7-1-1999

Reporting war and conflict

P. Cole-Adams
Sydney Morning Herald

Recommended Citation
Available at:http://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss7/7
Let me begin with a cautionary tale. Back in March 1901, a couple of months after the birth of Australian federation, a bloke called William Lambie – the correspondent whom The Age had sent to South Africa to cover the Boer War – achieved a remarkable but unenviable distinction. He became not only the first Australian war correspondent to be killed in the line of duty, but the first Victorian, military or civilian, to be killed in that ugly conflict. According to an Australian colleague, one A.G. (Smiler) Hales, who was reporting for the London Daily News, he and Lambie were comparing notes behind a group of Tasmanian troops when 40 Boers dashed out of a ravine and demanded they surrender. “We refused and tried to gallop through,” wrote Hales later. “The Boers fired a volley after us, and Lambie fell dead with two bullets through his head and one through his heart.”

Subsequently, the then Premier of Victoria, Mr McLean, told the State Legislative Assembly in a eulogy that Lambie was “an able journalist and an excellent authority on military matters”. Almost a century on, one wonders whether poor, brave Lambie’s editor might not, privately, have had reservations about the Premier’s judgment on both scores. These days, and it was presumably true then too, able journalists are not paid to be heroes but to file copy. Similarly, the editor might have wondered why and how an “excellent military authority” could have contrived to be in the place where he would be the first bloke to be shot.

Perhaps that is the first lesson to be drawn from the sad case of William Lambie. For a reporter, covering conflicts – particularly in countries where one is unfamiliar with the issues, the terrain, the society, the history and, more often than not, the language – is an inherently risky business. Three German journalists were killed in the first 24 hours after NATO troops moved into Kosovo, adding their names to a great many who have died in the Balkans, not to mention Latin America, Africa and Asia in recent years. Increasingly – and I really do not think it was quite like this in my war-reporting days, except in
to write polemics, woo the opinion-page editor, but stay away from the news.

Let me make the point that there are significant differences in covering a conventional war and reporting insurrections, so-called civil wars (a contradiction in terms, surely) and revolutions. The latter are messy and arguably more dangerous for those who have to report them, but at least journalists can usually talk to both sides. Certainly this was true in Northern Ireland, and it was apparently true of East Timor too. It is different when you are sent off to report a brawl between nations or between rival armies which each control territory. When you find yourself, as I did, covering an Arab-Israeli war or what the British called the Falklands war and the Argentines called the Malvinas war. You are in a sense the hostage of one side unless you insist on being excessively brave, or foolish, by trying to cross no-man's land. Remember the Balibo tragedy of 1975?

Assuming you are a sensibly devout coward, you are stuck on one side of the military divide or the other. (I covered Yom Kippur from Israel and the Malvinas from Buenos Aires.) This presents challenges. There is a natural, decent tendency to sympathise, even identify, with the people whose sufferings you are witnessing. Worse, as members of a more or less captive audience, you are fed daily doses of propaganda, cooked with varying degrees of subtlety, by well-trained official liars. Worse still, reporters suspected of being too diligent may be subjected to more insidious pressures, ranging from lack of cooperation, to minor harassment, outright intimidation or deportation. Geoff Kitney, the senior journalist whom the *Sydney Morning Herald* sent to Belgrade at the outbreak of hostilities earlier this year, was declared persona non grata shortly afterwards and ordered out of Yugoslavia. He never was told why, but presumably booting him out was in part a message to other nosey reporters. Be nice, or else! One result of Kitney’s forced departure was to deprive my newspaper of its best defence against any allegation that it was presenting a one-sided picture. That defence is, of course, to have correspondents on both sides. The other is to send people whom you trust to send fair and accurate reports.

