered by someone else. The frequency of the broadcasts can also lead to the over-emphasizing of minor events, so that it becomes difficult for the viewer to evaluate the course of the action. And the course of the action, the conduct of the conflict, is now delivered with corporate-style gloss by Western authorities: press conferences, selective video clips and photo opportunities are as much part of the official military information process as any other business.

All this sounds rather pessimistic for the pursuit of facts and significant information. On the contrary, the facts are probably there in greater profusion than ever before. It is just that they come in a welter of other material, and the viewer is hard-pressed to evaluate them and weigh their significance. Surely there is no obligation to watch twenty-four hours of conflict? However, does it seem right just to 'drop in' on a war, when it suits you? The relationship of the viewer to the television news is a little uncertain in this respect. Nor is the viewer given an opportunity to understand the process of what is being censored on grounds of taste: warnings such as 'Viewers may find some images disturbing' do not inform the viewer of the height of violence that may have been reached, or the depth of suffering – and which may have been excluded.

Another plus should be that we are getting information a great deal faster, however confusing it may be. There is an argument that a

democratic society should be kept informed, not just told the result at the end of the affair. Decisions are being taken by those involved in the conflict, and it may be that the public develops a view that such decisions should be questioned, perhaps changed. The Vietnam War is often cited in this respect, though it is something of a red herring, the traditional argument being that pictures of dead and injured GIs had such an impact on nightly news broadcasts that a groundswell of opinion eventually dissuaded the administration from pursuing the war. This was not the case – there was no noticeable growth in opposition to the war while the largest number of casualties were being taken. The pictures had no measurable effect on public opinion. The anti-war movement had different origins.

Again, on the positive side, the media in the West have never been better funded and so prolific: an explosion of TV channels, with work in the media seen as attractive and fashionable. Few people who have never encountered the media circus when it hits town seem to have much idea about the sheer number involved: gathered in Skopje in Macedonia before NATO troops went into Kosovo, a British army officer was curious to see how many journalists he was trying to deal with. He set about registering them – and journalists are suckers for a badge with the word 'Accredited' on it – not that it ever confers rights and privileges, it merely identifies you as 'Not a soldier'. He ran out of time and knew he hadn't got everyone, but he already had 2,734 on the list. The state of Qatar reckoned that more than 8,000 media arrived to attend the US military's briefing centre during the Iraq invasion. Somewhere in that lot there has to be a smattering of excellence, brilliant journalism, fair-dealing, honesty and accuracy?

And perhaps that's what's on the mind of journalists heading for conflict – those tricky moral issues which lie at the heart of the trade: the pursuit of truth, fairness, accuracy and lack of bias. Are we all there amid shot and shell, pondering these matters? Probably not, we are trying to stay alive. One of the consequences of improved technology is the longer time which the press are present in conflict. There is no need to leave the battle-front to find the telephone or send the pictures. The satellite transmission equipment goes as near as it can to the scene of the action – though not too near to sustain a hole in its

expensive dish. So, it is not surprising that the number of press, dead and injured in the last decade, worldwide, has increased.

The figures for this last year from the Paris-based *Reporters without Borders* show fifty-three journalists and fifteen media workers killed, at least 907 journalists arrested, 1,146 attacked or threatened and 622 media censored. Of course, many of these cases were reported in non-conflict areas; however, Iraq led the list, with nineteen reporters and twelve media workers killed during the year. Terrorist strikes and Iraqi guerrilla attacks caused most of the deaths, but the US army was held responsible for four of them. What this points up is the increase in deaths since President George W. Bush stood triumphantly on the deck of an aircraft carrier to signal a war all but won – and the enormous media bandwagon trundled home from the Middle East. With a conflict becoming much more complicated to report, less of a simple traditional two-sided fight, it has also become more dangerous and less attractive to the world's media.

And there's no doubt that the availability of cheap, lethal automatic weapons, particularly since the break-up of the Soviet Union, had added to the dangers. There is also an awareness, almost as worldwide, that television in particular can be used with great effect in a conflict – not just to report it, but as propaganda, a weapon of war itself. So the business of staying alive is a serious one. I had never seen a flak-jacket worn by a reporter – never mind worn one myself – until the Balkan war. And up to the 1990s, I doubt that any reporter had driven an armoured vehicle. Sadly, young reporters now take these things for granted.

And there is an added element today which places restrictions on even the most independent-minded young reporter: employers are now highly sensitive to the pressures from the Health and Safety industry and also insurance demands. What has been standard practice for years among journalist in conflict areas is now being modified: head offices and newsrooms are increasingly risk-averse, nervous of compensation litigation and worried that death or injury will reflect badly on corporate image. One effect is positive: better-equipped journalists – though it can also be argued that armoured vehicles and flak-jackets can distance the media from other civilians. However, the net

result of administrative caution is the tendency to accept offers of 'protection' – from the military or private organizations – with an eagerness which diminishes the opportunity for independence.

