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Note on the author

Kevin Marsh is Executive Editor at the BBC College of Journalism. He is a former Editor of the *Today* programme and also edited *The World at One*, *PM* and *Broadcasting House* on BBC Radio 4. He writes a regular column in *Press Gazette* and blogs at <http://storycurve.blogspot.com/>.

Compromising the first draft?

Tim Luckhurst traces the chequered history of the reporting of conflicts by embedded reporters. And, focusing on the current Afghan conflict, he concludes that war coverage has been most effectively performed when the work of embedded reporters is informed by journalism produced by unembedded colleagues operating apart from the military

Michelle Lang, a Canadian journalist working for the *Calgary Herald*, died on her first trip to Afghanistan. Keen to highlight what she considered to be positive achievements by Nato forces in that country (D'Alieso and Wilton 2010) she set out to witness the work of a Canadian reconstruction team. She was killed on 30 December 2009, when a roadside bomb blew up the vehicle in which she was traveling south of Kandahar.

Rupert Hamer, of Britain's *Sunday Mirror*, died when another roadside bomb exploded northwest of Nawa in Helmand province in January 2010 (see Mirror.co.uk). He was a veteran on his fifth visit to Afghanistan. Lang and Hamer were embedded correspondents, Lang with the Canadian Army and Hamer with a US Marine unit.

Reporting Afghanistan poses immense challenges to journalists. Issues including violence, humanitarianism, corruption and development offer a cornucopia of public interest stories. Threats including improvised bombs, crossfire and kidnappings make them dangerous to obtain.

The Committee to Protect Journalists records that 17 news personnel have been killed in Afghanistan since 11 September 2001 (Committee to Protect Journalists 2010). Five of them were, like Lang and Hamer, accidental victims of combat between the Taliban and the Nato-led International Security Assistance Force. More were targeted for murder because they were journalists.

Hammer and Lang decided that embedding, whereby journalists join military forces as their guests and are protected by them was the best way to avoid threats including kidnapping and assassination. Their deaths while working alongside Nato soldiers demonstrate that embedding cannot guarantee a reporter's safety, but many other reporters and news organisations have reached the same conclusion. They believe embedding gets them close to a story they could not otherwise cover. The purpose of this chapter is to explore whether it enhances journalism's capacity to perform its public purposes in reporting Afghanistan to the outside world.

Journalism's core purposes

For the purpose of this analysis journalism's purposes are defined as four of those identified by (Schudson 2008: 11-17); informing the public, investigation, analysis and social empathy and a broader purpose, familiar to diligent journalists, that encapsulates all of them: recording a reliable first draft of history. The question is: does embedding help reporters to inform, investigate and analyse the conflict in Afghanistan in such a way as to help them record a reliable first draft? Or, does it promote collusion, censorship and suppression in ways calculated to serve the interests of the military and Nato governments?

The terms upon which reporters are permitted to work alongside ISAF forces as embedded correspondents in Afghanistan are governed by agreements such as that set out in the latest revision of the UK Ministry of Defence's *Green Book* (Ministry of Defence 2008). This document is the product of dialogue between the Ministry of Defence and news organisations that began after the Falklands Conflict. It has been updated frequently. The MoD with the participation of news organisations including; the Newspaper Publishers Association, the National Union of Journalists, the British Broadcasting Corporation, Independent Television News, Sky News and the Society of Editors produced the current version.

The *Green Book* rules (Section 43) that "Correspondents must accept that in the conditions under which they will be operating the appropriate operational commander has the right to restrict what operational information can be

reported and when." It lists as "subjects that correspondents may not be allowed to include in [their reports]" topics including composition of forces, details of military movements, operational orders, casualties, place names, tactics names or numbers of ships, units or aircraft and names of individual servicemen.

It requires (Section 44) that "...correspondents must accept that they may be required to submit all written material, voice items intended for radio or television, films or video recordings produced for television, associated scripts or voice accompaniments, and still photographs for security checking clearance before transmission".

The *Green Book* also sets out (Annex A) the process whereby correspondents must outline the detail of their request to embed before consent will be granted for them to accompany UK Armed Forces in operational theatres. This includes guidance to "decide on subject matter to be covered in as much detail as possible (including issues/locations/interviewees that will facilitate the required coverage if known)".

