

Depicting Icarus: empathy and journalism (guest blog by Victoria Yates)

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2010/07/16/depicting-icarus-empathy-and-journalism-guest-blog-by-victoria-yates/

2010-7-16

“My son was nearly nineteen years old,” Mohammed said. “He wanted to be a doctor. There’s a photograph of him”-he waved his hand vaguely-“somewhere, wearing a stethoscope.” He made no move to get it, as though already discouraged by the effort. His wife begun to cry again.

“Mysterious are the ways of God,” he said. There had been no warning that his son would join the militants. “He willed it. He did it. That is all. He was a good, silent, obedient boy. He was my son, but, more than that, he was my friend. He was here, dawn to dusk, every day, day and night.”

(The New Yorker, Letter from Kashmir: Between the Mountains, March 11 2002)

This sort of story is sadly not a novel one in journalistic discourse. It is the sort of vivid and humanising picture that the best journalists strive to create. Yet, in all its familiarity, if we are honest with ourselves it can be hard to truly recognise that this prose was written about *someone*. Nor do most genuinely connect with the idea that it was written by a reporter who sat looking into the eyes of grieving parents in a way none of the consumers ever do.



Isabel Hilton

It was all the more shocking an image therefore when Isabel Hilton, the author of this extract, began to grow emotional during its recitation at a [POLIS/Granta event at LSE](#) where she and Janine di Giovanni talked about the realities and ethics of war reporting. For all the theoretical work done on journalism and its role in the representation of suffering, its attempts at neutrality, and its uphill struggle against the mass prognosis that is deemed “compassion fatigue”, it was a striking and humbling experience to hear firsthand about the guilt, and ideology driving the frontline where suffering and media collide.

In a world of cynicism and critique for both journalists and their often global, corporate bosses, in which traditional journalistic values are called into question and often described as discarded under economic circumstances it is entirely enlightening to see that the growing impression I’ve received from foreign correspondents reporting on conflict is one of absolute sincerity.

When asked why they choose to do the sort of reporting that their careers have come to epitomize, both di Giovanni and Hilton discussed the centrality of testimony, of being there to document reality so that the excuse “I didn’t know” can never again be valid.

On di Giovanni’s website it states that “her trademark has always been to write about the human cost of war, to attempt to give war a human face, and to work in conflict zones that the world’s press has forgotten”; hardly the capitalist conception of journalism that sceptics are peddling as the norm.

However, it is a key point. There are places the press has forgotten, indeed that it has deemed ‘unworthy’ of coverage. In the globalised media landscape there is such an abundance of raw material that the selection process essentially comes down to a series of criteria relating to relevance, and perceived impact on the consuming public.

This has led to a great deal of debate and discussion about the role of the media and their place not only as a mirror



Di Giovanni

but also a focussing lens that frames certain aspects of reality for distribution. Baudrillard's concept that "the gulf war did not take place" is rooted in this belief that the reportage was so distant and sanitized it is as if it never happened in the US.

While media works to effectively collapse the spatio-temporal distances between viewer and viewed, its process has been criticized as in reality heightening the difference. It is this sense that suffering always happens at a distance that W.H. Auden addressed in his poem "Musee de Beaux Arts" (1938). Auden draws on Breughel's picture *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* stating that in the image "everything turns away/ Quite leisurely from the disaster".

Both di Giovanni and Hilton recognized this competitive, headline driven mentality that often directs editorial decisions, expressing the near constant struggle to get coverage for stories that should be heard, regardless of perceived relevance.



Bruegel's Icarus

[Stuart Webb, a cameraman for Channel 4, recounts](#) talking his way onto a Chinook in order to report on the aftermath of the Pakistan earthquake, explaining to a media-wary officer that "the world's attention was slipping away from Pakistan, and in a cynical world those governments may never pay up on their promises if the TV pictures dry up".

There is in these accounts a real sense of the instrumental importance of reporters who are often as embroiled in the struggle to get the un-noted voices heard as the most dedicated activists. The extent to which these reporters

actively participate in areas of conflict is, however, a topic of debate both within and beyond the media community.

The recent Haiti earthquake has yielded the [heatedly contested actions](#) of Anderson Cooper (CNN correspondent) who carried a child away from a looting mob, all captured neatly for broadcast by his cameraman, and the less reactive event in which Matthew Price (BBC correspondent) and his team took a pregnant woman from the rubble to hospital in their car, captured but without following Price explicitly.

It is undeniable that the ultimate goal of journalism is to take reality and package it into a mediated piece, but I believe what Warren Buffett expressed when he said, "the smarter the journalists are, the better off society is. For, to a degree, people read the press to inform themselves and the better the teacher the better the student body". Voices such as those of di Giovanni and Hilton serve to remind me that we are, at least in some instances, in safe hands.

by Victoria Yates, [Polis Summer School student](#)

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science



Victoria Yates