

Why We Need to Hear the Voiceless: Media Coverage of Civilians in War

Written by Sarah Holewinski and Josh Yager

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SARAH HOLEWINSKI AND JOSH YAGER, FEB 9 2008

It's impossible to pick up the paper or turn on the TV these days without the headlines bleeding together: "Dozens Killed After Suicide Blast in Baghdad," "7 Children Killed in Airstrike in Afghanistan" or "20 Die in Somalia Blast." From the news, it seems civilians caught in combat on today's battlefields hardly have a chance. Compared to their military counterparts, that may be true. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, in World War I, nine troops were killed for every civilian. Now, ten civilians die for each soldier. It's no wonder the headlines are grim.

The good news is that civilians who may have died in previous wars are more likely to live through the fighting today. Modern medicine, more precise weapons used to combat counterinsurgencies, rules governing the protection of civilians – and public outrage when they're not followed – have increased the odds of survival.

The problem is that the people who live to tell the tale so rarely get the chance. The widows, the orphans, the ones with missing limbs, the ones living in rubble instead of homes don't often make the news in Western media – and they're the ones whose stories stand the best chance of changing what we know – or don't know – about the true cost of war.

American military officials learned in Vietnam that using enemy combatant death tolls, or "body counts," to measure success in an insurgent war is fruitless and misleading. But in the process, civilians in war zones – like Iraq and Afghanistan – have become casualties of the lesson. It's especially true for the ones who can walk, or crawl, away.

Consider the case of Manal and Aliya – young cousins from Ba'aquaba, Iraq – whose minivan was driving past a US checkpoint in 2005 when troops opened fire. Each woman lost her husband, each one lost a child and another family member was killed. Associated Press reported the story as "Five Killed at Checkpoint Shooting." That may have been the story of the day. But what about the next day?

After Manal and Aliya tried to pull their family members from the fiery car, they had to make their way home alone – one permanently blinded by shrapnel and the other paralyzed by bullets lodged in her spine. Iraq's medical infrastructure is so badly broken they didn't get medical help, and their emotional wounds will likely never heal.

The irony is that even as the 24-hour cable channels and the Internet create a huge and growing potential audience for stories like these, news organizations are drawing down their bureaus overseas. The reporters left behind are increasingly dependent on military and government officials and local fixers to fill in the blanks.

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Enterprise journalism in a war zone has always been risky, but perhaps never more so than in Baghdad since the US invasion. If you believe the surge statistics, the situation for Iraqis is getting better, but for journalists, it's arguably getting worse. It's rare to see Western media travelling without military escort outside the Green Zone. Many don't leave the hotels and compounds where their bureaus are located. Doing so means putting their lives directly at risk, along with the lives of anyone seen talking to them. So independently confirming anything, let alone reporting the full impact of deaths and injuries among local civilians can be all but impossible.

Though it does have advantages, the "military embed" system of pairing journalists with fighting units, may not make that any easier. On one hand, reporters get access and protection in a sphere outside any they could otherwise visit. On the other, they risk falling firmly inside the military's own sphere of influence – and reporting the stories their uniformed hosts want reported, in the way they want them reported. As James Hill of the New York Times said "...if you're in a convoy, you're not saying, 'Hey, that's a good picture. Let's stop and take it.'"

Often, the reason reporters aren't given easy access to civilian wounded is that those stories aren't good news. America and its allies aren't the only ones who understand that the war of perception is a war worth winning. The Taliban issue press releases like a well-oiled machine, blaming NATO air strikes for causing casualties even before the smoke clears. Journalists being shuttled from one bombing to another are left with a tough call: report on what they're told by official sources or leave a story untold. Often, they find themselves doing both at once.

Every few months, a major news outlet does run a piece about civilian suffering – usually one that involves an injured child and a conspicuous show of bravery and compassion to get help. The closer a story hits to home, the bigger a story it is.

CNN's coverage of "Youssef" – an injured Iraqi boy brought to the United States for surgery – has been so extensive because it became a kind of local news and because it had a happy ending. Youssef got help, but what of the many thousands who don't? In a perfect world, civilians and their loved ones suffering in wars around the globe would have their stories told in much the same way as the families of the September 11th victims. They don't deserve any less.

Leaving wounded civilians voiceless adds insult to injury, robbing them of the dignity – and the assistance – that comes from recognition. Marginalization fuels extremism. So while there are tremendous hazards in reporting their stories, there are possibly even larger ones in overlooking them.

Sarah Holewinski is executive director of Campaign for Innocent Victims in Conflict and Josh Yager is a CBS News producer who covered the US invasion of Iraq.