

Sophie Pilkington: You covered several suicide bombings during your career as a journalist--were there ever any instances when you felt that you or your team were not safe?

Tom Coghlan: If you're covering a suicide bombing, then the primary concern, in terms of safety, is the follow-up bomb, which is a pretty standard technique. They will set off a bomb and wait until the emergency services rush to the area, which is when they send in a second bomber to target all the people who are trying to help the wounded. There's loads of people that flock to a bombing. So if their goal is maximum bloodshed and maximum publicity, then the second bomb is a brutal but effective way to maximize damage. Covering bombings is horrible, and the threat of being in the blast zone of a follow-up bomb is significant enough that it used to be a big concern for us.

SP: When these events occurred, what were your initial steps to gather sources and information?

TC: When I was really eager, I would rush to the scene and try to get there within the first few minutes. I used to work for CNN and I would report on the phone. People who watch the 24-hour news cycle love that kind of immediacy. The first step would be to report on what is unfolding in front of you. The second layer of reporting would be trying to interview government officials, senior diplomats and sources at foreign embassies who could give you a sense of who might be behind the attack. You'd also call up analysts and then, of course, you'd call up the insurgents. In Afghanistan, the Taliban had a spokesman called Curry. There were a couple different men, but they always had the same name. Usually the Taliban would claim the bomb and that was a valid piece of reporting. Sometimes they'd tell you the reasoning behind the attack, too. In-depth reporting would include sources within the Western government who might know background intelligence. But first and foremost, there are human stories within any bombing, and they are always pretty harrowing. Sometimes kids get blown up, and sometimes people do incredibly brave things such as trying to tackle a bomber, and they always end up getting killed. Those are all important and valid stories.

SP: Did your coverage of violent events shift depending on which organization you were reporting for, or what region you were in at the time?

TC: That's an interesting question. I worked for a lot of organizations that I respected and I never worked for a newspaper that I didn't like. The Economist, The Times and The Telegraph were all good newspapers. In terms of how you write, language is a finely calibrated tool, and as a journalist your business is words. We are all picking them very carefully. The difference between a terrorist and an insurgent is an interesting one, and sometimes the difference is fluid. In Syria, for example, it seems particularly hard to differentiate. In Afghanistan my country was directly involved, and it was pretty standard for us to refer to the Taliban as insurgents. In some other conflicts it would have been a more finely calibrated decision. There was a company policy at The Times with everything in terms of reporting, right down to how we spelled "Taliban."

They were a terrorist group as far as the UN was concerned and as far as a lot of Western governments were concerned, so I didn't think that I had any problem referring to them as insurgents. But I hope that my reporting of them was nuanced, because that was certainly my objective.

SP: Have you ever spoken face-to-face with a member of a terrorist organization?

TC: I've spoken to quite a few insurgents in different places. I've spoken to members of the Taliban who I interviewed inside Afghanistan or outside in Pakistan. Those can be extremely dangerous to conduct. You have to build confidence and work through people you really trust. In Afghanistan the way you would try to negotiate a meeting like that would be using tribal networks. I had an Afghan fixer who I knew very well and cared about, and I trusted him. That's a bond of trust, and he also has contacts in particular provinces who he has a similar level of trust with, which can grant unprecedented access. But it can go wrong. It went wrong for a number of my friends and colleagues.

SP: When it comes to some of the worst situations you covered, how did you prepare yourself to write about such terrible violence?

TC: In terms of actual scale and difficulty to detach myself emotionally, I would say that natural disasters are worse than man-made events. An earthquake in Pakistan that killed 50,000 to 60,000 people was terrible. That's suffering on a scale that's just not proportional to anything. I covered the shooting down of the MH-17 flight -- the plane over Ukraine -- and that was the most egregious and upsetting in terms of horrible stuff spread over several miles of the country. In terms of preparing yourself for that, you can't really. You get fairly numb to it fairly quickly when it first happens, then it slowly creeps up on you afterward. I think there is an idea that anybody who comes into this thing is mega-fucked up afterward, but I would say that most emotionally intelligent people can let it in sometimes.

SP: Did you ever feel that you were providing propaganda for the Taliban or that they were using you to spread their message?

TC: Certainly, there was a consideration. It's a bit of a moral minefield to cover conflicts because everyone has a strong view. I used to write about Israel, and when you write about Israel, you get accused of being partial to one side pretty much every time you write an article. As long as you are taking a whole lot of crap from a whole load of people you're probably doing a good job. If all the criticism is coming from one side, then maybe you should start thinking about that. But if you're getting crap from everyone, I think that's a good thing. My embassy, at times, felt that I was leaning too close to the side of the Taliban when I was covering Afghanistan, but I think that's because, like a lot of journalists, I was quite critical of the way the war was being conducted. I focused a lot of energy on stories that talked about accidental bombings of Afghan civilians or Western aircraft launching airstrikes at the wrong place or other mistakes. Those obviously make you unpopular with the authorities.

SP: How do you see the wave of social media affecting reporting? Do you think it has enhanced the depth of reporting, or have there been negative effects?

TC: Social media has done some great things and it's been a pain in the ass as well. I mean, wow, we get amazing footage. You get combat footage today like you've never gotten combat footage before because of social media and the fact that everyone has a camera. But everyone knows the damages that social media is doing, such as controlling elections in western countries. It was fantastic for us to get information out of places, such as when we were covering the Arab Spring. I was on WhatsApp and it was amazing because we were talking to people in besieged enclaves around Damascus. That's unbelievable access. I was getting dudes to write articles for me out of starving towns in Syria. They were sending the stories through messages on WhatsApp over the course of weeks and months and it was just unbelievable. Of course I was trying to cross-check them, but you can only do that to a certain degree by getting people to post videos on YouTube with messages on them that prove they are who they say they are. That kind of access, for the most part, has been a positive. The downside is that governments are increasingly sophisticated in the way that they manipulate social media. The Russian government, Syrian government, and I don't think the Western governments are totally above this stuff, either. Journalists have to stay on their guard going forward.

SP: How did you transition from writing for The Times to being a director at K2, and did that transition have anything to do with the death of James Foley?

TC: I guess in some sort of way, yes, but it was not an overwhelming consideration. I just did my time and I think that kind of reporting is a young person's game. I was very lucky to get away with it for as long as I did. Quite a lot of people I knew at various times rode their luck too hard and some people, including James Foley, ended up getting killed. There were plenty of other considerations, though, like meeting a nice girl and needing to make some more money.