

The challenge of reporting an unreported world

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This report by Polis Summer School student David R Myles on how one foreign correspondent deals with the unique challenges of investigating original stories around the world.



Jenny Kleeman's unreported world

Imagine this: You are a journalist sitting in the passenger seat of a rickety SUV, traversing the crowded streets of Kabul, with a local guide behind the wheel and your producer nervously fidgeting in the backseat. Your safety belt grips you to the seat, and your head is on a swivel, watching for any and all potential threats, as you make your way to a neutral location to interview a Taliban commander about death threats he has ordered against Afghani filmmakers. Would you be able to handle the stress? Would you be able to stay objective and

ask provocative questions without letting your fear shine through? This is the kind of challenge [Jenny Kleeman](#) faces reporting the Unreported World for the UK's Channel 4.

Here's another scenario. You are in Uganda reporting on hydrocephalus in the country's infants. Hydrocephalus, or water on the brain, causes the skulls of newborns to swell to nearly unimaginable sizes. Wouldn't you instinctively think of your own children, nieces, or nephews? Would you know how to maintain proper journalistic distance? Would you know what to say to grieving mothers, mothers so desperate for financial or medical help that "begging" is barely a word, let alone an idea?

These scenarios are not meant to paint the citizens of developing countries as mere victims, but simply to put into context the degree of danger, stress, and emotions that a journalist faces in order to capture the "real" story, stories that are frequently overlooked by the mass media industry.

Jenny Kleeman is an award winning journalist and frequent contributor to *The Guardian*, *Vice Magazine*, *The Times*, and several other high-profile publications.

From covering human trafficking in Nigeria to questioning Mumbai's "party police," to even going undercover in 2005 as an agent in the press office of Britain's Labour Party in order to tell how the election was really won, Jenny Kleeman has seen and done some unusual and challenging journalism.

In our Polis Summer School course at LSE we have discussed how the media depicts suffering and war, and the importance of maintaining proper journalistic distance. Jenny Kleeman's work is a great example of an alternative to much traditional mass media, as she explains:

"It's important to me that the people in my films come across as real people, not just examples of a type. My job as a reporter is to help people feel empathy for those on the opposite side of the world that live very different lives than them."

Should the journalist intervene in the lives of their subjects off-camera? Kleeman says it can harm credibility and take the focus off the true subjects of the documentary:

“My job is to tell a story of a phenomenon, not to save one person. Too much [intervention] can muddy the waters for other journalists that may come to the area.”

She says her subjects are grown men and women who are able make their own decisions.

Kleeman’s in-depth documentary and investigative reporting, contains more danger and chaos than most people will experience in a lifetime. There are so many unknowns that one must be able to roll with the punches, see through cultural biases, undergo extensive emergency training, yet still acknowledge the role that luck plays in one’s job.:

“Being a journalist is about mastering the art of being lucky. But you never want to rely on luck. It’s about maximizing every opportunity.”

Through this summer school course and especially this talk, I am more sure now than ever that there are two kinds of journalists in this world: the first is the reporter who mainly reads the news with little context, who focuses on the differences between individuals, and the second type, the investigator, whose job it is to show the innate connections between people by revealing the human side of a story. Ms. Kleeman is the latter.

While acknowledging the inherent and unavoidable differences in news reporting and investigative journalism, Kleeman notes that:

“In news people seem like caricatures, because there isn’t always time to contextualize the story. Yet...news could be a bit more surprising and challenging.”

My thoughts exactly.

This report by Polis Summer School student David R Myles

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