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FROM JOURNALISM OF ACTIVISM TOWARDS JOURNALISM OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Nel Ruigrok

Abstract / In conflict situations it is difficult for journalists to get the full picture of the situation. Moreover, oftentimes journalists get involved themselves and become active participants in the debate about the conflict. The war in Bosnia was such an occasion where journalists embarked on a crusade to military intervene in the conflict and save the Muslim from the Serbs. This article describes the journalistic practices leading to this journalistic activism and examines the possible effects that such an attitude can have on public opinion. The article finishes with a plea for a journalistic practice that starts from accountability rather than activism.

Keywords / Bosnia / journalism ethics / journalism of attachment / war journalism

Introduction

In this special issue of *The International Communication Gazette* we are considering the practice of journalism in circumstances where information is hard to get and where stakeholders try to manipulate journalists in favour of their own cause. Incentive for this debate is Joris Luyendijk's book *Het zijn net mensen. Beelden van het Midden-Oosten [People Like Us: The Truth about Reporting the Middle East]* (2006), in which, drawing on his own experiences, he sketches the difficulties and dilemmas a journalist faces when covering Middle Eastern countries, a region in which reliable information is scarce and where journalists are being manipulated by different protagonists in the conflicts at hand. In this article I want to discuss one aspect of the difficulties that Luyendijk touches upon, namely the journalist's own ethics while covering the events in an authoritarian regime or reporting on a conflict. These ethics of journalists can cause tunnel vision, either in a dictatorial state or in a democracy. Or in other words, in either situation journalists have to deal with the blurry line between journalism and activism. This blurry line came to the fore in the 1990s when journalists engaged in a journalism of activism in several conflicts, especially, in the Netherlands, during the war in Bosnia. After a discussion of the journalistic practices during this conflict, I discuss the downside of such journalistic practices for our society. I finish with a plea for a journalism of accountability instead of a journalism of activism in such complex situations.

Journalism of Activism

The role of the media in our present-day society cannot be underestimated. A big majority of the population depends on the news media to be informed about international news, to interpret developments and to form an opinion (Page and Shapiro, 1992). In order to provide the public with information, news organizations have a code of ethics stating that each journalist among other aspects should live by: truth, accuracy and objectivity. Objectivity is an essential aspect since 'Objectivity was understood as an ideal counter to the reality of the reporter's own subjectivity' (Schudson, 1990: 268). However, as more and more is recognized, also among journalists themselves, the idea of being able to know the absolute truth and report it is fading. In conflict situations especially, journalists can try to separate facts from values but oftentimes it is impossible to get even a two-sided story, let alone a full picture. Moreover, as is seen in many instances, journalists even get personally involved. In politics they can become partisan, in a social context they can become advocates for a special cause, in a conflict situation they can take sides, becoming attached. Whatever the situation, when journalists lose their professional distance to the matter they report on, their journalistic practice can be labelled as a journalism of activism.

One form of journalism of activism in which journalists give up the aspect of neutrality is the journalism of attachment. So labelled by the BBC's former correspondent Martin Bell (1998: 273), 'journalism of attachment' proposes a form of journalism that 'cares as well as knows'. Bell rejected the 'dispassionate practices of the past' and fought for a form of 'journalism that is aware of its responsibilities; and will not stand neutrally between good and evil, right and wrong, the victim and the oppressor'. According to Bell, this phenomenon is in opposition to the traditional model of what he coined as 'by-stander journalism'. During the Bosnian war numerous journalists adhered to this form of advocacy journalism rejecting the aspect of neutrality. This rejection of neutrality is based on morality. As a consequence, the conflict is portrayed in such a way that 'good guys' and 'bad guys', 'good' vs 'evil', are clearly distinguished and journalists actively participate in the debate, becoming more activists than observers of the events. Nik Gowing (1997: 25–6) notes: 'there is more evidence than many media personnel care to admit that journalists embarked on crusades and became partial', siding with the Bosnian Muslim government and demonizing the Serbs. John Simpson (1998: 444–5) wrote about the situation: 'A climate was created in which it was very hard to understand what was really going on, because everything came to be seen through the filter of the Holocaust.' Hammond (2000: 375) observed that, throughout the total news coverage, a tendency towards journalism of attachment could be found: 'this style of journalism is not confined to comment pieces, but affects news reporting'.

