

# COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

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## PLUS

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# Media darling

Malala Yousafzai's long and delicate dance with the press

BY SHAHAN MUFTI

In 2009, *The New York Times* posted a two-part documentary on its website about Pakistan's battle against Taliban militants. At the center of the documentary was an 11-year-old girl from the Swat region in northern Pakistan named Malala Yousafzai, and her father, Ziauddin. The story begins in early January of that year, when the Taliban and the Pakistani military fought for control of the Swat Valley. Malala's home was Mingora, the largest city in the valley and a focal point of the conflict. ¶ Today, of course, the world knows Malala as the courageous girl who became

an international *cause célèbre* after the Taliban shot her in 2012. Last year, she was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize and published a memoir, *I Am Malala*. But in 2009, to the world beyond Pakistan at least, she was just another girl trying to better herself in a troubled land. The narrative arc of the film follows the family into exile during the fighting, and also the personal and political evolution of Malala and her father, a community organizer and the founder of the girls' school where Malala studied.

When we first meet Malala at the outset of the film, she is sitting next to Ziauddin. "I want to get my education," she says, "and I want to become a doctor." She then begins to weep. Over the six months, as captured in the two parts of the documentary, we see Malala shift from being just one of many students in her school to someone determined to make a difference. "I have a new dream," she says as she prepares to return home toward the end of the film. "I must be a politician to save this country." In the end, we see her, her father, and a few others meet with the late Richard Holbrooke, who at the time was President Obama's top official in the region, to discuss the situation in Swat.

In her autobiography, Malala writes that her "father was in a bad mood" the day the *Times* cameras first came into their home. One of Ziauddin's friends had persuaded him to participate in the project, she explains, but her uncle said "over and over again that it was too risky to have cameras in the house."

As for Malala, "I had done a lot of television interviews," she writes, "but I had never done anything like this." The camera followed her "even as I said my prayers and brushed my teeth." But the family had decided to cooperate. "My father knew this could be our megaphone to the outside world."

Malala and her father had already been interviewed dozens of times on TV, radio, and in print in Pakistan, often as a father-daughter team. The activist-father and his eloquent, telegenic daughter were leading a charge against the Taliban administration in Swat at a time when many in their community were afraid to speak up. When it came to the Taliban's campaign to close girls' schools in the valley, the Yousafzai family was threatened ideologically but also financially—education was, after all, the family business.

Interactions with the media have shaped much of Malala's young life, but her relationship with the media has too often been discussed in simplistic terms. Her detractors portray her as a media pawn, manipulated by a bevy of governments, militaries, and ideologically motivated news outlets to further their various agendas. Supporters, meanwhile, have cast her as Pakistan's Mother Teresa, a saintly figure who speaks and acts only from a place of purity.

The truth of Malala's relationship with the press is much more complex, and the *Times* documentary is representative of the delicate dance that the father-daughter team has participated in for years with the national and



**Savvy source** Malala Yousafzai, who was shot in the head by the Taliban for campaigning for girls' education, poses for pictures before an event launching her memoir, *I Am Malala*, at the Southbank Centre in London, October 20, 2013.

international media. They have let the media in, sometimes against their better judgment, and always with an eye to what the spotlight might do for them and their ambitions. At different times Malala has been an anonymous source, a named source, a character, and an expert in media stories. In each of these roles, she and her father found a platform for their admirable mission of educating girls. But in doing so they also became players in a multifaceted struggle between militant organizations, the Pakistani state, and the US government and military, in which information and news have been a most-potent weapon.

MALALA SETS UP HER AUTOBIOGRAPHY WITH A PROLOGUE that describes her day on October 9, 2012—"the day when everything changed." She was riding home from school with 20 of her classmates and three teachers. They had just turned a corner off the main road when a young, bearded man in light-colored clothes waved the van down. Another young man, wearing a handkerchief around his face, approached the open rear of the vehicle. It was in the few heartbeats before the man swung onto to the tail of the van that Malala's best friend said to her: "Look, it's one of those journalists coming to ask for an interview."

For an instant, Malala was probably prepared to slip into the "interview," a discreet social interaction that she had practiced endlessly and at which she excelled. Malala was expecting a microphone to be thrust in her face, and instead saw a black Colt .45.

