

INTERVIEW

Journalists in War Zones: The Question of Objectivity

An Interview with Photojournalist Laith Mushtaq

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Overview

Media reporting in war zones has changed over the years. The military realised that it needs the media and vice versa. You could call it a marriage of convenience. A better term to use would be a symbiotic relationship between the military and the media where each benefits from the other. As this symbiosis takes place, there are discordant voices discussing freedom of the press and objectivity of journalists. With each war fought there are lessons learnt. The military has learnt that it needs an ally: the media.

Military forces are now embedding journalists into their units in most war zones. You often see journalists in Kevlar jackets reporting from battleships or in Humvee vehicles. How objective are these journalists when they are given front row seats and protection on battlefields? How much are they allowed to report on?

It is vital to point out that armies and humanitarian missions around the world have embedded and continue to embed journalists in their units. Media networks did so with great numbers of journalists during the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq. Some also sent unembedded journalists to the same locations. Whose stories are more accurate? What is the price to pay for being unembedded? Veteran war photojournalist Laith Mushtaq of Aljazeera while in Helsingor, Denmark, in February 2012, gave answers to some of these questions based on his experience in war zones.

Keywords

military forces, embedded journalism, unembedded journalism, Iraq, battlefields, Afghanistan

THE INTERVIEW

Question: In the Vietnam War, journalists were blamed for fuelling the anti-war protests. During the first Gulf War, journalists used to complain that they were not being given access to the battlefield or getting access to information. What has been your experience?

Laith: The Vietnam and Gulf Wars changed the scope of war reporting in the world. I will try to explain the difference between embedded and unembedded journalism based on

my experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. I worked as an embedded journalist in Iraq with the American forces, and in Afghanistan with the French forces. The military forces give you possibilities that you can't get as unembedded journalist. They will provide security and make sure you are safe. They will take you by helicopter to places no one has been to and show you their version of events.

The disadvantage of being embedded is that the forces choose what you will see – in a nutshell, they control everything that you report. Since I was a former soldier in Iraq, I know the army and the media quite well. For example,



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the chosen journalist will be told what they can or cannot report. While in the camp, they will tell you which parts of the camp you can film and which areas you cannot. The general or commanders will tell you which questions they will answer and which ones they will not. There is always someone telling them which questions to answer or not. In unembedded journalism, you reach more people, you get the full story from first hand narratives, but it is very dangerous since you have no security. In both cases, each side tries to front their views to the journalist. I like working unembedded since there is no censorship and no one dictates what or whom I will cover.

Question: Before joining their battalions, the embedded journalists have to sign a contract which restricts when and what will be reported. Do you have any comments on this?

Laith: Sometimes they make you sign a contract that you are going there of your own volition. If anything happens to you, they are not liable. These are their rules and if you are going as an embedded journalist, you have to tow the line or you don't get the access that you need. In most scenarios, you are not free at all since they are in charge of your itinerary: where you will go, when you eat and sleep and who you will interview. There is always an escort with you, for 24 hours, on the battleship or military base.

Going unembedded is the exact opposite. What most media networks do is send one journalist embedded and another unembedded to the same location, and then they compare the stories for accuracy.

Question: Embedded journalism has become the norm in war reporting. Do you think the relationship between the media and the military is changing? And if so, in what direction is it headed?

Laith: The relationship has not changed. The US has faced continued criticism from many media networks over Iraq and Afghanistan. They didn't want to be in the news for five minutes (given little time on air). That's why Congress funded Alhurra (a satellite TV channel that broadcasts in Arabic to viewers in North Africa and the Middle East) to tell the American side of the story. They wanted to have an avenue to justify their actions without criticism. They learnt from the Vietnam War where the media reports led to mass protests and great criticism of the war. The forces treat unembedded journalists as enemies since they show a different side of the story altogether.

Question: Journalists are also being embedded in humanitarian missions by international organisations nowadays, to report on what the missions are doing. Linda Polman, in her book *War Games*, mentions scenarios in Goma, Burundi during the refugee crisis after the genocide

in Rwanda. What's your opinion on embedding journalists in humanitarian missions?

