

# 10. Conflict reporting: Emotional attachment, a sense of morality and reporting objectively

## ABSTRACT

This article explores how emotional attachment and a sense of morality often drive journalists to produce great work in areas of conflict, particularly those solo video journalists who produce long format current affairs. But it also questions if a sense of engagement can impede journalist's ability to report objectively? And how relevant is this ideal today? Former BBC war correspondent Martin Bell changed his view on objectivity after covering the Balkans War. He advocated for a journalism of attachment especially in war zones and amid human suffering. There are some Australian video journalists whose sense of engagement has defined outstanding bodies of work. However, some practices in the field often defy concepts of impartiality. Issues of, if, or when, to put down the camera and give assistance; or how to remain fair and honest to the story while gaining the long term trust of sources, sometimes challenges journalists.

Keywords: conflict reporting, fairness, honesty, morality, objectivity

JANINE COHEN

*University of Technology, Sydney*

WHEN objectivity in the media was first conceived there was no such thing as television, let alone current affairs reporting and investigative journalism. Objectivity was first devised as a formula for news reporting but the world of journalism today is much more diverse and complex. Much of the ethical discussion has been in the context of brief news and current affairs reporting. I draw on my own experience as a producer and reporter to explore some of the dilemmas and different ways of thinking about detachment and fairness in long format television reporting.

In his review of how ideas of objectivity are linked to the history of journalism, Stephen Ward traces its application to journalism from the very first

## REPORTING WARS

news journals of the seventeenth century Europe to the 21st Century. Ward maintains that today 'a reformed objectivity must be an inventive and relevant response to the changing rhetorical relationship between journalists and their audiences' (Ward 2004, p.163). In other words he accepts that journalistic ethics is always in a state of being re-invented to reflect the changing social landscape. So doctrines a century ago do not entirely reflect what is happening technologically and philosophically in society today.

In keeping with this, Australian academic Ian Richards states there is widespread recognition among journalists today that the traditional notion of objectivity that applied in the past is impossible to achieve and is no longer relevant (Richards, 2005, p. 40). Since the 1970s, journalism studies academics have debunked claims that objectivity is possible in reporting by demonstrating structural bias in coverage of issues through the selection of sources and framing. Richards proposes that a better test of objectivity is the one that the Australian Media Arts Alliance demands of its members that is, honesty, fairness, independence and respect for the rights of others. Stephen Knowlton argues that truth is still journalism's most important goal.

...objectivity does not demand that reporters treat all sides of a story equally. On the contrary, it requires that they exercise their best and most honest judgment and then report stories from there, not from the dead centre. (Knowlton, 1997, p. 41)

Fairfax political reporter Michelle Grattan proposes that journalists should think in terms of fairness and a commitment to pluralism and excellence in the trade. This means not being swayed by your own personal likes and dislikes of individuals (Richards, 2005, p. 29). Critics have often argued that journalists are incapable of this. For example, if you are Jewish you could not report impartially on the Arab situation. This has certainly not been the experience of Jewish journalist Amira Hass who for many years has lived in the Arab occupied states, reporting on their daily struggles, often with great insight and compassion (Hass, 1966). Most journalists at some stage report on an issue that they have a firm opinion on or belief in; but they are capable of—in fact ethically bound—to put their own personal prejudices aside. Richards believes the profession is more than capable of this.

It is generally assumed that journalists are capable of knowing their personal prejudices and allowing for them in their work (Richards, 2005, p. 40).

I would argue that journalism is not a science and cannot be objective in the same systematic sense because it relies on value judgements especially in long format television current affairs. By the nature of the 'grab' that is shown or the 'sequence' that is filmed to introduce people, there is a predisposed bias. Often in television it is driven by appearance and the quality of the delivery of a grab rather than who said it. Who to interview and what to film in a current affairs story is by its nature not an impartial choice. But there has to be choices made all along the production process, although this doesn't mean the end result is not a fair account. At some point too, the individual journalist will have to succumb to the choice or decision making of others, primarily executive producers, in house lawyers or editors when they start to prepare their script. Although this dilutes the journalist's influence in the production process they are still key deciders in what material is broadcast. Their final influence is often determined by how experienced they are. A senior journalist who has been working in long format current affairs or documentaries will need less direction from a producer than someone new to the craft.