Journalists who have covered the conflict in Afghanistan as embedded correspondents, and editors who have published their work, have conflicting opinions about the value of these practices and comparable rules set out by the Pentagon and defence ministries in other Nato countries.

National security and secrecy

Unprecedented access for journalists to battlefields is clearly offered on terms that accord higher value to the operational requirements of the military than to free speech. Every democracy acknowledges that national security requires secrecy about the operational aspects of military activity.

It is equally plain that embedded reporters witness only a fraction of what is happening in a conflict zone. Speaking about embedded reporters on *NewsHour with Tim Loberg* during the invasion of Iraq in 2003, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld acknowledged that their journalism offered a partial picture. "What we are seeing is not the war in Iraq," he observed, "what we're seeing are slices of the war in Iraq" (*Online NewsHour* 2003).

Do the slices proffered by embedded correspondents in Afghanistan convey the true flavour of the cake? Among journalists (Conference, Afghanistan; are we embedding the truth, University of Coventry 18 March 2010), there is consensus that embedded reporters retain a duty to interrogate power. Agreement also exists that embedding is a compromise: reporters get eyewitness experience of Nato forces in action but their access is restricted to a solitary repository of power.

Kevin Marsh, editor of the BBC College of Journalism, asks at the conference where the voice of the Taliban is to be found in journalism reporting Afghanistan to Britain. Does asymmetrical reporting blight this militarily asymmetrical conflict? Other concerns include prior restraint (material censored or blocked before it can be published), the MoD/Pentagon's power to restrict access to embedded missions to reporters deemed friendly to the military (Shane 2009) and fears that living and working with soldiers encourages reporters to concentrate on action stories to the exclusion of broader analyses.

The compromises involved in embedding

Vaughan Smith is founder of the Frontline News agency and a veteran of conflict both as a soldier (he is a former Captain in the Grenadier Guards) and as a journalist. He visited Afghanistan as an embedded guest of ISAF forces in Helmand Province. Smith says that embedded journalists working in Afghanistan believe taking risks to cover conflict serves the public interest, but he is candid about the compromises involved.

Smith says: "Embedding feeds the machine," (i.e. it supplies stories that appeal to audiences and, therefore, to editors and proprietors). He adds that it makes good economic sense. "The army pays for it, which is very attractive in the modern media economy." But he considers it a tainted compact that generates more public relations value to the military than democratic value to the public. Embedding, he says, serves the military objective of effective "media operations".

Other reporters acknowledge that embedding limits a correspondent's freedom, but justify it as "going with soldiers on one side or the other" (Thomson 2010) and therefore useful, providing reporting from the other side is available to secure balance. This argument mistakes neutrality for truth, and even neutrality is hard to achieve in Afghanistan, where access to the "other side" is least available in those areas where Nato forces are most actively engaged in combat.

A crudely ideological analysis might conclude that the political economics are blatant embedding is choreographed to tell the military's preferred narrative from the battlefield to the grave. It gets reporters close enough to thrilling action to enable them to dazzle and fascinate the taxpayers back home. But it only rarely risks blighting their appreciation with troubling narratives about wounded civilians. It is, in short, designed to create a version of the Stockholm Syndrome (Bejerot 1974: 486-487; see also De Fabrique et al 2007) in which the embedded correspondent becomes a willing and sympathetic ally of military/political authority that is exploiting them to create a narrative amenable to its interests.

In fact, the relationship between embedded correspondent and military is nuanced. Embedded reporters understand that they have a duty to see beyond what armies want to show them. Military leaders and their political masters know that sustained support for military intervention, particularly in a long and costly conflict, requires informed consent within representative democracies.

History is more useful than abstract theory to mature understanding of journalism. To appreciate the limitations of embedded reporting, and its consequences for the diligent first draft journalism, which, alone, can properly fulfill the profession's duty to representative democracy, awareness of the practice's past is invaluable.

Russell – and the birth of the embedded journalist

The name is modern, but embedding is not a new invention although the rules governing it are more precisely codified than before. The MoD argues that William Howard Russell (Knightley 2004: 1-18), who covered the Crimean War of 1853-1856 for *The Times*, was an embedded correspondent. If that assertion

(MoD 2007) stretches the definition of formal embedding, a recognisable version certainly came into existence during the First World War.

