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Why were Women Correspondents the Face of Coverage of the Libyan Revolution?

Is it patronising, sexist even, to mention the fact that three women reporters were at the forefront of media coverage of the Libyan revolution? Or is it crucial to any serious discussion about how that revolution was perceived? Glenda Cooper explores the issues

In the end, it came down to a pick up truck, a laptop and a small satellite dish powered by a car cigarette lighter. And a great degree of bravery: with this, Sky News foreign correspondent Alex Crawford and her crew provided riveting coverage of the rebel advance into Tripoli, scooping her rivals in the background.

Every war has a media “face”: Kate Adie in the Gulf conflict of 1991, John Simpson in Afghanistan in 2001, “Scud stud” Rageh Omaar in Iraq in 2003. But the particular media focus for the Libyan revolution was that the first three reporters into Green Square, Tripoli, were all women: Crawford, Sara Sidner of CNN, and Zeina Khodr, of Al Jazeera English – much to their surprise. Says Khodr:

I was really shocked by the focus in Western media on female reporters – there’s been nothing like that in the Muslim press. Surely we can both cover wars? – in fact, some women are more brave; some men, some crews were definitely staying away from the front line.

So is it patronising, irrelevant, sexist even to mention Crawford, Sidner and Khodr’s gender? Or can the fact that three women were at the forefront of media coverage of a revolution be worthy of discussion about how that revolution was perceived?

Executives are quick to say there was no deliberate attempt to foreground women reporting; Jon Williams, World News Editor at the BBC, says: “This wasn’t about male or female – it was about showcasing our best people.”

Not Just Coincidence

He disputes those on the ground who say it was coincidence. But Khodr, senior correspondent at Al Jazeera English, says she ended up in Tripoli purely because she was assigned on that week’s rota. Sidner puts down the number of women as “happenstance” adding: “A number of women happened to be in the same place at a historically pivotal and visual moment in the war.” And Crawford says she was sent back to Libya because of her previous experience in Zawiyah earlier in 2011. But she believes there were so many female reporters at the forefront of the reporting in other media organisations because:

I think they [news desks] did not realise how big a story it was going to

be...other organisations sent their big guns miles after the event. When I was leaving Libya and going to Tunisia, [the BBC's] Ben Brown and John Simpson were going in – they are reporters you would expect in the starting line up, but this time in the second line up.

Added to that, up to 35 international journalists from the BBC, CNN, Sky and Reuters were held up in the Rixos hotel, Tripoli, by armed guards loyal to Muammar Gaddafi, before being freed on 24 August, and thus unable to report from outside the hotel's confines.

All three women were television correspondents as well: the domination of the TV image has promoted the idea that Libya was reported by women, adds Lindsay Hilsom, Channel 4 News' International Editor.

The number of female correspondents reporting wars and other emergencies has been increasing over the years, but I don't really know why so much fuss about Libya. Maybe because Alex Crawford was so prominent, and the fact that she was doing live rolling TV news meant that people could see her in a dangerous place. No one watched live on TV as Marie Colvin's eye was shot in Sri Lanka. TV somehow makes it more powerfully obvious that the reporters are female.

Hilsom is correct to point out that women war reporters are nothing new: from Clare Hollingworth and Martha Gellhorn in the Second World War to Kate Adie covering the Tripoli bombings of 25 years ago. According to the Freedom Forum in 1998, during the first war in Chechnya nearly half the accredited reporters were women.¹ And as journalism jobs go, it can be a good one for women: academics Marina Prentoulis, Howard Tumber and Frank Webster, of City University, have argued that women front line correspondents are less subject to gender prejudices than other parts of the profession because they face the same psychological and physical hazards as the men. According to one female national newspaper journalist to whom Prentoulis *et al* spoke for their paper, *Finding Space: Women Reporters at War*, the reality was that:

Everyone is reduced to an equal and there isn't tension between males or females...no-one would have ever said, for example: "We can't take you because you're a woman"...you were just another reporter.²

The difficulty for many women is getting the job in the first place. We have come some way since 1970 when only 6 per cent of foreign correspondents were women.³ Yet Crawford, a Royal Television Society award winner, who took six years to win a foreign correspondent's role, comments:

I got turned down continually – it became a running joke in newsroom how many times I got turned down; one friend said to me: 'By now most people would have given up – they don't want you.' But I kept on going and finally got it.

