

Viewpoints: Media access to conflict zones and citizen journalism August 2009

Abstract

Journalists, media experts, and journalism advocates offer their responses to the pressing question: **'In view of recent media restrictions in Iran, what implications do you think the limiting of journalists' access to conflict zones has for news audiences?'**

Key findings:

- Contributors believe that the recent events in Iran do not represent anything new in terms of the behaviour of parties attempting to limit the access of journalists. Other conflict areas raised in this context include Afghanistan, Georgia, Gaza and Sri Lanka
- Yet they agree on the significant impact being made by web-based networking and mobile phone technologies on crisis reporting. This influence, despite its perceived benefits, is seen as likely to further catalyse existing tensions between journalists and the parties they report on in foreign news
- The limitations of citizen journalism – described by one contributor as 'a brilliant challenge to repressive regimes' – are also addressed
- Upholding standards of news reporting when dealing with reports based on Twitter feeds and mobile phone footage is viewed as a challenge. Citizen journalism reports need 'situating'
- Contributors disagree over whether the new forms of citizen journalism will eventually bring safety benefits to journalists through support from larger news agencies, or further endanger them as governments react with heavy-handed tactics
- There is a strong sense that governments and other parties should avoid limiting access to journalists, with both moral and pragmatic arguments being articulated in support of this view
- Concerns are expressed about the reliability of conflict reporting, and explicit connections are drawn between the decision by parties to limit media access, and the perceived hostility of the subsequent reporting

Contributors

Tala Dowlatshahi, Senior Advisor for Reporters Without Borders USA

Sanjana Hattotuwa, Senior Researcher at the Sri Lanka-based Centre for Policy Alternatives

Yaacov Lozowick, Israeli historian and archivist

Denis MacEoin, Chief Editor of Middle East Quarterly and Islamic studies expert

Milica Pesic, Executive Director of the London-based Media Diversity Institute

Jean Seaton, Professor of Media History at Westminster University and official BBC historian. Author of 'Carnage and the Media: the Making and breaking of News about Violence'

Saul Zadka, Former London correspondent for Israeli daily Haaretz and regular commentator on world affairs

Introduction

The purpose of this briefing is to gather diverse views on the issues of media restrictions during times of conflict and the rapid development of citizen journalism. Just Journalism invited a variety of media experts, journalists and journalism advocates to offer their responses to the question:

‘In view of recent media restrictions in Iran, what implications do you think the limiting of journalists’ access to conflict zones has for news audiences?’

The role of new media in transmitting information out of Iran following disputed elections in June raises important questions about the future of conflict reporting. Anyone with a mobile phone and internet connection is only a few clicks away from becoming a citizen journalist, whose material is beamed across the globe – often without full verification – to millions of viewers. This also has implications for parties to conflicts, including governments and non-state actors, who have an interest in controlling the flow of information during crises.

The responses reflect consensus as well as diversity on key points. This briefing comprises a collation of comments from the contributors.

Implications of citizen journalism

The scale of the participation of demonstrators in Iran in the process of disseminating information about their predicament has mixed implications. Contributors generally agree on the great impact of new technologies and the use of mobile phones and the internet in particular on crisis reporting. Senior Advisor at Reporters Without Borders USA **Tala Dowlatshahi** professes:

“I am now awakened to the true evolution of crisis reporting as something that is being carried out not only by trained journalists, but also by amateur photographers, videographers and Iphone users. Mass demonstrations documented by average members of civil society have garnered the political will of countries all over the world.”

Senior Researcher at the Sri Lanka-based Centre for Policy Alternatives **Sanjana Hattotuwa** adds a key point that citizen journalism has extended the reach of journalism to everyday people, particularly those whose views are not commonly represented:

“New media offers a range of ways to help us establish a democracy more faithful to its definition and more attentive towards citizens who have been marginalised from our national fabric. This is why I see hope in new media.”

Executive Director of the Media Diversity Institute **Milica Pesic** sees potential for safety benefits accompanying the proliferation of new technologies, citing the support they could offer to local journalists reporting from conflict zones:

“Due to new technologies, those locals could be reached and kept protected by the foreign news organisations much more than what usually is the case.”

By contrast, **Tala Dowlatshahi** emphasises the dangers associated with new forms of citizen journalism:

“The transformation of crisis news reporting from traditional methods to mobile interactive platforms has both enabled journalists to get their stories across more rapidly and it has put them in greater danger. On the one hand their pieces get disseminated, quoted, and referenced through a variety of near-instantaneous online networks, which increases the immediate felt impact of their pieces, but this new power also makes them a more likely and visible target for government crackdowns.”

