

A World of Trouble

Who's a journalist? In today's war zones, the answer matters.

IN NOVEMBER 2008, THE PAKISTANI ARMY LAUNCHED ITS FIRST MAJOR OFFENSIVE against militants in the tribal areas of the country. I was working as a reporter for *The Christian Science Monitor* and had arrived in the border town of Peshawar from Islamabad, prepared to enter the war zone with a military unit as an embedded journalist. It was not an ideal arrangement, and I expected nothing more than a sloppily choreographed dog-and-pony show that would showcase cooperation with the U.S. military aims. But reporters were barred from entering the war zone, and this was the only way to get in legally. It also meant a close, if carefully managed, look at the battlefield. After weeks of wrangling, I had a green light from the military, and I thought that little could go wrong.

Then it went wrong in a manner I had not even considered. When I arrived in Peshawar, my fixer told me he'd heard that the Taliban in the tribal areas had kidnapped a Canadian woman. Over the next few hours, I pieced together from rumors and half-baked accounts that she was a freelance reporter of some sort. I didn't recognize her name, but I gathered that in spite of many warnings by local journalists, she had decided to travel alone into the heart of Taliban country to shoot a documentary.

I called my contact in the Pakistan intelligence agency, the ISI, with whom I had arranged my embed. It was immediately evident that the tone had changed. The colonel, who had been reluctant but helpful so far, was no longer in the mood to accommodate my professional requests. Had I heard about this Canadian woman? he asked. I told him that I had. Did I know her? I did not.

As we spoke, a few things became clear: first, the colonel was not convinced that the woman was a legitimate journalist. He didn't go so far as to accuse of her being a spy or a collaborator with the insurgents, but he did wonder out loud why she was not on anyone's radar if she was working in Pakistan as a reporter. Second, he was somehow holding me—and all English-language journalists—responsible for making his job more difficult. Third, he was going to make sure I paid for the PR nightmare that was already unfolding for him with the Canadian government. "We're not taking in any reporters," he said, and hung up before I could get in a full sentence.

The Canadian, Khadija Abdul Qahaar (formerly Beverly Anne Giesbrecht), was fifty-five years old at the time of her kidnapping. Two years later, she is still in captivity. She was a one-person news organization, the publisher of Jihadunspun.com, a Web site dedicated to chronicling what Qahaar viewed as a war against Muslims waged by America in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. By venturing alone into the

tribal areas, she had obviously put her life in danger. She had also screwed up my story and, after speaking with the colonel, I realized that she had eroded, however slightly, the reputation of the entire foreign press corps covering the war. Qahaar's abduction left many of us foreign correspondents feeling that we had to be extra careful, extra cooperative with the authorities to make up for a major gaffe by someone who was supposed to be "one of us."

As frustrated as I was, I found it difficult to blame Qahaar completely. For more than a year, I had worked in Pakistan as a freelance reporter. I had only weeks earlier become a full-time correspondent and "legal"—eligible to obtain a coveted press pass. I knew all too well that for a freelancer in a war zone, bold (and even reckless) moves—such as the one made by Qahaar—often seem like the only way to get attention, and a paycheck. As a freelancer I too had traveled into the tribal areas with nothing more than a notepad, a camera, and a young fixer by my side. With Pakistan now in an all-out war, nowhere was particularly safe. My closest calls had actually come in Pakistan's largest city, Karachi, when the former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto returned from exile. A bomb exploded in the middle of a massive procession that I was covering, killing nearly one hundred and fifty people. There were dozens of foreign freelanc-



Captive Shane Bauer, one of three U.S. citizens arrested last year in Iran, with his mother during her visit in May.

ers operating from Pakistan during this time, and most of them, at some point, had done something foolish in search of a story. Qahaar's misfortune was that she got caught.

Today, western freelance reporters of all stripes are spread across not just Pakistan but Iraq, Afghanistan, Africa, and Latin America, reporting on the most violent conflicts in the world. War zones have become the training ground for some of the greenest reporters, a way to break into a U.S. news business that has dramatically reduced its footprint in the world, shuttering bureaus and calling correspondents home. For newsrooms with shrunken budgets, freelancers in far-flung hotspots are a godsend. They

tend to be young and hungry and, more to the point, cost a fraction of what staff reporters do. They don't have to be insured; they don't require business cards or press passes or Kevlar vests or hostile-environment training.

This situation is not new. The retreat from foreign coverage has been under way for at least twenty years, and intrepid freelancers have long set off without institutional backing to try to make their own professional breaks. But what is different now is that the financial health of most news outlets has become so dire that their use of—and in some cases reliance on—such lone-wolf reporters has become the norm rather than the exception. Advances in digital

technology, meanwhile, have enabled a new breed of citizen journalist to wander in search of a scoop—or stumble upon one—publishing on their own Web sites and on their own terms. The result is that while not long ago we would have expected a star reporter like Christiane Amanpour to provide the defining reportage from a violent post-election Iran, today it is raw camera-phone video footage of a young woman bleeding to death in the streets of Tehran that defines a moment in history. The people who uploaded this video of Neda Agha-Soltan were awarded a Polk award, one of journalism's highest honors.

