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Media in conflict: the new reality not yet understood

War on TV: the speed of change in technology has been breathtaking.

THE TRADITIONAL ASSUMPTIONS of the relationship between the media, humanitarian organizations and all others involved in conflict and emergencies are fast becoming outdated and even irrelevant.

This means that assumptions about accountability are similarly outdated. As a result, mind-sets will have to change – or at least be modified – swiftly. Institutional understanding of the "media" dynamic has to a large extent become frozen in these old assumptions instead of rapidly adapting to the new realities that are driven by the new, cheap, lightweight capability of information technology to observe, record and bear witness from the field.

The new witnesses

Most significantly, the bearing of witness in crises can now often be done not just by journalists but by a whole new cadre of impromptu information "doers". They are the new mediums, and they are presenting new challenges that are barely acknowledged, let alone considered. Many of these new information doers from conflict situations can now be amateurs

with little or no training in the principles of good journalism – namely, balance, impartiality and accuracy. A growing number are motivated advocates or partial campaigners who have found low-cost, low-tech but highly effective ways firstly to record and then to distribute their information and views in near real time.

This massive proliferation of new information gatherers and publication/transmission outlets is challenging and bypassing the traditional definition of the media. Their work can efficiently seize the information high ground in an emergency, circumvent the traditional media and thereby have a profound impact that catches many unawares.

Less checks and balances

Crucially, the new transmission platforms – especially websites fed with information from the field, chat forums and mobile phones – have begun both to bypass and challenge the layered filtering and editing processes of the established broadcast and publishing news mediums. An increasing number of them may be subject to no

editorial scrutiny or standards. By way of both text and video on internet websites and other forms of distribution they are steadily finding ways to seize the information initiative from the traditional media. Often, though not always, they use questionable but enticing misrepresentations, exaggerations or polemics.

Indeed, the growing evidence is that their often unfiltered, wild-card content can make waves just as dramatically as the traditional radio, TV or newspaper platforms. Sometimes the impact can be even greater, with unpredictable consequences. The potential for distortion and/or misrepresentation is clear.

Significantly, they have been taking with them willing information receivers – especially from the less trusting younger generation. These audiences are no longer prepared to accept automatically and passively the reporting perspective of long established media brands, many of whom are considered by the new information doers to have a commercial and political agenda that either distorts or inadequately represents the core message they expect to be transmitted from a crisis. The radical

Middle East website "Electronic Intifada" states unequivocally on its homepage that it "will equip you to challenge myth, distortion, and spin in the media in an informed way, enabling you to effect positive changes in media coverage of the Palestinians and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict".

A combination of this head-on challenge and the inexorable fragmenting of audiences highlights the growing signs that established media brands will eventually be weakened and their traditional influence undermined.

Recognizing the new developments

In summary, the media in conflict, crisis and emergency are no longer just what most believe them to be – the traditional news and information outlets of radio, newspapers and TV. As the old media matrix fractures and fragments at an extraordinarily rapid rate, many players in crisis have yet to embrace and confront these new realities.

The trend is not yet overwhelming, but in a matter of months it has been

established. As a result, its impact in crises is growing faster than many with the levers of power in government or public influence in the established media care to accept or admit.

Likewise, while the outlines of the new trend are clear, the nature and extent of the new information doers has yet to be fully identified, especially on the institutional media radar screens and by those involved in crisis management. But in the interests of preserving an acceptable level of integrity and credibility for information in crises they will have to be. And fast.

So, the role of the media in crisis is still being perceived through an understandable but outdated prism. This is hardly surprising, however, and no blame should be apportioned. The speed of change in both technology and information transparency since early 2001 has been exponential and breathtaking. Even major media organizations, along with government intelligence processing agencies assumed to be the best equipped and funded to cope, have been left floundering and gasping at the speed of developments.

The new realities are creating a formidable struggle to adapt information systems and work practices, not just in news rooms but also within governments, diplomacy and the military. NGOs must also confront this. Embracing the new media dynamic in crises has been shown to be a belated, painful process of catch-up that is usually well behind the curve of change.

Thus, what this author long ago warned would be a "tyranny of real time"[1] has now arrived with a vengeance. By its very nature, the new, cheap real-time technology is forcing the ditching of filtering and editing media processes in the interests of immediacy and real-time impact. But that can lead to increasingly imperfect and flawed information.

