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The voice of journalism

In Syria, freelancer demand amidst increasing restrictions

New outlets are happy to reap the rewards of dangerous reporting, so long as freelancers shoulder all responsibility

News organizations are desperate for Damascus-based reporters, so they are calling on freelancers, stretching their own rules against doing so.

“It’s the freelancer hypocrisy—they ignore us until they realize they’re desperate,” says one freelancer whose work appears in major news outlets. Like many sources I spoke to, he did not want to be named. In the British news industry, a reputation for awkwardness virtually guarantees unemployment.

In the July/August issue of *CJR*, Francesca Borri, who freelances from Syria for Italian news outlets, described (http://www.cjr.org/feature/womans_work.php?page=all) conditions where she is sometimes too poorly paid to afford the driver, flak jacket, or insurance that would help mitigate the dangers of reporting there. The risks of reporting from Syria were already daunting. But now, to add to the peril of the gangs of kidnappers—for whom Western journalists have become a prize target—there is also the danger of getting caught in potential American airstrikes and further gas attacks.

Today’s news editors rely on freelancers more than ever because they have too few staff reporters, and those that are still employed may be reluctant to risk their lives. For these reasons, Syria is sometimes called the “freelancer’s war.” Figures for the numbers of journalists killed there bears this out. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, nearly half of the 5650 journalists killed in Syria since the conflict began have been freelance.

But even as outlets rely increasingly on freelancers for foreign coverage, they are making statements against using them in warzones. In February, the UK paper the *Sunday Times* told the *Press Gazette* (<http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/sunday-times-tells-freelances-not-submit-photographs-syria>) that neither it nor its sister paper, the [London] *Times* would be taking freelancers’ work from Syria. At the time, the *Sunday Times* said that after its star correspondent, Marie Colvin, was killed in Homs, editors there did not want to encourage inexperienced freelancers to take unnecessary risks. Four other broadsheets—the *Guardian*, *Independent*, the *Times*, and the *Observer*—all went on the record (<http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/broadsheets-back-sunday-times-decision-decline-freelance-submissions-syria>) saying that they too would refuse to take the work of independent journalists. The BBC also has a policy against using freelancers in Syria.

But it seems that such policies are simply discarded when a major story demands copy and pictures, as illustrated by the gas attack in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta on August 21.

Within hours of the attack, which the US government says killed over 1,400 people, four British news outlets all posted that they were looking for reporters in a closed online forum used by journalists who report from Syria.

Phoebe Greenwood, deputy foreign editor of the *Guardian*, made it plain that the paper was seeking “any freelancers currently working in Damascus.” This despite her paper’s declared prohibition on employing freelancers in Syria.

Greenwood says she was only looking for “corroboration” for the gas story, not to hire someone. But just how a professional journalist would have supplied such information without reporting from the scene is unclear. And, having done so, surely a freelance reporter would seek payment, and probably a byline too.

In truth, there is ample evidence of other news outlets flip-flopping over whether to employ freelancers in Syria. Sean Ryan, associate editor of the *Sunday Times*, says the *Press Gazette* story proclaiming his paper’s refusal to use freelancers in Syria “slightly misunderstood” his position and misquoted a colleague. (The *Press Gazette* says that the quote was taken from an email sent by the newspaper itself.) Apparently the *Sunday Times* has always been willing to do business with responsible, experienced freelancers, though Ryan says that no work from freelancers in Syria has in fact been published since the *Press Gazette* piece.

Freelancers who had previously sold their work from other global conflicts say that, as the war in Syria has developed, their clients come up with ever higher hurdles to clear before they listen to pitches—but they are happy to reap the rewards of dangerous reporting, so long as those freelancers shoulder all responsibility for insurance, possible medical fees, and kidnapping negotiations.

Freelancers who had been used to selling their work to outlets ranging from Sky News and the *Los Angeles Times*, to the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation and Al Jazeera, now find it harder and harder to sell their work. One common trick is to insist the independent reporter leaves Syria before offering his or her work, ensuring the news outlet won’t need to bail the freelancer out of harm’s way. Freelancer Robert King says he was told that Channel 4 News would only take his footage of a frontline hospital in Syria when he had left the area. He eventually sold the material to CNN instead.

Petra Ramsauer, an experienced freelancer who previously worked for Austrian news outlets in Libya and Egypt, found that none would supply the letter of assignment the

Free Syrian Army press office in the border town of Azaz required for her to work. “None of my clients, even my best friends, were prepared to write such a letter,” she says. “If something had happened to me, it would have cost their company an enormous amount of money.”

Richard Spencer, Middle East correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph*, was one of the commissioning editors who sought reporters on the closed online forum to help cover the gas attack. “From a corporate perspective, the management of the *Telegraph* are concerned about the costs of getting people out of kidnap situations,” he says.

The BBC has also found it expedient to break its own rules on using freelancers in Syria. In August, independent journalist Hannah Lucinda Smith filed a voice piece (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-23696829>) for Radio 4 from reporting she had done in Aleppo, at a time when BBC staff reporters had been ordered out of the area. Her dispatch triggered a row among BBC executives because a commissioning editor in radio had ignored a ban on the use of freelance work from Syria that was ostensibly in force throughout BBC News.

Perhaps the charges of double standards simply confirm how hard it is to report the conflict in Syria and how frantic news editors are to obtain reliable coverage. Reporters on the government side operate under rigid censorship. It is not always possible to assess the provenance of activists’ videos. There is no substitute for independent reporters on the ground. Sadly, too few professional news organizations appear willing to accept the responsibilities that come with hiring them.

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