Despite the fact that the term was coined during the war in Bosnia, the phenomenon also occurred elsewhere. During the war in Kosovo, the media contributed to an atmosphere in which the international community was making up for earlier mistakes. With the inaction still in mind with respect to the Bosnian war, western governments were eager to react in Kosovo. Drawing on the framework used to report the Bosnian war, the media also did not want another battlefield as seen

there and strove for military action. The use of the term 'ethnic cleansing' by the media and governmental officials is an example of this. Stemming from Serbo-Croat military vocabulary the term was used by western diplomats to describe the brutal acts of the Serbs against their victims. The Serbs became the 'issue owner' of the term, portrayed over and over as the main perpetrators of ethnic cleansing and other war crimes against the Muslim population (Ruigrok, 2001; see also Hammond, 2007). Having framed the conflict in Bosnia in such a way, it was a small step to continue this type of coverage during Kosovo. Western newspapers for example framed the air strikes as humanitarian aid to the Albanians to stop the 'ethnic cleansing' initiated by the Serbs (Ackerman and Naureckas, 2000; Hammond, 2000).

This moral basis of the coverage in the 1990s continued during the war on terror. Notwithstanding the idea that it was an act of aggression that was answered with aggression, the American attack on Afghanistan and especially on Iraq was also packed in a story about human rights and moral good. The war was a liberation war against the evil in the Middle East. War stories were being told with the flourish of explicit moral discourse (Wasburn, 2002: 125). A key aspect of the framing was fear. As Brennen and Duffy (2003) conclude in their comparison of news coverage about Pearl Harbor and 9/11, the news media were encouraged a specific ideologically formed opinion in their news coverage that was cultivating the climate of fear that reigned in the United States.

The Effects of Journalism of Activism

Morally triggered or not, in all the aforementioned cases, the violation of journalistic rules by involved or attached journalists not only affected news coverage itself, but also the audience. News coverage of foreign affairs has been found to influence public opinion to a greater extent than news coverage of domestic issues, which citizens have more knowledge about (Page and Shapiro, 1992). Especially when an atmosphere is created in which both politicians and media strive for the same purposes, there is a danger of tunnel vision. Wieten (2002: 83) for example concluded about the Bosnian war:

Media and politics seem to have aided each other in creating a rather stereotypical, simplified picture of the conflict, and, as a consequence, also of what the international community, the Netherlands in particular, could do to bring it to an end and solve it.

The spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1991) explains how such situation can occur. 'The more clear-cut the majority and the minority are in the climate of opinion, the more it may be assumed that this will influence the willingness to speak out or keep silent in public' (Noelle-Neumann, 1991: 262). During the coverage of the Bosnian war, with its morally loaded news reporting, in which the Serbian aggression was compared to Nazi practices, more and more people, including journalists, adhered to the idea that the Serbs were the personification of evil that had to be stopped. The same attitude appeared in other situations, such as the aftermath of the World Trade Center attacks. After 9/11, journalists embraced enthusiastically the new framework of 'the war on terror', in order to interpret the 'friends' and 'enemies' of a state. Following the 9/11 attacks in New York, there was an accelerating trend

among journalists towards increased attachment. The scenes of reporters crying on camera while reporting from Ground Zero (Tumber, 2002: 257) illustrate this well. Mike Hennessy from WFLA Radio, positioned himself as a patriot: 'I am an American first, a journalist second' (quoted in 'message' 2002 (1): 25).