Before the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria by a Serbian nationalist provoked Germany to invade France through the territory of neutral Belgium and, thence, Britain's declaration of war on August 4 1914, some British newspapers resisted the jingoism promoted in market leaders such as the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express*.

The *Manchester Guardian*, forerunner of today's *Guardian*, carried a full-page advertisement announcing the formation of a league to stop war. Newspapers of the liberal and socialist left, including the *Labour Leader* and *Daily News*, protested that Britain should not become involved in a European war (Knightley op cit: 84-85). But the intense imperial pride promoted in previous decades, not least by popular journalism, delivered 1 million volunteers to Lord Kitchener's New Army by the end of 1914 (Robinson 2009).

Men were encouraged to enlist by the dominant belief that Britain was great, good and civilised and that their duty was to fight in its defence. That view dominated newspapers, too. In January 1915, Baron Herbert Reuters, one of the owners of the powerful Reuters news agency, told a colleague: "Every day I realise more deeply the colossal task before us, and the necessity of sparing no sacrifice to succeed where failure spells ruin to three Empires and will involve the unspeakable blight of German military tyranny over the whole Continent" (Read 1992: 111).

Fleet Street placed at the service of the war effort

Lord Northcliffe, owner of the *Daily Mail*, worked for the British government as Director of Propaganda in Enemy Countries. The editors of the *Guardian*, *Times*, *Daily Express*, *Evening Post* and *Daily Chronicle* placed their titles at the service of the war effort. Their abdication of the liberal principle that a free and independent press should speak truth to power was reinforced by reports filed from the Western Front by the first formally accredited war correspondents.

A few reports conducive to holding power to account emerged from the first months of the conflict, but, these simply encouraged the pro-censorship enthusiasms of ministers such as Winston Churchill who believed journalists should cover war by writing what Admirals, Generals and Secretaries of State told them.

This approach generated turgid copy, so ministers realised that, given newspaper owners' enthusiasm for the great crusade against tyranny, eyewitness reporting, of an acceptably sanitised and eulogistic variety, could promote the war effort and sustain newspaper profits. Missing were only the docile journalists to write it. They were found.

These men were: Philip Gibbs of the *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Chronicle*, Percival Philips of the *Daily Express* and *Morning Post*, William Beach-Thomas of the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Mirror*, H. Pery Robinson for *The Times* and *Daily News*, Herbert Russell for Reuters and Basil Clarke for the *Amalgamated Press*.

Their reporting failed, abjectly, to deliver a reliable first draft of the history of combatants' sacrifice and suffering. In the First World War, embedding contributed to one of the most dismal episodes in professional journalism's history. These prototype embedded correspondents wore officers' uniform, held the honorary rank of Captain and relied upon the army for food, drink, accommodation and transport. They went nowhere unless accompanied by a serving soldier known as a "conducting officer". In return for their accreditation their employers had agreed to restrictions that prevented them from identifying places, people or military units.

Hemingway on the propaganda of the First World War

Ernest Hemingway, the American writer and journalist who served briefly in the war as ambulance driver, later observed that it was "...the most colossal, murderous, mismanaged butchery that has ever taken place on earth. Any writer who said otherwise lied. So the writers either wrote propaganda, shut up or fought". The embedded reporters wrote propaganda.

Philip Gibbs wrote of the bombardment that opened the Battle of Vimy Ridge in April 1917: "It was a beautiful and devilish thing, and the beauty of it, and not the evil of it, put a spell upon one's senses." Describing the infantry's advance against German trenches he reported: "They went in a slow, leisurely way, not hurried, though the enemy's shrapnel was searching for them. 'Grand fellows,' said an officer lying next to me on the wet slope. 'Oh, topping'" (Gibbs 1917: 179).

This "beautiful" and "leisurely" collision between flesh and hot, flying steel cost the main allied force of Canadian troops dear. At Vimy, there were 3,598 killed and 7,004 wounded in three days. Gibbs, writing for a British audience, even avoids clarity about the preponderance of Canadian soldiers in the assault. He writes of "English, Scottish and Canadian troops," though the majority involved in the action he describes were Canadian. It hardly matters, to Gibbs who makes no pretence of objectivity; the soldiers are "we," not "they".