As a result the integrity, accuracy and balance of high profile information that seizes the high ground in moments of crisis and tension is often – though not always – not quite what it seems. Indeed, in this new proliferation of mediums

1 N. Gowing, *Real-Time Television Coverage of Armed Conflicts and Diplomatic Crises: Does it Pressure or Distort Foreign Policy Decisions?*, Joan Shorenstein Barone Center, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University, 1994.

and data generators, which piece of information is credible? Once information is out in the public domain, unfiltered and uncorroborated, yet seizing the initiative, how can it be checked and verified?

Even more important, as information timelines become relentlessly compressed, which new and partial information doer with a laptop computer, digital camera and mobile uplink capability in a crisis zone might be knowingly trying to manipulate or deceive in a time of crisis? In their jungles or mountain hideouts, the warlords, warriors and guerrilla groups can now be as well equipped and IT savvy as both the traditional media and the advocacy groups with their PC and young webmaster in a city office.

And the established media?

The overall implications for the accountability of the established media must now be assumed to have the potential to become sweeping.

For a start, no longer will they be viewed obediently as the high priests of what is expected to be the most reliable information. Their versions can now be challenged explicitly, contemporaneously and credibly by other information doers.

These information doers also have the ability to create a rival, alternative agenda of issues and coverage to expose what some view as the usually narrow, often superficial agenda of traditional media outlets with their constraint of ever-shorter column inches or finite amounts of airtime for news and analysis.

Already some of the new information doers are showing how effectively they can both expose and challenge the inherent

editorial shortcomings of traditional media in conflict. As with the globalization street protests in Genoa, Gothenburg, Prague, Davos, Seattle and elsewhere, it could be said that the fundamental challenge to an existing status quo has been masked by the smoke and noise of a handful of dramatic, violent events. Before the terrorist outrages of 11 September in the United States, a fundamental upheaval was already under way, changing things faster than traditional thinkers had even begun to realize.

More exposure for world suffering?

There is, however, a positive upside for humanitarians who struggle to focus international attention on what they fear are victims and crises that are forgotten or ignored. They may suspect bias, propaganda and the power of commercial interests in some of the traditional media. Yet the recent evidence shows that the combination of the new, cheap, lightweight technology and the proliferation of transmission platforms means there is a far greater chance of war and the suffering of victims being both recorded and exposed, even if it is not to a mass media market. The swift and proliferating presence of MiniM and TV satellite uplinks in Northern Afghanistan within days of the 11 September outrages is partial proof of this.

Although critics complain that the prime time TV news programmes and main broadsheet newspapers appear to have abandoned coverage of all but the most dramatic humanitarian crises, the world has the chance to know much more about conflict than it ever did. By way of one medium or another, there is more coverage in text and video of more

A UNHCR spokesperson is interviewed by the BBC over satellite phone as Rwandan refugees return home.

conflicts and emergencies from more parts of the world than ever before. The IRIN and Alert Net websites[2] are but one vivid confirmation of this.

There is also the proliferation of young, sometimes callow freelancers who aspire to greater things in the media and want to take risks to bear witness to war and humanitarian crises, even if their earnings are minimal.

Some must be admired for the brilliance of the revelatory work that they have taken big risks for. Others have shown themselves to be inept and foolhardy, and thereby a liability to any media organization they claim to be working for.

Tragically, but inevitably, a handful of both the brilliant and inept have paid

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with their lives. Eight highly respected international journalists died in Afghanistan during three incidents involving both robbery and combat. From what we know, more journalists were killed in the first months of the hunt for Osama Bin Laden and al Qaeda than soldiers in the US-led forces. But this new breed of risk-takers continues to be willing to cross the lines into zones of conflict and emergencies to record suffering and the reasons for it where many would think twice and refuse.

Despite intense danger for humanitarian workers and a Russian bounty for anyone found with even a tiny camera and satellite uplink, the horrors of Chechnya have been exposed piecemeal by a small, determined band of defiant information doers. In late 1999 the Russian journalist Andre Babitsky of Radio Liberty was eventually detained by the Russians as a spy, handed over to Chechen guerrillas in exchange for Russian soldiers, according to some sources, and then narrowly escaped death.