One of the other problems of covering conventional wars is censorship. At least, it used to be: the information technology revolution – specifically the laptop computer, the high speed modem and vastly improved telecommunications systems – have made it much more difficult for even the most highly developed nations to impose censorship in the way they used to. I remember, when I was in Tel Aviv in 1973, a colleague ringing me and asking, idly but unwisely, in the course of a chat about my expenses: “How are things on the Golan Heights?” There was a click on the line, and a suave voice broke in. “I do hope you have cleared your answer with the military censor, Mr Cole-Adams.”

The communications revolution works both ways. It is easier for us to get information out, but it is also easier for them to find out
compromise. There comes a moment in every daily cycle when the reporter has to go with what he or she has got, knowing that all or the facts are not in, that things are still happening that might change his or her story or, worse, make it look ridiculous in next morning’s newspaper or broadcast. Obviously, there is an alternative, which is not to file. There are occasions when that may be the sensible, even courageous, thing to do, but it is not an option much favoured by editors.

In my view, the best policy is almost always to file, acknowledging in the copy that the situation is still, as we say, developing, and not pretending that informed speculation is revealed truth. Some of your more gung-ho colleagues may accuse you of a cop-out; some of the more fatuous armchair critics in media studies departments may crow from the safety of retrospect that you got it wrong anyway; but you can at least console yourself with the thought that you have tried to deal fairly with your readers. Besides, there is always a brand new edition next day. Remember, one of the most famous cables ever sent by a foreign editor to a foreign correspondent was received by a British journalist who, 24 hours earlier, had scooped the world by prematurely reporting the death of the then Prime Minister of Iran. “Your story still exclusive,” it read. “Please explain.”

Oddly enough, I have noticed that the temptation to write too dogmatically about complex situations, to assume an authority not based on knowledge, tends to be greatest in an inexperienced reporter’s first days in unfamiliar territory. This is partly because editors like their correspondents to be seen to hit the ground running. It is an unfortunate law of the game that a journalist sent to cover a conflict is most likely to make a splash on the front page when he is least equipped to get the story right. I think the best way of handling that newcomer’s dilemma is to discipline yourself to stick to describing, as graphically and accurately as you can, what you actually see and hear. The real professionals do not chance their arms at writing analysis or making predictions until they have spent some days getting their bearings, reading every bit of background they can lay their hands on, listening (with the help of an interpreter if necessary) to locals, expatriates, diplomats and, yes, other reporters who do know their way around.

Now let’s move into trickier territory. Contrary to widespread belief, reporters, like the general run of humanity, are impressional, even emotional beings. They carry the normal burden of prejudices and preconceptions. When covering situations of violence and misery, that burden has to be handled with care. My own view, admittedly old-fashioned since the invention of ‘new journalism’, is that the best defence against the temptations of self indulgence is to decide that, while true objectivity is an unattainable ideal, it is still one worth pursuing. To masquerade as a reporter while promoting a cause is a betrayal of what our profession is supposed to stand for. If you want
what we have been up to. Long gone are the days when you could file a story in reasonable confidence that those who might be enraged by it were unlikely to read it until you were well and truly out of the country. An East Timorese pro-integration militia leader recently made a death threat against allegedly biased Australian journalists. “I know who they are,” he said. “I have the Internet.”

There is one more dilemma that needs to be acknowledged, although I doubt that it can ever be satisfactorily resolved. It is one that relates most obviously to television crews who are a lot more visible than fat reporters with small notebooks. How do you strike the right balance between the duty to report what is happening in a time of civil unrest and the real risk that the very presence of cameras and reporters will make matters worse and provide precisely the sort of publicity that the demonstrators or insurgents seek? What do you do? Stay away, and be accused of failing to report the news? Or go, and be accused of helping to create the news? The conundrum is terrible. Foreign correspondents are paid to live there.

PETER COLE-ADAMS is the defence and foreign affairs correspondent for the Sydney Morning Herald. This is a revised version of the speech he delivered to the World Association of Press Councils’ Oceania Regional Conference, Brisbane, 22-23 June 1999.