State action against protesters in Iran suggests that the participation of everyday people in the dissemination of information may indeed be an example of the proposition that ‘governments get meaner’ (**Dowlatshahi**) in this climate. In a circular way, these crackdowns, in turn, generate a greater prominence of citizen journalism as other traditional methods of journalism fail under repression.

Iran

Media limitations: Following protests against the disputed presidential election results in June 2009, the Iranian government implemented wide-ranging measures to stem the flow of information within Iran and between Iran and the outside world. Foreign journalists were effectively placed under house arrest, and some expelled. Satellite signals were jammed, preventing television channels such as BBC Persia from being broadcast.

Implications: Foreign news audiences had to rely on grainy mobile phone footage and Twitter feeds from anti-government protesters in order to try and piece events together.

Another concern about the proliferation of new technologies such as Twitter and other social networking and blogging websites in transmitting news is alluded to by **Jean Seaton**, Professor of Media History at Westminster University and official BBC historian. She posits:

“Citizen journalism is a powerful new tool: yet its accounts still need situating. While it offers a brilliant challenge to repressive regimes, it is not sufficient on its own.”

A number of issues remain to be fully addressed. For example, the ability of media outlets gathering such information to verify the identity of their sources as well as the veracity of claims made. Furthermore, it is possible for the profile of citizen journalists to be so narrow as to obscure the full picture of events. In Iran, the profile was almost exclusively anti-government, although pro-government protests also took place.

Sanjana Hattotuwa views questions surrounding the reliability of such journalism as secondary to the importance of its existence:

“I am less interested here in the qualitative nature and veracity of the information that was produced, and more in the sheer quantity of content produced by thousands of citizens, often using nothing more than their mobile handsets.

To the inevitable question about the signal to noise ratio, or in other words, how much better we were able to understand the situation on the ground through citizen produced media, one can only answer by pointing out how much more ignorant we would be if it wasn't for the content that made it out of Iran.”

Media restrictions in conflict zones – old news?

Contributors are more divided on their approach to the very concept of government and other parties' interference with media reporting. Some put forward passionate accounts of the need for a free media during conflict situations.

Jean Seaton asserts:

“The independent witness that journalism provides in conflicts is the only way in which the reality of events can be assessed... Being in the frontline of a battle is not the complete story: but without it all other reporting is speculative. Reporting and the open account of events is the only known social and political antibiotic against corruption, injustice and the perversion of understanding that we know works.”

Milica Pesic agrees with these sentiments, lamenting the frequency with which the work of journalists is intruded upon:

“Unfortunately, the recent media restrictions in Iran are not an exception, but a confirmation of history repeating again and again. Even the Governments in very democratic societies try hard to dictate the ways war reports are done.”

She goes on to cite the Falklands war, Serbia under Slobodan Milosevic and the recent conflicts in Sri Lanka and Gaza as prior examples of government interference in reporting.

Sri Lanka

Media limitations: During the final months of the Sri Lankan civil war that ended in May 2009, a total media ban was imposed on the conflict zone, with no journalists granted access to the north-east of the island. Local journalists were often threatened with violence, and one editor was killed.

Implications: The government banning of journalists from the affected zone, and the lack of communications technology in the area, meant that news audiences were faced with a virtual information blackout for months on end.

Conversely, some contributors exhibit a more sympathetic outlook towards parties to conflicts trying to influence the flow of information. Middle East Quarterly editor **Denis MacEoin** notes:

“War reporting has faced several obstacles since the 20th century. Even democratic states restrict where reporters may go, who they may talk to, and what they can report. Some of this is understandable. In a report from Israel during the recent Gaza war, a foreign news reporter revealed the identity of the combat unit, what sort of tanks they had, and where they were headed. Hamas will have found that helpful. Unless, of course, this was black propaganda designed to mislead the enemy. The fog of war.”

Israeli journalist **Saul Zadka** takes a forthrightly pragmatic approach. He claims:

“It does not pay off to keep journalists out of the war zone. Israel did it in Gaza and it still pays a heavy price for that. The Sri Lankan government did the same in its recent offensive against the Tamil Tigers and so did the Russians in their war against Georgia in summer 2008. The latter even deliberately targeted the press.”