In his post war memoir, *Adventures in Journalism*, Gibbs explained: "We identified ourselves absolutely with the Armies in the field... We wiped out of our minds all thought of personal scoops and all temptation to write one word which would make the task of officers and men more difficult or dangerous. There was no need of censorship of our despatches. We were our own censors" (Gibbs 1923).

Lovace confirms (1978) that formal censorship has been unfairly blamed for British newspapers' glorification of the First World War. Self-censorship by reporters, editors and proprietors played a more important role. In this respect, the *Guardian's* editor C. P. Scott, who zealously "enforced the principles of civil and religious Liberty", edited in harmony with his Conservative nationalist peers. Scott dismissed as "too damaging for publication" a letter from a wounded corporal in which the soldier revealed that he had seen conscripts shelled by friendly fire (Wilson 1970: 142).

Journalism's failure to tell the truth about the 1914-1918 carnage

So, editors and proprietors share ultimate responsibility for professional journalism's failure between 1914 and 1918 to tell the public the truth about the brutal, squalid war fought in their name. As a result, a student wishing to understand the reality of the Western Front learns more from the poems of Rupert Brooke and Wilfred Owen, or from paintings such as *The Ypres Salient at Night* and *The Menin Road* by Paul Nash than from contemporary newspaper reports.

But journalists have consciences, and the pioneer embedded reporters of the British press failed, abjectly, to exercise theirs. For them, embedding was a Faustian pact from which they emerged diminished along with the titles they wrote for. In the clash of cultures between liberal fourth estate ideals and the drilled, obedient hierarchy of army and state, military and civil power triumphed without having to try very hard. Embedding helped power to defeat truth, just as it was designed to.

Politicians and the military learned the lesson; embedding is a convenient way to encourage journalists to privilege the security and strategy of the state over freedom of speech. It trades access for obedience. Some journalists learned too. The Front Generation was deeply embittered about reporting that sanitised the hell they had endured. The great clash of ideologies that emerged from their suffering nurtured enduring examples of the excellence conflict reporting can produce when journalists are free to witness what they choose, to gather facts unimpeded and to report honestly.

Two fine examples of frontline reporting conducted by non-embedded reporters emerged from a conflict in which both sides deployed ideologically partisan and embedded correspondents to their own advantage: the Spanish Civil War. Preston records that in 1938, Martha Gellhorn wrote to her friend, Eleanor Roosevelt:

You must read a book by a man named Steer; it is called the *Tire of Gernika*. It is about the fight of the Basques — he's the London *Times* man

-- and no better book has come out of the war and he says well all the things I have tried to say to you the times I saw you, after Spain. It is beautifully written and true, and few books are like that, and fewer still that deal with war (Preston 2008: 263).

Steer was George Lowther Steer, a short, slight, redhead born in East London in 1909 and educated at Winchester College and Christ Church College, Oxford, where he obtained a double first in Classical Greats.

Steer's courageous reporting of the Spanish civil war

Before travelling to Spain he had covered the German reoccupation of the Saarland for the *Yorkshire Post* and the second Italo-Ethiopian war of October 1935-May 1936 as a special correspondent for *The Times*. He arrived in Spain, again as a special correspondent for *The Times*, in August 1936, less than a month after General Jose Sanjurjo launched the nationalist military coup against Spain's democratically elected Popular Front government that started the civil war.

Initially working under the supervision of Nationalist press censors, Steer witnessed brutal repression and saw civilians murdered, including women who complained that their husbands had been killed by the Falange and Guardia Civil (ibid: 191-238). He was expelled from Nationalist territory, almost certainly on ideological grounds, and returned to Spain in January 1937, landing in Republican territory at Bilbao.

Steer was immensely impressed by the Basque people, a sentiment that probably reinforced his courage when, on the 26 and 27 April 1937, he spent hours interviewing survivors and collecting evidence in the ruins of Guernica. In *The Tree of Guernica*, he would later write that a journalist is "a historian of every day's events, and he has a duty to his public". In the ruins of the Basque capital he performed superbly the journalist/historian's job as a meticulous recorder of reality.