It was not entirely unwarranted for the 16-year-old girl to mistake her would-be assassin for a journalist. Journalists had hovered around Malala—and she around them—for years. She made her first television appearance at age 11 on a Pashtun-language channel in Pakistan to talk about the Taliban influence in her valley. The BBC later published her blog under a pseudonym and brought her writing to a global audience. She took journalism courses offered by the London-based Institute of War and Peace Reporting in Pakistan. She took her first airplane ride, to the megalopolis of Karachi, for a television interview. In her downtime she watched *Ugly Betty*, the TV show about a girl thrown into the deep end of the New York magazine world, and "dreamed of one day going to New York and working on a magazine like her." So inundated was her life with the news media that when her friends at school decided to throw her a surprise party after she won the National Peace Award, they went with the most believable

cover story: a group of journalists was waiting to interview her at school.

Even the Taliban came into Malala's life through the radio waves. Fazlullah, a self-styled mullah and the leader of the Taliban in the Swat region, began preaching his message over an FM radio frequency in 2006, when Malala was 9 years old. FM radio was a revolutionary platform introduced, along with private satellite television, by Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's military ruler at the time.

Radio gave the mullah access to people inside their homes, a highly private space in Pashtun culture. Radio Mullah, as he became known around Swat, even had access to women, who have traditionally been excluded from public discourse. "Women would tell him their dreams and he would pray for them," Malala writes in her book. Her mother, she says, "enjoyed" his stories.

Fazlullah also used the FM frequencies illegally, filling airtime with Koran recitations and statements attributed

by wading through reams of conflicting press releases. But when the war with the Taliban entered Swat, the media were faced for the first time with covering an actual war—a bloody war with real events, real sources, and real characters.

The people of Swat were caught in the middle. "The media in Swat were under pressure to give positive coverage to the Taliban," Malala writes in her book. "But many local journalists were unhappy about what was happening to their valley and they gave us a powerful platform, as we would say things they didn't dare to." In such a situation, Malala's voice stood out. In an interview by ATV, Pakistan's only private Pashtun-language channel, Malala was interviewed for the first time, along with a dozen or so girls, "about girls dropping out of school due to the militancy."

Malala instantly impressed. While most other girls stopped appearing for fear of reprisals by the Taliban, Malala began offering herself for more interviews. With the support of her father, she developed her skill at reading journalists and responding to their questions. Malala also became a faithful believer in the power of the interview to change the course of history. One day, in 2007, she arrived at the offices of Geo News, one of the largest TV news outlets in Pakistan, and saw a wall of screens tuned to dozens of stations broadcasting simultaneously in Pakistan. Malala had an epiphany: "The media needs interviews. They want to interview a small girl, but the girls are scared." But she knew that she was different. "I have a father who isn't scared, who stands by me." Malala submitted to the power of the media with the zeal of a convert.

MALALA BURST ONTO THE INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH-LANGUAGE news media scene, anonymously and unexpectedly, in 2009. An editor for the BBC's Urdu service was searching for a female teacher or a young girl who could document her life under Taliban rule in Swat, when he met Malala's father. The editor asked Ziauddin if he had any ideas. "Why not me?" Malala remembers asking her father.

To introduce her to his journalistic concept, the editor told Malala about Anne Frank and the diary she kept under Nazi rule. But instead of leaving Malala with a pen and paper, the editor began working closely with her over the phone, like a reporting partner, or a source. "He would guide me, asking me questions about my day, and asking me to tell him small anecdotes or talk about my dreams," writes Malala. The editor would then post her responses as weekly diary entries on the BBC's Urdu website. The blog appeared under the pseudonym "Gul Makai." The editor instructed Malala that she must not let anyone, not even her best friends at school, know about the scheme, as it would put her life in danger.

This was a more intricate and involved journalistic process than what Malala was used to with the Pakistani media, and she revealed her more personal and honest thoughts. It "proved to be such a hit, the blog was translated into English," Jon Williams, the BBC's world news editor, later wrote. It was posted on the main BBC website in early 2009. The BBC also made a recording of the diary using another girl's voice. "I began to see that the pen and the words that come from

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**'I began to see that the pen and the words that come from it can be much more powerful than machine guns, tanks or helicopters,' Malala recalls in her book.**

to the prophet Muhammad, some of which spoke of the importance of women staying hidden from the public eye. He directed his followers to destroy television sets and DVD players, instruments that he claimed threatened public morality. This was not exactly revolutionary talk in the conservative region of Swat, and the government initially chose to ignore him.

Soon, though, Radio Mullah began inveighing against the state. He railed against the polio-vaccination campaign, which he claimed was a Western plot to render Muslims infertile, and preached against education for girls, which put him squarely at odds with the Yousafzais. In summer 2007, after the military killed hundreds of religious students in a standoff at a mosque in Islamabad, Fazlullah declared war against the Pakistani army. The military sent troops into Swat, but the offensive failed and by 2009 Fazlullah had effectively taken control of the entire Swat Valley.