In my experience often the quality of the vision or a particular shot can help drive the narrative. This may be something the journalist in the field is at the time unaware of. It is only when he or she returns to the office to view their raw material and write their script that they decide what will be featured. The argument about what constitutes fact, what is an impression and what is truth is sometimes blurred by the need for ritualistic balance. The onus to be fair sometimes gives weight to those detractors whose arguments are not bedded in fact. This is classically seen with the current climate change debate in Australia. Sceptics are often given a voice, despite the fact they have little credibility. Many of their claims have never been peer-reviewed but their assumptions are included in stories on climate change for 'balance.' Equally, in long format reporting of overseas conflicts, air time may be given to someone who the journalist suspects is delivering not the facts, but propaganda, but for 'balance' includes them in their report. The danger, of course, for journalists is the risk of delivering something that is not based in fact. It is for this reason that I agree with William Rivers and Cleve Mathews who maintain that mechanical objectivity results in simplistic reporting. They argue that mechanical objectivity treats all opinions as equal when they are not. Some opinions come from understanding, some from ignorant reaction: the constraints of tradition do not always allow the reporter to indicate which is valid and which is not. (Mathews & William, 1988, pp. 70-71)

## REPORTING WARS

A form of mechanical reporting was what sustained radio journalist Pierre Vicary when he covered the Balkans conflicts for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation for almost 10 years. Reflecting on his time there, Vicary stated:

I drew back into the lessons of detachment and objectivity I'd learnt as a young journalist. Not because I was fearful of appearing partisan, but simply in order to keep going. It was a form of sleep walking, and I've been doing it ever since. Whether it's the gaunt prisoners in Serbia camps in north-western Bosnia, or civilians hunting for water in Sarajevo, or columns of people trudging along muddy roads from towns and villages that have been 'ethnically cleansed', the only self-protection for the reporter is detachment, a form of anaesthetic. (Hamish, 1994, p. 2)

I would argue that after seeing so much death, suffering and violence, Vicary lacked the capacity to become engaged in the stories he was covering. The correspondent may have been suffering from what academic Keith Tester calls compassion fatigue—when a journalist is left exhausted and tired by those reports and ceasing to think that anything at all can be done to help (Tester, 2001, p. 13). It is doubtful that Vicary's 'lessons of detachment and objectivity' would have served his journalism well. It is difficult to see how 'sleep walking' through an assignment would produce great work.

### **Morally and engaged reporting**

In contrast to Vicary, former BBC reporter Martin Bell, returned from reporting the Balkans in the mid-1990s, called for a morally serious and engaged form of reporting which he called journalism of attachment (Tester, 2001, p. 10). What Bell had witnessed in the Balkans made him critically review his practices in the field. Prior to the Balkans War, Bell, like Vicary, moved dispassionately from war zone to war zone thinking he was doing his job to the best of his ability by remaining removed from his subjects. But the atrocities and killings Bell witnessed in the Balkans changed all that. He advocated, especially in war zones and amid human suffering, for something that was not neutral or mechanical:

[A] journalism that cares as well as knows; that is aware of its responsibilities; that will not stand neutrally between good and evil, right and wrong, the victim and the oppressor. (Tester, 2001, p. 10)

Australian video journalist Matthew Carney practises Bell's journalism of attachment and makes no apologies for it. Carney agrees with Bell that this journalism can be in some sense a moral enterprise.

If we define moral enterprise as reporting the suffering of civilians I think that is valid but you have to be very careful where you are placing your moral enterprise. You don't want to provide fuel for political causes. (Carney, 2009)

It is for this reason that Carney is critical of media organisations that get embedded with some defence forces like the US Army in Iraq and rely only on one source. He argues some US television networks do this because it is easy and convenient—they can just fly in and fly out, rely on official US propaganda, and never bother to return to the scene to gather other facts or check with other sources.

Carney maintains it is about finding the right balance between being engaged with your sources and being balanced and fair. Carney argues that he could not adopt Vicary's approach to the job because he could not make the right judgments about the story if his sensitivity was absent or if he was 'sleep walking' through it. He suggested that perhaps Vicary was able to manage simply because he was 'pumping out facts' for news bulletins. Carney argues it is a very different situation for journalists reporting for long format current affairs. Long format current affairs journalists, unlike news reporters, often spend weeks with their sources filming and developing trust so that their interviewees feel comfortable on camera and safe to tell their story. Gilles Gauthier, a big proponent of objectivity in news reporting, acknowledges that this notion was never meant to apply to investigative reporting (Gauthier, 1993).

