

Alice Millerchip: Do you feel as if you have a national identity, or is your identity diffused? If so, does this play a role in how you report on terrorism?

Rukmini Callimachi: Just about the first question I get from people is “where are you from?” I used to take that question badly. I used to take it to mean that people think I’m not from America when in fact, it is the only identity that I have since I’ve been here for pretty much the bulk of my life. I think that feeling of outsidership has helped me in my reporting because, in the end, a group like ISIS is a form of outsidership.

AM: When you are reporting, it seems like you are an insider in a lot of ways. Could you tell me what you think is gained or lost in being an insider while reporting, or whether you still feel like an outsider?

RC: When I’m talking to ISIS fighters, there is no hiding. In their eyes, I am American because I come in representing the New York Times. It doesn’t matter if I tell them I’m from another country. In their eyes, I am working for a newspaper that is headquartered in the country that their organization is fighting. I usually have to spend a good part of the interview getting people to try to see me on my own terms -- the way I do that is by asking them questions that display my detailed knowledge of ISIS.

They are expecting that as an American, I don’t know much about their group. It’s by catching them in inconsistencies in the stories they tell, by asking them in depth questions about the theology that they are applying, that I am able to somehow approach them, disarm them and meet them as an expert in the group. If I succeed, then they’ll open up to me. But a lot of interviews basically end up with me just opening and closing my notebook because they don’t want to talk to me.

AM: Do you think they consider you an expert and this is one of the reasons you can keep talking to these sources? Is this how you maintain contact with your sources?

RC: They have told me as much. But I would have to be honest and say other members of ISIS have also insulted me and said that I know nothing and that I’m just an infidel. They called me a “kafira” woman. “Kafira” is the female form of “kufir” which means infidelity. So, I get that too.

AM: How do you use the information that you find online, or in chat rooms, in your work, and how does it influence your reporting on the ground?

RC: The chat rooms are basically the basement of the house that I stand on. It’s part of the foundation. I check into the chat rooms every day. Every day, I’m looking at what they’re posting. Other than using it as a couple of lines of color in my stories, I can’t do entire stories off of that because I don’t know the real identities of the people that are posting and although in my gut I know that they are ISIS, I don’t know it at the level of proof that I need to know it at in

order to be able to publish a NYT article. It's almost like a tip-service for me. By being in the chat rooms, I hear what they are talking about, I see the trends. So, for example, a couple of months ago, they were consistently posting posters calling for terrorist attacks on Halloween and then attacks on Christmas, but in a very targeted way. And they were singling out America as one of the places. And sure enough, on Halloween, there was an ISIS supporter who used the truck to attack a bike line and crush people in Manhattan and then around Christmas time, there was another ISIS-inspired attacker who strapped on an improvised bomb and tried to walk into a subway tunnel near my office, and he later said that he specifically chose that subway tunnel because it had Christmas decorations in it. So, that's the kind of thing where I saw that coming. When those attacks happened, I knew how to position them, but at the same time, I wouldn't have done a story on these chats because it just sounds like you are trying to scare people. We don't want to hype their threats for them.

AM: Could you elaborate on what you meant by saying that you think your job as a journalist is to understand “bringing gray” to where there is only black and white, because there is always gray? This was your response, during an interview, to criticism about your work giving terrorists a voice.

RC: This beat, terrorism, I think it's the only beat, probably in the world, where journalists routinely put out stories about this particular group, the Islamic State, without attempting to contact them to get their side of the story. On any other beat -- let's say you were talking about a pro-choice, or pro-life rally that turned violent somewhere in the Midwest -- the story would be considered unbalanced and flawed if all you had were quotes from the pro-choice people. As a journalist, you *have* to try to get the other side, even if the other side is violent, or doesn't want to talk to you. And terrorism is the one area where the rule, somehow, gets suspended. We routinely put out stories about ISIS without any comment from the organization. Now, the reason we do that is the terror. There are also several other reasons. Number one, it's a secretive group -- it's very hard to contact them so it's not evident how you would even go about doing that. Secondly, there's this perception that any sort of comment from the group, any sort of “this is what they said,” “this is what they believe” -- any sort of explanation of what they think -- does their work for them. I actually disagree with that. I think that one of the reasons why we keep getting the War on Terror wrong is because of this idea that we should never talk to them. In the end, this is an actor in the conflict that we are facing in the world today. I think that there are responsible ways to seek them out, to try to get to the bottom of what they believe and to responsibly report that.

AM: Why have you chosen to write in a storytelling format? Why do you think it's important to write stories like this, as opposed to providing straight facts about what has happened in attacks?

RC: Do you remember the last time that you were moved by a story that just presented facts?

AM: No.

RC: Right, so there is something uniquely human about telling stories -- about storytelling. It's something that our ancestors from the earliest time did around the campfire, and the reason we do that is by telling a story, and by trying to put readers, essentially, in the skin of whatever subject you are profiling. That makes it more real. It allows people to identify. You know, that person to feel close to them and in that action, I think you are able to actually convey information in a more complete fashion than if you are just listing facts.