Before this, Pakistan's fight against the Taliban had been limited to the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. It had been raging for years, and the media had been severed from the isolated and autonomous region. For the most part, the media covered the intermittent conflict in the tribal areas

it can be much more powerful than machine guns, tanks or helicopters,” Malala recalls in her book.

But through the process of working with the BBC, Malala was also learning more about the art of the interview and the complexities of journalistic storytelling. “I got to know the kind of things Hai Kakar [the editor] wanted me to talk about,” she writes. “He liked personal feelings and what he called ‘pungent sentences,’ and also the mix of everyday life with the terror of the Taliban.” Malala gave the interviewer what he wanted, and she was rewarded. “It was thrilling to see my words on the website.”

In May 2009, a few months after *The New York Times* had posted the first part of its documentary about Malala, a newly elected Pakistani government signed a peace deal with the Taliban in Swat. Musharraf’s unsuccessful attempt to dislodge the militants from the valley had left the new government with few ideas, and it ceded the judicial and administrative responsibilities in the valley to Fazlullah and his armed followers. The peace deal became a lightning rod in the relationship between the United States and Pakistan. Washington, which was already knee deep in the Pakistani conflict in the country’s tribal areas bordering Afghanistan, was pulled deeper into Pakistan’s internal affairs. “I think that we cannot underscore the seriousness of the existential threat posed to the state of Pakistan,” Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told the House Foreign Affairs Committee in April 2009. If the Taliban were to overrun the Pakistani capital, Islamabad, Clinton told Fox News, “then they would have the keys to the nuclear arsenal of Pakistan, and we can’t even contemplate that.”

I was based in Pakistan at the time and had been reporting from there since 2007, closely tracking the conflict in Swat. The idea that Fazlullah’s militants were poised to overrun the Pakistani capital and snatch the keys to the country’s nuclear arsenal was ludicrous. The statements were simply diplomatic and military rhetoric designed to ratchet up pressure on the Pakistani government to disengage from the peace efforts with the Taliban, whose brethren the Americans were struggling to defeat next door in Afghanistan.

The American news media, though, provided a shrill soundtrack of overwrought panic, uncritically parroting the alarmist statements from the Obama administration. *The New York Times* published an editorial titled “60 Miles from Islamabad,” in reference to what had become something of a catchphrase to describe how far the Taliban-administered territory had pushed toward the capital. “If the army cannot or will not defend its own territory against the militants,” the editorial asked, echoing Clinton, “how can anyone be sure it will protect Pakistan’s 60 or so nuclear weapons?” The American media were perceived in Pakistan to be Washington’s partner in crime.

The peace negotiations did finally break down in May 2009. The Pakistani military moved into the Swat Valley once again, more decisively this time, dislocating more than a million people who became refugees inside their own country, including Malala and her family. The battle turned out to be relatively easy, and by July 15 the Taliban had been beaten

back. Washington was pleased, and the refugees began returning home.

In late October 2009, two weeks after *The New York Times* aired the second part of its documentary, Secretary of State Clinton visited Islamabad. The *Times* noted in a dispatch that “engaging Pakistan’s unruly media was perhaps Mrs. Clinton’s most important job on this visit.” Newspapers and television, the *Times* said, “drive public opinion more here than in many countries, and the coverage is sharply critical of the United States, tapping into deep Pakistani resentment.” The media, in other words, were becoming a battlefield in the shadowy conflict in Pakistan. Richard Holbrooke, the article said, “is developing a plan to encourage new FM radio stations as a way to counterbalance propaganda from radio stations that fall into the hands of the Taliban or other militants.” Some of the American-backed radio stations took to the airwaves a few months later.

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## Lying in that hospital bed in Birmingham, England, Malala was truly a passive object of the news media—perhaps for the first time. But it didn’t last long.

ON OCTOBER 10, 2013, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS RELEASED A piece about frontrunners for the Nobel Peace Prize, which was to be announced the following day. The first paragraph of the story described the problem with such predictions. “With no clues from the judges in Norway, speculation about the frontrunners for Friday’s announcement is primarily based on the committee’s previous choices and current events.” In other words, there was no real way to know who was being considered seriously by the selection committee, let alone who the frontrunners were. Still, the article went on to list four favorites. Malala Yousafzai was the first nominee mentioned; she was the “bookmakers’ favorite,” the article noted.