Very Specialised Group

Those women who succeed in becoming foreign correspondents make up a very specialised group, according to Anthony Feinstein and Mark Sinyor, in a report for the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard. According to an analysis of more than 200 war reporters, they say:

The emerging profile of the female war journalist – more likely to be single and better educated than their male colleagues, no more vulnerable to PTSD, depression or overall psychological distress, and keeping up with the men when it comes to drinking – suggests they are a highly select group. It is not by chance that these women have gravitated to the frontlines of war.⁴

Yet those who do succeed in the job still face frequent prurient discussion over their role in a way their male counterparts do not. Underlying the admiration for Crawford *et al* in media commentary of their work in Libya has been an on-going debate about their marital/maternal status; particularly those reporters who are mothers (such as Crawford) and continue to put themselves in danger. Plus, as Sidner wryly puts it: “Those reporting on us rarely fail to mention what we are wearing, how our hair looks, and our overall appearance in some of the harshest conditions humans have to face.” In a recent Q&A session at the Edinburgh Television Festival discussing her reporting of Libya, Crawford says of questions over whether she should do this job as a mother of four:

It’s frankly really insulting and very, very sexist...I’m working alongside today the chief correspondent who’s a man who’s got three children and there will be no one who says what do you think you’re doing, how awful, what are you doing to your children? No one, it won’t even be raised as an issue and yet the stories that I do, [provoke] quite a lot of comment and a lot of criticism.”⁵

Yet women who choose to work as war reporters continually have to justify themselves. In a recent piece for the *Daily Mail*, Janine di Giovanni, who has reported from Bosnia, Chechnya, Somalia, Rwanda, Iraq and Afghanistan, described her decision to step back from war reporting in emotive terms:

I knew having a child would mean I would miss lots of stories and would never again be the first one inside a city under siege or get the first interview with a dictator. But I would have pages and pages of diaries filled with memories of [her son] Luka’s first tooth and witness the first moment he walked. And no scoop is more satisfying than that. ⁶

The Assault on CBS Correspondent Lara Logan

Even Crawford said during her Edinburgh Q&A that her children would prefer her to be a “dinner lady” than a war correspondent putting herself in danger. This debate was thrown into sharp relief following the assault on CBS correspondent Lara Logan while covering the Egyptian revolution in Tahrir Square earlier in 2011.

Logan (a mother of two and, as the *Daily Mail* repeatedly pointed, out a former swimwear model ⁷) came in for fevered criticism that she had somehow “deserved” to be assaulted, with the academic Nir Rosen resigning from New York University after he tweeted that she had probably “just been groped”. ⁸ And National Public Radio in the US later had to remove countless offensive messages from their message boards questioning whether Logan should have been reporting from Cairo in the first place. ⁹ As a result there were concerns news organisations would be more reluctant to expose female journalists to possible danger by reporting on the “Arab Spring”. Such suspicions have made women disinclined to raise the issue in the past: in a piece for the *Columbia Journalism Review* in 2007, Judith Matloff argued that women often failed to report assault in case it stopped them getting future assignments or hindered gender equality ¹⁰ – even though a 2005 study for the International News Safety Institute, found that of the twenty-nine respondents who took part, more than half reported sexual harassment on the job. ¹¹

Interviewed after Logan’s assault, Jon Williams, World News Editor for the BBC, said that it would be naïve to see gender as irrelevant when deploying journalists to hostile environments but that “changing gender of the person doesn’t eliminate the risk; it just makes it different...The threat is there and real, how it manifests itself may be different for men and women but it doesn’t eliminate the threat”. ¹² Crawford added:

After the attack on Lara there wasn’t any change; we’d already had a couple

of nasty moments of being mobbed outside hotel in Alexandria...The anger seemed very much directed against women broadcasting – they started shouting “bitch bitch bitch”, completely walked past the cameraman who is usually the first one attacked, tried to grab me and the producer.

