

# **Reflective Journalistic Practice in an environment of uncertainty and change**

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**A thesis commentary submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by Prior Output awarded by London Metropolitan University.**

**February 2013**

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## Abstract

My thesis commentary 'Reflective Journalistic Practice in an environment of uncertainty and change' examines the challenges facing journalists reporting the world after the end of the Cold War, and following the attacks on the United States on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. The work which I am presenting for examination includes a book, *Reporting Conflict* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), three articles from peer-reviewed journals, and television, radio, and internet journalism which I produced when working as a BBC correspondent in the Middle East and the Former Soviet Union. My commentary is divided into five sections: the literature of practice, and the literature of analysis; the value of original material; the influences of politics and public relations; context in news reporting; the effects of changing technology. My purpose is to identify, through commentary on my journalism and academic output, the characteristics of good journalism in an environment of uncertainty and change. My work has the further aim of contributing to scholarly understanding of journalistic practice, and sharing my experience for the benefit of practitioners. The outputs which I am submitting for examination combine the perspectives of both reporter and researcher, and, as such, represent an independent and original contribution to knowledge.

## **Reflective Journalistic Practice in an environment of uncertainty and change.**

A thesis commentary for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by Prior Output (Ph.D. BPO).  
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### **Introduction.**

The rationale for presenting my work for a Ph.D. BPO is to offer an academic account of a set of key issues arising from my work as a practitioner of journalism. Journalists do not generally read what academics write about them. Perhaps they should do so more, but that seems unlikely while working journalists have less and less time to do their job. There is, as Schudson noted, suspicion too: 'Social scientists who study the news speak a language that journalists mistrust and misunderstand.' (1991: 141). As noted in the introduction to *Reporting Conflict* (Rodgers, 2012a: 3), while some studies of working journalists offer insights which are truly illuminating, others are wide of the mark. David Morrison and Howard Tumber's book *Journalists at War* (1988), their study on reporting the Falklands conflict, makes an irresistible claim to be placed in the former category. Even so, as they themselves accept,

Reading the academic literature one cannot help but feel sympathy with the journalists' claim that the 'outsider' has failed to get inside the trade: it is all too formalistic, too sterile, too serious; and it is not surprising, therefore, that working journalists fail to recognize the world they are supposed to inhabit (1988: viii).

The logical consequence of this failure by academic researchers 'to get inside the trade' is a gap in research - a gap which my work has aimed to fill. Moreover, while there has been work on journalism as reflective practice (Niblock, 2007), academic work in the field has paid little or no attention to reflective journalistic practice in particular political circumstances, the fraught context in which some journalism takes place: times of extreme uncertainty and change.

The uncertainty and change specifically referred to here is the world in which I worked as a journalist from 1990-2010. Two major events, both of which I covered, the first for Reuters Television, and the second for the BBC, stand as the seminal moments which have come to

symbolize change, and the uncertainty that followed, within those two decades: the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the attacks on the United States on September 11th 2001. These political transformations have coincided with technological change so rapid that it is almost impossible to pick up a media or journalism studies textbook now without finding therein extensive reference to that change, and its effects (Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Beckett, 2008; Shirky 2008; Albertazzi and Copley, 2009; Williams, 2011).

The body of work which is submitted here for a Ph.D. BPO includes both academic publications, and my practice as a working journalist. The cornerstone of the thesis is my book *Reporting Conflict*, (Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), which draws on my experience covering international news, including the two world-changing events I refer to above, and my rare perspective, as both academic and practitioner, on the ways in which they affected journalism, especially conflict reporting (cf. Thussu, 2003; Tumber and Palmer, 2004; Zelizer and Allan, 2002). The book considers in detail the reporting of some of the conflicts which, following as they did the collapse of the USSR, and the attacks of September 11th, can be considered consequences of extreme uncertainty and change: the conflict in Chechnya; the 2003 invasion of Iraq; the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia. In doing so, it builds on the work of Tumber and Prentoulis (2003); Robinson et al (2010); Carruthers (2000 and 2011) and others. It also analyses the coverage of another, older, conflict, the course of which was also affected by 1991 and 2001: that between Israel and the Palestinians. My writing on this conflict is based on my time as the only non-Palestinian journalist based in the Gaza Strip from 2002-2004, during the second Palestinian *intifada*, or uprising, against Israel. In addition to this, I am submitting three articles, 'Capturing Saddam Hussein: How the full story got away, and what conflict journalism can learn from it' (2011) from the *Journal of War and Culture Studies*; 'Two sides of the mountains and three sides to every story: Towards a study of the development of the BBC's multimedia newsgathering' (2012) from the *Journal of Applied Journalism and Media Studies*; and 'The air raids that never were and the war that nobody won: Government propaganda in conflict reporting and how journalists should respond to it' (2012) from *Global Media and Communication*.

The journalism I am submitting consists of two radio documentaries: *The PR war for the Caucasus* (BBC, 2008), and *The Middle East and Home* (BBC, 2004), as well as a television documentary, *Warm Russia* (BBC, 2009). These three programmes have been selected for the reflective journalistic element permitted by the longer format, and for the different ways

in which they address uncertainty: *The PR war for the Caucasus* for its account of a conflict (the 2008 Russia-Georgia war) which seemed, at least at first, to involve a newly assertive, even aggressive, Russia; *The Middle East and Home* was an attempt to counter some of the great, and, with the benefit of hindsight, baseless optimism in diplomatic discourse at the time when the 'Road Map' for Middle East peace was launched; *Warm Russia* considered the unpredictability of climate change in Northern Russia, and the possible coming economic and social consequences that would bring to a population which had already lived through the end of Marxism-Leninism, and the advent of a particularly brutal version of capitalism. My commentary will also discuss the *Moscow Diary* which I wrote for the BBC News website from 2007-2009. Not only did this project embody the theme of 'uncertainty', it also represented the taking of an opportunity offered by new platforms to develop a new, more immediate, and reflective, form of journalism than would normally have been permitted within the BBC's traditional editorial framework. The *Diary* was also interactive, in that the audience was encouraged to post comments on *Moscow Diary* entries. In that sense, it belonged to a wider, constantly developing, trend of networked journalism (Beckett, 2008) as conversation, rather than monologue, which has been especially characteristic of the post-September 11th period and continues to evolve today.

