

External and Internal Factors Regarding a War Correspondent. A Theoretical Overview for IO and NGO Public Information Officers

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RESUMEN

The environment in which military men, journalists and international and non governmental organizations' (IO-NGO) personnel develop their work during a war or any armed conflict is already definitely more complicate than in the immediate past. That is why for any of those actors is so important to understand the mechanisms that explain how do the other relevant subjects behave in the front line and the rearguard in order to adapt and improve their performances to that changing scenario. This work focus on the specific relations established by journalists and IO and NGO press information officers. The conclusions of this paper are the result of ground work and historic library research and are linked to the author's historical based theory about external and internal factors regarding war correspondents.

Palabras clave: Journalists, military, international organizations, NGO, press officers.

Factores exógenos y endógenos del corresponsal de guerra.
Aproximación teórica para responsables de prensa de organizaciones
internacionales y no gubernamentales

ABSTRACT

El ambiente en el que militares, periodistas y personal de las organizaciones internacionales y no gubernamentales desarrollan su trabajo durante una guerra u otro conflicto armado es ahora mismo definitivamente más complejo que en el pasado inmediato. Por eso para cada uno de esos actores resulta tan importante entender los mecanismos que explican el comportamiento de los otros sujetos, tanto en el frente como en la retaguardia, dado que de esa forma podrán adaptar y mejorar su desempeño en tan cambiante escenario. Este trabajo se centra en las relaciones específicas de los responsables de prensa de las organizaciones internacionales y no gubernamentales con los periodistas. Las conclusiones de este artículo son el resultado del trabajo de campo y la investigación bibliográfica de tipo histórico, al tiempo que se apoyan en la teoría de base histórica sobre los factores endógenos y exógenos del corresponsal de guerra desarrollada por el propio autor.

Key words: Periodistas, militares, organizaciones internacionales, ONG, responsables de prensa.

SUMARIO: 1. Introduction/ 2. Journalism, History and War Correspondents/ 3. External Factors/ 4. Internal Factors/ 5. Conclusions/ 6. Bibliography

1. INTRODUCTION

Just a couple of decades ago a war or an international crisis in the form of an armed conflict was an exclusive matter of armies, journalists working with mainstream media and very few well known international organizations (IO), such as the International Red Cross or the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. But after the fall of Berlin's Wall, the end of the Cold War and the consequent freedom of movement before restricted because ideological reasons, but also the 1990's technological revolution, all that old war and crisis scenarios have definitely passed away.

Today, and as far as the state has lost its old relevance in the international arena, it's more than possible to find not just regular armies, but also all kind of guerrillas, paramilitary groups and terrorists organizations in any so called war or, better, armed conflict. Recently, the Balkans, West Africa, Central Asia and Latin America has witnessed the increasing role of those irregular groups over traditional state armies in this new era armed conflicts¹.

Beside those not regular armed groups and because that freedom of movement and mainly the technological revolution linked to satellite television, digital cameras, Internet and so on, in now days crisis it's very easy to find not just mainstream media organizations' journalists but also more and more professional and non professional free lances and also what professor Philip Taylor calls "citizen journalists"². The same reasons explain the affluence of more and more IO and Non Governmental Organizations (NGO) to those conflicts.

So the environment in which all those subjects —military men, journalists and NGO and IO personnel— develop their work during a war or any armed conflict is definitely more complicate than in the very near past. That is why for any of those actors is so important to understand the mechanisms that explain how do the other relevant actors behave on the ground in order to adapt their performances to that changing scenario.

Already there is a deep knowledge and therefore an important bibliography about the long relationship between military men and journalistic war correspondents³. There are also some papers and even books, mainly official ones, about the links between regular armies and IO and NGO personnel. However, there is a total lack of information about the increasing and conflict after conflict more frequent relationship between journalists and IO or NGO Press Information Officers (PIO). In that sense, the aim of these academic paper is to make a general approach to that very specific relation starting from the author's own theory on External and Inter-

¹ See KAPLAN, Robert D: *The coming Anarchy*

² TAYLOR, Philip M: "Information as a strategic weapon", conference at the 6º Ciclo de Otoño de Comunicación del Foro Complutense, Madrid, November 21 2002. For additional information about the idea of "citizen journalists", see www.leeds.ac.uk/ics/phillink.htm

³ See Bibliography at the end of this paper.

nal Factors⁴ regarding front line war correspondent's duties and rearguard journalists' activities. The facts and conclusions of this paper are also based on the author TV journalistic ground and rearguard experiences⁵ and as well his time lecturing future army, IO and NGO PIOs⁶.

