

The fight for independent journalism

Last May, Manu Bravo, 2013 Pulitzer's winner, published an article detailing how risky the conditions are with what many photojournalists like him cover some of the most dangerous conflicts in the planet/around the world. The article was published a few days after the release of the journalists Antonio Pampliega and Ángel Sastre and the photojournalist José Manuel López, who were held captive in Syria for 11 months.

Mónica G. Prieto, freelance correspondent based in Asia, confesses that after 20 years "all wars are the same: the human being turns into a monster and he usually repeats the same patterns, commits the same crimes, the same abuses against women and minors. They get delight from the violence. The freelance Palestinian - Spanish photojournalist, Maysun goes further than this. "Conflicts not only destroy physically but also psychically, morally. War is pure destruction. The only thing that has changed is the decay and the upsurge they experiment", she adds. The photojournalist went inside the Yarmouk refugee camp, in Damascus, in 2009 for the first time. Back then, she perceived some kind of life, some kind of routine, some kind of an educational system; everyone had their own space. Unfortunately, everything is now destroyed. "I would like to go back but the Syrian regime is surrounding the area and trying to get into it would be suicidal".

"The possibility of being kidnapped or suffering from a terrorist attack increases the tension when you cover the conflicts; but you don't stop going because of the possibility of some kind of risk could exist". The freelance journalist and African correspondent for La Vanguardia, Xavier Aldekoa, knows clearly what pushed Pampliega, Sastre and López to cover Syria's conflict despite its critical situation. "There are no real fears and you must know how to manage them when you are in the field". Lately, for example, Boko Haram forces women and children to commit attacks with explosive vests. In Africa, you are used to working having children around. This is obviously a positive aspect but in conflict zones it increases the tension. But again, it is an intangible tension that doesn't prevent you to cover any conflict", he says.

Overcoming different obstacles

Getting into a country where there is a conflict is riskier as time goes by. Prieto, winner of the Julio Anguita Parrado Journalism International Prize, explains the diversity of scenarios that make it difficult to get into conflict zones. "Normally, in a war there is some control that blocks the access for journalists or it could be that they ask you for authorisation or a permit to get into it. In this last case, it can happen that there is no type of organism/organisation that can give you any permit or authorisation or that one of the two parties/actors in the conflict are responsible for doing that", she says.

That's what happened to her on 2003, in Iraq, where she had to work with the North-Americans or with Saddam Hussein's regime. "In both cases, they showed you what

they wanted you to know, what they wanted to show to the world. In Syria, the control of the borders changes every day and you never know who you will be confronting. In China, you have problems with the cybernetic wall and, in the arab world, the communications are controlled by the government, ... honestly there are too many different scenarios”, analyses Prieto.

The journalist has been for over two decades covering conflicts around the world where she found a considerable amount of closed doors that she had to open. “Pick up cars, you blackmail, you cross borders walking on a mine path, you use protocols that allow you to break with the cybernetic controls imposed by the regimes, ... and that is how you overcome the obstacles you find in your way”, she explains.

Apart from being forced to inform from one side it can also happen that you might not be able to interview all the parties, as it happened to Aldekoa. It is very difficult for him to have access to the areas controlled by the jihadists implying that you can only inform from one side, what he considers to be a deficiency in journalism. To solve it, he tries to interview people who may have had contact with the jihadist group, who are relatives or who might have been kidnapped by them. But it seems that the jihadists or Boko Haram are not interested in being a mediator for the journalists. On the contrary, the terrorists want to transmit the information themselves through propaganda or prozelytizing magazines.

In this sense, Maysun asks herself “how can you explain a conflict if you are not at the frontline?”. She answers to herself: “a war is much more than what happens at the frontline: a war is all about the injured who arrives to the hospital, it's/a war is all about the families who have lost their homes, a war is all about the express funerals for all the victims who have passed away... there are thousands of stories/tragedies that happen in a war and there are thousands of ways to tell their stories/explain them”.

Do the mass media have ethics?

Those are realities that happen around the border, beyond the frontline and can be explained. In spite of this, Maysun, Prize-winner of the Gijón's City International Journalist, says firmly that there are limits to what you cannot pass when you are covering a story: “I cannot explain any war if I'm not there. This is why I get incredibly frustrated when I see journalists talking about Syria's war from Jerusalem. The journalism of what I believe in is the one that talks from the field. If I cannot explain the conflict I talk about the stories that happen around it but I'm not talking about it from miles away”, criticises Maysun.