The effect of such news coverage is actually what we should be aware of. After all, the public depends on the news media as a source. Findahl's (1998) study provides a striking example of the effects on public opinion of enduring news depicting 'good guys' and 'bad guys'. He followed the news audience in the Swedish town Umea and questioned them about their memory of news items. One of his findings was a rewriting of history by the audience. A massacre committed by Croatian armed forces in autumn 1993 became front-page news for a couple of days. One year later, most people still remembered the vivid pictures of the massacre. Their interpretation of the pictures had changed, however. Where, in 1993, they said that the Croatian forces committed the atrocities, one year later, the Serbs had replaced the Croats and the Croatian massacre had become a Serb massacre. The pictures remained the same, but the context had changed according to the general picture about the Bosnian war that was presented in the international media. The Serbs were the 'bad guys', the Muslims the victims. Findahl (1998: 123) concludes, 'In this way the history, or one's memory of the history, can be influenced by the news, especially when the audience does not have relevant knowledge and experience of their own on which they can rely.'

The same effect can be seen when we look at the news coverage in the build up to the war in Iraq. In an attempt to justify the war, the US and British governments made claims, through the news media, that Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) could be 'ready within 45 minutes of an order to use them'. According to a British dossier dated September 2002, 'Iraq's military forces are able to use chemical and biological weapons, with command, control and logistical arrangements in place. The Iraqi military are able to deploy these weapons within 45 minutes of a decision to do so' (British Government, 2002: 17). Although these claims later turned out to be false (Rampton and Stauber, 2003), the western news media gave them prominent coverage, thus strongly influencing public opinion in favour of an attack against Iraq. *The New York Times* later recognized this attitude and apologized for its one-sided news coverage in the build-up to the Iraq war. Ombudsman Daniel Okrent (2004) states that the newspaper 'fell for misinformation', and concluded that 'the failure was not individual, but institutional'. The lack of dissenting voices is especially striking, making such effects on the public possible. Bennett et al. (2007) explain the lack of criticism by the press by a lack of criticism from the opposition. They conclude that the media do not publish 'opposing stories unless sources with power in government choose to tell them' (Bennett et al., 2007: 33). In other words, the press needs a political environment that will provide a counterargument to challenge the government, instead of going after opposing voices themselves. With a lack of opposition therefore, media are more vulnerable to tunnel vision.

Towards a Journalism of Accountability

With respect to a tendency towards too much journalism of activism, prudence is needed. The media have an important role in our society. Journalists can influence the public debate about issues through their coverage. As we have seen, journalism of attachment can create an atmosphere around a certain issue, in which a socially or politically accepted opinion becomes the dominant framework and in which the issue is perceived in such a way that it overrules the journalistic practice of balance and neutrality. Such situations, either in an authoritarian system or in a western democracy lead to tunnel vision with all the possible consequences for the audience.

Journalism of activism is especially dangerous the moment all journalists adhere to the same cause. Therefore, media organizations should strive for pluriformity among journalists, in order to guarantee a range of opinions, by a continuous dialogue between desk editors and correspondents, in order to provide the public with the most balanced picture possible of the situation at hand. Also, investigations afterwards about the quality of the news provided by the newspapers, such as the research conducted by *de Volkskrant* (Klaassen and Klein, 2002), are invaluable, since they might point out how mechanisms among journalists function during conflict coverage, out of which lessons can be learned for future situations. As Glasser and Ettema (2008) argue, the aim of ethics in journalism boils down to accountability. There must be a willingness to discuss articulately and deliberate thoughtfully about the dilemmas that journalists encounter while covering world events and to publicly justify the choices they make. Journalists should step down from the throne of the masters of the information and acknowledge the fact that they might be the object of manipulation in certain conflicts or cannot give a full picture, but nevertheless provide the public with the information they were able to get. Some examples of such practice have been seen in the news coverage during the Gaza conflict. Journalists from both the public and commercial news programmes in the Netherlands admitted that it was difficult to get a full picture of the conflict, that objective sources were difficult to find and therefore that one should be prudent with the information they were about to give. Such journalistic practice is a glimpse of what is needed on a much wider scale in order to provide the public with a more complete picture of the complexities in such situations and prevent a stereotyped, simplified picture that might be spread to the general public and lead to tunnel vision as we have seen in the case of Bosnia and Iraq.

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