AM: How does the emotional toll affect you? Does it affect you while reporting or writing?

RC: I think, like most people on this beat, I have developed a couple of techniques to try to minimize the violent imagery that I see. For example, there is this set format to how ISIS videos unfold. They all begin with a black screen. Then there is some writing on the black screen. And then there will be some imagery and typically there will be a lecture of some kind from a narrator, either in person or else over another scene, before they get to the execution screen. So I know that when an ISIS video comes into my inbox, I know I can click on it and at least for the first few minutes, I'm not going to see anything bad. That allows me to click on it, see what it's generally about. Before they kill somebody, they like to set it up. They'll have a prisoner that is in an orange jumpsuit and they'll make him kneel. When I see that kind of stuff, I basically just put it on fast-forward and I put my hand over the actual image so I don't see the killing. I don't actually need to see how this poor person is being killed because I don't think that's good for my psyche. I just need to know, generally, what is this video, what is the information that is being conveyed in this video, how does it fit with the pattern of videos I've seen in the past, does it tell us anything new about ISIS' media-making machine etc.

AM: Is that the same case when you are on the ground in ISIS strongholds that have just been liberated? While talking to sources there, do you have any emotional reaction?

RC: I think some of the hardest interviews I've done were with the Yazidi victims of rape of ISIS. Those were truly sad interviews that stayed with me for a while. As for the rest, in general, I think I'm about to metabolize them pretty quickly. In the end, I understand that I'm the reporter and I'm covering these things and the story is not about me.

AM: What do you think of the literature that criticizes media coverage of terrorism?

RC: I think that the literature is inherently flawed. I think that it conflates two things. For example, there have been studies that have shown that there is a correlation between an increase in terror attacks and the coverage of those terrorist attacks. Researchers, from this, glean that

because there is media coverage around it, this essentially inspires people that are fence-sitters and moves them to violence.

What this literature is missing is it's not computing the role of the terror group's own media. None of these researchers are actually inside their chat rooms and they don't see just how developed that media is. It's incredibly developed. It's really it's own universe. You can be just inside that media – You don't have to watch the BBC or hear CNN or read the NYT or see anything else – and you will be informed about the attacks that have happened, in line with their propaganda. I think that is the vector that is pushing people to do copycat attacks. It is not the external media because if you read the NYT, you will inherently come away with a negative impression of terrorism.

We are not writing something positive about terrorism, we are writing about the human toll, about the victims, and so anybody who is reading it with some level of intellect is going to understand that that is not a good thing to do.

AM: When you are interviewing hostages, negotiators, victims or government officials, how does your interview style change? How are you flexible with the way you interact with these different kinds of people?

RC: I think I just come into the room where I'm meeting the person and I sit down and try to meet them with that. If it's a woman who has been raped, obviously there is a whole other protocol with how you even start talking to her and getting her permission and everything else, versus if you're sitting down with a government official.

AM: Have you had interactions with national security or government officials in regard to withholding information?

RC: I think most reporters at the NYT have been contacted by law enforcement if they are on this beat. But, of course, we are not law enforcement. We are independent of them. Our reporting is for our public and they are welcome to click on our stories and read them once they are put out.

AM: How would you define your role as a journalist? Is this different from how you would define your role as a journalist reporting on terrorism?

RC: As a journalist, I think our role is to shine a spotlight on the issues of our day. As a journalist covering ISIS, my role is to try to understand who these people are -- what are their motivations, why do they do what they do and what are the strategies that they are employing to do that. And, finally, what is being done about that.

AM: Are there mechanisms that you find problematic in today's coverage of terrorism? In a past interview, you said that most reporters contact officials and have government voices.

RC: Right, I think that's the big failure of reporting on this beat. Reporters, still to this day, don't understand how politicized this issue is. No government wants to admit that they have allowed a terror threat to grow or that they have allowed an attack to happen on their soil. So you get into all of these contorted things that happen when you speak to officials. For example, back in the days of Al Qaeda, we used to be told that Al Qaeda had been decimated, destroyed, that these other little groups and affiliates that Al Qaeda had were not really part of the core. Then with ISIS, we were told, "no, this is the JV team. This is not the real deal." I think there has been far too little skepticism of those official statements when they came out.

AM: After contacting your sources and interviewing them, how do you maintain relationships with them? Are these sustained relationships or are you always looking for new people?

RC: I'm always looking for new people. The way that I have managed to maintain good relationships with sources is through radical transparency. By never manipulating them, by never promising them something that isn't the case, by telling them exactly what I'm really working on. I think human beings are intelligent people and they figure out very quickly if you are playing them somehow, if you are pretending to like them and you are pretending to give them positive coverage and, in effect, you are actually preparing something else.

AM: It is clear that these are not positive things that they are doing. Regardless of that, do you think it's the transparency?

RC: I'm not suggesting that it's easy, but that has been my go-to position. It's not easy to be transparent with sources because at a certain point, when you get involved in a story and you've worked a lot on it, you want the story to come out.