

On the Future of Crisis Reporting

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An Interview with Sukanya Roy
Providence, RI, 13 April 2016

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113

Brown Journal of World Affairs: Over the course of your career as a foreign correspondent, you've been held hostage on multiple occasions and reported from some of the most dangerous regions in the world for journalists. What would you say are the greatest risks facing journalists working on issues of international security today? What impact do such threats have on the quality of reporting?

David Rohde: Sadly, it's more dangerous than ever to cover these conflicts. I remember, when I covered the war in Bosnia in the 1990s, journalists weren't liked by the different sides in the conflict, but there was a sense that the sides wanted to use—or needed to use—foreign journalists to get their message out to the wider world. You weren't liked, but you were somewhat respected as an outside party. Today, the parties in a conflict can get their message out directly, through Twitter or YouTube. And foreign journalists are seen as enemies, sources of publicity, or sources of ransom. I'm a huge fan of the Internet, but it's created

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SPRING/SUMMER 2016 • VOLUME XXII, ISSUE II



DAVID ROHDE

unintended complications for journalists who are trying to cover these conflicts. Over the course of 20 years, there's been a shift where foreign journalists went from being not liked but sort of respected as neutral outsiders, to open targets. They're vilified by governments, abducted by different factions, and not given any protection. And the saddest part of all of this is that there is less coverage. When the Assad government first targeted journalists intentionally—Marie Colvin and several other journalists were killed in a shelling by the Syrian government—and then the Islamic State (IS) murdered James Foley and Steven Sotloff and others, it created a chilling factor that leads journalists not to go into Syria. I think that lack of press coverage has made it easier for the international community to ignore Syria. The dangers are sadly limiting the flow of information and coverage.

Journal: In addition to being captured by the Taliban, you were arrested by Bosnian Serb authorities after uncovering evidence of the Srebrenica massacres. Both state and nonstate actors continue to act in ways that undermine press freedom today. How would you compare the types of threats they pose? What are the challenges news organizations and reporters' home governments face in countering each type of actor?

114

Rohde: I think that harassment of journalists by governments and by insurgents is terrible. There's a growing form of state censorship that's emerged out of places like Russia and Turkey. It's been very strong in China, Egypt—an effort by nationalist leaders to vilify the press as enemy agents. There's a book called *The New Censorship* written by Joel Simon, who is the head of the Committee to Protect Journalists. He surveys all the new methods governments are using against the

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press; for example, they file tax cases against people. So, I would say that some of the government methods are more subtle and less brutal, but it's the same insidious goal as IS—to silence the press, to block coverage, and to keep critics and opponents from publicizing their views.

Journal: How much of this censorship is self-imposed?

Rohde: More than 95 percent of the journalists who are killed, imprisoned, or abducted in the world are local journalists. When U.S. or European journalists



get kidnapped, it gets a lot of attention, but the numbers are very clear. I think a lot of local journalists engage in self-censorship. I don't blame them for doing that since there are so many dangers. There's an enormous problem with impunity where a corrupt businessperson—or maybe a corrupt local government official—will kill a local journalist who's looking into their activities. And in many countries around the

world, there's a very low chance that anyone will face prosecution. Journalism is under siege from both governments and insurgent groups. IS gets more headlines, but government censorship is just as insidious. And it's working. I think that there's less and less press freedom in the world today, largely because of governments, because of places like Russia, China, Egypt and Turkey—very, very large countries, where the press is being systematically silenced, which is a really disturbing trend. And then in the United States, the Obama administration has prosecuted more government officials accused of speaking to journalists and leaking information than previous administrations. The record number of leak prosecutions by the Obama administration has created a chilling effect in Washington where government employees are afraid to talk to journalists. And a cornerstone of any functioning government is whistleblowers who feel they can speak openly.

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Journal: If journalism seeks to hold governments accountable, a problem arises when the only existing mechanisms for accountability are through those same governments. You've written, for example, about the U.S. response to coverage of the CIA torture report and its policies regarding Guantanamo Bay. To what degree can international scrutiny lead to reform in situations like these?

Rohde: I think it's vital that organizations like the Committee to Protect Journalists hold governments accountable, but the key factor is going to be local politics and local populations wanting press freedom in their country. I think it can help. I also think the news industry itself can set standards and create pressure. Since the murders of Jim Foley and Steven Sotloff, I've been involved in an effort, A Culture of Safety Alliance, to try and set basic safety standards for how freelancers and news organizations should work together in conflict zones. We have 90 news organizations and journalism groups that have signed on to raise the standards of everyone and report in safe ways. If a major organization

DAVID ROHDE

like *Reuters* signs on to these basic safety principles, which *Reuters* has, that puts pressure on news organizations in different countries to do the same.

I think the United States in the past had leverage. It could pressure countries to improve their records in terms of press freedom. But when President Obama is blocking the release of records through FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) and prosecuting more whistleblowers than the last several administrations combined, that undermines the leverage the United States has to advocate for press freedom. It's an enormous problem. Journalists have lobbied the U.S. government to make serious threats to governments that censor and repress journalism by reducing U.S. aid, but it hasn't taken that step. The United States will give a private warning, but it will not use the leverage it has in terms of economic aid or military aid to really pressure a government to stop the harassment of journalists. I think the fact that the United States hasn't used those tools shows that it doesn't take the issue seriously enough.

Journal: One of the distinguishing features of journalism at any scale, whether local or international, is its claim to objectivity. At the same time, reporting on issues of international security—on topics such as conflict zones or human rights violations—raises all sorts of ethical questions. Can such coverage avoid taking sides? Should it?