Video journalists like Carney and fellow Australian Mark Davis, are a special breed of journalists who often risk their lives to expose miscarriages of justice and breaches of human rights. Their constant witnessing of atrocities and killings engages them more deeply with the victims. I would argue this is not necessarily a bad thing as it can drive them on to report the truth and expose injustices, often at great risk to themselves. To that end, Stephen Ward argues that pragmatic objectivity does not require detachment from all values and perspectives. 'Pragmatic objectivity is acutely aware of and therefore allows for, human failings; it wears a human face' (Ward, 2004, p. 264). Matt Carney reported with 'pragmatic objectivity' from the Middle East for

four years and his stories were broadcast all over the world, including the US, UK, Germany, and Australia. He won many prestigious international media awards and I interviewed him in August 2009 about his experiences. Carney is a journalist who has covered conflicts abroad with passion and emotional attachment, but he maintains that he has also remained professional, honest and fair.

It was this sense of engagement that drove Carney's coverage of the Jenin massacre on the West Bank in April 2002. Carney decided he did not want to rely on official propaganda from the Israel Defence Force (IDF) about the situation in Jenin because it was not an independent account, and he suspected it was not entirely accurate. The IDF had attacked the civilian township because it alleged there were terrorists occupying it. Unlike the great majority of the international media, Carney chose not to rely on the IDF version of the facts and go to the occupied territories in Ramallah, the Palestine capital on the West Bank, to see for himself where the truth lay.

Carney had to find a way around the Israeli checkpoints. It took him three days and many attempts before he arrived in Jenin and what he found was 'so horrendous, so shocking', a complete contrast to IDF reports. It was clear 'there had been a scorched earth policy' towards the Palestinians. Israel had bulldozed dozens of houses full of innocent civilians. Carney said witnessing this made him passionate about reporting the truth, more vigilant about bearing witness particularly in light of the fact that accounts by the IDF had not been accurate. Having witnessed such devastation, Carney said he was mindful of the need to report the truth. He said this did not require him to give equal time to the IDF, but it did require him to use his best judgement to be fair. At one point, Carney filmed a family in Jenin pulling their daughter's body parts out of the rubble. Carney said he was faced with a choice: to stop filming and help, or continue documenting the tragic event. He said he kept filming and did not offer assistance because there were others around who could help and he thought the most important thing he could do was show this horrible scene to the world—to bear witness.

But when to stop filming and give aid to people in distress is always problematic. There are no clear rules. No professional guidelines. Often it is a very personal decision taken by the individual journalist. In January 2004, Carney was in Iraq following and filming the Iraqi National Security Advisor, Mowaffak Rubaie. Carney was about to find out what it was like to be 'torn

between objectivity and human attachment' as academic Keith Tester describes it (Tester, 2001, p. 25). Rubaie had been the subject of multiple assassination attempts. Carney knew travelling with this official was dangerous but was comforted by the fact they were travelling with a dozen bodyguards in three bullet proof vehicles. He filmed all day with the Iraqi advisor and the last stop was to a sympathetic organisation, the Iraqi Free Prisoners' Association. They left the safety of the vehicle and Carney started filming immediately. As they walked through an entrance there was a spray of bullets. The bodyguard in front of him went down but Carney continued to film and offered no assistance. Carney said he didn't speak Arabic and the other bodyguards were tending to the man that was injured. Carney was scared, but he said what stopped him from panicking and kept him focused was concentrating on getting the images through the view finder of the camera. Again, he thought his primary role was to bear witness.

What happened next demonstrated how quickly the line of involvement for journalists can change, not only from story to story, but from minute to minute on the same story. The national security advisor was only metres from his vehicle and Carney was filming him when a second bodyguard, one who previously had helped shepherd Carney, collapsed. He had been shot in the leg. Rather than film the distressed man, Carney stopped filming and helped pick the man up and get him back to safety of their vehicle. Carney believed helping the bodyguard was his fundamental response as a human being.

If I defined that experience solely through the prism of journalistic objectivity or impartiality I wouldn't have done it, I would have kept filming; but if someone has been protecting you all day and has been putting their life at risk to protect yours, in some small way you repay the favour. (Carney, 2009)

Carney maintained that he had filmed the necessary 'sequences' and had obtained good coverage. Unlike when the first bodyguard was hit, he also felt this time he was in a position to help. Carney said the point of the story is these ethical/moral dilemmas never present themselves as a simple choice. 'You are never in a situation where the perimeters are defined.' If we take the rigid orthodox approach that a journalist should never get involved, never put down the camera to help, then you could argue that Carney failed in his duty as a journalist by assisting the bodyguard. But as any journalist who has

worked in areas of conflict knows, it is not that simple. Carney said he would find it difficult to continue if it meant showing callous indifference and shirking his responsibilities as a human being.

