

Journalists in conflict zones: How much safety and truth?

SOFIA, BULGARIA: GERMAN AND SOUTH EAST EUROPEAN REPORTERS AND MEDIA EXPERTS DISCUSS SELF-PROTECTION AND ETHICS IN WAR REPORTING

The headlines in the press are dominated by wars in Ukraine, Iraq and Syria. The question arises, however, under which conditions professional news can be produced during wartimes. A KAS conference on 13 February 2015 served as “platform for exchange between experienced war reporters, media experts and young journalists, who critically analyse the developments in crisis reporting and define guidelines about the work in conflict zones” as Christian Spahr, Head of the Media Program South East Europe of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), said.

One of the keynote speakers was Jörg Armbruster, former ARD Middle East Correspondent who reported from the war in Syria until 2013. “Journalists have to ask themselves whether they have sufficient experience to report from a conflict zone”, he said in the first panel on “Safety of Journalists” (Moderation: Oliver Vujović, South East Europe Media Organisation). No story is worth risking one’s life, said Armbruster, even though publishers and editors put increasing pressure on journalists. In addition, war parties, military and politicians selectively feed journalists with information in order to bias them. According to Armbruster “data are one of the most important weapons at war.”

But even if one is constrained from the support of political actors, independence remains the top priority for journalists. The same applies to the legwork of “fixers” – a jargon term for local contact persons who

establish connections between journalists and sources.

Safety training in advance

“Journalists should think much more militarily”, said Mila Serafimova, member of the National Defence Academy in Bulgaria, in a discussion. One of the main obstacles to secure cooperation at war is the divergent perspectives of journalists and the military. From a military perspective, safety always has priority over the journalistic mandate to provide information. Serafimova does not believe in an “objective truth”: Journalists should be aware that the truth they perceive could also be the result of a successful PR strategy. Serafimova and Armbruster agreed on one point: they advise journalists to attend safety trainings prior to operations abroad. Some NGOs, but also military forces of some countries, such as the German Federal Armed Forces, offer this kind of trainings.

Professional communication saves lives

Christian Mihr, Executive Director of Reporters Without Borders (RSF) Germany, declared that the integrity of journalists is also a central issue for the activities of the NGO. Journalists should be clearly recognisable by carrying “press” signs in order not to get mixed up with war parties. Hence, a vivid discussion arose about whether and to what extent journalists are perceived as a war party anyhow – or as a potential financial resource for kidnappers.

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Mihr stressed the importance of a reliable contact person in the editorial office back home. Only in this way the accuracy of facts can be ensured and developments can be followed in the background; developments that a journalist in action does not overview. "Lives were risked because no safe communication could be assured", said Mihr. Additionally, editorial offices increasingly face the conflict of whether they are allowed to put a journalist's life at risk at all. As a consequence, many offices reject texts at least from freelance journalists in war areas. RSF offers bulletproof jackets to journalists in crisis areas. Andrej Ivanji, Balkan Correspondent for several German and Austrian newspapers, highlighted the importance of personal contacts on-site to assess the security situation. In wars with involvement of the U.K. or the USA, it could be important to maintain good relations with British or American journalists: They often knew in advance which targets might be tackled next.

The Austrian freelance journalist Gregor Mayer reported from one of these war zones: He was on-site at the Sarajevo Blockade (1992-1996) during the war in Yugoslavia. On the basis of his experiences, Mayer discussed with his colleagues in the second panel, moderated by Orlin Spassov (Foundation Media Democracy), how a journalist can report accurately in a hail of bullets. "Usually you talk to survivors, who can tell exactly what they have gone through", said Mayer. He agreed with Mihr: "These pictures can indeed be distorted." That is why reporters always should compare their perception with the facts of the editorial office back home. "The problem is that as a journalist you always remain dependent on people on-site, such as security forces" – especially on those that are interested in providing particular views.

The Bulgarian-Syrian journalist Ruslan Trad initiated the first Bulgarian-speaking blog for the Middle East. He confirmed that the risk of manipulation is enormous: "In a crisis people usually don't ask questions, because it is hard to evaluate the whole situation behind the ongoing." Therefore, background research is needed. Funding

became one of the biggest problems for freelance journalists. Partly, Trad had to save up the money for his stays abroad for months.

Are female journalists more in danger at war than their male colleagues?

A major discussion arose when the Bulgarian documentary filmmaker Elena Yontcheva stated that female journalists are not more in danger than their male colleagues. Although Yontcheva was kidnapped in Iraq and Syria, according to the experienced TV journalist, it was not because of her sex. The Director of the Ethical Journalism Network Aidan White (London) voiced a contrary opinion. Armbruster and Mayer also noted that female reporters became victims of sexual violence on the Tahrir Square in Egypt.

At the third panel, keynote speaker Aidan White amplified the responsibility of war reporters – especially in times of media propaganda. He warned against demonising one side of the conflict too strongly and criticised that many journalists deal carelessly with issues like "Hate Speech" or "Hate Crime". They were neither adequately informed about these terms nor about international laws. Following up on this, Yevgen Fedchenko presented the work of his Ukrainian NGO "Stop Fake" which refutes Russian media propaganda. According to him, the Kremlin is able to propagate its view particularly efficient via social media where the Russian state media and their supporters present themselves as an alternative source of information. The concept: False information cannot be proved, but it also can be disproved only with difficulty. Additionally, Ukraine does not possess the financial resources to disseminate its opinion to a comparable extent, Fedchenko said.

"Transparency, objectivity and details"

Third panel's moderator Boyko Vassilev, talkshow anchorman of the Bulgarian TV channel BNT, asked the speakers in the end what they miss about war reporting:

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“transparency, objectivity and details”, were the answers.

In two parallel workshops, the conference participants discussed current developments in war reporting. They criticised that editors and publishers are saving money on good journalism. They should face the discussion about quality. In addition, there is a trend of ongoing tabloidisation of the press, which contributes to a crisis of confidence in the media. Such circumstances foster propaganda.

In a workshop led by KAS Media Coordinator Martina Kaiser, the conference participants developed a catalogue of guidelines for journalists in conflict zones. These recommendations have been published separately.



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