Some freelancers have capitalized on the new reality to produce impor-

tant coverage and establish themselves as serious journalists. Chris Albritton, for instance, translated his fearless and incisive freelance war reporting into a bureau chief position with Reuters. Michael Yon, another freelance war reporter who became popular for his coverage of fighting in Iraq, published a book and caught the attention of Bruce Willis, who expressed interest in making a movie based on Yon's experiences.

But given the range of people who roam the world's volatile regions—from academics doing research to tourists with blogs and digital cameras—it isn't surprising that we periodically hear the alarming news of freelance journalists—or someone with a camera who may or may not consider himself a journalist—getting into trouble. The imprisonment of Iranian-American journalist Roxana Saberi by the Iranian government was only the most publicized of recent cases. Shane Bauer, one of the American “hikers” arrested months later in Iran on charges of spying, has also been described as “a published journalist who reported from Darfur, Yemen and Iraq,” and whose “insightful commentaries have covered issues not tackled by the

The upshot is that there is real confusion over who is a journalist in a war zone, and that confusion can cause problems for professional journalists as they try to do the already difficult work of covering conflict. But me having a trip into the tribal areas scuttled, and having to work overtime to mend my inherently fraught relationships with the Pakistani military, are minor irritations compared to the very real possibility that this confusion can be exploited for political gain. And the problem is not simply a matter of foreign governments looking to control the western media, or gain a propaganda edge. The more serious signs of trouble are coming from home.

In January, Major General Michael T. Flynn, the top U.S. intelligence official in Afghanistan, published a report calling for an overhaul of intelligence-gathering operations. Drawing parallels to how sports reporters gauge the chances of teams winning in the National Football League, Flynn expressed the need for intelligence assets who would “retrieve information from the ground level and make it available to a broader audience, similar to the way journalists work.”

nalist, told the *Times* “that the government hired him to gather information about Afghanistan and that Mr. Furlong improperly used his work.” The freelancer felt cheated. “We were providing information so they could better understand the situation in Afghanistan, and it was being used to kill people,” he told the *Times*.

Clearly, the American news media aren't the only ones moving to a freelance model for information gathering. The military and editors in New York are in some cases drawing on the same talent pool. Under such circumstances, the ambiguity surrounding journalists in war zones—to say nothing of the under-employed nature of journalists generally—suits the military just fine. But it is bad news for American journalism. It makes the days when the industry wrung its hands over the military's embedding program look ideal by comparison—at least as embeds journalists maintained the institutional integrity of the press, even while riding on the military's jeep.

It also makes the Pakistani colonel's insinuation that Qahaar had a “secret agenda,” and the allegations of espionage that have been hung on nearly every kidnapped or arrested journalist in recent memory, much more troubling—not because I suddenly believe those charges have merit, but because there is now something concrete for the folks doing the kidnapping and arresting to use to justify their claims.

It is useful to remember that the term “freelancer” was first used for mercenaries who lent their martial skills and services to the highest bidder in time of war. In the current environment, the following scenario is certainly plausible: a freelance journalist, strapped for cash and with no institutional affiliations or loyalty, embeds herself with a unit of freelance warriors from the Blackwater army. Together, they ride into a war zone, all freelancers, with indeterminate missions and no one to vet whatever “journalism” gets committed. Things have never looked quite so eerily uncertain. **CJR**

SHAHAN MUFTI is a freelance writer. He teaches at the Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies at New York University.

The confusion over who is a journalist in a war zone can cause problems for actual journalists that go beyond safety concerns—it can be exploited, by the U.S. military and others, for strategic and political gain.

mainstream media.” These arrests in Iran came on the heels of the imprisonment of two Asian-American journalists in North Korea, and in the following months many freelancers also ended up in jails while covering the post-election upheaval in Iran and the war in Sri Lanka. And then there are those under-reported stories, like Nicole Tung, the twenty-three-year-old college graduate (and journalism major) who was picked up by Pakistani intelligence agents last December as she wandered in the tribal areas armed with a camera, working as a freelance photographer.

In the footnotes, he was even more pointed: “Analysts need not come solely from the intelligence community.... Seasoned print journalists who have been laid off in the current industry retrenchment, and who want to serve their country in Afghanistan, might be a source of talent....”

Then in March, *The New York Times* broke news that a Defense Department official, Michael D. Furlong, had “set up a network of private contractors in Afghanistan and Pakistan to help track and kill suspected militants.” One of the subcontractors, a freelance jour-

Copyright of Columbia Journalism Review is the property of Columbia Journalism Review and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.