It should be mentioned that the commentary will be an example of reflective practice as it relates to journalism. For example, it will reflect on Piaget's idea that, 'Any knowledge raises new problems as it solves preceding ones,' (1975: 30), as it relates to evolving journalistic practice. In the context of Higher Education, the work of Schön, and particularly his suggestion that there are instructors who fear that their students may 'misunderstand, misuse, or misappropriate' their expertise, and who, as a result 'tend, sometimes unconsciously, under the guise of teaching, to actually withhold what they know' (1987: 119) will be pertinent to my thesis – specifically, the issue of how reflective journalists can avoid the tendency which Schön describes (it should be noted that this is something which journalists may deliberately do in the presence of sociologists - perhaps a further reason why academics 'fail to get inside the trade'). For that reason, I have decided to divide this commentary into the following five sections, the better to reflect upon my experience, and highlight the themes which, I would argue, from my standpoint both as a journalist and academic researcher, are the most important for journalism in a time of uncertainty and change:

1. The literature of practice, and the literature of analysis
2. The value of original material
3. The influences of politics and public relations
4. Context in news reporting
5. The effects of changing technology

This list is not longer partly because of the format – this 10,000 word commentary – in which the ideas are to be discussed. It is not meant to be exhaustive. Rather, it highlights the most enduring themes I can identify from twenty years in journalism, and, it is to be hoped, provides a basis for future research and practice for journalism

### **The literature of practice, and the literature of analysis**

Books about journalism fall generally into three broad categories: journalists' memoirs, focusing on their working lives; academic analyses of the processes of newsgathering, production and distribution, often adopting a political economy approach (McChesney, 2008; Herman and Chomsky, 1994; Schudson 1991) to explain those processes; and, thirdly, textbooks for journalism students offering practical instruction. While the first category, because it usually takes the form of a memoir, does include elements of reflection on practice (Bell, 1995; Simpson, 1999; Loyd, 2000), there is almost never an attempt to confront current or earlier trends in academic thought (although Martin Bell, with his idea of the journalism of attachment (1997: 127-8) is a good example of a journalist's reflective memoirs contributing to such trends). Journalists, as noted above, largely remain blissfully unaware of what media studies departments are saying about them, and, while they might come to university media and journalism departments to discuss their work, that is about as far as the relationship usually goes. For their part, social scientists and media studies lecturers, the authors of the second category of books, are often isolated in their own way – as Morrison and Tumber note in the extract quoted above. This may change as journalism becomes a more widespread discipline in Higher Education (I am talking here principally of the United Kingdom, where university journalism departments have, until recently, been relatively few in number compared to other parts of the English speaking world, and beyond), but, for the time being, there is a distinct divide between the first two broad categories of writing about journalism which I have identified. It was my aim, in writing *Reporting Conflict*, to draw on my

experience, as someone who has made the transition from practitioner to researcher, and hopefully combine some of the best elements of these two categories – the literature of practice, and the literature of analysis, as they might be called – in the hope of producing a book which could go some small way to ending the separation between them. Then there is the challenge which faces everyone trying to write about media and communications today – that of avoiding obsolescence even as a book goes to the presses. As Andy Bull notes of his own *Multimedia Journalism*,

If *Multimedia Journalism* was just the book you hold in your hands, it would have two fundamental things wrong with it. For one thing, it would not be a completely up-to-date account of the latest software and hardware available to the multimedia journalist. It would go out of date almost as fast as I wrote it. (2010: xi)

The chosen approach was to try to treat my journalistic experience as something which, while being the subject of my scholarship, was also separate from it. My work as a journalist became, in effect, an archive to which I had been granted access. As I sifted through what I found there, I would compare it with the ideas and conclusions offered by the existing academic literature on the reporting of conflict. The principal period of study was defined by the two historical milestones identified above: the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on the United States. Within these periods, the focus was on conflicts which I had covered as a journalist: principally Chechnya, Iraq in 2003-4, and the second Palestinian *intifada*, or uprising, against Israeli occupation. Having defined my principal area of study, I read as widely as possible the literature I judged to be most relevant. I complemented that research with original interviews, trying, perhaps in an echo of the journalistic approach I advocate in the concluding chapter of the book, and which I have called the Gaza model for conflict reporting, to draw on sources, such as a soldier's letter home from the Battle of Waterloo, and the experience of a BBC correspondent turned public relations advisor for the Kremlin administration, which were less frequently consulted than mainstream news editors or reporters.

It appeared that some of the most relevant works for forming an idea of reflective journalistic practice in an environment of uncertainty and change, however, actually pre-dated the period on which the study was focused. Two works in particular fell into this category: one journalist memoir, Michael Herr's *Dispatches*; and one study of journalistic practice in



wartime: Morrison and Tumber's *Journalists at War*. Herr writes about Vietnam in the 1960s; Morrison and Tumber's subject is the 'dynamics of news reporting' during the 1982 war between Britain and Argentina over the Falkland Islands. Despite the fact that they are concerned with events outside the period particularly identified for the present study, they are both most illuminating for any analysis of conflict journalism as reflective practice. Herr's verdict on the Vietnam war that, 'Conventional journalism could no more reveal this war than conventional firepower could win it,' (1977: 175) seems now to take on the air of an enduring truth. The United States-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, in 2001 and 2003, have been the more recent wars which 'conventional firepower' could not win – at least not alone. The deployment of a counter insurgency strategy (NATO, n.d.) involving attempts to assist the civilian population of Afghanistan, rather than simply fighting the enemy, was confirmation of this. The revelations which came with Wikileaks' publication of the 'Warlogs' – the leaked U.S. military documents relating to those conflicts – showed still that conventional journalism had its shortcomings no less than conventional warfare. *Collateral Murder* - Wikileaks' title for a US military video which the website made public, and which showed a helicopter gunship firing on people in an Iraqi street, was, Beckett and Ball (2012: 6) say, a 'seminal moment'. The release of the pictures 'made graphically visible the actions of power in a way that mainstream and alternative media had arguably failed to do.' (2012: 7).