Sara Sidner says she was concerned there would be a change in policy restricting women from covering certain conflicts – with CNN continuing to assess and adjust security measures for its staff around the world:

I covered Libya during the revolutions and did not have a single incident. However, during my time in South Asia, and one of the Gulf countries during gatherings of large crowds of mostly men, I have been harassed while trying to report on a story. I have yelled, fought back, and simply moved away to try and get away from that kind of behaviour so that I could continue doing my job. It is maddening at times.

Yet the women who covered Libya were often keen to play down potential dangers and emphasise the advantages of their gender in covering the story. Crawford said:

Women are seen as less aggressive...Men find it easier dealing with women and are more likely to take against other men. It doesn't matter what you look like or your age; if you have half an ounce of charm and sociability, you can use that – not in a Machiavellian way but just in getting on with people, making friends...and other females are obviously much more ready to talk to me than a strange foreign bloke.

In fact, Hilsum pointed out that there was a danger that one gender could be discriminated against as a result of difficulty in war reporting:

Often only women can talk to other women for cultural reasons...It means women can get 100 per cent of the story and men only part of it. But, as I've said before, I don't think this means men shouldn't be allowed to report wars. I think they have a contribution to make, even if they can't get the whole story.

Yet Khodr's view was that the advantage she had in Libya was not primarily to do with her gender but her particular skills:

The advantage was that I speak Arabic so you get the story without waiting for the translator, and people tend to be more comfortable as they feel you understand the culture and the situation. Men are very conservative in Libya so they were shocked at me being there but when I approached I felt it was important not to show any weakness.

Women “Often Given the Softer Side of War to Report”

Was the type of coverage in Libya different though because of the numbers of women journalists? The war correspondent Janine di Giovanni, writing in the *Daily Mail*, believes that in war situations the stories women cover mean that they “were not equal to men”: “We are often given the softer side of war to report, ‘the female angle’ so to speak, feeding into the stereotype that women are more ‘caring war reporters’ than men.”¹³

Yet executives and journalists on the ground in Libya disagree with di Giovanni's concerns. Sidner points out “on a single day in Tripoli CNN had three female producers in the field”. Khodr says of the stories she has covered: “We were covering battles; then we did the makeshift jail where people burned alive. It's going to be a while before we turn to the feature stories,” while Hilsum says that she has interviewed far fewer women than usual: “Women in Libya have largely been behind closed doors. They only came out on the streets in the last few days.”

Jon Williams points out that while Orla Guerin had covered the plight of families in Misrata and the nurse in a Tripoli hospital, Ian Pannell had done similar stories. Williams goes on to talk of a “humanity and a personalisation of the conflict” in both Guerin and Pannell’s reporting; something that is backed up by the academic research. Prentoulis *et al* argue that the shift towards human interest stories, encapsulated in the phrase “the feminisation of news,” may be symptomatic of a broader cultural shift, moving towards a “journalism of attachment”. They say:

The latter, favouring more “human” stories of civilian victims and some degree of emotional involvement, may be allowing women reporters more space for approaching war stories in their own way and, at the same time, allowing male correspondents to respond to the intensity of the war, without the “macho” bravado often associated with the war correspondent

Lindsay Hilsum agrees that there is less distinction between male and female reporting in war these days:

I think you’d be hard-pressed to find a consistent distinction between men’s and women’s reporting of wars and revolutions. But I would say that when a man does the weepy, human side he is regarded as empathetic and sensitive, but a woman may be perceived as “not coping” if she shows emotion. So women broadcasters have to be very careful not to play into people’s stereotypes.