In the year since she had been shot by a Taliban militant, Malala’s story had reached epic proportions. It began brewing even before she had reached the hospital bed in Pakistan—her father had to turn off all the television sets in the waiting area that evening, because they were all reporting the news of the shooting and he couldn’t bear to watch. The chief of the Pakistani army, who was aiding in the logistics of Malala’s treatment, followed her progress from his office on TV screens, “one tuned to a local channel in Urdu and the other to Sky News in English,” Malala writes. By the time

she reached the children's hospital in Birmingham, England, a few days later, "A Sky News helicopter was soon circling above, and as many as 250 journalists came to the hospital as far away as Australia and Japan."

Lying in that hospital bed, Malala was truly a passive object of the news media—perhaps for the first time. But it didn't last long. In March 2012, while she was still getting cochlear implants to regain hearing in her left ear that was destroyed by a bullet, *The Guardian* announced that Malala had signed a deal worth a "reported 2 million" pounds for her memoir. Christina Lamb, a journalist who had reported from Pakistan and other Asian and African countries, was chosen to be her co-author. The publication date was set for October 8, 2013, almost exactly a year after the assassination attempt and days before the announcement of the Nobel, for which Malala had already been nominated.

Between the book release, the anniversary of her shooting, other international awards, and the upcoming Nobel announcement, Malala was ubiquitous in the global media during the first week of October last year. She delivered an arresting performance on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. "We spoke up for our rights to every media channel, to every newspaper, that we could," she told Stewart. "And we did not know at that time that our small interview would have an impact or not, but it had." While Malala didn't ultimately win the peace prize, between the flurry of media speculation leading up to the Nobel announcement and her book publicity, *I Am Malala* jumped to number three on *The New York Times* Best Sellers list.

As the Americans embraced her, back in Pakistan, the news media that had first catapulted her into the world of global news began withdrawing its love for her, painting her as just another pawn in the war of words between Pakistan and the US. An article in the *Frontier Post*, the oldest and most respected English-language daily in Pakistan's north-west region, ran an article with the headline, "Malala: The New Dolly." Malala is an "unnaturally engineered character to be used for geopolitical experiments," it said. The Western media, in turn, pounced on the opportunity to cover the bad press Malala received in Pakistan. An article by Reuters explained the phenomenon simplistically: "In a nation thriving on conspiracy theories, some have even doubted the sincerity of her campaign."

In the midst of all this, many journalists and editors wrote confessionals about their relationship with Malala and the Yousafzais. Jon Williams, the BBC's world news editor, posted a piece that stated, "Neither she nor her father was paid" for her blogging. And it was her father who had "decided to disclose her real name," Williams noted. Christina Lamb, Malala's co-author, wrote a long feature for the *Sunday Times* headlined, "My Year With Malala." And the day before Malala's book appeared, *The New York Times* posted another online video produced by Adam Ellick, the reporter who had made the original documentary, along with an article in which Ellick answered "the five questions people often ask me" about Malala.

This new film was titled *The Making of Malala*, and it was reedited footage from Ellick's original work on Swat in 2009.

"This is a story of a young girl, her ambitious father, and the media and the role we all played in her rise and the tragedy that almost took her life," Ellick says in the introductory voiceover. The documentary focused on Malala's father, who in hindsight reminded Ellick "of a parent pushing their kid to become the next tennis star or beauty pageant winner." Ellick lamented the fact that he had not thought enough about Malala's safety at that time, but he ultimately laid the blame at her father's feet.

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"It was the only time in my career," Ellick wrote about his relationship with Ziauddin, "that a source was becoming increasingly interested in a story, while I was becoming increasingly tentative."

But the seduction was mutual and undeniable all along. The problem was not really an overbearing father or an overly enthusiastic press. In the end, Malala was shot because no one, not the Pakistani news media, not the reporters and editors in the American and international press, and not the Yousafzais, recognized how potent a weapon the media had become in the war in Pakistan. This lack of recognition—some might even call it denial—is something that puts all journalists, as well as their sources, in mortal danger every day in Pakistan.

Malala, in the end, appears to be the wisest. In the acknowledgements of her book, which is likely the only section over which she had complete control (Lamb had her own acknowledgements section), she thanks "everyone in Pakistan and all round the world" who prayed for her. She mentions more than two-dozen people and organizations by name. She thanks a motley crew of characters, from the bus driver who drove her to school to Angelina Jolie and Ban Ki Moon—even the chief of the Pakistani army. She thanks her nurse, Fiona Alexander, for handling the media so well. And while she does thank Lamb for "turning into reality what was just a dream," Malala mentions no other journalist. **CJR**

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