Thus this work would like to contribute to improve and enrich the performance of those IO and NGO PIOs dealing on a daily base with professional journalists working as free lances or for mainstream media organizations, non professional journalists and the so called "citizen journalists". Actors of the front line or rearguard of any armed conflict that IO and NGO PIOs should know and understand in deep.

2. JOURNALISM, HISTORY AND WAR CORRESPONDENTS

The first thing that many IO and NGO personnel should know is that journalism, in contrast with armies and even IOs and NGOs, is a very unsteady, irregular and disorganized activity. One that unfortunately not always runs according to professional criteria. In one hand it's possible to find very professional personnel, with journalism university backgrounds and a deep knowledge of other people duties involved in a war or an international crisis. But at the other hand it's also possible to find many intruders. Not proper journalists, say non professional free lances or even worse, as Leeds University Professor Philip Taylor describe them, "citizen journalists". A normal citizen that takes a camera and acts as a journalist during a conflict without the minimum academic and technical skills to do so. People that never care about the risks and ethics that are involved in the daily activities of proper journalists but also of those other personnel such as the ones working with an international organization as a permanent or, as often happens, temporal and circumstance press information officers.

Thus an NGO or IO PIO should try to guess out with whom is he or she working and know the different approaches of journalists or media people. In that sense, the best way to understand journalists covering a war or an international crisis is knowing in deep the underground factors that are involved in that very specific work.

⁴ See SAPAG MUÑOZ DE LA PEÑA, Pablo: "Desinformación exógena y endógena en la Guerra de Kosovo", in Benavides, J. y Alameda, D. (eds), *Las convergencias de la comunicación. Problemas y perspectivas*, Madrid, Fundación General Universidad Complutense, 2000, pp. 437-442.

⁵ The author is a senior war correspondent. Working for Telemadrid public TV broadcast company, he has been in Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia, Bosnia, Algeria, Morocco, the Middle East, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Mexico, Argentina and Ulster, among other destinations.

⁶ The author is a staff professor at Madrid Complutense University where he lectures future war correspondents and army, IO and NGO public information officers. At the same time, the author prepares Spanish Army officials as future PIOs at the Instituto Universitario General Gutiérrez Mellado. He is also a professor of the Course of Helsinki España "Rapid Cooperation and Assistance for Conflict Prevention Operations, Crisis Management and Post Conflict Rehabilitation".

Factors that are the result of war correspondents' history⁷. In other words, what that history of more than a century tells.

WAR CORRESPONDENT'S HISTORY

= + / -

FIT TO THE WAR ON INFORMATION

CLASH OF FACTORS 1) EXTERNAL 2) INTERNAL

That History is the way in which journalists have fit —more or less— into the war on information. That's the parallel conflict fought by journalists, in one side, and the information, propaganda and censorship departments of state armies, guerrillas or paramilitary groups that participate in the main fight: the war itself or whatever armed conflict.

Reaching this point, it's necessary to underline the fact that in general journalists are more aware of the military men than other people involved in a conflict, such as the personnel working for an IO or an NGO. In that sense public information officers (PIO) of any IO or NGO should be ready to recognize that on journalists eyes they will just be a second or third source of information in order of importance. They first prefer the military, then the civilians and finally the international organizations or NGOs. It's not fair but that's the way it is, at least in general and to present days. Thus, members of international organizations, will be forced to make their information message more attractive because they first compete with the military men, those who journalists use to privilege, and secondly with refugees and other conflict victims, despite they are part of it and so an interested party and many times another propaganda agent⁸. Even though many journalists use to forget that because a combination of internal factors described bellow.

Going back to the History of war correspondents -the very one that allows us to understand journalists' behavior- it has been said that it shows how journalists have fitted into the war on information along the years. A conflict that is no other than a clash of factors. From a journalist point of view, those factors are external and internal.

⁷ For a general but very good and rigorous approach to war correspondents' history, see KNIGHTLY, Phillip: *The first casualty. The war correspondent as hero and myth-maker from the Crimea to Kosovo*, London, Prion, 2000.

