

Press Freedom in times of war and conflict NOT AT WAR

When German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock said in late January: We are fighting a war against Russia, not against each other, she dropped a bomb in capitals worldwide. Her statement was quickly clarified: of course the minister did not really mean Germany was at war with Russia. But her diplomatic misstep did express a sentiment that can be felt around Europe for over a year. So much so that it nearly sounded strange to hear that 'we' are not at war with Russia.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing war has naturally shocked and scared many in Europe. People used to living their relatively peaceful lives were suddenly, brutally disturbed by a grim realization that war has come very near. The immediate response was to close the ranks against a common enemy, meaning Russia.

Overnight, peace loving politicians turned into warmongers, competing over who could use the strongest language in Brussels, London or Berlin. News bulletins were suddenly dominated by military experts who pushed the narrative that we all should stand united to support Ukraine, and send weapons.

Those who openly questioned this narrative, or wondered what the consequences could be, were often portrayed as pro Russia or seen as providing the enemy with useful propaganda about a divided west or a weak NATO.

I want to take this opportunity to argue that not only politicians or civilians in Europe have closed ranks - a natural response in times of crises - but some media as well. And I want us to consider how this form of self-censorship undermines our press freedom.

Let me be clear: I am not talking about obvious victims of state censorship like the Russian media who were forced to close down or leave the country. Or Ukrainian journalists dying on the frontlines or forced to operate within a state tightly controlled by the military. I will get to that later. My focus is on European media and how they have responded to the war in Ukraine.

As a consequence of Russia's invasion European societies quickly became polarized. The feeling became that you are either with the mainstream narrative, the government narrative. Or you are against it. For any grey area in the middle, there seemed to be less room. In Germany for example several surveys have indicated that the German population has been divided about military support for Ukraine. Around 45 percent supports sending weapons; a similar number is against it. For historical reasons, sending weapons to a conflict where Germany used to be the aggressor is a bit more sensitive than in other countries. So a thorough discourse would not have been out of place. But those against, although a large part of the population, have hardly played a role in the public debate.

In their book *die Vierte Gewalt, The Fourth Estate*, published in Germany in September last year, philosopher Richard David Precht and sociologist Harald Welzer

argue that the media's role as a watchdog for those in power has increasingly changed into pushing the government to make decisions. To the extent that in Germany 44 percent of those asked in a poll two years ago wondered if they could still trust the media as being independent from the government.

The authors argue that this became clear during the Covid pandemic and even more so during the war in Ukraine. They see it as a social psychological phenomenon with not only politicians and civilians closing the ranks in times of war and conflict but journalists as well. The authors describe the mindset as guarding social conformity where questioning what is considered a common narrative is seen as undesirable and a threat to the unity needed to win.

This in my opinion is the exact opposite of what journalists should do. Our role is not to guard unity but to show different perspectives. Especially in times of war and conflict it is crucial that the public can rely on professionals when it comes to independent, factual and balanced information. We journalists, the fourth estate, the controllers of those in power, should never stop asking uncomfortable questions, especially in times of war and crisis.

We should keep our heads cool and our skills and work ethics sharp. WE are not at war with anyone. We have only one weapon and that is our impartiality in our search for facts. When others chose to close their eyes or look away our eyes are wide open even if we don't like what we see. Let me rephrase: especially when we don't like what we see. We have to stick to our main principles:

independence, fact based, fair and balanced reporting and do it with bravery. Some would call this old school journalism and that probably says it all.

But our eyes were not always open and at times our mouths were shut when important questions had to be asked. What is the end goal of this war? What happens to all these weapons after a peace agreement has been signed? What are the risks if they fall into dangerous hands? Why is there a different western response after Russia invaded Ukraine compared to when the US invaded Iraq? Why are pleas of countries suffering economically from this war ignored? Where is the western outpouring of help for Sudan? Who blew up the Nord stream pipelines and why does it take so long until we get more details?

When Dutch news anchor Marielle Tweebeeke during an interview with Ukrainian president Zelensky asked him about corruption in his country she was criticized for attacking a president who was being bombed by his neighbor. Some said it was not the right time to discuss this particularly sensitive topic. A similar remark was made during the Covid pandemic when the Dutch government came under fire for doing too little too late. Volkskrant chief editor Pieter Klok argued that if there is so much fear in society we should stand together as a country including the media. So in his view it was not the right time to criticize. I was shocked to hear this from the chief editor of one of the leading newspapers in the Netherlands where press freedom is often seen as a given.