Laith: You are not supposed to accept gifts from anyone. For example, Aljazeera does not allow its journalists to accept gifts. When organisations offer to pay for flights and accommodation, they are already wooing you. Media networks must make sure that they provide these things for their journalists. Freelancers or young journalists need to protect their reputation. Trust is very important in this profession and once you lose it, that's it for you.

Question: What are the perils of unembedded journalism?

Laith: I have been lucky to survive till now. I have lost great friends in the battlefields. This is the price you pay. It can happen even to those journalists who are embedded, since a missile can just be dropped on your secure location and everyone dies. Being kidnapped and facing torture or physical violence is a huge problem faced mainly by unembedded journalists. Despite the dangers involved, an honest journalist is concerned with the realities of war, the plight of civilians, and the true story behind the war. Other journalists are just there to transmit news like a cable. They don't care that much.

Question: What story does the embedded journalist tell and how objective is this journalism? Take the case of the late Tim Herrington and Sebastian Junger, who shot *Restrepo* in Afghanistan while embedded in the US Army.

Laith: If you can tell the story and still be objective that would be great. If you are filming soldiers in a camp, they will always say that everything is fine. We are helping people, building bridges, but eventually the viewers know that is not the truth. They are not stupid. They see the civilian casualties and then see the generals lying about the mistakes they made. This also depends on which unit a journalist is embedded in. If you are with NATO there is more room for you to tell your story and be objective, as compared to being with the American forces. The German and French military will also chaperone you but in the end will give you some leeway to tell your story the way you want. It is vital for any embedded journalist to mention at the end of their report that what the viewers are seeing is what he or she was allowed to report on or see by the military forces.

Question: There have been allegations of war crimes being committed in some of the war zones you have worked. Do you think some journalists are oblivious to the war crimes being committed in Afghanistan? One example would be the Bagram torture and prisoner abuses.



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Laith: The soldiers themselves took most of the photos and videos that came out. When the journalists got hold of the photos and videos they published them so that the world would know what was happening in those places. Some journalists might have heard of the abuses, but, without evidence, they can't come out and make bold accusations against the forces. I don't think a journalist with evidence of such proportions would be silent about it.

Question: Let's look at the case of Afghanistan. Where does a journalist draw the line saying this is free press and this is censorship?

Laith: It depends on the situation, the people, and which military forces you are dealing with. Before you go in, you sign an agreement which stipulates what you can and cannot do. It is the responsibility of the journalist to push for more freedom in their coverage. One must distance themselves from the position of the military in order to be objective. You must remain neutral at all times but it is hard for a lot of journalists not to take sides.

Question: In your experience, how do you, as a war journalist, find the balance between skill and confusion (bombs, gunfire, noise...)?

Laith: The price for working in a war zone is that you end up having psychological damage. But the story must be told, no matter what. Just like doctors who specialise in different parts of the human body, we as journalists

train in different kinds of reporting. With the necessary skills, training and intuition, I have been able to survive the mayhem that I have seen over the years in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Nigeria. Those suffering from war need us to tell their stories. We are the messengers. We suffer and endure a lot of pain to bring you the stories that you see on your TV or newspapers, this is a holy duty.

BIOGRAPHY

Laith Mushtaq was born in Baghdad, Iraq, in 1970. He studied history and then started working as a battlefield cameraman during his military service in Iraq. While in the army, he covered the first Gulf War, which marked the birth of his career in war reporting. In 2003, Mushtaq joined Al Jazeera and went on to cover the first battle of Fallujah during the American invasion of Iraq in 2004. Laith Mushtaq was one of the only two unembedded cameramen during the first battle of Fallujah, in which 600 civilians died.

In 2004 he was sent by Al Jazeera to report from Afghanistan for six months. Between 2005 and 2009 he worked as a senior photographer and filmmaker covering the whole of Africa, Chad, Niger, Mali, Nigeria, Uganda, Darfur, Sudan and Mauritania. He recently reported on the Egyptian revolution and the battles in the western mountains of Libya. During his career, Laith has faced numerous death threats and endured physical violence.

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