*Journalists at War*, published first in the different geopolitical landscape of the late 1980s, still has much to tell us. The technology has changed, but the description of the often finally irreconcilable differences between the wants and needs of reporters, and those of army press officers, remains instantly recognizable. Consider, for example, this account, which draws on the recollection of Patrick Bishop, who was working for the *Observer*, of the curiosity inspired in both journalists and soldiers as they become acquainted,

The troops were clearly puzzled by any civilian's readiness to risk life and limb on such a venture, 'even a journalist'. This, and the way the correspondents chose to live and behave, produced reactions of affectionate amusement. 'They were as fascinated by us, observed Patrick Bishop, 'as we were by them.' (Morrison and Tumber, 1988: 29).

My work, inspired as it is by my own experience of building working relationships with personnel from the Russian, Israeli, and British armies, also demonstrates that that mutual suspicion of motive can often define those relationships from the start – and what follows, as

I argue in *Reporting Conflict* (2012a: 36) is an ‘uneasy game’ of which the two parties try to make the rules on the hoof.

*Journalists at War* is a successful example of what I have termed the ‘literature of analysis’ in that it identifies timeless elements of a journalist’s experience. The book also tells us something timeless about the way in which both news organizations, and government communications teams, approach the circumstances arising from a new conflict – especially one which, as Morrison and Tumber say of the Falklands,

was unusual and unexpected. Many of the government’s critics in the news organizations have compared the episode to their experience in the Middle East and Vietnam and found that the facilities they were given and the procedures they were expected to follow were in The Falklands severely wanting. The British Government – the British public, too – had however been involved in no such major conflict for many years. (1988: 189).

The ‘unusual and unexpected’ is generally journalism’s daily fare, but the political and economic changes in the post-Cold War, post-September 11<sup>th</sup>, world, combined with the way that journalism itself is changing because of new technology, and the pressure placed on long-standing business models for news gathering and distribution, mean that, for contemporary journalism, the ‘unusual and unexpected’ is more than ever the quotidian, too. Journalism has not always coped well with that challenge. ‘Unusual and unexpected’ conflicts have also provided governments and their communications professionals with opportunities to score big wins in the ‘uneasy game’. One example is Russia’s 2008 war with Georgia - discussed in my section on the influences of politics and public relations – another is the United States-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Journalism’s general failure to examine sufficiently the case made for attacking Iraq, and thereby question, if not expose as false (the information sources available to journalists might have made that impossible in any case) the suggestion that the government of Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, raised uncomfortable questions about the ability of the mainstream British and U.S. media to challenge the assertions made by those holding political and military power. The *New York Times* was at least honest enough subsequently to admit its own shortcomings, in its article ‘The Times and Iraq’ published in May 2004. ‘In some cases,’ the piece stated, ‘information

that was controversial then, and seems questionable now, was insufficiently qualified or allowed to stand unchallenged.’ (New York Times, 2004). Reflection on this failure recalled points raised in Herman and Chomsky’s *Manufacturing Consent* (1994), their account of the workings of the news media, and in particular their idea of a series of ‘filters’ enabling commercial and political powers to influence news production. While some authors subsequently have been critical of Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model (1994:10) - Schudson, for example, writes of its ‘flat-footed functionalism’ (2000: 180) – it seems harder, in the light of the *New York Times*’ recognition of its own ‘problematic articles’ (New York Times, 2004) to be quite so dismissive. The *New York Times*’ article is also worth considering as an example of reflective journalistic practice. The admission that, ‘Editors at several levels who should have been challenging reporters and pressing for more skepticism were perhaps too intent on rushing scoops into the paper.’ (ibid) is just the kind of reflection that should lead to improvements in practice – similar to what Schön calls ‘reflection in action’ (1983: 129). For, if anything, this need to ‘(rush) scoops into the paper’, has only intensified in the years since the words were originally written. To cite another, recent, example of good ‘literature of analysis’, Beckett and Ball’s Wikileaks (2012), ‘This is a period of rapid and radical transformation for journalism. It is moving from a closed to an open system. Deadlines are dissolving as news is personalized by consumers into an on-demand service.’ (2012: 33). ‘Rushing scoops into the paper’, or onto television, radio, or a webpage is a process which lies at the heart of journalism’s heady, exhilarating, appeal to those whose work it is. This commentary is not an appeal for that to change. It is an appeal for journalists to think about how those scoops can be rushed, and still accurate – a particular challenge in an environment of uncertainty and change.

My aim has been to try to encourage good contemporary reporting by taking the best accounts of journalistic practice, and adding to them lessons from the best academic analysis. During my time both as a full time journalist, especially later in my career, and now as a researcher and occasional journalist, my work has exemplified this approach. The ‘*PR war for the Caucasus*’ (2008) and my Moscow Diary entry *Media Tensions* (2007), were examples of a working journalist reflecting on journalistic practice and custom; my article *Capturing Saddam Hussein* and my book *Reporting Conflict* took the same approach while also incorporating ideas drawn from scholarly literature on journalism, and the reflective accounts of other journalists such as Antony Loyd in *My War Gone By, I miss it so* (2000), or Evan Wright in *Generation Kill* (2009), and especially Michael Herr in *Despatches* (1977).

