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THE NEED FOR CONTEXT: THE COMPLEXITY OF FOREIGN REPORTING

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I cover foreign affairs for the *Today* programme, the morning show on BBC Radio 4. My particular focus is the United States and the Middle East, the areas where I travel to and work out of most. I am interested in exploring some of the differences between the United States and Europe and, in particular, how they covered the 'war on terrorism'. I also want to touch on the challenges for journalists and the constraints in trying to explain the war on terrorism and some of the mindsets behind terrorism and foreign affairs.

Straight after 11 September 2001, I was in Washington and I remember well a speech President George Bush gave to the US Congress on September 20. In this speech, he posed the rhetorical question 'why do they hate us?' and the answer was 'they hate what they see right here in this chamber – a democratically elected government. They hate our freedoms: our freedom for religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other'. Now, I think most people in Europe would find it hard to agree with that. As, I think, would most people around the world. What are the causes of anti-Americanism? Why do people dislike America? They would not say it is because people are envious of Congress. They would give a whole host of other reasons to do with everything from economic, cultural and military power to US intervention and the failure of many an intervention. What interested me most about Bush's statement was the fact that he could make it without really being picked up on it. The questions 'Why don't people like us?' and 'why are we quite unpopular?' were undoubtedly buzzing around Washington. The thing that struck me was that it was partly a failure of the US media to explain to the American public how the rest of the world sees America. Foreign coverage in the US media has declined dramatically since the end of the Cold War with the associated closure of a number of foreign bureaux.

Only about five or six per cent of the American evening news before September 11 was about foreign news. Instead it was the story about California congressman Gary Condit's relationship to his former intern Chandra Levy that made the headlines. However, if you read the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* or you go on the internet, there is some of the best foreign reporting one would find anywhere. But it was not necessarily on television and in the places where most Americans get their news from. And it is one of the biggest struggles for journalists to explain to your own audience how other people think, how other cultures think, how other groups of people (communities) think. This is especially difficult during war and, I would say, in the context of terrorism. But it is critical to our understanding of the world, and it has real consequences in terms of policy, that ability to hear and listen to critical voices about what is happening and to hear alternative voices.

Another example is the big difference between the United States and Europe in the way they see the Middle East. An American reporter I spoke to saw European support for the Palestinians simply as anti-Semitic. Now many people would disagree with that: there is a difference between being sympathetic to the Palestinians and to being anti-Semitic – it is possible to be anti-Israel without being anti-Semitic. But there is a perception in the US that there is some deep-rooted European problem with Jewish people. Equally, I think Europe misunderstands the way America sees the Middle East in that I read a lot over here about the power of the Jewish lobby in Washington. However, the reasons for US support of Israel are a lot more complicated. The Jewish lobby is important in Congress particularly, but its impact on the White House is less so. American support for Israel post- September 11 is much more to do with the perception of terrorism, seeing terrorists destroying the Twin Towers and also seeing terrorists blowing themselves up in cafes in Tel Aviv. They see both events in the same context as being part of the same problem of terrorism. There is a fundamental difference there in the way in which we see the world which comes out of our cultures. It is tempting to say that Europeans sometimes see more of the context and as a result sometimes lose some of the clarity as they get bogged down in some of the history while Americans have a slightly more simplistic view.

Explaining the motivations of suicide bombers and what is happening there is a challenge. Because if you try to do a report on the *Today* programme explaining why someone becomes a suicide bomber (as we have done), you have to go to the family of the suicide bomber. The immediate response is that you are explaining, and by implication, that you are justifying someone being a suicide bomber and you come under a lot of pressure as a journalist for doing that. Equally if you explain the way in which Israel reacts to terrorism and the mindset of the Israelis towards terrorism and the impact of daily bombs going off in cafes and restaurants amongst civilians, you are accused of justifying the

Israeli response and the Israeli aggression. So there is a serious problem in trying to convey why people are doing things around the world in the context of terrorism and war: why people are being suicide bombers without justifying suicide bombers. One of the things which we have been accused of on the BBC and on the *Today* programme is that every time we have Hamas on we are accused of justifying them, and equally every time we have Israeli ministers on we are accused of justifying them by allowing them to explain Israeli actions.

Why is it so difficult for the media to convey these mindsets and motives of other cultures? It is partly because, as journalists, we are not always specialists. Some of us are in certain areas but I think, particularly with the war on terrorism in Afghanistan, there certainly were not many people in journalism who knew a lot about Afghanistan at the start of it or who understood that much about the culture in the region or even about Islam. A lack of understanding on the part of journalists is one of the problems. There are also the political pressures that we come under. On the BBC and on the *Today* programme we come under a lot of flak for criticizing government policy, particularly when we question the war on terror, whenever we question whether the bombing is working in Afghanistan or should our troops be there? There is a lot of pressure on journalists who are seen as unpatriotic for raising any criticisms, which is a very dangerous situation to be in. It is partly the consciousness of government that there is a battle for public opinion going on – whenever they are most worried about public opinion not being on their side, that is when they are most critical of the media for not toeing the line.

