

THE GLOBAL JOURNALIST



News and Conscience in a World of Conflict

PHILIP SEIB

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For Christine

It is not because I cannot explain that you won't understand, it is because you won't understand that I cannot explain.

—Elie Wiesel (at the opening of the Holocaust Museum)



Preface

This book examines journalism as a moral enterprise by exploring the relationship between news and foreign policy. The linkage is complex, reflecting changes in media technologies and economics as well as shifts in the values that govern international relations.

With the end of the Cold War, the geopolitical truisms that shaped news judgments as well as government policy were open to revision. Policymakers and journalists alike had the opportunity to redefine priorities. Undertaking humanitarian intervention, for example, which had primarily been a function of protecting strategic interests, now has become more of an ethical issue, which moves it onto terrain that neither governments nor news media have fully explored.

In many American news organizations, international coverage is accorded minimal importance. The conventional wisdom within substantial parts of the news business seems to be that international reporting costs too much and does too little to win and keep an audience. It makes more sense, so this thinking goes, to give the audience what it wants. If people want “news you can use”—what to feed your cat and yourself, and other equally helpful items—give it to them.

That may be logical when contemplating corporate profits, but it does not meet standards of professional responsibility. The rest of the world *is* important, and it is part of the journalist’s job to keep the public apprised of what is going on in faraway places.

In these matters, principles of national policy run parallel to those of journalism. As the most powerful nation, the United States has duties of leadership, which it should not shirk. The news media have commensurate duties to cover events that affect the interests of the American government and the American people. Defined broadly, those interests include economic matters, security concerns, humanitarian issues, and much in between. There are plenty of stories to be told. The growth of the oil industry in former Soviet republics, for instance, will affect Americans' energy costs and will also affect the stability of a volatile region. A war in central Africa may seem to have little to do with Americans' daily lives, but the conflict—particularly if it is depicted vividly by the news media—might have considerable impact on Americans' consciences. That may influence decisions ranging from charitable giving to voting.

Events in the 1990s frequently tested post-Cold War moral resolve. In the Balkans, Rwanda, and elsewhere, governments' ability to assist people in trouble was not always matched by a willingness to do so. Similarly, news organizations were sometimes slow to respond to stories that were of great urgency to the people directly involved but of little perceived importance to others.

The impact of news coverage continues to be debated. The "CNN effect" is the supposed ability of coverage to influence policymaking. There is little evidence that this actually happens to a significant degree. Certainly, news reports can call attention to events and sometimes capture the public's interest, but only the most chaotic policymaking process would actually be driven by news coverage. As policy develops, news stories may be influential, but rarely if ever are they truly determinative.

Also the subject of continuing debate is Americans' attitude about their nation's role in the world. When various opinion surveys are studied, it is apparent that Americans are neither isolationist nor interventionist, but rather fall somewhere in between. The best description of their outlook is "cautious."

Despite this caution, intervention sometimes is appropriate. News coverage of the humanitarian crisis in Somalia in 1992 helped reinforce the Bush administration's decision to provide humanitarian assistance backed up by a military presence. When news coverage depicted things going bad, it was a factor in the decision to extricate American forces. The more complex situation in the Balkans produced a different level of American involvement and a different kind of news coverage. Some journalists, outraged by the horrors they witnessed and by what they be-

lieved to be an inadequate response by the international community, reconsidered the sanctity of “objectivity.” They determined that their role should extend beyond providing balanced presentation of all sides’ positions and instead should make clear who are the victims and who are the aggressors. Even within journalism circles, this embrace of advocacy is controversial.

In the 1994 Rwandan war, the magnitude of evil challenged the news media’s ability to convey the reality of what was happening. Only belatedly did the world acknowledge that genocide had occurred. This sluggish response is not unusual when the war or other crisis takes place in Africa. The Rwanda story is an example of how race can be a subtle presence in both policymaking and news coverage decisions. That is something governments and news organizations should address.

Events in Rwanda and the Balkans also presented some journalists with a difficult choice about the extent of their responsibilities as witnesses to horrific events. Is their duty only to report what they see and let others act upon that information? Or should they feel obligated to present their information in other forums, such as by testifying in war crimes trials?

Even after an uneasy peace was imposed in Bosnia, trouble in the Balkans did not end. In 1999, NATO launched its first war when it decided to stop the expulsion of Kosovar Albanians from their homes. In addition to the importance of this war in reshaping European security policy, it was a testing ground for the news media. This was the first “Web war,” with the Internet serving as an important means of gathering and disseminating information. News organizations had to address not only technology-related issues, but also adapt traditional standards—such as corroboration of sources’ information—to the demands of Web-based news. And, as in any war, journalists needed to resist efforts by governments to push news coverage in politically convenient directions.