The freelance photojournalist and video journalist, Ricardo García Vilanova, has the same point of view: the important stories are the ones that happen inside a war. “What happens to journalists is not important. The lives of the people who have to live their daily lives through the war is the important thing to talk about. In the end, we are only communicators, transmitters of what is happening and we have the privilege to leave and enter the country whenever we want. They are the ones who are suffering, who are trapped, who have neither economical and logistical resources to get away. They are the ones who we have to talk about”, he affirms.

“The best stories tend to be those that you don’t have access to, and when you don’t have resources to reach them it’s worse, especially for the freelancers”, adds Maysun. “Television have a superior budget and sometimes they arrive at the point where they pay to have access to the information. And this, besides not being at all ethical, means that the freelancer encounters lots of closed doors who don’t have the economical resources”, complains this Spanish- Palestine photojournalist.

In this sense, García- Vilanova criticises how the budget of *the* big media inflates prices.”Usually, fixers -local staff hired by foreign journalists who develops translation and make contacts’ tasks- have as a minimum price 150- 200 dollars per day, in Syria; but it reached a level when the price was 500 dollars per journalist per day and 1,200 per day and per TV representative. It is said that the main problem they face is occidental media wasting exorbitant amounts of money to get into countries in conflict and make prices rise for everyone.

The journalist, who has been covering conflicts for over two decades, comments that currently is trendy treat/it is trendy to treat the information as a business. For example, international media that arrives to the Turkish border with Syria and pay for pieces of news who will present as breaking news/exclusives later on?: presentations of documents which you know they payed loads/ a lot of of money to have them and, consequently, it generates a machine of people who are able to make fake documents with the purpose of getting five or ten thousands dollars. This, then, means two things: first, the moral questioning of these practices and, secondly, the journalist who arrives after them looking for information or looking to contrast it/argue against it, like us, find ‘*lads*’ that make everything up just to get you to give them money. It is immoral paying to get information and immoral for journalism”.

Keeping distance from the mainstream.

“To be able to have access to the information, I spend big amounts of time on creating complicities with the people that can help me because we are friends, or because that person gives me security or confidence, explains Aldekoa. “Other times, -he adds-, you ask your colleagues. The net of freelance journalists, or at least the one formed by the ones/those who work in Africa, we help each other a lot, we give each other pieces of advice and we suggest to each other tips about borders, visas, security, ...”.

In addition, the author of the book, *Africa Ocean* (Península, 2014), uses his personal acquaintances to get different information from the one that is on all the newspapers due to the fact that “you might end up doing the same story as the fixer gave to all the other journalists. He usually brings you to the same places and gives you the same contacts he gave to the other journalists”, details Aldekoa. Furthermore, *the* Internet emphasizes this setback.

The internet has made life easier for all freelance or hired journalists. The information is accessible from everywhere and from everything, “even in the most remote village in Afghanistan”, specifies Mónica G. Prieto. But, like all coins, the Internet has another face. “Unlike what you might think, the Internet doesn’t help you to get into the country. For example, in the middle of the Arab Revolution I tried to get into Bahrain, where the regime

was appalling for the population and when they decided to put my name on the internet, they kicked me out of the country”, remembers Prieto. On the other side, Maysun really could get into Birmania because she erased her website and other pieces of news and images referring to her but a colleague of hers didn't do it so he couldn't go into the country.

The Internet brings a lot of knowledge about any fact but, as Prieto affirms, is important to differentiate what sources are good, question everything you read and confirm in the field if you the story is good. She also mentions the importance of not believing everything you read as it can affect the treatment of your stories. In this sense, La Vanguardia correspondent adds that on the Internet, and in Twitter specially, “you can read stories that have been already told. I try not to get influenced by them because if not, we end up talking about the same issue”.

Journalism or propaganda

Looking for the difference and trying to explain other dimensions of the conflict has also their disadvantages, especially when there is no media interest because then, “the media doesn't support you 100% which means that having access to the country is more difficult”, as it happened to Aldekoa in 2013. That year, the conflict in the Central African Republic reached terrifying levels of danger and an exceptional level of mortality. Aldekoa had to use his own resources and his film producer to cover the conflict. On the other hand, at the end of the same year, Nelson Mandela died and “*the* media from all over the world called me asking for collaborations. I had to reject some of them because of the lack of time and, obviously, I didn't have any kind of logistical problem to arrive there neither getting accommodation or whatsoever”.

So, as the photojournalist García- Vilanova says, “every piece of coverage is a personal investment to generate work that you might not sell. This type of work is extinguishing. The difficulties of having access to the country, of having economical resources, of security or because of the lack of media interest; everything goes against freelance journalists; 85% of the journalists who cover the armed and social international conflicts around the world are freelance journalists”. And, when there is no possibility to contrast the information or to not explain what is happening, “journalism becomes propaganda” sentences.