⁸ For the propagandistic use of refugees, see SAPAG MUÑOZ DE LA PEÑA, Pablo: *op. cit.*

**+ ARMY CENSORSHIP/INFORMATION DEPT.
(EXTERNAL FACTORS)**



INFORMATION



**- MASS MEDIA /CORRESPONDENT
(INTERNAL FACTORS)**

3. EXTERNAL FACTORS

The external factors are those regarding to information, propaganda and censorship departments of the parties in conflict. In other words, censorship strategies and tactics used to technically deal with journalists and their organizations. They are external to journalists because even they should know them to adapt and tune their work, they cannot change those factors related to censorship strategies and tactics. That's why they are external factors from a journalist point of view. They can know them but not modify them.

In that sense journalists should know how the military deal with public information, what strategies and tactics do they use so reporters can adapt at real time to more or less censorship. The reason to adapt lays in the fact that not always, in fact in general, media personnel have the resources to be everywhere at any time. So as correspondents on the ground they have to decide where to go, and that is a very critical decision. In that sense, if they understand how censorship is working, as journalists they can take the better option, preserving their lives and the so often limited resources that they normally have to cover an armed conflict. In that sense and in order to take the right decision., professional journalists have the following formula to discover how the Censorship Bureau of any military organization —army, guerrilla, paramilitary group, always in that order of importance— involved in a conflict is dealing with information matters.

+ INFORMATION VALUE

=

+ CENSORSHIP

=

**+ DIFFICULTIES TO THE
CORRESPONDENT AND REARGUARD JOURNALISTS**

As journalists have learned along the years, frequently in a very painful manner, censorship depends on the information value of any fact that happens on the ground. If the information value is high, it seems very possible that the military will censor it and in that sense a journalist will find more difficulties to do his or her job so at the end, regarding the risks and the always limited resources that reporters normally have, they will try to look for another news or fact to cover. That is the way it use to be as far journalists are under permanent high pressure from their media organizations, which demand a non stop feed of stories, unfortunately so often despite the real information importance of those stories, many of them just anecdotic ones⁹. When that happens, when journalists can not reach military sources or facts, the very ones that they prefer, is the right time for IO and NGO PIOs to try to attract journalists attention in order to insert their facts and points of views in the crowded media agendas.

Saying that, it is very useful to understand what's the information value of any fact on the ground. In short, the final information value is the result of a simple sum or addition. One between the military importance of any ground fact and the propaganda importance of that same fact. Factors, however, that can also operate independently.

FIELD MILITARY FACT

MILITARY IMPORTANCE

+

PROPAGANDA IMPORTANCE

=

> / < INFORMATION VALUE

In terms of practical and relevant cases, recent war in Iraq offers plenty of them¹⁰. During the first days of April 2003 the U.S. Army launched its final assault on the Iraqi Republican Guard Division protecting the capital Baghdad. But during

⁹ For examples of those anecdotic stories that so often media organizations demand to their correspondents on the ground, see SAPAG MUÑOZ DE LA PEÑA, Pablo: "Guerra contra el terrorismo. Guerra contra el Periodismo", in Benavides, J. y Villagra, N (eds), *Públicos, instituciones y problemas en la comunicación del nuevo milenio*, Madrid, Fundación General Universidad Complutense, 2003, pp. 311-321.

¹⁰ For an academic and technical analysis of war correspondents and rearguard journalists behavior during the last war in Iraq, see: SAPAG MUÑOZ DE LA PEÑA, Pablo: "Una doble tragedia. La guerra de Irak y los medios de comunicación", in *Información, Producción y Creatividad en la Comunicación*, Madrid, Fundación General Universidad Complutense, 2004, pp. 257-271.

the same days the first American APC vehicles entered the city and Saddam's statue was pulled down from its pedestal. In military terms, what's more important and which one of the two situations is more relevant from a propagandistic point of view?

Definitely the first case is more relevant in military terms and the second one in propaganda ones. In the first case censorship was high from the two sides. The U.S. Army information and censorship apparatus did not want to expose a possible military failure to journalists. Meanwhile, and because the same reasons, the Iraqis also censored the access to the battle front.

Regarding Saddam's statue, the situation was different. For the U.S. information apparatus it was very important to have as much journalists as possible to cover the symbolic last moment of Saddam's regime. So it was a situation with very high propaganda value. Because they wanted to stretch that same regime as far as possible, the Iraqi Ministry of Information, ruled by Mohamed Ali Al Sahaf, tried its best to avoid journalists witnessing Saddam's government final breath. Again but because opposite reasons, for the Iraqis Saddam's statue affair had a very high propaganda value even in strictly military terms that same fact worth nothing.