Any work which contributes to an understanding of reflective journalistic practice must, naturally, have this reflective element. I did not simply concentrate on the work of writers who were famous among their fellow journalists, or who, like John Simpson, were household names. In this respect, a long-standing personal interest in other journalists' accounts of their own work stood me in good stead, having given me a knowledge of less well known, but not less pertinent, texts, such as Michael Moynihan's *War Correspondent* (1994). For his account of his work in the Second World War, and other conflicts, is the story of a journalist who was not a household name, and who knew the disappointments and frustrations which are much more frequently the daily lot of a reporter than front page stories, top TV headlines, and total professional triumph. Moynihan, covering the allied advance through Belgium in late 1944, discovers on his return to Fleet Street that, 'Of the 24 despatches I sent over a period of 32 days, only seven were used' (1994: 126) – hardly the stuff of heroic Hollywood reporter legend. The challenge was to sift through these accounts and find those which, as Charles Baudelaire said of the art of Constantin Guys, take the eternal from the transitory (1968: 553) – a phrase which I apply here in the sense that it also applies to a writer able to describe his or her time in a way that identifies enduring characteristics which those coming later will recognize in their own days.

### **The value of original material**

One of those characteristics has been the value of original material. It may seem so obvious as not to require stating, but recent events – most notoriously the incident of the 'Gay Girl in Damascus' blog (see Bennett, 2011) – have demonstrated most clearly that there is a need for a renewed emphasis on the value of primary sources. Since William Howard Russell, struggling to build up a clear picture of the events he was covering on the Crimean War, 'stopped every officer and soldier he could find and asked them to describe what had happened,' (Knightley, 1989: 9), this eyewitness material, these first-hand accounts, have been the purest raw material of the best journalism. The advent of new technology, especially as it is used for social networking, has both improved and complicated the gathering of such material. On the positive side, social media can, as Alan Rusbridger of the *Guardian* said of his tweet designed to help the circumvention of an injunction (in this case on the reporting of Trafigura's dumping of toxic waste) achieve, 'something it would have taken huge amounts of time and money to achieve through conventional journalism or law' (2010). On the other, there are cases such as that of the 'Gay Girl in Damascus blog', which was wrongly taken by

some leading news organizations to be the authentic voice of Amina Araf, a young female supporter of the uprising against President Assad of Syria (the author was in fact neither a ‘Gay Girl’, nor in Damascus - Amina Araf not even exist). As Bennett says, the ‘hoax highlighted the pitfalls of operating as a journalist in the digital era’ (2011: 190) – while also noting that, ‘Uncovering “the truth” of Amina Araf’s blog was, instead, made possible by a collaborative investigation and verification process facilitated by online networks.’ (2011: 188).

This emphasis on original material seems an indispensable part of journalism’s successful negotiation of the challenges arising from an environment of uncertainty. For *Reporting Conflict*, the approach chosen was to identify those interviewees who were best placed to test the theories I planned to advance. Contributors were selected on the basis of their specialist insights, as with Angus Roxburgh, a former BBC correspondent who had, at the time of my research, recently finished three years as a public relations consultant to the Kremlin. His inside knowledge was invaluable to the book’s fourth chapter ‘*How the war was spun: the role of public relations companies, propagandists, and governments*’. An email correspondence over the course of several months with Major Richard Streatfeild, a British Army officer who had contributed reports to the BBC Radio 4’s *Today* programme, led eventually to a meeting and an interview January 2011. Streatfeild’s contributions to the BBC’s output represented, it seemed, an important departure in the covering of conflicts: the decision by a major broadcast news organization to hand over a degree of editorial control to a combatant. This was significant in that it recognized how changing technology (in the interview, Streatfeild spoke of how simple it was for him to send his material, something which would have been all but impossible in earlier conflicts without expensive and cumbersome professional equipment) was making a much wider range of sources available to producers and editors than had previously been the case. It appeared to be a good example of Beckett’s idea of ‘Editorial Diversity’ (2008: 150), and how it could most usefully be applied to journalism in wartime. Streatfeild’s work was also relevant to the idea of original content because it could be seen as a contemporary version of the letter home written by the soldier at Waterloo to which I referred above. The book’s purpose was not to give a history of conflict reporting beyond the limits of the brief summary of important milestones offered in Chapter 1, yet it was clearly impossible to make a case about change and its effects without at least some reference to what had gone before.

This desire for a degree of historical context was also behind the decision to interview Stephen Somerville, who had been bureau chief for Reuters news agency in Saigon during the Vietnam war. His insights assisted my research as I sought to consider my suggestion that politics and technology are above all the two most important influences on news production in wartime. His account of the relative ease of access for reporters then (consider, too, Herr's description of the way that he and his contemporaries were able to take military helicopters almost like taxis, 'Sometimes they were so plentiful and loose that you could touch down at five or six places in a day, look around, hear the talk, catch the next one out.' (1977: 16)) was illuminating in an age when we are more used to embedding as the standard, and indeed largely the only, way for journalists to accompany troops. Evolving military attitudes to journalism, and changing tactics employed by armies and their political masters as they sought to influence the coverage of conflict, was the reason behind the decision to conduct an interview, by email, with Colonel Sam Gardiner, formerly of the United States Air Force. The decision to interview Gardiner by email rather than in person was taken only for practical reasons, rather than academic or editorial ones. He lives in the United States and, because of other professional commitments, and limited financial resources, it was not possible for me to travel to the U.S. during the research period. Gardiner's paper, *Truth from these podia* (2003), which I discovered from reading Nick Davies' *Flat Earth News* (2008), offers analysis of attempts at news management during the U.S. led coalition's attempt to capture the Iraqi city of Basra during the 2003 invasion. Its findings seemed to suggest similar techniques were in use then to those I encountered five years later, while reporting on Russia's war with Georgia in the summer of 2008. Gardiner agreed during the interview that 'the comparison (was) very valid' (quoted in Rodgers, 2012a: 74). This perhaps even suggests that the Georgian government might have taken media advice from its U.S. allies (the administration of the Georgian President, Mikheil Saakashvili was very close to that of George W. Bush).