There is also an insidious pressure which arises from the ever-rising graph of fatalities: the call for journalists to be covered by some sort of International Code of Ethics, which would be intended to give them some kind of protection in conflicts. The suggestion usually comes from governments who are none too happy with foreign journalists crawling over a particularly nasty little war of civil insurrection. If only they could identify the pesky critters – then they could afford them the correct 'help and attention' and perhaps some 'protection'.

In my experience, away from the relatively sophisticated older members of NATO, the first question asked by a general, indeed, by most people in uniform, is: Who regulates you journalists? Behind this lies the universal military desire to establish a chain of command. It is anathema to soldiers that journalists are such free spirits; that their behaviour cannot be supervised by a code of practice. I fear that an International Code of Ethics – which isn't much discussed in this country but is a favourite topic in countries with a little local difficulty in progress – would be seized upon by most men with guns: not to give journalists freedom to operate, but to restrict and to control.

The military mind will seize on any code which contains a hint of the words 'internal affairs of a nation', 'in the national interest', or 'territorial integrity' – or even fairness and balance. You can imagine how the military interpret such words as aiding and abetting the enemy, especially when lives are at stake. And as commercial and publicly funded organizations in the West become more cautious in their approach to dangerous assignments, let us hope that they do not even toy with the notion of a Code of Ethics: it would be corrupted before it ever got signed up to.

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One comment on another development which also touches on the emotional and moral values we attach to involvement in conflict, and which television can emphasize disproportionately: a fighter pilot is shot down in battle; a prisoner of war is taken: routine story? Not if that fighter is a woman.

It's a straightforward fact that women live in the shadows of conflict. The history of war and insurrection, crime and domestic trouble, scenes of violence, though littered with the odd heroine, the occasional pioneer, the eccentric female, and the exception to her times, the oddball woman, is the story of man. Or men. Decisions on declaring war, the leadership in battle, the composition of armies, the maintenance of law and order in civil society have merely reflected the second-class status of women. Their lack of political or economic clout. And at times, the wilful exclusion by historians of redoubtable deeds by women, just because women weren't supposed to do them. No surprises there, and that's history for you.

However, in the twentieth century, there was an explosion of information, a massive growth in education, and whole populations now learn about the world in a way which was impossible, inaccessible, in previous centuries. Add to that the way in which the Western world has seen – in just two generations – the age-old assumptions about women's status challenged and changed.

Women do have views on conflict – and they may be varied – not just the conventional view that they are always pro-peace and anti-war. However, these views are frequently discounted, or not even heard, because the very presence of conflict makes it harder for women to break into the macho circle of decision-making.

I saw numerous example of this in the Balkans, where well-educated women, the beneficiaries of an efficient non-discriminatory Soviet education system, were elbowed into the sidelines as soon as the war began. Many were municipal officials, civil servants, media personnel. Their roles were gradually usurped in a militarized society, where wearing a uniform and boasting about front lines became the badge of success. Time and again, I attended gatherings in which ceasefires were negotiated, where refugee problems were discussed. They were exclusively male. I met many able and experienced former civil servants – these women expressed frustration and bewilderment at the way in which they'd been pushed aside with the crudest of arguments. War's not for women. Generals don't want skirts around. Your job's at home – the men are on the front lines – someone's got to look after the kids; anyway, the water's been cut off and there's no electricity.

One of the first signs of women's trek backwards in Sarajevo was the sight of middle-class women lawyers and teachers and architects lugging pails of water and chopping down trees for firewood. Their jobs seemed secondary in a war – so they had to take on the physical tasks thrown up by the damage caused by war.

A good number of them tackled their new situation with a resentful determination. One of the commonest sights in the middle of Sarajevo at the height of the shelling was that of schoolchildren clutching their brightly coloured bags, and darting across streets vulnerable to deadly sniper fire. One of the main secondary schools was on the riverbank in the north. It was a few hundred yards from the Serb front line. The headmistress wasn't a particularly tough character, but she explained, while wrapped in a duvet against the freezing weather blowing in through the four-foot mortar hole in her office, that war didn't stop education. And she was insistent – and I met many women to attest to this – that school was continuing because the pupils' mothers were frantic that their children would have a future – something other than fighting. It was the mothers, she said, who scraped together a bit of sawdusty bread and some ancient jam for the tiny lunch-box, and shoved their children out onto the streets to make their way through mortar and artillery fire and past snipers to school. Their argument was that as women, no one took any notice of what they said about the war, so they were going to make sure that their children at least got an education so that they could leave and prosper elsewhere. And anyway, they added, you were as likely to be shelled in your own living-room or kitchen as in a classroom, so off you go to school.