Miguel Gil Moreno, an APTN cameraman, also spent four weeks living with the victims of Grozny and the Chechen

mountains in late December 1999 and early 2000. Uniquely, and at great risk, he recorded on his video camera the Stalingrad-like conditions of the capital, along with the slaughter of both Chechen civilians and Russian troops. On the morning he returned to Britain, he told me in the BBC World studio that Chechnya had been "the most frightening time of my life" but "I had to do it".

Gil Moreno had done the same at great risk in many conflicts, including over many years in the Balkans. His vivid bearing of witness brought the horror to world TV screens and won him many awards. In May 2000 he was killed in an ambush in Sierra Leone with the Reuter correspondent Kurt Schork, a revered veteran of the Balkans since Croatia and Sarajevo in the early 1990s.

These are just three examples of great journalistic distinction in this new era of technology in conflict. They are proof of a determination to report horrors. Like scores of others, they were there and they bore witness, which must always remain the primary journalistic aim in a humanitarian crisis.

Bias or truth?

As surely as night follows day, there will always be accusations of media bias, often due to assumed commercial pressures or business interests of some media organizations. Without doubt, some concerns will be justified in some parts of the world. However, the reality about bias and truth is far more complex.

It is best illustrated by what happened to a commercial risk-taking media enterprise like the formerly independent Russian TV station NTV. In late 1999 – when it was still an independent media voice – NTV defied the Kremlin by dispatching brave Russian video journalists into Chechnya to reveal both the appalling fighting and the high, but still secret, casualty rate among Russian troops.

NTV's nightly coverage enraged Russia's political leaders. It exposed the Kremlin's deceit, the rising death toll among Russian soldiers and the dreadful human suffering in one of Russia's own

2 www.reliefweb.int/IRIN/ and www.alertnet.org

Emotions run high as Palestinian mothers grieve for their lost sons. Intifada-2 has underscored how real-time reporting can show unfolding incidents through contradictory prisms.

republics. NTV's motives for the coverage were clearly both commercial and journalistic, yet humanitarian suffering was exposed vividly.

But the policy carried a high price. Subsequently the Kremlin targeted NTV, engineered a commercial "takeover", forced the station's leading figures into exile and sacked the main editorial staff and on-air presenters. This was the commercial and editorial price for journalistic risk-taking and bearing of witness in war. It forced the Russian government to try and turn the screw even more decisively and ruthlessly on those journalists, information doers and diminishing number of media organizations who continued to try and defy the Kremlin's political determination.

In the new world of 24-hour channels on TV, radio and websites, the cacophony of accusations of media bias will always grow, especially from the participants in a crisis. But this is the price of the new information transparency in zones of conflict.

The warring factions – whether the government, insurgents or street protesters – now monitor the 24-hour output of most news stations. As Intifada-2 in the Middle East has shown, real-time reporting is uncomfortable for all sides because they see or hear unfolding incidents immediately through contradictory prisms during the heat of conflict. In different ways, each views factual reporting – including the inevitable imperfections in real time – as either a betrayal or tactical threat to their military operations.

The media in war today

As a result, there is often deep hostility and resentment towards the media, without acceptance or understanding of the new real-time realities. This has now led to a new insidious trend. The growing evidence being gathered from news organizations by the International Press Institute is that this is exposing camera operators and information doers on the ground to the new threat of being actively targeted by warring factions, including by government forces under orders to "eliminate and neutralize" those who bear witness to their military operations.