### **The influences of politics and public relations**

Whether or not there was formal cooperation between the Georgian and U.S. administrations, there were, as Gardiner notes above, definitely similarities in tactics. This section will look in more detail at the Georgian (and Russian) governments' communications strategies during

their brief war over the Georgian territory of South Ossetia in 2008 – and what wider conclusions my work has been able to draw from my reporting of it: both as a news story at the time, and as a journalistic account of PR practice. Although attempts to influence journalism are probably as old as journalism itself, the increased concentration (Davies, 2008; Miller, 2004; Davis, 2002) on this issue in recent years suggests that it is becoming a matter of greater concern. Davies (2008:85) in particular makes the case that the resources at the disposal of public relations companies in the U.K. are now greater than those enjoyed by news organizations; Eleanor Mills made a similar point in the *Sunday Times* in August 2012 when she concluded, on the basis of a journalistic career stretching back two decades, ‘The truth is that public relations executives are far better paid than journalists, and increasingly more numerous.’ (Mills, 2012). For this reason, political and PR influences have been chosen as one of the key themes in the present commentary. For it seems that these are influences of which the journalist of today must be ever more aware if he or she is to work effectively in an environment of uncertainty and change. The failure, discussed above, of the *New York Times* and other news organizations adequately to weigh up the worth of the information at their disposal prior to the invasion of Iraq is an example of why this matters.

As if to confirm the research of Davies and others, referred to above, and the impressions of Eleanor Mills about the growing presence and financial clout of PR’s, the experience of covering Russia’s 2008 war with Georgia marked a new departure in my journalistic experience in the sense that many years of working in Moscow had not prepared me for the deployment by the Russian government of a new tactic in dealing with journalists: what seemed, on the surface at least, to be almost unlimited cooperation. For a foreign journalist, whose country, the United Kingdom, experienced often difficult diplomatic relations with Russia during the post-Soviet period (NATO’s bombing of Serbia during the Kosovo conflict in 1999, and the murder in London of the former Russian secret policeman, Alexander Litvinenko, in 2006 being two spectacular low points) access to Russian official sources was usually very limited. Put simply, the approach had been to have little to do with foreign journalists, and then dismiss their reporting as inaccurate and uninformed. In *Pockets of Resistance* (2010), their study of British news media coverage of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Robinson et al, seeking to evaluate the influence or otherwise of new communications technologies, conclude, ‘Increasingly professional government media-management techniques may have been effective in countering these developments,’ (2010:29). In the case of Russia’s war with Georgia, Russian officials were suddenly more available than they

had ever been. It seemed a prime example of ‘increasingly professional government media-management techniques’ similar to those which Robinson et al had identified in the invasion of Iraq.

The key issue in the coverage of the events of August 2008 was the lack of agreement over who set in motion the events which led from sniping and occasional shelling to the outbreak of war. It made for fertile territory for ideas planted by public relations executives thousands of kilometres away, in Brussels. As far as my research, for the programme *The PR War for the Caucasus* (Rodgers and Edmonds, 2008) which I made with the BBC’s David Edmonds, was able to establish, none of the PR agents had ever visited the region. That did not lessen their willingness, or their self-estimated ability, to become experts on it from a distance – and seek not just to influence the reporting of the conflict which erupted there and, in at least one case, to try to establish as fact that which had not happened. The public relations consultants joined the media war with great enthusiasm. ‘I suppose at the height of the war on August 8th, 9th, we were probably sending out an email every hour, every 90 minutes,’ said James Hunt of Aspect, a company which was then advising the Georgian government (quoted in Rodgers and Edmonds, 2008). In his view, ‘There’s only one question that matters in the end, which is who started the war’ (quoted in Rodgers and Edmonds, 2008). He continued

And what we’ve tried to do throughout the whole process is to demonstrate that Russia’s actions, accumulated actions over weeks and months ahead of August 7th, combined with their evacuation of Tskhinvali<sup>i</sup> and their use then of the South Ossetian irregulars to shell Georgian villages on the nights of the 5th and 6th of August all add up to, in effect, a declaration of war by Russia on Georgia. (ibid)

Yet Mr Hunt also admitted to seeking to establish as fact that which he did not know to be true at the time: in this case, the capture by Russian troops of the Georgian city of Gori. The significance of Gori’s fall, were it to be confirmed, was this: Gori lay outside the administrative boundaries of South Ossetia – so a Russian advance to that point would have indicated that Moscow’s military goal was wider ranging than the openly declared objective of driving Georgian forces out of South Ossetia. In the end, Russian troops did enter Gori, but only after Mr Hunt had been trying hard to get journalists to report that they had already done so. As he put it



You do get confused information, there's no two ways about that. We here in Brussels put a lot of pressure on your organization, the BBC, and on CNN to say you should change the tickers on your screen because the Russians have taken Gori (ibid.).

Mr Hunt's willingness to promote a version of events which he did not know to be true (he could not have – it was not) is symptomatic of a menace to good reporting. Russian officials were hardly blameless, either: in the first stage of the war they put out a claim that 2,000 people had been killed in the Georgian Army's advance (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2008). This has never been either substantiated, or corrected.

Public relations executives have always sought to influence the reporting of conflict. Today they have come to understand very well the challenges and opportunities which 24 hour news affords them as they seek to promote versions of events which will show their clients in a favourable light, perhaps even make them out to be 'angels'. Journalists need to understand those challenges and opportunities, too. My work on *The PR War for the Caucasus*, and the more detailed, reflective research to which it led for *Reporting Conflict*, have, I hope, provided some ideas to assist their doing so.

I sought to expand those ideas in my articles 'Capturing Saddam Hussein: How the full story got away, and what conflict journalism can learn from it', and 'The air raids that never were, and the war that nobody won: Government propaganda in conflict reporting, and how journalists should respond to it.' The purpose of 'Capturing Saddam Hussein' was to reflect at length on the coverage of a major news event within a conflict, the U.S. led invasion of Iraq, which seemed not to have been reported as comprehensively as it should. The article, combining analysis from different parts of *Reporting Conflict* to examine how the reporting of that event could have been improved by some of the ideas I offer in the book's final chapter, offers an account of a reporter's experience in travelling to the place where Saddam Hussein was caught, and the difficulties, including those of access and security, which were involved. It then considers the perceived shortcomings in the resultant coverage, and suggests ways in which these could have been improved. The principal concern was not that the capture of the fugitive Iraqi leader was not a huge news story. Clearly it was. As the article notes