As the new century began, news organizations had to decide how best to use the limited resources they devote to international coverage. Judging what is most newsworthy continues to be one of the most important and difficult tasks of the news business. The international AIDS crisis, environmental concerns, persistent wars, and the effects of globalization were among the issues that received coverage, some of it substantive, much of it skimpy.

Issues are important only as they affect people, and millions continue to be affected in terrible ways by war, disease, famine, and poverty.

Much of the international community takes only passing notice of these sad conditions, and suffering continues. Neglect is never benign.

As this book was about to go the printer in September 2001, the United States was attacked by terrorists and thousands of people died. The U.S. government's immediate response included a vow to wage war on the perpetrators and the nations that harbored them.

This would not be the kind of war that is discussed in parts of this book—the “virtual war” that relies on high-tech weaponry and gives highest priority to eliminating American military casualties. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said: “People think of the wars that we have seen lately, the kind of antiseptic wars where a cruise missile is fired off, shown on television landing in some smoke, and so forth. That is not what this is about.”

For political leaders, soldiers, and journalists alike, defining “war” is particularly difficult when the enemy is not a state. Terrorists are elusive as military targets and as subjects of news reports.

Nevertheless, as this twenty-first-century war proceeds, journalists will be covering it. In this, as in the coverage of other global events, news organizations have the responsibility to resist jingoistic impulses and to present a complex story with evenhanded precision. This is one more test for the global journalist.

In the years ahead, there will be many more conflicts and issues to cover. The job of the news media is not to try to solve all the world's problems, but to shake awake the world's conscience. Good journalism can do that. Encouraging journalists and others to think about this is the purpose of this book.

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CHAPTER ONE



Collision: Technology, Money, and Ethics

The horrible images have become familiar, so often do we see them on television screens or newspaper pages. Children maimed by war or shriveled by hunger. Fields of bodies, felled by weapons or disease. We see them and react with sadness, sometimes anger.

How should the public respond to the events and policies behind these horrors? Political leaders may say these are not matters of “national interest” and so are none of our concern. The news media sporadically provide bursts of information that tend to be so lacking in context that the public rarely understands why these horrible things are happening or how they might be stopped.

What should be done?

In much of the global village, war and famine resist all attempts to eradicate them. Prosperity and opportunity spread slowly and erratically. Disease and environmental decay take their massive toll. An accurate, comprehensive picture of all this, presented by the news media, would be strikingly ugly, but that ugliness might touch the conscience of those who could do something about it.

Most news organizations, however, cover such matters only fleetingly. They are wary not so much of ugliness—devastation captures the public’s attention—but of the complexity behind it. News organizations tend to keep coverage of faraway places short and simple. The news, after all, is a product, and it wouldn’t do to overtax the presumably limited attention span of its consumers.

If this journalism of convenience prevails, chances of improving life in much of the world will be slim. If, however, the news media reassert their traditional values—such as the long-standing mandate to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable—perhaps journalism will help foster change.

Doing good is possible. News coverage can influence public opinion, which in turn can nudge the policymaking process. At the end of this chain—sometimes—is progress. The hungry might be fed, the sick might be treated, the besieged might be rescued. Reaching this end is one challenge facing today's global journalist.

Entering the New Century

The global village is still under construction, but it has assumed a definite look and lifestyle. As a virtual community, it is bound together electronically. This is partly due to the Internet, which may prove to be transforming in ways comparable to the broadcast media and, some would say, even the printing press. To see evidence of this new cohesion, hopscotch the world with a few clicks of the mouse. Send an e-mail from Omaha to Ouagadougou. Scan the day's news from Bombay or Brasilia. Watch the legislature of your state discuss tax policy or the parliament of a distant country debate war and peace. It's all there, as close as if it were just down the street in your village. Anyone with a computer and access to the Internet can skitter across the Web to seek or deliver information. The quantity of material is vast, and its quality is uneven. What the public will do with it is still unknown.

The latest news technologies offer unmatched breadth and speed. Delays in news delivery are increasingly rare; anything less than real-time coverage seems archaic. Reaction to news, whether from the public or policymakers, has similarly increased in velocity.

The speed at which news moves is a relative matter. In *Paul Revere's Ride*, David Hackett Fischer charts what was then the rapid spread of the news about the first shots of the American Revolution, fired at Lexington on the morning of April 19, 1775. Word reached as far as Providence, Rhode Island, that night. By the following night, news of the clash was received in New London, Connecticut. A report reached New York City late on the 23rd and Philadelphia on the 24th. A handbill carried by an express rider got to Annapolis, Maryland, on April 26 and the story reached Williamsburg, Virginia, on the 28th; Charleston, South Car-

olina, on May 9 (by sea); and settlements in western Pennsylvania the second week in May.¹

Today, anyone in those same American cities can see Baghdad being bombed on live television. They can watch real-time briefings from the Pentagon telephone or read e-mail reports from Iraqis while they are under attack. Good and evil from around the world arrive instantly in America's living rooms. Those who deliver information and those who respond to it must adjust to new definitions of timeliness.