Afghanistan

Media Limitations: British journalists can report from the front line of battles in Afghanistan only if embedded with British forces. Journalists have reported being forced to email their copy to military press officers before publication, and to remove facts from stories in the interests of operational security.

Implications: News viewers are limited to the incomplete perspective of 'embeds' and to material approved by the Ministry of Defence.

Zadka offers an insight into Israel's decision to ban foreign media from entering Gaza during the recent conflict. Crucially, he refers here to the common practice of granting journalists access but 'managing' them in the field. This highlights the grey area that exists between governments allowing and preventing access to conflict zones:

“Why did Israel do it? Because it felt that during the previous military confrontation, against Hezbollah in Lebanon, it gave the press an unrestricted freedom of movement which may have compromised its security. Wrong assumption. The trouble with that war was that the media was not managed, not least because it broke out without an advanced warning, so foreign correspondents were roaming free in the battlefield.”

Jean Seaton is similarly critical of Britain's exercise of media restrictions inside Afghanistan, describing them as 'short sighted, improper, and ineffective.'

Reporters and conflict journalism

The question of freedom to report events is highly sensitive. However, the question of reliability and accuracy of work produced by both professional and citizen journalists can be of genuine concern to parties to a conflict.

Denis MacEoin takes the firm view that much of journalism is not to be trusted:

“TV news is highly selective and is driven by a combination of political bias and a need to get high ratings, something that translates into a choice of stories that are dramatic or sensational or sentimental.”

Saul Zadka gives full expression to his belief that 'Journalists do not like to encounter obstacles in their effort to do their job.' And that 'Keeping them away makes them frustrated and hostile.' He claims:

“Many of the Jerusalem-based journalists vented their anger when they were allowed into Gaza after the war ended. Then came the reports of human rights violations, indiscriminate attacks, targeting civilians, using illegal weapons and turning the local residents into human shields.”

Jean Seaton also alludes to the possible intrusion of frustration into what should be impartial reporting:

“...the [Israeli] controls did nothing to balance the Arab media's fury and accounts of what was happening. It damaged the Israeli government more than their opposition.”

However, not all contributors feel that war reporting is always necessarily key to breaking news to the populations of parties to conflicts. Israeli historian and archivist **Yaacov Lozowick** contends:

“Israeli society, for all its very impressive diversity, is extraordinarily closely meshed. The “Everyone knows everyone” cliché is fundamentally true. In such a society the media has many roles, some of them important, but supplying the dramatic events of the news isn’t one of them. Whether it be the arrest of a prominent comedian or the suicide of a celebrity, the media confirms what people have already heard, it doesn’t notify them.”

Regarding the more controversial accusations reported by various media outlets, arising from Israel’s military action in Gaza, **Lozowick** says:

“... when the foreign media told of massacres, we shrugged our shoulders, as usual. Who, exactly, would be committing them? If we were, we’d know about it. If we didn’t know, it could reliably be assumed it wasn’t happening.”

Conclusions

It seems probable that the longstanding tension between the desire of journalists to reach the front line during crises and interested parties’ desire to prevent or at least control journalists’ activities will be compounded by the rise of new technologies. Events in Iran point to a rapid and heavy-handed response to citizens and journalists who act to instantly convey the images around them to the outside world.

Several contributors make the important point that many issues raised by recent events in Iran, or Sri Lanka and Gaza, do not represent anything new. Charges of political bias and overriding commercial interests regularly levelled against news outlets obviously predate restrictions on media reporting and the involvement of the masses in the dissemination of information. Recent developments merely point to a deepening of existing suspicions.

On the issue of regulation of the dissemination of new forms of (particularly citizen) journalism, discussions seem embryonic at best. There is more concern with government crackdowns than the question of how accurate and reliable these forms of reporting are. Much more discussion needs to be had about how to uphold standards of news reporting when dealing with reports based largely on Twitter feeds and hazy mobile phone footage. Without this discourse, the accountability of journalists for the veracity of their output will diminish, leading to greater problems for the future of conflict reporting.

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Just Journalism is an independent research organisation focused on how Israel and Middle East issues are reported in the UK media. We produce analysis of print, broadcast and online media and regularly publish research on trends in the media’s coverage.

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Gaza

Media limitations: Broadly, foreign journalists were denied access to Gaza from the outset of the recent conflict, though they were still permitted to travel freely within Israel. Once the conflict had ended in late January 2009, they were permitted access to Gaza again.

Implications: Israeli closures meant that news audiences consumed many reports filed by journalists who were not in the place they were reporting about.