### **Bearing witness or humanity?**

A controversial photograph published in *The New York Times* of a vulture in a field lurking near a dying Sudanese baby exemplifies the debate about when to bear witness and when to intercede. After it was published in 1993, the photograph by Ken Carter won a Pulitzer Prize; but it also attracted criticism. *The Petersburg Times* in Florida said: 'The man adjusting his lens to take just the right frame of her suffering might just as well be a predator, another vulture at the scene.' (Macleod, 2001) *Time* magazine reported that some questioned why Carter did not help the baby (Macleod, 2001). I was part of a group of postgraduate journalism students at the University of Technology, Sydney, in 2009 who was shown the photograph and asked if they would take the photograph or save the baby. The majority, most of whom were junior journalists, indicated that they would have taken the photograph. They believed it was a journalist's job to bear witness only. There were two dissenting opinions from mature-aged students, both experienced journalists.

To further explore the dilemma of if, or when, to put down the camera and give aid to your subject, I did a small survey of 10 experienced journalists, most of whom work at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. They included reporters, producers, researchers, and executive producers. I showed them Carter's photograph and asked them to consider only what was in the frame of the photograph. I asked the journalists if they would stand by and film or take a photograph of the scene if there was a real chance that during that time the vulture could attack or take the child away. All but one said they would intervene to pick up the baby first rather than take the photograph. The vast majority surveyed maintained that their duty as human beings overrode their professional obligations. They all believed there would be another photograph almost as good around the concern

One senior reporter said each case has to be judged on its individual merits and recalled once holding a dying baby while doing a report on starving children. She argued there was nothing she could do to help that baby but said she would like to think if she could save the infant in the Kevin Carter photograph she would have. She dismissed the notion that that one photograph



could save a thousand lives by generating publicity and inspiring donations of food and money to help the other starving Sudanese children. One senior editorial executive thought the photograph looked contrived and thought Carter possibly set it up. Despite this, the executive was emphatic that she would intercede on the baby's behalf. Another journalist said she wanted to believe that she would pick up the baby but said the true test could only be measured once you were in the field: temptation for a scoop is sometimes overwhelming. A producer and former camera operator was the only dissenting voice. He initially said he would pick up the child, but when told the picture won a Pulitzer prize, he changed his mind. He said it was well known that vultures only ate carrion and not living things. He said there was still a window where the photograph could be taken. Afterwards he said he would kill the vulture. Most believed that the moral obligation to put down the camera and give assistance, or to stop filming altogether was an individual decision, and one that sometimes outweighs the needs of the occupation. Three months after winning the Pulitzer Prize, Kevin Carter, penniless, and depressed after years of photographing conflict and human atrocity, committed suicide.

#### **'A licence to kill'**

I have a great amount of professional respect for solo video journalist Mark Davis, who has won many prestigious awards for his reporting of conflicts including five Walkley Awards. Like most video journalists he has covered stories where he has been exposed to atrocities and killings that have affected his journalistic judgement. This was clearly the case in his groundbreaking *Four Corners* programme, 'A licence to kill', in 1999 which documented for the first time how the Indonesian military were killing and torturing pro-independence East Timorese civilians. This was despite Jakarta statements to the rest of the world that it would consider independence for East Timor. Davis obtained graphic accounts from families of atrocities committed on their loved ones. This ongoing exposure to brutal killings and accounts of torture deeply affected Davis. He risked his life to bring this story to the world.

During the making of the programme, Davis was filming at a post in a remote village manned by Indonesian military sympathisers who were East Timorese. Three different men asked Davis not to film them because they claimed they would be beaten to death or shot. To this, the journalist replied,

## REPORTING WARS

'I will leave you. I am sorry I didn't realise' (Davis, 1999). Davis, however, did include these men in his report. More than 10 years later he makes no apologies. He argues these scenes were too important to leave out of the programme and that blurring their faces would not disguise their identity. Shortly after it was broadcast, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's then *Media Watch* presenter, Richard Ackland, criticised him for not disguising these men and potentially risking their lives (Ackland, 2000). Davis argues this *Media Watch* episode cost him a Walkley award and detracted from the credibility of the overall story. Ackland maintained it demonstrated the arrogance of journalism.

It could be argued that Davis was motivated, not by arrogance, but by a sense of moral rectitude. He believed the people he exposed at militia posts in his *Four Corners* report did not deserve the same treatment as the civilians who had been tortured or had witnessed the murder of their families. Controversially, his view is that some sources are more deserving of confidentiality than others. A decade later, Davis is unrepentant.