So again the women had lost their public voice because of conflict.

Another aspect of reporting conflict is to observe the way women have become involved in the actual business of fighting. The change in women's status in Western democracies in the last few decades has led to this.

Of course, there are numerous historical examples of females in combat. But it's interesting to note that the arguments about women in the front line are often accompanied by some of the hoariest old myths about women and conflict. One of the commonest is that men fighting next to women are likely – nay definitely – going to lay down

their arms, abandon military discipline and forget what they're fighting for, the moment the woman next to them is injured. Chivalry.

I find this fascinating. Because chivalry is not something that seems to have gained ground in other areas where women have demanded equality. It's much more likely to have originated in the arguments that took place in the Israeli army over thirty years ago, where women had gained significant participation in the armed services, only to encounter objections from the religious element, who then had them ejected from front-line duties, a ban which has remained in place until the past couple of years.

However, many military planners in the Western world are now grappling with the role of women in the armed forces, not so much because they are yielding to notions of equality, but because they face a considerable shortfall in recruitment, added to the increasingly technological aspects of war, where better-educated people are needed. The traditional cannon-fodder – the uneducated, unskilled male – is no longer the major constituent of a modern army, navy or airforce. And most countries are having to widen their recruitment base because many of the qualified people they need happen to be women.

It's a complex situation, if only because of the fundamental emotions it arouses in everyone about the roles of men and women in war and peace, on the front line and the home-front. As a reporter, I have faced the inevitable pressure – which comes of convention – that the 'exceptional' constitutes a story. In other words, when you're working on the deck of an American aircraft carrier during full battle operations – a frightening, hellish place, with dangerous jet aircraft manoeuvring feet from you, while you climb over piles of rockets and bombs, all the while unable to hear anything because of the scream of the take-offs – there is the moment when the F-18 pilot waves from the cockpit before hurtling off at several hundred miles per hour from the catapult on deck. And she is a stunner. With a long blonde plait stuffed into her hi-tech helmet.

Worth a story? Or just another F-18 pilot?

And if something happens to her, then the media suddenly hurtle back several decades, deeply traditional and discriminatory in their

view of a woman's place, leaving front-line reporters mulling over whether they have dealt with the 'exceptional' or merely reinforced old prejudices.

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So, more media, better equipped, able to broadcast faster; wrestling with traditional conflict problems of military restriction. censorship and unpalatable pictures. Communicating to a television industry running twenty-four-hour channels, hungry for material, presenting itself ever more in entertainment mode.

What does the viewer make of this? If I had the answer, I'd be setting up my own station.

What is immediately obvious is that the pattern which lasted for nearly forty years, of ever-increasing audiences spread across a handful of channels, with a very discernible set of viewing habits, has now crumbled. And despite the proliferation of satellite and cable options, the audiences for any one particular programme are, with occasional exceptions, much smaller than a decade ago.

Programming which deals with the subject of conflict – documentaries and current affairs – have declined on terrestrial stations and are rarely to be found in peak-time viewing hours. However, this is countered with specialist channels – Discovery, History and so on. News has expanded on all fronts; even so, the time when nearly half the adult population could be expected to watch one of the main evening bulletins has gone. The twenty-four-hour news channels claim 'cumulative' audiences – adding together figures for various times, regardless of whether these may be the same people tuning in; and they are still only measured in fractions of the terrestrial channels. The fall-off has run parallel with a decline in newspaper readership. There are a variety of reasons put forward – society is changing, young people do not belong to the loyal generation which 'grew up' with television; news is considered less significant within busy lives and where there is no overarching international threat, such as the Cold War, also the 'emotional, touchy-feely' and personalized style of reporting grates with older viewers – and many other suggestions.

Nevertheless there's no doubting the ability of certain stories and images to reach out and affect public opinion. If images of conflict

were not influential, then the military and political machines would not bother to attempt to control them.

There is cause for optimism. We have large numbers of young people interested in and caring about reporting; not all merely want to be 'rich and famous' – which is a much-voiced mantra. The equipment grows ever more sophisticated and can take the reporter into the conflict to deliver what he or she can see and show. The audience is not only important in terms of audience size. In a sophisticated and grown-up society there are large numbers of people who understand that conflict must be reported and reality confronted.

Long may we try to serve that understanding.

FURTHER READING

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K. Adie, *Corsets to Camouflage: Women and War.* London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2003.
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