It is not reasonable to question the idea that getting to the hideout was the priority for news organizations on that day. One of the biggest single news stories since the invasion had happened, and – on that day at least – it had to be given the prominence that it deserved. (Rodgers, 2011: 184)

The flaw lay instead in the fact that

given that the insurgency in earnest began the following spring, there must have been people at that stage who were planning it. That part of the account of the invasion and occupation of Iraq was missing, with the result that, while the United States may have captured their quarry, journalists did not capture the full story (Rodgers, 2011: 185)

It was too late to correct these faults, but my purpose was to identify them, in the hope of improving future practice. The article as a whole was an attempt not just to learn from the shortcomings outlined therein, but to try to draw wider conclusions. Niblock is persuasive when she writes, ‘while news journalists have a remit to look forward and anticipate the next news cycle, a good deal of their previous experience is brought to bear upon subsequent judgements,’ (2007: 25). Yet this process of using ‘previous experience’ to inform ‘subsequent judgements’ is too often, in contemporary journalism, applied only to taking editorial decisions within the daily news cycle, rather than to considering broader issues, and seeking to change policies in order to avoid a repetition of earlier mistakes. The present commentary exemplifies a more rigorous, reflective, approach designed to improve future practice. Similarly, Peter Maas, recounting his experience of reporting on taking down in Baghdad of a statue of Saddam Hussein, writes, ‘I had little awareness of the media dynamics that turned the episode into a festive symbol of what appeared to be the war’s finale. In reality, the war was just getting underway’ (2011: 4). Good, reflective, journalistic practice must make itself aware of these ‘media dynamics’, and seek to put the facts behind such ‘festive symbols’ as the pulling down of Saddam Hussein’s statue, and the later capture of the deposed dictator himself. It seems reasonable to conclude that, in both instances, ‘the full story got away’. The reflective journalist, covering such times of change, must seek to stop that happening by using the tools of incisive questioning, and context.

The article ‘The air raids that never were, and the war that nobody won: Government propaganda in conflict reporting, and how journalists should respond to it.’

was another example of this approach. Inspired by a BBC News item broadcast on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2011 to the effect that a Royal Air Force (RAF) bombing raid on Libya had been aborted for fear that it would cause civilian casualties, it built on my analysis of public relations in wartime from Chapter 4 of *Reporting Conflict*. The BBC was not alone in reporting the story (Rodgers, 2012c: 2) - which was impossible to verify. Here, it seemed, was an example of news media accepting without question a story which could of course have been true, but which, taking into account the political climate around NATO's attack on Libya, and the United Kingdom's decision to join it, might just as well have been released principally to stress the declared humanitarian purpose of the military campaign. For it seemed that in a world where the change from printed newspapers and scheduled broadcast news bulletins alone to the arrival of 24-hour television and online news, and social networking sites, had happened bewilderingly quickly: government communications teams understood that no news was no longer good news. In other words, there needed always to be something to give to the news media. Morrison and Tumber wrote of researchers as outsiders apparently '(failing) to get inside the trade'. The reporter turned researcher benefits in two ways: firstly, he or she has been 'inside the trade', so does not have that gap in their knowledge. Secondly, they combine their earlier inside knowledge with their new understanding, that of a new outsider, to provide fresh analysis. 'The air raids that never were' exemplified these advantages of perspective. Some might have seen the apparent willingness to take the Ministry of Defence's account and report it without check or caveat as proof of a desire, stated or not, on the part of the news media, to promote British government policy in Libya. I would argue this could better be understood as being motivated by a desire to report something previously unknown, and to report it first. That desire, it seemed in this case, was open to exploitation by a ministerial communications tactic which understood its nature. I emphasize here the point which I made above: the story could well have been true. Its unclear provenance, and timing, though, mean that its veracity or otherwise was impossible to establish. I do not suggest that the story should not have been reported - only that that limitations placed on journalists' access to first-hand information should have been acknowledged. My work on the influences of politicians and public relations agents has demonstrated this. The interests of rigorous reporting demand that information be presented for what it is - even if that might mean putting pressure on a precious relationship with a source. How the New York Times may have wished they had done that in their reporting of the run-up to the invasion of Iraq.

## Context in news reporting

The war in South Ossetia was seen at the time as an attempt by Moscow to reassert its influence over parts of the territory which, as the capital of the Soviet Union, it had once controlled. In this case, as in so many other conflicts, such as the wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, historical context was indispensable to audiences' understanding. That is especially true of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, controversial and contradictory as the two sides' interpretations may be. The radio documentary *The Middle East and Home*, for the BBC World Service, was both a piece of journalism reflective in its approach, and an opportunity for a journalist to reflect. Although this was a conflict which had defied those political and diplomatic attempts which had been made to resolve it, over a long period, this was also a time of uncertainty and change for, during the making of the programme, the then Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, announced his intention to remove all Jewish settlements from the Gaza Strip (BBC News website, 2004a). This seemed an abandonment of his 1970's policy when, as the chief of the Israeli Army's southern command, he had actually decided on the location of the settlements in order to strengthen the Jewish hold over the Gaza strip. (Sharon, 2001: 258).

Now Mr Sharon's announcement, which came as Palestinians were celebrating the Islamic Feast of the Sacrifice (Eid al-Adha), that those settlements were to be dismantled, confused those who might have been thought of as his friends and foes alike. 'Sharon's Gaza plans unsettle press,' was the BBC's verdict in a headline summarizing the response of Israeli newspapers (BBC News website, 2004b), with 'Press scorn Gaza pullout plan' (BBC News website, 2004c) following a few days later. The initial response from the Palestinian Authority's chief negotiator, Saeb Erekat, 'If Israel wants to leave Gaza... no Palestinian will stand in its way,' (quoted in BBC News website, 2004a) seemed a statement of the obvious, rather than a response to an announcement which, the respondent believed, truly indicated an important shift in policy.

