

[Autos](#) [Careers](#) [Classifieds](#) [Homes](#)

SEARCH



Journalists soldier on

By PETER WORTHINGTON

Last Updated: 11th May 2009, 2:09am

"Embedded" is a relatively new word in journalism, applicable to reporters attached to American, British or Canadian troops in Afghanistan and/or Iraq.

At the beginning of the latest Iraq war, the CBC opted not to have reporters embedded with the American troops on grounds that the journalists would be subjected to military "spin" and thus risk losing their objectivity. Nonsense and insulting, but it stigmatized the idea of "embedded" journalists.

Instead, the CBC used videos from embedded networks and put their own interpretation ("spin") on the war footage. That's honest journalism?

Scott Taylor, publisher of the magazine Esprit de Corps, titles his recent memoir, Unembedded: Two Decades of Maverick War Reporting which, he says "is gleaned from first hand observation ... about challenging the official position. Seeing through the other guy's eyes is the key to any success."

Again, this implies that being embedded with the military is an impediment to objective, balanced or fair reporting.

In a long career that involved coverage of a lot of wars, revolutions, coups, etc., I was mostly "unembedded" in that I had no support system or firm base, or sanctuary. Nor did most journalists who covered crises.

In the days of UN peacekeeping, it wasn't necessary to be "embedded."

CROSSING LINES

In Cyprus, for instance, Turks and Greeks had no argument with journalists who criss-crossed the lines. In Algeria's war for independence, the French didn't much like journalists but tolerated them, while Algerian nationalists relished a generally sympathetic foreign press. In the Congo warring elements ignored or sought to use foreign journalists.

But in the Biafran war, if you weren't "embedded" with one side, you couldn't report from that side. If Nigerians captured a journalist with the Biafran forces, he'd be shot as a mercenary. The same with UNITA insurgents in Angola. In the Eritrean war, if a journalist with the rebels was caught by Ethiopian soldiers -- again he'd be shot as a mercenary.

In Afghanistan, unless a journalist is "embedded" with the Canadians, Canada's story won't be told. The trouble is, some reporters embedded with the Canadians also try to tell the Taliban story -- as Taylor says, "seeing through the other guy's eyes."

The spring edition of the Ryerson Review of Journalism tells how the Globe and Mail's Graeme Smith covered the Taliban while embedded with Canadians at Kandahar. Meeting and interviewing the Taliban was dangerous, so Smith compiled a list of 20 questions and got his hired Afghan "fixer" to videotape interviews with the Taliban, which Smith got translated and developed into a six-part series in the Globe called "Talking with the Taliban."

In the old days, that would be considered questionable journalism -- no direct contact with the story, no nuance, no personal assessments, no colour, no feeling for mood or the Taliban environment.

PIPELINE TO TALIBAN

A concern for the Canadian military is that a journalist's Afghan "fixer" may be a potential pipeline for the Taliban into the Canadian base.

Journalists babble like brooks, and if the "fixer" has Taliban links he's potentially a foil and source of information for the Taliban.

There are cases of "embedded" journalists being reluctant to go "outside the wire" for fear of roadside bombs. Some getting their "fixers" to do leg work for them. Journalists such as Matthew Fisher, who are old school and want to see for themselves, are becoming rare.

Summed up, a journalist in Afghanistan who is not embedded with the military is incapable of getting the whole story, and is far more likely to be captive of what he/she is told by the Taliban who are adept at using the media in a way our military wouldn't dare.

Copyright © 2009 Winnipeg Sun All Rights Reserved