There is also peer pressure within the media as well on how we cover the war on terror and the difficulties in conveying critical alternative voices. I remember the *Sun* attacking Steven Sackur, one of the BBC's Washington correspondents, for interviewing Donald Rumsfeld and questioning him about the treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay. I think that the *Sun* said he, Steven Sackur, was pro-Taliban or asking these questions. That was unfair but it reflects the combative media environment in the UK and the pressures the BBC especially faces due to its commitment to impartiality. Guantanamo Bay was another interesting situation because of the different mindsets. The Americans could not see anything wrong with the way they were treating the prisoners at all. I went to Guantanamo Bay to have a look at it and one of the things I saw on the plane on the way over was a film about Arizona prisoners and one of the toughest sheriffs in America. They showed these prisons which were amazing because they still had chain gangs and kept them in corrugated iron huts and you then realize that in the context of the American criminal justice system Guantanamo Bay is not actually that much more extreme than the way in which they treated some of their own prisoners. Now we can disagree, we think that is too tough, but to Americans that does not seem too tough, because that is their view of

crime. I think that is one thing that journalists need to get across more clearly, the need to look into a country's mindset to understand its motivation.

Why do we have trouble doing this as well? Everyone knows that the military and governments restrict heavily what we can report on and that they put political pressure on us when we do not report something they like. That does not stop us doing it at all. On the *Today* programme we get lots of complaints from all sides but it does not tend to stop critical coverage. What is more dangerous is when you have an atmosphere in which the media finds itself swept up in patriotism of an event and for that reason finds it hard to raise any critical dissenting voices. I think President Bush's comments that 'you're either for us or against us' and that 'this is a battle of good and evil' makes it harder for journalists because if you say anything that is critical of government policy or conduct you could be called unpatriotic. If you explain anything that the other side is doing – if you explain the motivations behind Osama bin Laden for example – you become accused of trying to explain and justify evil.

What are the other problems involved in reporting on conflict? One of the hardest stories to cover is the Middle East because whatever you do you get flak from either side. Opinions from both communities are so polarized that almost anything you say as a result of being in the middle, as a reporter, leads to criticism. I went to Jenin recently and it was definitely one of my hardest experiences. You had one side who would say it was clearly a massacre and the other side people who would say it was a legitimate action against terrorism and not many people were killed. Trying to say anything more than just presenting those two views is very hard without a lot of work. To substantiate whether or not there had been a massacre takes a lot of work and more time than most journalists have (unless you are working for a weekly publication). What happens is that you get sent in there by an editor and you turn up and are told that you have to file something the next morning. You interview some refugees and they say 'there has been a massacre'. It is then very easy to go on air and play a little tape of the refugees with the translator saying 'there's been a massacre' and you have got a great story. But to substantiate whether or not there has been a massacre takes a lot of interviewing and a lot of work and time and is not necessarily the type of thing you can do in daily journalism as much as you would always like.

You end up taking a great deal of flak just by presenting conflicting perspectives on a specific event. This was particularly evident in Jenin where many European journalists jumped to the conclusion that there had been a massacre and reported it as such when in fact it was more complicated than that. American journalists, on the other hand, for whom the idea of tough anti-terror action fits with their idea of what is necessary in the war on terrorism, gave it very little coverage. I think

that because people understand the power of the media, one of the main obstacles in trying to get inside people's mindsets and finding out what is actually happening is that people, including ordinary people, do not tell you the truth. Refugees in Jenin, because they knew we were journalists and were going to report what they were telling us to the outside world, would exaggerate and lie. Both sides were lying to us quite a lot and that is quite a hard thing to get through and try and deal with, particularly when you do not have enough time to substantiate and research events.

It is vital for journalists to tell the public and opinion formers about the complexity of the world out there and to try to explain to them the way different people and cultures think: to create some understanding of why people hate America, why people become suicide bombers and why people think they need to crush terror in the West Bank. As journalists we have to be willing to confront people with these quite harsh realities and they might not necessarily like to hear about why these things are happening. Too often I think journalists, because of the constraints on them, do not have the ability to do that and end up giving a much more simplistic story or sometimes pandering to stereotypes. I do not think it is impossible to convey this complexity and I think the best journalists do it, but it is definitely far from easy.