During those days the conflict also offered the battle around Baghdad's airport, an operation with very high military and propaganda value. So, it wasn't easy for journalists to reach the airport in those days because the add of military and propaganda value make things even more complicate to correspondents. In that case and because those two reasons that add up in the information value, neither the American censorship nor the Iraqi one wanted not a single witness at Baghdad's airport.

Many professional journalists think about the information value before taking any relevant decision about where to go and what to cover during an armed conflict. If a field military fact has a high military importance and also a high propaganda negative importance it could be absolutely useless to try to cover that strictly situated on the place or the so called front line. It could be too risky and also a waste of time and of the limited resources of media organizations. That was the case of Baghdad's airport battle.

Even the importance of doing so, some journalists never assess the information value of a field military fact in order to guess the degree of censorship that they can find. That's because they still view their activity as a romantic and adventurous one based on good or bad luck and intuition rather technical skills. History of war correspondents is full of such people¹¹.

In that sense, people involved with an IO or NGO public information strategy should use the same formula. If correspondents' difficulties are very high, that's the specific moment in which they can sell properly any activity of their organization that otherwise cannot easily reach journalists' interest because they use to privilege the military side of a war and specially the so called spectacular part of it. That is more evident on TV war reports¹².

¹¹ KNIGHTLY, Philip: *op. cit.*

¹² See CARRUTHERS, Susan L: *The media at war*, New York, Palgrave, 2000, and the author's works.

4. INTERNAL FACTORS

Beside the external factors regarding war correspondents and rearguard journalists there are also some internal ones that an IO or NGO PIO should also know in order to improve his or her performance dealing with journalists. These internal factors are very important because journalists can not just know them, as happens with the external ones, they can also modify and manipulate them to improve their performance on the field in journalistic and security terms. In other words, the internal factors depend directly on them.

The first of these internal factors is journalists' own ideology commitment. This is a big problem for them. A one that journalists couldn't overcome along the years. As a human being, a journalist has his own opinions about this and that. The very professional ones can put aside those opinions, patriotism and their commitment with themselves, also ways of non journalistic commitments¹³. However, many journalists, even some professional ones, cannot do it. The result is a poor journalistic performance. As Philip Knightly underlines¹⁴ that was exactly what happened during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) in which the writer Ernest Hemingway was a case in point because his poor journalistic record as far he shaped his reports according to his political opinions rather than what he was looking on the field. His fault was such a big one that the North American News Association (NANA), for which he was working, decided to suspend the relation with the writer.

First Internal Factor

IDEOLOGY COMMITMENT	>	JOURNALISM QUALITY
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Public information officers must be very aware of the way in which journalists manage with their own opinions, ideology, patriotism and the commitment with themselves. That is why some PIOs, military or civilian ones, try to check that before offering any relevant information to journalists. If they don't do so their organizations could be in troubles because those so called "committed" journalists will use the information that has been provide to them in their own ideological or personal

¹³ Robert Kaplan suggests that focusing on a conflict from a historical point of view allows journalists to run away from superficiality and thus political propaganda and any protagonistic attitude. Kaplan says: "A journalist must accept that many things have happened before he has arrived into a place. A journalist must know that he is just writing a chapter of a very long history: knowing the first chapters help to have a more profound approach. Unfortunately, today there are many journalists that don't take History in account (...) If you just follow headlines you will always be behind the news" *El País*, Madrid, September 29, 1999, p. 50.

¹⁴ KNIGHTLY, F.: *op. cit.* pp. 209, 210, 214, 230-2.

interests, damaging the organization prestige and image. In that sense, the worse are the ones that focus on a conflict from an emotional stand, using the simplicity of good and bad, white and black. They tend to be the amateur journalists, of course citizen journalists not withstanding.

The second internal factor regarding to a war correspondent is one that can be described using Professor Marshall McLuhan communication theory. He says that the media is the message. In other words, that the important thing is not the information but the media itself. A newspaper, a radio station, a TV channel or an Internet web site that places a journalist on the field just to say that they are in place regardless of the information itself. In a few words, the media sells itself more than real information based in facts or rigorous interpretation. That is understandable as far as information is also a big business. The problem is when it's just that and nothing else. When the media is the message and the company doesn't leave any space to information then journalists' work will have little or not importance at all.