The people that were complaining about not being filmed were militia, they were not innocent villagers. The villagers had fled and had gone to Dili. These guys were manning a militia post where people had been killed, so they aren't quite your innocent poor East Timorese. I mean I didn't want to sink them, but they were militia, they were on the road, they were threatening to kill me. I was there. I saw people killed. I had women that were raped that talked to me. My sense of indignity of course was overflowing and I did have it and I'm not ashamed to say I had it and that story, that *Four Corners* [programme] was as it turned out a critical report at a critical time. (Davis, 2009)

### Conclusion

Both Davis and Carney have enjoyed great access to people in areas of conflict. One of the reasons for this is that unlike a full current affairs crew complete with reporter, producer, camera operator, and sound recordist; these video journalists travel alone. They are less conspicuous and less intimidating, carrying only a small camera. They often can spend more time filming with the 'talent' (talent is an Australian industry term used to describe on camera interviewees) as they only have themselves to consider, but more importantly, they often can develop more intimacy with sources. The one-on-one benefits of dealing with 'talent' or sources should not be undervalued.

In order to get the best interviews they must gain the trust of the people they are interviewing. However, these journalists must also be cognizant of the perils of becoming too close to their sources, allowing this relationship to effect their editorial judgement. One of the disadvantages of not travelling with colleagues is that the solo video journalist does not have a producer or crew to bounce ideas off or to caution them on sensitive ethical issues. It could be argued that this counsel may have benefited Davis while he was reporting in East Timor. Equally, it could be argued that the *Four Corners* executive producer had final say on the programme and approved it for broadcast.

While passion and emotional attachment can drive video journalists in areas of conflict to get the difficult stories against great odds, they need to be vigilant in ensuring it does not adversely affect the integrity of their journalism. They often need to be engaged with their subject but at the same time cognizant of reflecting balance and accessing other sources. This does not mean being mechanically neutral or even impartial. Martin Bell came to believe that the tradition of neutral reporting of armed conflicts did a disservice to the viewers where it was clear that one side was committing atrocities. Clearly, that is also the view of Mark Davis as he demonstrated in his reporting in East Timor. The challenges for video journalists reporting in areas of conflict are immense and often greater than those faced by news reporters. They are mercurial and dependent on many variables including subject, talent, and location. The moral/ethical dilemmas they face never present themselves as simple choices. Sometimes a journalist may feel the need to put the camera down and give aid to those in need. The constant challenge, however, is to bear witness to atrocities and at the same time remain fair and honest in the journalistic narrative. No matter how abhorrent the actions of the perpetrator, the profession should strive for this.

## REPORTING WARS

### References

- Ackland, R. (2000). *Media Watch*, Episode Two, Australian Broadcasting Corporation
- Carney, M. (2009, August 12). Research interview with the author.
- Cohen, J. (2009, October). Survey of 10 Australian Broadcasting Corporation journalists.
- Davis, M. (1999). *Four Corners*: 'A licence to kill'. Australian Broadcasting Corporation.
- Davis, M. (2009, January 21). Transcript of unpublished interview for *Media Watch* Anniversary programme.
- Gauthier, G. (1993). In defence of a supposedly outdated notion: The range of application of journalistic objectivity. *Canadian Journal of Communication*. 18(4). Retrieved on 1 August 2009, from [www.cjc\\_online.ca/index.phpjournal/article/778/68](http://www.cjc_online.ca/index.phpjournal/article/778/68)
- Hass, A. (1996). *Drinking the sea at Gaza*. New York: Henry Holt
- Knowlton, S. (1997). *Moral reasoning for journalists*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publications
- Leith D. (2004). *Bearing witness: The lives of war correspondents and photo-journalists*. Sydney: Random House
- Macleod, S. (2001, June 24). The life and death of Kevin Carter. *Time*, 144(11): 70
- Mathews, C., and Rivers, W. (1988). *Ethics for the media*. New Jersey, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc.
- Richards, I. (2005). *Quagmires and quandaries: Exploring journalism ethics*. Sydney: University of NSW Press Ltd.
- Robertson, H. (1994). *Correspondents reports: Despatches from ABC foreign correspondents 1993-1994*. Sydney: ABC Books,
- Tester, K. (2001). *Compassion morality and the media*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Ward, S (2004). *The invention of journalism ethics*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press

*Janine Cohen is an ABC Four Corners investigative journalist. She was nominated in the coverage of Indigenous affairs category of the 2009 Walkley Awards as part of a four-member team which researched a forensic account of the events that led to an Aboriginal man's death in a prison transport van in Western Australia.*

janine.cohen@abc.net.au

Copyright of Pacific Journalism Review is the property of Auckland University of Technology and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.  
<http://www.aut.ac.nz/depts/commstud/journ/pjrsubs.shtml>