

While many journalists would certainly be able to imagine what work could be like if reporting in foreign countries – and even in hostile environments -- most people would not. The news reports we hear or read so casually often are the stuff of movies: gathering info at great peril, deal-making, questionable diplomacy, difficult work conditions, etc.

This course investigates the unique world of international journalism so that students have a greater appreciation for global newsgathering, and so that some may pursue work in that field.

Your taking this course is especially timely, given the wave of change sweeping across the Middle East. You have multiple weeks of news involving Egypt, Lybia, Iran and other countries and provided by brave and diligent reporters from which to consider and on which to comment.

Things have changed since I started as a journalist 26 years ago. While the media did certainly cover international news, it was quite limited. In fact, I learned a term in college that reflected a general indifference to most news abroad...

Afghanistanism

The definition of that is “stories about distant places that editors dismiss as irrelevant,” according to Hamilton (2009), who adds that the word is now “grimly ironic.”

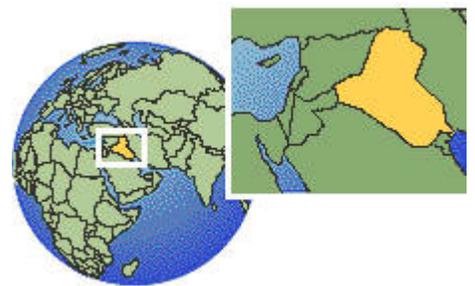


As you now know, news from Afghanistan in the past two decades has forever distinguished the relevance of that part of the world. We now realize – especially due to technology and global impact of one (even) isolated event on many parts of the rest of the globe.

The world's focus on Afghanistan started with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan for 10 years starting in 1979. Since then, Afghanistan has again surfaced in the 21st century as a place where Islamic extremists are trained to attack the U.S. to such a degree that America invaded that country in 2001 (and continues to this day) to put an end to the terrorist training camps. All of that has made me realize no part of the globe is truly an unlikely place to cover.

My “Afghanistan” was Iraq

My own short stint into work as a foreign correspondent was spent as a chronicler of events surrounding a fact-finding mission to Iraq a year ago. Today, I work exclusively in public relations, but I am trained as a journalist – having put in 10-plus years with daily newspapers. It's this combination that interested the Sponsor Iraqi Children Foundation, which sponsored the trip to Iraq.



The organization that seeks to improve the plight of 2.5 million under-served orphans in Iraq wanted me to capture the trip in words and photos. While our textbook shares many other and better stories of global reporters, I thought I would offer mine too, because as Owen states: “First-person reporting

is fundamental to international journalism” (p. 1).



I got a taste of what it is like to gather news in another country through that assignment. I also got the chance to work with journalists working in Baghdad, the capital. I helped them interview our delegation’s spokespeople [photo at left] and lent my services to answer any additional questions they had.

I remember working with a Reuters reporter stationed in Iraq who insisted that the story of our mission was a priority for him, but his timing was out of sync with the timing of our visit. I went ahead and answered his questions about this fact-finding trip and supplying him with additional information in light of his scheduling conflict. This included the contact information for our chief spokesman so he could set up an interview when his time permitted.

We did garner some coverage. Al Jazeera and other news agencies showed up for one of the

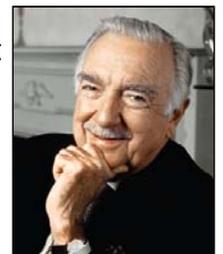


two press conferences we held. The last one was set to occur in the office of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki [photo at right]. Since he was going to cite his support for the sake of Iraqi orphans, the media wanted to be present.

What I learned

First, I learned from that experience that long-distance news gathering by poorly connected reporters (like myself working in Iraq) could not begin to get reliable news. Every agency needs correspondents or freelance reporters who serve in the country or region. Obviously, these journalists must be fluent in the language. And ideally, they become integrated with the official and unofficial stakeholders there.

This arrangement also suggests that saving the big stories for TV anchors is also not ideal. Surprisingly, popular anchor Walter Cronkite agrees. He labeled the term “Bigfooting,” (Cronkite, 1996, p. 356) when the anchor person “parachutes in” to a foreign country in a way that overshadows the work of local correspondents.



“The peripatetic anchor is no substitute ... for a resident correspondent who knows the ins and outs of local politics and has a long list of sources he knows he can trust. ... The full-time network correspondent, supported by a strong bureau, also has the advantage of detailed knowledge that gives him a sixth sense when stories are about to break – an advantage no distant newsman is likely to have” (Cronkite, p. 357).



Another good reason for locally-based reporters is the “fear factor.” All humans and all organizations are rightfully guarded when it comes to a “foreign” person making a lot of solicitous questions. Well-credentialed and respected reporters who live and work in the

country obviously is the ideal. “Local correspondents are vital to getting the story right” (Schlesinger, 2009, p. 30).

Even then, there are pros and cons to using local or outside reporters. “Local correspondents will tend to have much more detailed knowledge of the history, background, local significance and nuances of story, but they may not have an understanding of its relevance to other countries or regions, or the world, depending on their experience,” said Brendan O’Malley, reporter with University World News, a global online news service.



“We send our own journalists to major international stories around the world,” said Lindy Mtongana, news anchor for E News Channel, the only independent TV news broadcaster in South Africa. “In the past year, we have sent reporters to Haiti, Afghanistan, England, Thailand and the USA. This seems to have worked well for us as our viewers tend to enjoy the sense of familiarity in seeing a face they know, giving them the news from other parts of the world.”



Other challenges

All journalists, and especially those on foreign turf, are required today to make sense out of the extensive and complex information that flows so freely in our high-tech world today.

In Baghdad, it became evident very early that they are competing forces at work that can easily obscure any effort for producing insightful news coverage. Not only are their multiple voices that want to be heard, but there are “misinformation” efforts and official interests and sabotaging efforts that make newsgathering difficult.

News volume is also a key challenge. In foreign situations, and certainly under war zone circumstances, determination of news value is quite difficult. The agencies themselves must sort out whether news is pertinent for someone in the U.S. or Australia or Canada or Israel or Europe.

Advances in technology – while a positive development – has only made this challenge and others more pronounced.

According to Smith, “The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have pushed media skills into the Middle East, and media non-governmental organizations have been funding the development of these skills internationally” (Smith, 2009, p. 70).



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