Armed with the evidence of his own eyes, numerous interviews carefully recorded in his notebook, and the remains of German incendiary bombs that he collected from the ruins, George Steer filed a report describing the Luftwaffe

bombardment that destroyed Guernica and inaugurated the style of intense aerial bombardment that would soon torture British conurbations including London, Coventry and Clydebank.

His sober, descriptive prose identified this as a new form of warfare. It was published on 28 April in *The Times* and *The New York Times*. On 29 April it appeared in translation in the French Communist newspaper *L'Humanité* (ibid: 280), where it was read by Pablo Picasso and inspired his famous painting (Chipp 1988: 58-70).

The courage of Jay Allen

Comparable with Steer's report from Guernica in terms of its value as a first draft, and even more impressive as testament to its author's courage, is *Chicago Tribune* correspondent Jay Allen's treatment of the Nationalist massacre of Republican prisoners at Badajoz in August 1936.

Jay Allen was among the best informed correspondents to cover the Spanish civil war. He had lived in the country for several years prior to 1936 and had become intimately acquainted with its politics. He knew senior figures on both sides of the conflict, and had interviewed Franco, but his sympathies undoubtedly lay with the Republic, and specifically with the Socialist Party.

Allen had visited Badajoz four times in the year before August 1936 while conducting research for a book about agrarian reform in Spain (Preston op cit: 296-297). He heard rumours of mass killings by the Nationalist troops who had captured the town while he was reporting from Lisbon on the delivery by a German ship, the *Kamwin*, of eight hundred tons of military equipment destined for General Franco's forces. He set off immediately to cross back from Portugal into Spain.

Allen's report, filed from Elvas in Portugal on 25 August 1936, deserves to be read by every student of journalism. It reveals a crime against humanity, the cold-blooded butchery of thousands of Republican, Socialist and Communist militiamen and militawomen by Nationalist firing squads.

He obtained his story by interviewing witnesses and by traveling through the town, incognito. He did so with the conscious intention of remaining independent, recording: "I believe I was the first newspaperman to set foot there without a pass and the inevitable shepherding by rebels, certainly the first newspaperman who went knowing what he was looking for."

Reporters who avoided "deliberate shepherding" wrote enduring journalism that revealed truth about the terror perpetrated on both sides of that conflict. Though they were outnumbered by partisan colleagues, many of whom meekly accepted shepherding and censorship, they penned first drafts which have served as secure foundations for future historical research.

Independent reporting of the Second World War

In the Second World War, a conflict during which taking the Allied side required no moral compromise, independent reporting continued to prove its worth and to demonstrate, emphatically, the importance of balancing the perspective offered by embedded correspondents with other, more diverse material.

Among the clearest examples of the usefulness to representative democracy of independent reporting of conflict was compiled during the London Blitz by Peter Ritchie Calder, a *Daily Herald* reporter, who later worked as a propagandist in the Political Warfare Executive.

Calder's achievement is to demonstrate through meticulous eyewitness reporting of the Blitz in the East End of London, the incompetence of government preparations for aerial bombardment, and, crucially, for the care and support of those who survived it. His best work is collected in a slim volume, *The Lesson of London*, published in 1941 as part of the Searchlight Books series edited by T. R. Fyvel and George Orwell (Calder 1941).

In narratives laced with authentic quotes and detail, Calder reveals the absence of planning to deal with homelessness and the dearth of facilities to assist its victims. The government had prepared to bury tens of thousands of dead. It had made no effective arrangements to accommodate, feed and console survivors.

His criticism of "official blundering" is fearless. He describes "Magnot lines of official obstructions" separating the needy from help and condemns the bureaucracy of London boroughs as "a jig-saw of parochialism" and "a cockpit of jealous officials as jealous of their territorial integrity as a Beer Baron of his precinct".

Calder reported that Blitzed Londoners were not fighting for "a democracy of privileges and slums" and that during the intense aerial bombardment of Britain's capital by the Luftwaffe, "an epoch went crashing down in the angry brown dust of crumbling property". He depicts class tension: "In the perspective of history, the Lesson of London may be that 'Black Saturday,' September 7th 1940, was as significant in its own way as Bastille Day, July 14th 1789," in a style that is very different from the "all in it together," message assiduously promoted by the Ministry of Information.