How then should journalism have responded? The vital ingredient was context. *The Middle East and Home*'s primary purpose was to aid understanding of just why the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seemed to defy solution. This was clearer to many journalists in the region than it was to their audiences, or even their editors. One correspondent for a major

news organization, widely respected for its international coverage, had spoken privately some months earlier, in the summer of 2003, of the pressure he had come under from his news desk to present the launch of the ‘Road Map’ for Middle East peace as a major success, a cause for optimism. The fact was that nothing which had gone before had given support to such a point of view, and a couple of conversations in markets or cafes anywhere between the Mediterranean and the River Jordan that summer might have confirmed that. *The Middle East and Home*, made a few months later, was just such an exercise: a piece of longer format journalism which would give people whose livelihoods, future prospects, and even, in some cases, lives were at stake in the conflict a chance to explain their perspective away from the pressure cooker of reacting to daily news. In more than one case, I decided to return to talk to people whom I had met while compiling on-the-day news reports to give them a chance to speak at greater length about longer term issues, hoping thereby to avoid some of the faults which Greg Philo’s research led him to identify, when he concluded

TV audiences have in general very little understanding of events in the developing world or of major international institutions or relationships. This is in part the result of TV coverage which tends to focus on dramatic, violent and tragic images while giving very little context or explanation to the events which are being portrayed. (2004: 222).

The contributors expressed views which will influence any eventual end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but to which the demands of daily news then – often reading like a list of new acts of violence – only rarely gave space. The striking thing, reading the script again now, is the lack of optimism (as opposed to the optimism which the correspondent’s editors, above, felt was there, and was simply not being articulated) felt by the contributors to the programme: Israelis and Palestinians alike. At different times, both refer to 1948 and the founding of the State of Israel: ‘independence’ or ‘catastrophe’ depending on your point of view. The guiding journalistic principle here is the influence of history in forming contemporary protagonists’ views of their own situation. Both journalists, and their journalism, need to take account of that if their work is to have meaning.

‘Context’ in this case meant moving away from the disciplines of daily news, which generally demanded that the events described had happened within the past twenty-four hours or so. Yet ‘context’ can be understood not only in terms of time, in the case above, providing historical background, but also in adding different and diverse voices and points of view.

Over the past decade, increasingly, online journalism has offered the opportunity to do this, in two ways in particular. Firstly, websites have greatly increased the space which news organizations have to publish material. Secondly, they have given audiences the ability to respond and react almost immediately to published content. The *Moscow Diary* - combining these two characteristics – presented an opportunity to move towards what Beckett called, ‘Editorial Diversity’, a phrase which he defined as, ‘an openness to engage with new sources, perspectives, and narratives, and an ability to use them to create networked journalism’ (2008: 150). The *Moscow Diary* was not fully networked journalism in the sense that it might be understood now, making use of social networking, but it was open to engagement with ‘new sources, perspectives, and narratives’, in two important aspects: firstly, it was an opportunity to deal with on-going themes, which had important points to make about cultural and political change in Russia, but which rarely manifested themselves in a dramatic enough way to grab the news headlines, and therefore be brought to the attention of audiences. Examples which could be placed in this category would include ‘Shopping spree’ (Rodgers, 2007), which was an account of a night spent in Moscow’s 24 hour shops and other businesses, the purpose being to demonstrate how post-Soviet Russia had consigned empty shops, with unfriendly opening hours, to the past; ‘Chechnya challenge’ (Rodgers, 2008a), which reminded audiences of the continuing threat of instability in a region which had seen war twice in the post-Soviet period; and ‘Team Spirit’ (Rodgers, 2008b), which sought to explain why the Russian football team’s successful run in that year’s European football championship meant even more than it might to another country. Secondly, in every case, members of the audience were able to submit their (admittedly moderated) comments for publication. In this way, by its treatment of subjects which, while not headline news, were vital to an understanding of Russia’s continuing transition from Marxism-Leninism to its own brand of capitalism and democracy, the *Moscow Diary* demonstrated the opportunities for new editorial approaches which had come with changing technology. In editorial terms, the themes it raised were both reflective, and contributed to audiences’ understanding of Russia in a time of uncertainty. This was especially the case with ‘The Spectre of Default’ (Rodgers, 2008c), published as Russia looked back to its financial crisis of the late 1990s as it wondered what lay ahead in new times of economic instability. The experience of the *Moscow Diary* was partly the inspiration for the making in 2009 of the film *Warm Russia* for the BBC. The focus of this was the effects of unpredictable winter weather on the lives of people living in and around the northern Russian city of Archangel. Unusually warm weather seemed to follow extreme cold (in the week when the film was shot, the temperature went from -5 C to -

35 C in the space of a couple of days, then rose again to almost 0), making it hard for all kinds of sectors of the economy to pursue their normal activities. Foresters could not count on transporting timber on woodland tracks which had not frozen hard as they normally would; fishermen could not predict the behaviour of herring shoals. In a country which had seen its entire political and economic system dismantled and rapidly rebuilt less than 20 years before, it seemed that even the climate could no longer be relied upon to behave as once it had.

### **The effects of changing technology**

For journalists themselves, the greatest change in working practices since the end of the Cold War has been in the field of technology. As noted in the introduction, many contemporary authors (Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Beckett, 2008; Shirky 2008; Albertazzi and Cobley, 2009; Williams, 2011) are in agreement that developments in technology have changed, and continue to change, the nature of the media in general, and journalism in particular. Any journalism seeking to chronicle a time of uncertainty and change must understand that there is a parallel process affecting the way that journalism itself works. This is not of course new. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, ‘new technology raised the level of investment needed to start a paper,’ (Curran, 2010:26). Conboy offers the broader assertion that ‘journalism is itself the product of a particular combination of technology and public communication.’ (2011:81).

From my experience of working as a journalist in the past twenty years, the pace of this change has quickened considerably. In 2009, a senior editor at the BBC World Service said that people who had been there in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s could have done the same job – that is, used pretty much the same technology in pretty much the same way - for most of their working lives. In this new century, that was no longer the case. In the article ‘Two sides of the mountains, and three sides to every story’ (2012b), I developed ideas discussed in Chapter 5 of *Reporting Conflict* to chronicle part of that transformation – comparing two reporting assignments to different parts of the Caucasus in 2000 and 2008. The evolving practices, and challenging economic circumstances, which characterize contemporary journalism add an extra element of uncertainty: not only do today’s journalists have to make sense of a world which is undergoing profound change, they do so when their own circumstances are themselves uncertain.