116

Rohde: I'm a reporter, not a columnist, and I think the most important thing I can do is get verified facts out into the world. Facts matter. There can never be perfect objectivity, but there is a way to say, "This many people were killed here on this day by this perpetrator." Being able to report that involves going out on the ground. There's a term in journalism called *ground truth*, where you're literally witnessing events or talking to witnesses to an event or seeing evidence of it, and you're getting those facts out. I understand that there's no perfect impartiality, but we need more fact gathering on the ground worldwide, and we need to make that fact gathering as impartial as we can. I know some critics claim there to be no such thing as impartial journalism, but I think we live in an era where we're flooded with instant opinion or ideology, which influences people's analysis.

I was a foreign affairs columnist for a couple of years, but I came back to investigative reporting because I feel like we need more facts, not more opinions. There's a sea of opinions available online. Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton can give speeches one day, and people can analyze and question them. But that's not getting out and witnessing. I'm thinking more of foreign reporting, but

THE BROWN JOURNAL OF WORLD AFFAIRS

even in the United States, going to Ferguson, Missouri and talking to people about their lives and their frustrations with law enforcement. It's not going to be perfect, talking to people in person, but it's vital that the basic process of relaying facts as best you can and as impartially as you can to the broader public continues. And it's getting harder and harder to do that. It's getting more and more expensive to do that, to safely travel to places and talk to people face to face. I think it's a tremendous public service, an imperfect public service, but I'm a believer in that very basic form of journalism. My experience has been that going to places inside the United States and around the world, talking to people firsthand, and seeing their plight firsthand can reveal really important, relatively objective facts that the rest of the world should read about. Just dismissing the whole enterprise as inherently biased is shortsighted.

Journal: One of the roles of foreign affairs coverage has been not only to disseminate information in the way that you've just described, but also to hold state and nonstate actors of all kinds accountable for their actions. To this end, is there a particular audience at which international investigations are aimed?

Rohde: I've always thought it was the general public. *Reuters*, where I work now, and the *New York Times*, where I used to work before, both have a strict policy where their journalists don't testify before Congress because we feel that our job is to inform the public. I write for the public, and if a policymaker happens to learn from my article, that's good. If they want to cite my article in a hearing, they're welcome to do that. But we don't go testify because we don't want it to seem like we're a branch of the government or that we are around to inform the government. We are here to inform the public and to inform voters. "Afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted" is one of the expressions journalists try to follow.

Journal: Media outlets tend to fixate on international issues for set periods of time, even if they continue to persist after the spotlight has moved elsewhere. How can individual journalists work to counter this short attention span?

Rohde: It's more dangerous than ever to report abroad. It's more expensive than ever to report abroad safely because you have to hire a really top-notch local journalist to work with you. And then simultaneously there's been a collapse in the core business model of journalism, which has resulted in the death of newspapers. Even in television you've got a smaller and smaller audience that's

DAVID ROHDE

fragmenting. I think the collapse of the core business model of journalism has dramatically impacted news organizations. And I think coverage has dropped in quality as a result. There's an intense focus in cable television on crisis events or partisanship because there's pressure to get numbers. So you'll move from international story to international story quickly because to make profit and stay in business, new organizations have to attract these larger and larger audiences online. And it leads to more sensational and superficial coverage. But these are real economic pressures. Newspapers across the country have gone out of business. It's not a question of greed or some corporate media conspiracy—it's a real crisis. You have governments attacking journalists more openly because they don't need them; you have insurgents attacking journalists; and then you have a failing business model. Together, that means less support for journalists, less patience, which can lead to others being less interested in serious stories that need coverage.

Journal: Even as journalism tries to bring attention to events occurring across the globe, the international response often centers on specific areas of the world and a narrow set of issues. Such disparities were widely discussed, for example, in the aftermath of the Paris attacks, which received much more attention than a similarly deadly bombing that occurred the same week in Beirut. What role do you think the media plays in perpetuating this selective attention, and what tactics could it employ to help mitigate it?

Rohde: I do think there's a bias in the coverage where an attack in Paris gets far more attention than an attack in Beirut or an attack in Lahore. And it also adds to fear in the United States that there will be imminent attacks about to happen. I don't know how you can counter it. The PBS News Hour, as an example, I think is less biased, but its sober, fair coverage will often attract fewer viewers and fewer readers than more simplistic and sensational coverage. One of the most interesting developments in journalism is the emergence of different nonprofits and journalist groups, which decrease the pressures to develop huge audiences, to sensationalize. I'm optimistic about the role of these groups. I'm on the board of something called the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, and they specifically give grants to young reporters, freelance reporters, to go overseas and do reporting. The grants cover the travel costs of the journalists, and that allows a young journalist to arrive in a country, find and hire the best local journalist to work with them, have a driver and a car at all times. It's a safety issue—if a journalist is in a crowd, and things are getting out of control, they

THE BROWN JOURNAL OF WORLD AFFAIRS



On the Future of Crisis Reporting

can immediately get away with their own car, or stay in a safer hotel. Safety is today in many ways an economic issue for journalists. The Pulitzer Center is an example of how in-depth journalism is still possible and that there are still safe ways to do it. And the goal of the Pulitzer Center is the public good; it's not profit, it's not ratings. There are fantastic for-profit journalism organizations—I'm not saying that being for-profit inherently makes you biased. *ProPublica* is a big success story. So is the *Marshall Project*, which looks at criminal justice reform and is run by Bill Keller, my former editor at the *New York Times*. These non-profit organizations really make me optimistic that a new model can emerge. 