I have to admit I am guilty as well of falling for what I call

the western narrative. After I returned from Kyiv late March last year I was assigned to cover a meeting of foreign ministers at the NATO head quarters in Brussels. Images of bombarded residential areas and grieving survivors were still fresh on my mind when I asked secretary general Jens Stoltenberg why NATO was not more decisive in closing the sky over Ukraine and was he not worried NATO would end up on the wrong side of history if the alliance wouldn't be more decisive?

From a European perspective I thought it was a valid question at that time. The debate about NATO intervention was dominating European headlines and the common narrative was that the west was not doing enough while Ukrainians were being killed. The press conference was aired live on CNN and I soon ended up in a discussion with my managers in Doha. My question may have sounded valid from a European perspective but Aljazeera is being watched world wide and for our audiences in Nigeria, Argentina or Sri Lanka it may have sounded like I was not only pushing politicians into a decision but also supporting only one narrative, the western one. When I later travelled outside of Europe for work it became even clearer to me that some western media have been sucked into this one narrative and as a consequence have sacrificed their independence when it is needed most.

France 24 recently was persuaded to take down a report that showed Russian soldiers training to go to the frontline in Ukraine. The report contained interviews with soldiers who said they were not afraid to die defending the motherland and that their Russian weapons were better than Ukrainian ones. After complaints by the Ukrainian

ambassador in France accusing France 24 of giving a face and voice to occupiers and murderers, and outrage on social media, the channel took down the report. It is rare to see or hear Russian soldiers on a western channel and although you can argue about the quality of the report what is the validation of banning it? Personally I would have wanted to see more critical questions put to these Russian soldiers or at least know under what limitations they were able to talk. But I don't see any justification to ban their report altogether.

Ukrainian diplomats often describe interviews with Russian state actors as the same as talking to the Nazis of Hitler's Germany, something they describe as unimaginable at that time. But I believe we should talk to all sides as long as we confront them with the right questions and put the interviews into perspective and against the facts on the ground.

I have interviewed people convicted of terrorism who committed the worst possible acts, military generals accused of mass murder, ordinary people who turned into mass murderers, the man accused of killing my friend and colleague journalist Sander Thoenes: very difficult interviews at times. Some left in the middle of the interview leaving me looking at an empty chair...But those who replied to valid and difficult questions-even if their answers were blatant lies- have helped viewers and readers to form an opinion about important historical events that otherwise would have been erased from the public debate.

To ban something also does not mean it will simply disappear. You may not be able to see it but others will.

Last year the European Council banned Kremlin backed media Russia Today and Sputnik as instruments of Russia's disinformation campaign. Both channels clearly spread propaganda and therefore can be seen as potentially dangerous to security. But a European institution imposing a media ban could be a similarly dangerous precedent and a slippery slope away from press freedom. The Dutch Journalists Association formally filed a complaint.

Trust me I realize remaining independent as a journalist is sometimes easier said than done, especially at a time when journalism has increasingly come under attack. Journalists murdered or dying while doing their job has been a scary upward trend.

Today May 11 it has been one year to the day that my colleague Shireen Abu Akleh was shot and killed by an Israeli bullet in the occupied West Bank. The Aljazeera correspondent was wearing a bullet proof vest with the words Press. For 25 years Shireen had been one of the most prominent journalists in the Middle East and an important source of information for the Arab World. One year after she died nobody has been held accountable for her death let alone brought to justice.

Since the start of the war in Ukraine the Committee to Protect Journalists has counted at least 14 journalists killed on the job.

It takes a lot of courage to report from the front lines. And while staying independent has proven to be difficult in the relative safety of western cities, journalists in war zones fight an even harsher battle to get the real story.

On March 3, 2022, one week after Russian troops invaded Ukraine I was on my way to Kyiv as part of an Aljazeera team. Like many other journalists our colleagues had left the Ukrainian capital amidst a barrage of missile strikes in those early days of the invasion. Our channel had since been covering the biggest story in Europe from Lviv and was keen to have a team back in the capital then increasingly surrounded by Russian troops.

We chose Vinnytsia, around 250 kilometers south of Kyiv as our transit point. From there we would assess when it would be a good moment to approach the capital by car. On March 6 we saw smoke coming from the direction of the town's airport. Quickly reports followed that 8 missiles had struck and completely destroyed the building. Nine people were reportedly killed and 6 injured. It was the first attack on the town where many Ukrainians had taken shelter. Arriving at the gate we were immediately scolded and told off: 'If you don't leave now I will shoot you', a stressed out Ukrainian soldier screamed. We didn't ask any further questions.