Calder's reporting broke with the docile consensus among journalists that had produced the "myth of Dunkirk". It predicted the bold, reforming mood that would be made policy by the Labour government elected in 1945. It demonstrates the value to the public sphere (Habermas 1991) of bold, independent, fact-based journalism published in mainstream newspapers with substantial readerships and concomitant social and political influence.

Post 1945: influential reporting from conflict zones continues

The period post 1945 saw the production of plentiful cases of influential reporting from conflict zones by non-embedded journalists. Some noteworthy examples include; James Cameron's work for *Picture Post* in the Korean War, John Pilger's coverage of the Vietnam War for the *Daily Mirror*, Robert Fisk's reporting of the September 1982 massacres at the Lebanese refugee camps at Sabra and Chatila for *The Times* (Carey 1987), Allan Little, of the BBC's award winning reports for BBC Radio from former Yugoslavia (Little 1996) and Allan Little and Jeremy Bowen's coverage for BBC Radio and Television of the February 1991 destruction of the al-Amiriyah bunker in Baghdad during the first Gulf War.

Such independent coverage has paid dividends in Afghanistan too. Among the most compelling examples is the work for the *Guardian* of Gaith Abdul-Ahad, an Iraqi journalist and deserter from Saddam Hussein's army, who advertises his own work online at the website www.unembedded.net. Abdul-Ahad's reconstruction through witness interviews of the events following a Nato airstrike on two fuel tankers in the Charadrah district of Kunduz province in northern Afghanistan, conveys a powerful impression of the physical, emotional and economic forces unleashed among Afghan civilians. (Abdul-Ahad 2009a).

His investigation of fraud in Afghanistan's electoral process during the 2009 Presidential election and his intrepid excursions to interview Taliban fighters, arms traders, opium farmers and tribal leaders in rural Afghanistan have supplied priceless and salutary context (Abdul-Ahad 2009b). Such reporting attains the highest standards of depth and accuracy. It is compiled at immense risk to the reporter. In December 2009 Abdul-Ahad and two Afghan journalists with whom he was working were held hostage for six days by an armed gang in the mountainous region of Afghanistan bordering Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province (Taylor 2009).

In September 2009, Stephen Farrell, a *New York Times* reporter who resolved to investigate the Kunduz fuel-tanker bombing, was also abducted together with his interpreter, Sultan Munadi. The men were held by Taliban fighters. Mr. Farrell was rescued when British soldiers assaulted the compound in which he was held. Mr. Munadi died in crossfire. Farrell's release came about approximately three months after another unembedded reporter, David Rohde, also of the *New York Times*, escaped after being held hostage for seven months in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Schmitt 2009).

Other unembedded reporters, including Yvonne Ridley of the *Daily Express* (in 2001) and Kosuke Tsunooka, a Japanese reporter (in 2010) have been kidnapped and detained while attempting to cover Afghanistan without the formal protection of the military.

Unembedded reporting from Afghanistan today

Despite the risks, unembedded reporters continue to work in Afghanistan. The BBC's Kabul bureau is routinely staffed by a correspondent operating independently of ISAF (author's interview, 8 March 2010). This journalist's security is protected by a private force recruited by the BBC. The arrangement has facilitated coverage of social and economic conditions beyond the conflict zones e.g. Allan Little's exploration of economic prospects in Herat for BBC television (BBC News 2010).

The lesson from journalism's history has not been forgotten entirely. Quality broadsheet editors and their counterparts in radio and television know that embedded reporting can easily turn into cheerleading for "our boys". Embedded correspondents know it too. Among the insights offered to the 18 March 2010 conference at Coventry University by reporters recently embedded in Afghanistan was that embedding is safer, because, in Vaughan Smith's words: "You have a lot of guns protecting you," but it reduces the human interest content of coverage and privileges reports concerning combat and military derring-do.

Vaughan Smith showed the conference images of the nuclear mushroom cloud over Hiroshima and children in Vietnam. He said: "In Afghanistan we are doing the mushroom clouds, but not the babies." Embedding tends to produce that outcome and when the dangers of operating independently are extreme the narrowing of journalism's perspective may become acute.

The diverse, chaotic and unlovable market-based news industry, which liberal theorists and democratically elected politicians believe protects liberty and safeguards truth, has understood the compromises inherent in embedded reporting since 1918. It has acknowledged through editorial decisions that, while embedding may be a necessary compromise, it is not an intrinsically virtuous technique.