Another key issue to take into account is the nature of the process of technological change itself. Here it seems that Piaget's idea that, 'Any knowledge raises new problems as it solves preceding ones,' (1975: 30), is especially useful in trying to understand the nature of reflective journalistic practice. One of a journalist's most valuable resources on assignment is time. As Charlie Beckett says in *Supermedia*, 'Talk to experienced journalists and they will say that if you reduce resources - especially time - then editorial corners will be cut.' (2008:29). New technology has given journalists the ability to do things more quickly (video material which could once only have been sent from a professional standard television station can now be sent across the internet from a mobile telephone or wi-fi network). In that sense, time has been saved. However, the ability to send material so easily, combined with the advent of 24 hour television news channels and websites, have led to such an increase in demand and expectation that, on a busy news day, the time advantage afforded by more mobile and flexible technology is lost ( 'Two sides of the mountains, and three sides to every story' discusses this idea in detail). This is why Piaget's idea seems so useful in understanding the nature of change: substitute 'technology' for 'knowledge' and it describes almost exactly the experience of the journalist in a time of rapid technological evolution. For while social networking websites have provided journalists with some excellent primary sources of information (for example the tweets of prominent people and other newsmakers), they have also, in the case of 'A "Gay Girl in Damascus"' 'highlighted the pitfalls of operating as a journalist in the digital era' (Bennet, 2011: 190). The number of times which news organizations in reporting the current conflict in Syria have had to use the disclaimer that material 'cannot be independently verified' (a quick search of the BBC News website in July 2012, for example, found the phrase, or versions of it, in stories reaching back to the spring of 2011, when the uprising against President Assad's administration began) demonstrates that new technology may have facilitated the gathering of a great deal of new material, but not facilitated the proliferation of the same number of reliable sources. Indeed, in June 2012, BBC Trust told the Corporation that it 'should do more to make it clear how it has authenticated user-generated content (UGC), such as phone footage from activists or bystanders' (Douglas, 2012). The fact that the BBC, and other major media organizations, have teams specially dedicated to authenticating such material shows what a challenge it has become.



## Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, the journalistic themes discussed here are not supposed to constitute an exhaustive list. They have been selected on the basis partly of my research since leaving full time journalism, but principally, and, I would argue, appropriately, given that the subject in hand is 'reflective journalistic practice', on the basis of reflection on twenty years in journalism reporting the world after the end of the USSR, and after the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>. The approach taken here can best be summarized as the best of the old, and the best of the new. I claim no original thought in placing emphasis on such ideas as the importance of original material, or the need for reporting to provide context. My own experience as a journalist leads me to suggest, however, that there is a need for these ideas to be given renewed prominence in journalistic practice, and, in preparation for that, in journalism education. Such an approach can help to counter pressure from politicians, and their hired public relations hands, whose purpose is to confuse and obstruct clear impartial reporting. I intend the 'best of the new' to be understood as making the most efficient use of the advantages which new technology, in particular social networking websites such as Twitter and Facebook, offer journalists in terms of the gathering and distribution of news content.

As noted above, one of the biggest challenges facing contemporary journalism (setting aside the near collapse of long trusted economic models – not the subject of the present study, but clearly a very important issue) is the loss of time which has come with the effective disappearance of deadlines. Yes, deadlines for particular programmes still exist – but a journalist today can rarely count on having to work towards one or other particular deadline alone. This has limited the time available for careful thought, for reflection. Consequently, it has given rise to a kind of journalism which might be considered more reactive than reflective. Reactive journalism allows itself always to be dictated to by outside sources of information, rather than attempting to order those sources, to put them in context, to judge them, and, when necessary reject them – as the reflective journalist should. BBC journalists joke that their competitors at Sky News should have 'not wrong for long' as their slogan – suggesting that they are willing to broadcast information they have yet to verify in the hope that it will turn out to be correct. If it does not, they can always put it right later - they will not have been 'wrong for long'. That is reactive journalism: reporting which allows itself to be

influenced by governments, political parties, businesses, and individuals promoting their own interests, rather than setting its own agenda.

Reflective journalism is especially important in the age of uncertainty and change in which we now live - a time when global economic and political prospects are uncertain, as are the consequences of climate change. It fulfils two invaluable roles: the first, to record what is happening - while taking every effort to provide primary sources and context in doing so. This informs the second: on the basis of the understanding of the event or time they are covering which reflective journalists are able to build up, they can inform their audiences of the options facing policy makers or voters as they seek to make their choices. Perhaps the most important contribution of reflective journalistic practice comes only in the longer term: in some cases, after the details of one or other day's news have been forgotten by most members of the audience. Writing in the *International Herald Tribune* on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of the war in Bosnia, Alison Smale, who covered that conflict, concluded

Journalism, it turns out, does not change things immediately. But its first rough draft helps forge what is eventually history — in Bosnia's case, a machinery of international justice that did not exist 20 years ago. (Smale, 2012)

This need to understand longer term trends does not mean that journalists should write each day's news as if they were looking back on it from the future. Rather, they should be aware of the limitations placed upon them because of the nature of their work. In a BBC interview in late 2011, Eric Hobsbawm made a comparison between the uprisings in the Arab world that year, and those in Europe in 1848

Two years after 1848, it looked as if it had all failed. In the long run, it hadn't failed. A good deal of liberal advances had been made. So it was an immediate failure but a longer term partial success - though no longer in the form of a revolution. (quoted in Whitehead, 2011).

The best reflective journalistic practice can help its audience to understand that the seeds of long term success may lie hidden in apparent failure, and vice versa. My work as a journalist did not always achieve that; my work as a writer on journalism, aware now of the potential pitfall, aims to do so – and to assist others to do so, too.

## Note

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<sup>i</sup> The principal town in South Ossetia

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