

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

Journalism: A Risky Profession ^[1]

The British news agency Reuters proudly notes its scoops on its journalism training website, such as President Lincoln's assassination in 1865.

As part of its on-line pitch to attract journalism students to its training courses, Reuters states that: "Successful graduates can expect an unrivalled choice of overseas assignments in their careers and swift progression to posts of real responsibility." Just think, exclaims Reuters, "You might run a large news bureau such as Moscow or New York," but if that doesn't suit your fancy, "you might want to be an editorial manager." It fails to caution that in today's world, journalists are encouraged to take survival training courses as well, and for those in TV, the old adage that a picture's worth a thousand words takes on special meaning.

At another journalism training facility, in the Middle East, Professor Abdullah S. Schleifer, at the Adham Center for Television Journalism in Cairo, is calling it a day after 22 years at the facility he founded. In Adham Center News, he laments that teaching broadcast journalism isn't what it used to be. TV correspondents, he says, do so many "live on-camera reports... responding to an immediate event without taking the time to go to the scene and actually do some reporting." He claims that TV reporters do not have time to "sit down and write a script that provides a coherent story... four intelligent hours after an explosive event, and not just an ignorant five minutes after the event."

As an example of what Professor Schleifer does not like about the trend toward more live TV news reporting, I note a story by Maria Elena Fernandez in the Los Angeles Times, that reveals CNN's plans to launch a new three-hour broadcast August 8 featuring wall-to-wall live reports of breaking news from around the world. On the program "Situation Room," anchor Wolf Blitzer will be encircled by a wall of TV monitors featuring CNN correspondents at the scene of stories to report them as they happen -- perhaps before they happen -- with a Reuters-type scoop. Says Wolf Blitzer, "We're not going to compromise on journalism but we're going to take you behind the scenes and let viewers see what we're getting when we're getting it, especially in those critical hours where news is gelling."

The rage for live reports by TV correspondents at the scene of breaking stories can be especially dangerous, as journalists are often positioned precariously close to the action, from which they lead viewers into the unfolding stories "as you can see behind me."

TV news appears to be going over the top with its coverage of breaking live events in its effort to attract viewers. Journalism is already one of the most dangerous professions in the world, and does not need to be made more so.

Can you name the most dangerous country in the world for journalists? Iraq, you say? No, it's the Philippines, with Iraq second, then Colombia, Bangladesh, and Russia next in that order, reports the Committee to Protect Journalists. According to the CPJ, 190 journalists were killed on duty worldwide from January 1, 2000, through May 2, 2005. No murders have been solved

in those five most murderous countries. Most killings are in retaliation to journalists' stories, not from crossfire.

The problem of safety is a popular topic of discussion at professional journalistic gatherings, where experts appear on panels to offer suggestions. Robert Frank, a senior writer at the Wall Street Journal, whose Daniel Pearl was killed by terrorists, provides this commonsense advice to journalists: wait until what appears to be the first wave of conflict is over, and then go in. "The most interesting story is there," after the fact, he told Allison Hoffman, in her article for the South Asian Journalists Association. "The point is not being the first person there, in the most dangerous place, but to find the best analysis or angle through different sources," Frank commented. War reporters are urged to forget about getting exclusives and to "stick together."

In the media research field, NewsLab, provides its hostile coverage survival tips. "Change your reflexes," it advises. "Think of the situation as an unfolding event, not just a story to cover. Terrorists want to take out the first responder, including journalists."

The European Broadcasting Union, which notes on its website that it is the "largest professional association of national broadcasters in the world," has what it calls Hostile Environment Safety Training courses specially designed for TV journalists.

Reporters are taught how to evaluate war zone risks, and are put through "real time situations," where they must work under time pressure while staying alert to danger signs. One problem that reporters face is not realizing how their physical condition may be deteriorating over a period of time, making them less alert and responsive to dangers in stressful situations.

Conditions vary depending on the nature of the conflict, but the challenge is always to remain vigilant and clear-eyed. In Colombia, reporters covering the prolonged armed conflict find themselves unable to leave safe shelter for security reasons for long periods of time. They are taught by the International News Safety Institute how to identify Post-Traumatic Stress, and ways to deal with it.

And so prospective journalism students who read on Reuters training website that they can expect an "unrivaled choice of overseas assignments" may find that, upon further reflection, some locations are not that great.