Before the multimedia era, the news industry performed its duty to democracy by ensuring, whenever possible, that embedded reporting was partnered and

balanced by the work of brave and dissident reporters operating beyond the restrictions embedding imposes. Since the advent of online news it has often deployed user-generated material to convey perspectives not available to professional reporters.

Why the embeds tell only a small fraction of the story

In Afghanistan user-generated content is rare and the difficulties confronting independent journalists are uniquely hard to overcome. Embedding is easier and cheaper. It enables correspondents to witness an important aspect of the conflict. They see ISAF and Afghan soldiers in action. They report on training and reconstruction projects in which ISAF forces are involved. They fill pages, websites and programmes with dramatic reports. They only tell a small fraction of the story.

Embedded reporters do not wholly define their own missions. They are shown things their military sponsors believe they should see. Their liberty to seek out stories and follow leads, already limited by security concerns and, often, by lack of language skills, is further restricted by the terms of their contract with the military.

The bravery and team spirit of military units in conflict zones are intriguing to journalists. The atmosphere they generate is distinct from the atmosphere of a newsroom. But, despite cultural dissonance, many embedded correspondents perceive drama and glamour in military activity. Their response is amplified in newsrooms outside the conflict zone, where the circulation and ratings boosting potential of vivid action stories from the frontline have been familiar to editors for centuries.

The military's interest in ensuring that conflict is depicted in ways that supports their mission is legitimate. Equally important is an accurate first draft of history that can inform electorates in ISAF nations, analyse the consequences of the ISAF mission, investigate allegations of wrongdoing by ISAF forces and their allies and promote social empathy for the victims of war, civilian and military.

Historical precedent offers suggestions that these core journalistic duties have, in the past, been most effectively performed when the work of embedded reporters is partnered and informed by journalism produced by unembedded colleagues operating apart from the military.

Some of the many questions posed by the current Afghan coverage

The news industry's coverage of Afghanistan poses questions that merit empirical research. To what extent does the risk of kidnapping and violence permit non-embedded reporters to gather facts and impressions independently? How many news organisations permit their journalists to work in Afghanistan if they are not embedded and, when this does occur, are they able to work in the zones where conflict is intense?

Does the pulsating glamour and dazzling martial imagery of much embedded reporting squeeze out of news coverage reporting that does not depict combat? Finally, when even embedded correspondents such as Lang and Hamer can lose their lives, is Afghanistan now too dangerous to allow journalism to produce a reliable first draft and so perform effectively its duty to the public sphere?

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Note on the author

Tim Luckhurst is Professor of Journalism at the University of Kent and the founding head of the university's Centre for Journalism. He is best known as a former editor of the *Swissman*, Scotland's national newspaper. He began his career in journalism on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme for which he produced, edited and

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How the media distorted the truth on Afghanistan, ignored it or focused on soldiery valour in the face of evil

Phillip Knightley, author of the seminal history of war reporting, *The First Casualty*, argues that the mainstream media, by deciding that in time of war its best interests lie in supporting the government of the day, has surrendered its right to report and its duty to provide the first draft of history

In south Mumbai, India, on the road to the military cantonment, the navy hospital, and the English cemetery, lies the Church of St John the Evangelist. Built by the British to commemorate the dead of the disastrous First Afghan War of 1838, it is known locally as "the Afghan Church". Just inside the entrance is a marble plaque inscribed: "In memory of the officers, non-commissioned officers and private soldiers, too many to be recorded, who fell mindful of their duty, by sickness or by the sword in the campaigns of Sind and Afghanistan 1838-1843." It is unlikely any current American general, Nato general, British general, Western politician or war correspondent has read this plaque. They should have.

The campaigns of Sind and Afghanistan were an unmitigated disaster and ended in a humiliating rout. After five years of optimistic alliances, skirmishes, "final pushes" and full-on battles, 16,000 British soldiers and their Indian allies began a final retreat from the battlefields of Afghanistan. They were wiped out. Only one, a medical officer, Surgeon Dr William Brydon, survived to tell what had happened.

There was no real apportioning of blame. This was the British Empire at its imperial peak. Military setbacks in far corners of the world were part of life. To have questioned why would have been considered unpatriotic and little short of