And that perhaps is why the images of female reporters dominated the media agenda; not that there were women correspondents (there have been those for decades) nor that there were so many of them there (unlikely to be statistically greater than normal). But in a world where we are used to a subjective, so-called “feminised” approach to news, seeing Khodr, Sidner and Crawford in their flak jackets and helmets having to shout their commentary over the sounds of bullets being fired and rebels chanting was to come full circle: just as men can report Williams’ “personalization of the conflict” without it being a shock, Crawford *et al* made clear women can report in the traditional “macho” way – and do it just as effectively, armed only with a car cigarette lighter.

Notes

¹ *Journalists in Danger: Recent Russian Wars*, New York and London, Freedom Forum, 1998 p. 307 quoted in Jean Seaton, *Carnage and the Media*, London: Penguin 2005 p. 178

² Marina Prentoulis, Howard Tumber and Frank Webster, *Finding Space: Women Reporters at War*, *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 2005 pp 374–377

³ Annalena McAfee, *Women on the Front Line*, *Guardian*, 16 April 2011. Available online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/apr/16/women-war-reporting-annalena-mcafee>, accessed on 29 August 2011

⁴ Anthony Feinstein and Mark Sinyor, *Women War Correspondents: They Are Different in So Many Ways*, *Nieman Reports*, Winter 2009. Available online at <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/article/101967/Women-War-Correspondents-They-Are-Different-in-So-Many-Ways.aspx>, accessed on 29 August 2011

⁵ Alex Crawford in live Q&A at the MediaGuardian Edinburgh International Television Festival, 27 August 2011. Full transcript available online at <http://news.sky.com/home/world-news/article/16058071>, accessed on 29 August 2011

⁶ Janine Di Giovanni, *Motherhood and Warfare: The Rise of Women Reporters on the Front Line*, *Daily Mail*, 31 August 2011. Available online at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2031387/Motherhood-warfare-The-rise-women-reporters-line.html>, accessed on 1 September 2011

⁷ See, for example, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1357485/Lara-Logan-assault-Former-GMTV-reporter-suffers-sex-attack-covering-Egypt-uprising.html>, available online at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1357394/Lara-Logan-attack-CBS-reporter-leaves-hospital->

Cairo-mob-sex-assault.html; and <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1358104/Toe-curling-Richard-Mellor-peaks-Bahrain-Radio-4.html>, both accessed on 1 September 2011

⁸ *Daily Mail* reporter: No one told her to go there: Now female pundit lays into Egypt sex attack victim Lara Logan and “anima” protestors, 18 February 2011. Available online at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1357957/Lara-Logan-attack-Debbie-Schlüssel-Nir-Rosen-criticise-CBS-correspondent.html>, accessed on 1 September 2011

⁹ Mark Memmott, Why have so Many Posts on the Attack on Lara Logan Been Removed, 16 February 2011. Available online at <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2011/02/16/133804167/why-have-many-comments-about-the-attack-on-lara-logan-been-removed>, accessed on 1 September 2011

¹⁰ Judith Matloff, Foreign Correspondents and Sexual Abuse: The Case for Restraint, *Columbia Journalism Review*, May/June 2007. Available online at <http://www.judithmatloff.com/correspondentsandsexualabuse.pdf>, accessed on 1 September 2011

¹¹ Survey by the International News Safety Institute, *Women Reporting War*, 2005. Available online at http://www.newssafety.org/images/stories/pdf/programme/wrw/wrw_finalreport.pdf, accessed on 1 September 2011

¹² Katie Connolly, Lara Logan attack turns spotlight on female reporters, BBC online, 19 February 2011. Available online at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-12510289>, accessed on 1 September 2011

¹³ Janine Di Giovanni op cit

Note on the author

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