Second Internal Factor

McLUHAN

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**CORRESPONDENT &
INFORMATION IMPORTANCE**

(The Media is the message)

Press officers working for an international organization must check out why a journalist is in place. If he or she is there just to sell the media or to do something else. In the first case they will not be interested in the information that an international organization or NGO PIO can provide them or in their points of view about this and that. In other words, PIOs must identify why that journalist is there because if they don't do so press information officers could waste their time and their message could be absorbed by the media is the message very common and extended attitude.

The third internal factor regarding a war correspondent performance is the relation between journalists and their editors, in theoretical terms, the rearguard of war correspondents. In that sense it should be recognized by journalists and media organizations that many information get lost or don't reach the public not because military censorship but because a poor relationship between a journalist on the ground and his editors and journalists mates on the rearguard, people as important as the former in terms of dealing professionally with information matters. All that, and as Carruthers underlines, despite many ground correspondents don't want to see that reality. "In reporting war, the procedures and decisions of those far from the 'front line' may be as important as the actions of those correspondents who observe it first hand (or as close as they are permitted to come) (...) Long before our 'celebrity jour-

nalism'war reporters have liked to portray themselves as exceptional individuals operating in exceptional circumstances (...) But we should beware journalistic mytographers. War correspondents belong to larger news organisations which discipline their work (...) But it should also be noted that much coverage of war is not the work of war correspondents at all, just as most news reporting derives from secondary sources, not first-hand observation. Reporting of distant conflict is often based largely on agency reports and footage shoot by less glamorous (and less well paid) local 'stingers'in trouble-spots. Moreover, coverage of wars in which the media's own state is involved is likely to depend, in large part, on domestic elite sources within the government and the military"¹⁵.

Third Internal Factor

EDITORS+REARGUARD v/s **GROUND CORRESPONDENT**
JOURNALISTS

=

POOR INFORMATION

Just a few journalists working as editors in the newsroom have performed before as ground war correspondents, so very often they really don't value what their correspondents have suffered to get an information. Many times they don't publish or broadcast the reports not because censorship but because ignorance or even envy, a very common attitude in media organizations, especially on TV. History of war reporterism is full of cases.

Thus a press information officer working for an international organization cannot believe that after talking to a journalist on the field his point of view or information will pass through to be published. They must do a double work: talk to the journalist on the field but also to the editors on the rearguard. Experience shows that that is the only way to be sure that their information output will find a place in the paper, the radio or TV agenda.

The fourth and final internal factor linked to war correspondents and rearguard journalists are their own academic and technical skills. As mentioned before, there are many intruders in journalism. Risky people that can make big troubles for everybody. They are more interested in the spectacularity of the war than in real information. Some times they use international organizations' public information offi-

¹⁵ CARRUTHERS, Susan, L: *op. cit.* pp. 15-16.

cers to accomplish their goals, ones that have nothing to do with journalism or real information.

Fourth Internal Factor

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**ACADEMIC &
TECHNICAL
SKILLS**

**WAR CORRESPONDENT/
REARGUARD JOURNALIST**

That's why many PIOs take their time before delivering any information regarding their organization. They try to check with whom they are dealing. In that sense is a very good idea to build up a sort of journalists and media data base. Knowing who is who, is easier to identify the professional ones and distrust the intruders, those who use to say that anybody could be a journalist, that this is just a matter of guts and courage and so on. In a word, run away from the adventurers and romantics that attracts any war or armed conflict. People that can mislead the information that PIOs provide them and that can also put under risk them and others. In that sense it should be noticed the increasing number of journalists killed or wounded in the last decade. Some, the professional ones, are aware of that and appreciate more and more the academic and the technical preparation. In that sense, they are demanding their companies more journalistic and security courses. Other journalists, however, are stuck in the old fashion way of war journalism and run away from any academic and technical preparation. They just trust in themselves, in luck, and instinct. As experience and war reporterism history show those are very risky journalists for IO and NGO PIOs¹⁶.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The new nature of armed conflicts after the fall of Berlin's Wall and the end of the Cold War, and as well the technological possibilities of these days that have eased the access to battle front and the possibilities to broadcast from there, make more and more frequent the relationship between journalists and IO and NGO personnel. Anyway journalist's characters have also changed so IO and NGO PIOs must now know them in deep to avoid troubles in an increasingly complicated information scenario. In that sense, the best way to deal with them is to have a comprehensive knowledge of journalists' techniques and the way in which they operate with other armed conflict actors.

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