Overall, many will readily conclude that the media as traditionally perceived are in retreat in humanitarian crises. However, there are good reasons to confirm that the opposite is the case, albeit with a fast-changing matrix of media operators and new on-the-ground realities. It is nevertheless imperative that these realities are embraced and confronted.
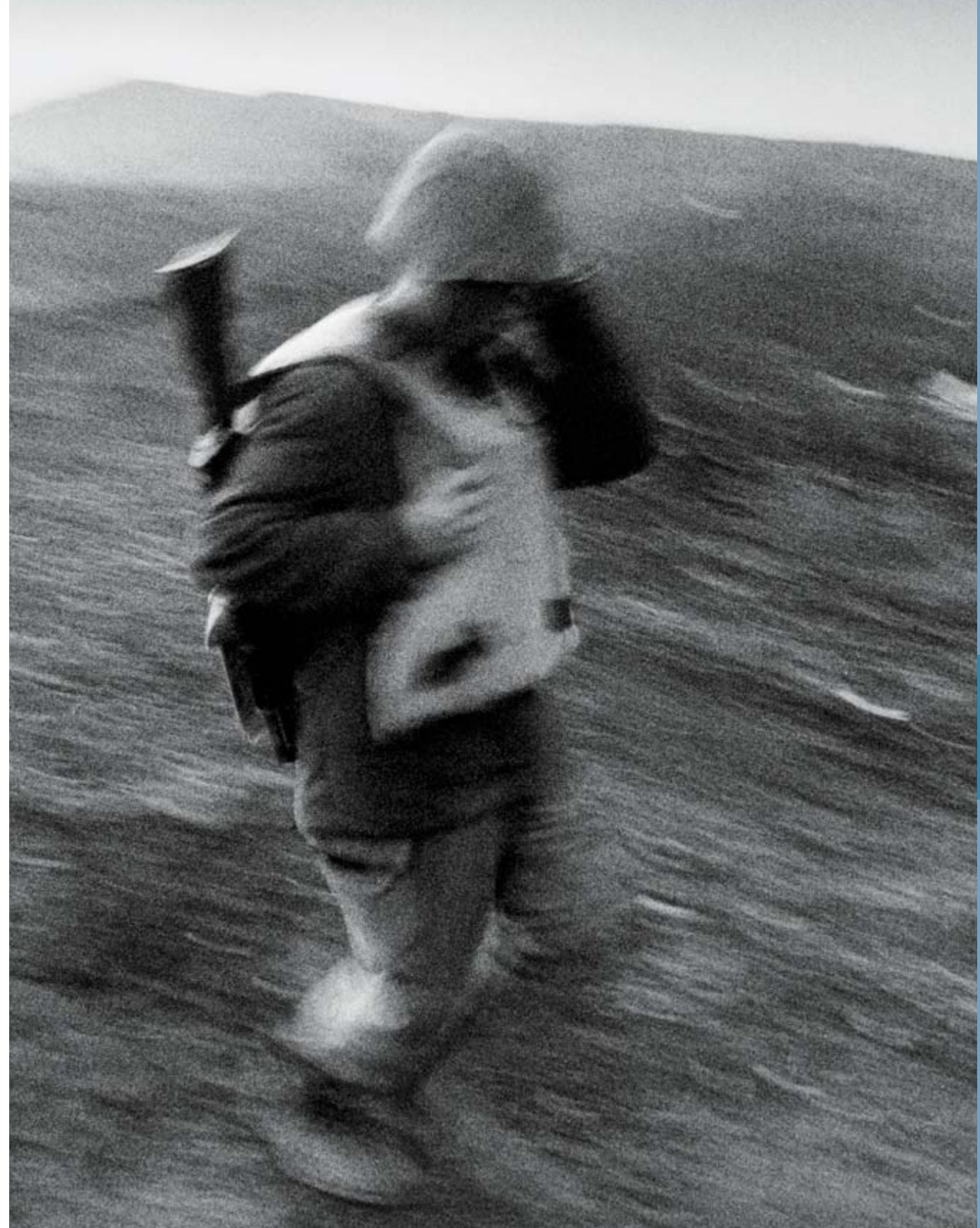
A major concern is the effect of real-time reporting on accountability. The very immediacy of such reporting increases the expectations and assumptions of accuracy. Yet the reality can be just the opposite, with impressions and rumours abounding. When the two aircraft were videoed flying into the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, the images told us what had happened, but not why. Was it a massive air traffic control failure? Pilot error? A catastrophic on-board failure? Or the more unthinkable possibilities – at that stage – of hijacking and terrorism?

Inevitably, media anchors and correspondents began speculating. They can be accused of making the wrong assumptions and held to account for such inaccuracies. However, the new inherent tension of real-time reporting is precisely that the *fact* of an incident is often known and reported well before an accurate *explanation* for what has taken place.

Moreover, the recent recession and the collapse in advertising have highlighted the massive commercial pressures on media companies, both large and small. Reporting excellence since 11 September has been put under immense strain because good journalism costs money. Both newspapers and commercially-funded broadcasting media have been forced to bleed cash in order to fight for readership, while advertising income has slumped. Newspapers have become thinner and their very survival in the medium to long term has been put in question as, more than ever, the profit and loss accounts have failed to balance. ■

Dangerously close: following the war in Chechnya.