We then decided to go on a mission to find those wounded. We visited every single hospital in Vinnytsia but we did not find any sign of any injured people from this attack. Hospital directors told us nobody was brought in, no dead bodies either. So we ended up that day with no witnesses, no story and mixed thoughts about what really happened.

During our live report that evening I told my viewers that I could not independently confirm the death toll or the number of wounded from that attack.

It shows how challenging fact-finding can be during a conflict or a war when information is immediately considered a state asset and becomes tightly controlled. It certainly was during these extremely tense days at the start of the Ukraine war and it very much still is now. Ukraine's secret service kept a very close eye and we had to constantly report to commanders about our whereabouts and plans. Showing the aftermath of senseless bombardments on residential areas, schools, hospitals was no problem, interviewing victims or survivors who made an emotional plea for a no fly zone: that was easy. Everything else: very difficult or impossible.

As a journalist you know you have become part of a war propaganda machine. Ukraine's tight control of both national and international media is considered a matter of national security and journalists barely ask any questions. We all realize that any piece of information we broadcast could possibly endanger human lives. But the extent of this control should be a matter of debate.

Since the start of the war Ukraine's main six TV channels have been asked to combine forces and participate in what has been named Marafon, a television marathon bringing 24 hours news showing mostly a version of the war as the government wants to show it. Ukrainian journalists consider this self-censorship for the sake of national survival. The saying that truth is the first casualty of war very much applies here. Of course it is a huge dilemma, if

your country is under attack, to report on the weaknesses, problems, wrong doings of your own army or government -- information the other side can use for its propaganda purposes. Recently Ukrainian journalists have started to complain about the lack of media freedom with some saying the government is using the war too easily as an argument to control information.

Before the war Ukraine was ranked 97 of 180 countries on the press freedom index but due to military control of the media the country dropped to 106.

Russia's war in Ukraine is no different from any other recent war in terms of control of the narrative, except that the tools to control or distort have become increasingly sophisticated.

Two years before Russia invaded Ukraine I was a correspondent in Moscow. After working 23 years in Asia I thought I had seen my fair share of censorship, misinformation and silencing of the press, often literally. But what I experienced in Russia was an entirely different level of information control. Just arriving from Indonesia it felt like I unwillingly became part of one of these famous shadow plays in which what really happens often remains a complete mystery.

Twice I saw myself on Russian national television, filmed while I was reporting, with a Russian voice portraying me as someone who was either changing the facts or rewriting history. This was a new form of intimidation for me. As a journalist I have been arrested, shadowed, threatened, intimidated, bugged but becoming part of the state's

narrative was a threat to my independence as a journalist I had little idea how to respond to it.

Russia is among the world's poorest performers when it comes to freedom of the press. Simply reporting facts can land you in prison. On the global press freedom index it scores only slightly better than Iran, China or Myanmar among others. Journalists who manage to continue to work in those circumstances are brave and of utmost importance. We should continue to campaign for justice for journalists who are wrongfully detained like Evan Gershkovich who works for the Wall Street Journal in Moscow and Han Thar a journalist who I have worked with in Myanmar who has been sentenced to seven years in prison and hard labour on similar bogus charges, to name but two.

These and other brave journalists are our examples on how to stand by our principles: fearless reporting despite threats, intimidation or public pressure; committed to telling the full story even if some facts are inconvenient and are not supporting the common narrative.

Only then we can regain credibility with the public, and earn the trust so important for us to fulfil our roles. We are all aware of how media credibility has been eroded over the years. On purpose by politicians like Donald Trump- to name the most obvious example –whose 'fake news' campaign has resonated well in authoritarian circles or anyone else who benefits from silencing the press. It's been an attack on the media with even worse consequences than shutting us down. It has hit us in the very core of our existence.

That's why we need to work harder to counter this campaign. We should stop providing ammunition to confirm fears that we are biased and our reporting one sided, or that we are too close to the government. We should stick to our core task: providing independent, balanced information which people can trust – even when the narrative says we should stick together and close ranks. As I said earlier we are not at war with anyone and our biggest defeat would be to lose so much public trust that we become irrelevant. That would not only be a defeat to the press or press freedom but – above all -- to our democratic systems.