Even assuming that high-speed communication is a blessing, there must be an intellectual and moral foundation on which the new, always-in-touch virtual community is built. This is particularly important to journalists who face the danger that their profession will be so technology-driven that the reasons for doing journalism are forgotten. Whatever size village the journalist covers, she or he has a responsibility to find and deliver information that the public needs. Sometimes that mission conflicts with speed and limits profits. Journalists must try to reconcile the varied demands placed on all who work in the news business.

Beyond the concerns about the mechanics and economics of journalism is the fact that news can make a difference in people's lives. From that basic truth rises a moral mandate that journalists and news consumers should recognize.

Defining Journalistic Responsibility

There is no precise formula for establishing intellectual independence, but part of the task for news organizations is to rely less on governments' priorities and take a more proactive approach when evaluating events around the world. This entails not just being more knowledgeable but also having a more sophisticated appreciation of the responsibilities of journalism as profession and the ethical duties of journalists individually.

First is the basic duty to inform, and especially to inform a broad audience. Journalist James Hoge has noted that "elites in business, the professions, and government have ample news and information sources. It is the general public that is being short-changed by media that have yet to exhibit the combination of effort and talent to make news of the wider world interesting and relevant."² Along these lines, British journalist Ian Hargreaves asked, "Why should we choose to live in an isolationist 'dumbtopia' precisely at the moment when there is almost nothing which

affects our daily lives, whether at the economic, social, or cultural level, which is not in some sense globally charged or driven?”³ Part of this duty to inform is to report the truth—not mere surmise or propaganda, but facts that are verified and explained.

Second, decisions about what to report and what to withhold are important not only as they relate to stories’ newsworthiness, but also in terms of the effects of such decisions. Diplomacy sometimes works best outside the glare of media coverage, and journalists may decide to give diplomats a chance, at least briefly, to work with minimal visibility. Similarly, journalists may withhold information about intelligence or military operations. News executives making these decisions weigh the public’s *right* to know and *need* to know, and add to the equation the responsibilities of citizenship. This does not mean acceding to every government request for secrecy based on vaguely defined “national security” concerns, but it does mean recognizing the realities of national interest in a contentious world.

Third, tone of coverage is important. The line between aggressive reporting and biased reporting can easily be crossed. As with the decision to publish or withhold, journalists should not surrender their aggressiveness in gathering information, nor should they disregard the effects of their coverage. Also, if reporters are unfailingly cynical in their stories, the public may get a distorted view of events and good-faith efforts to resolve a crisis may be undermined. Skepticism is often merited, such as when government action does not match government pronouncements, but when that skepticism leads to an unshakable presumption of incompetence or malfeasance, it may have gone too far.

Fourth, journalists should recognize that their coverage may affect opinion and policy. News organizations exercise considerable power when they decide to go to or stay away from a distant trouble spot. Where cameras go, attention and aid are much more likely to follow. That makes journalists actors, not merely observers, and there is no escaping the responsibilities that accompany that role. British journalist (and later member of parliament) Martin Bell has argued that “in the news business it isn’t involvement but indifference that makes for bad practice. Good journalism is the journalism of attachment. It is not only knowing, but also caring.”⁴

In this context, one of journalism’s most important roles is that of awakening the public’s conscience. Journalists must decide when the alarm must be sounded and how best to do so.

Governments' Changing Outlook

News coverage generally reflects governments' views of foreign affairs. These are undergoing revision as Cold War principles recede into history. For the major democracies, particularly the United States, the task is twofold: to define what their world role should be, and to enlist domestic political support for that definition. At the heart of this matter, again especially for the United States, is deciding what to do with power.

During the Cold War, the answer was easy: stand firm and protect yourself and your allies against a formidable adversary. With that adversary gone, grand strategies change but the responsibilities of power remain.

Complicating matters is the issue of public resolve. A mix of idealism and fear provided a foundation of support for America's foreign policy-makers when there was a superpower foe. That foundation wobbled sometimes, but it could usually be steadied through appeals to patriotism or reminders about nuclear menace.

Much danger remains, but it has assumed a different look: the threat of terrorism, or the disproportionate clout of a minor power (the "rogue state") with major weaponry. Responding to new threats is part of the business of being a modern world leader, but just possessing the ability to react falls far short of being a comprehensive foreign policy. For one thing, a country such as the United States presumably has room for some altruism in its dealings with the rest of the world. That can range from aiding a nation's economic growth to sending troops to help during a humanitarian emergency. This presumption about altruism depends on the existence of a willingness to act, which is a function of political leadership.

At the heart of this matter is the definition of "national interest." During the Cold War, that meant self-preservation and a vague notion of achieving and maintaining superiority in varied venues. With self-preservation no longer the same kind of pressing issue, and with "superiority" less relevant, a new philosophy needs to be articulated.

That need, however, may not be apparent to those politicians who prefer to manage crises on an ad hoc basis, and who like a policy-free flexibility that allows them to drift with the political winds. Perhaps they believe that such formlessness is wise until post-Cold War alignments become better defined, but meanwhile a leadership vacuum exists. The lack of a governing philosophy could be seen in the Bush administration's

poorly thought-through response in 1992 to events in Somalia and President Bill Clinton's ambivalence about an American role in the Balkans, Rwanda, and elsewhere. If it were to rely on a strict definition of "national interest" grounded in security concerns, the United States would be able to remain distant from most of the conflicts boiling around the world. But no American administration is likely to adopt a doctrine of rigorous disengagement, if only for the loss of prestige that would accompany such a disavowal.

That still leaves the task of defining grounds for involvement. National interest is broadened by its incorporation of national values, and that can be the basis for stepping into a crisis. The form of participation can range from rhetoric to money to military force, any and all of which should be governed by a consistent philosophy.

Old-school pragmatists frown on what they consider to be the ill-considered moralistic interventionism of Madeleine Albright and others, and believe instead in the broad applicability of James Baker's observation about Yugoslavia as it was disintegrating: "We don't have a dog in that fight."⁵ Along these lines, Henry Kissinger observed that "once the doctrine of universal intervention spreads and competing truths contest, we risk entering a world in which, in G. K. Chesterton's phrase, virtue runs amok."⁶ Supporters of Albright's approach argue, however, that willingness to champion humanitarian causes is the mark of an enlightened foreign policy.

Neither side in this debate has the upper hand politically. American foreign policy remains strikingly inconsistent, and that infects the policies of America's allies. No one, friend or foe, seems to know if the United States might be willing to go beyond defending baseline security interests and move into protecting values, such as human rights. Even when a military course is selected, effectiveness is often limited by a refusal to endorse the fierceness and accept the casualties that are part of war. This has been referred to as a refusal to "cross the Mogadishu line," based on the post-Somalia Clinton administration doctrine that assigned highest priority to protecting American personnel.⁷ As a result, writes Michael Ignatieff, the opponents of the Western democracies "reason that the West's commitment to human rights is canceled out by its unwillingness to take casualties, and its commitment to help the vulnerable is canceled out by its unwillingness to take and hold territory."⁸

Given that perceived lack of resolve, endorsement of humanitarian principles has limited impact. This pertains not just to the United

States, but also to NATO and to some extent to the United Nations. In addition to the unmatched sophistication of much of its weaponry, the U.S. military has unique intelligence-gathering and logistical capabilities (such as airlift capacity) that are crucial to any but the smallest and quickest military operations. So far, no American president has clearly stated the U.S. position on using these resources in humanitarian crises that arise from armed conflict. The United States, with NATO, responded to Serb aggression in Kosovo, but this was an ad hoc decision, not grounded in clearly defined policy and certainly not set forth as precedent for future actions.

This is not to say that there is no movement toward devising standards for humanitarian intervention. The United Nations Security Council resolution of April 24, 1992, cited “the magnitude of human suffering” in Somalia as a threat to peace and security. The previous standard for such an actionable threat had been a cross-border dispute between at least two sovereign states.⁹ Journalist William Shawcross has written: “Increasingly among the rich West there is a belief that humanitarianism must now be part of national policymaking in a way which it has never been before. That conviction bestows a right to interference which cannot always be carried out, but sometimes should be. It is an ambitious doctrine, both morally and politically.”¹⁰

Before an ambitious doctrine such as the one Shawcross cites is widely embraced, bureaucratic mindsets must change. Relief expert Andrew Natsios wrote that most U.S. policymakers “do not view humanitarian disaster assistance as a principal objective or undergirding principle of U.S. foreign policy. . . . Humanitarian interventionism does not have a large career constituency in the State or the Defense Department.”¹¹

The practical demands of humanitarian intervention are daunting. The pattern during the past decade has been to insert, at least initially, a small, lightly armed force. As a political gesture, this exudes nobility. As a way to halt human rights abuses, it borders on pointlessness. The monitors may end up watching terrible things happening while they lack the power to react. Those perpetrating the abuses are quick to see this, and they proceed as if the monitors were not even there. On some occasions, monitors are murdered (as in Rwanda) or taken hostage or ignored (as in Bosnia). Unwilling to risk being dragged into a conflict that will produce casualties among their personnel, the countries that have dispatched the monitors concern themselves mostly with crafting extraction plans so they can exit quickly if their representatives’ safety is jeopardized.