

Limitations of Journalism in War Situations. A case study from Georgia, September 2008

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1) Research Preconditions

The recent open Caucasus conflict broke out in the early morning of 8th of August 2008 and was terminated by the signing of a cease-fire by Russia and Georgia at 15th and 16th of August. The end of the hot phase of the crisis can be dated by 1st of October, when the EU-Monitoring Mission to Georgia became operational.

Due to fortunate circumstances, the author of this had the opportunity to be in Georgia (as an UNHCR consultant) from the 18th to the 27th of September 2008 and to attempt some research with regard to the work of journalists in crises. A short questionnaire (15 items only) in English was designed and distributed to journalists in the region via the UNHCR office in Tbilisi from the 16th of August onwards. The main focus of this questionnaire comprised experience in crisis reporting, familiarity with the region in question, reflection about reliable sources, support in Georgia and knowledge of regional languages, including Russian. Despite the questionnaire was addressed personally to at least one hundred journalists the response was a failure. The outcome of this presentation is therefore based on eight directed interviews in situ with a) journalists and b) leading representatives of the UNHCR Caucasian mission who were regularly contacted by international journalists.

2) Main Observations

The UNHCR staff, experienced in several crisis operations worldwide, unanimously reported two phases of journalistic research strategies:

The first one rolls out during the immediate high time of a crisis (as long as open fights are going on). The lion's share of media coverage is done during this period. Most journalists leave a hot spot after the conflict declines. Here a strong distinction is made between "global players in journalism" (BBC, CNN, AP, etc.) with a huge amount of technical and intellectual resources on the one hand and "stand-alone war-reporters" on the other, who often also lack of sufficient background-knowledge and are forced to produce stories with a minimum of expenditure. Their lack of research means is often compensated by recourse to seemingly

clear-cut news-factors such as personalisation, archetypes (helpless mothers with children, tented refugees etc.) or good-bad dichotomies.

The second phase of a crisis – after the military operations have officially stopped – attracts much fewer correspondents. However, these are better-informed journalists (this was also the result of the interviews with journalists conducted after the cease-fire in Georgia), who are bound to produce bigger background-stories.

3) Some remarks concerning studies about journalism in war:

- The role of working conditions of journalists in crisis reporting is underestimated. It can be assumed that biased news-production (and also the growing success of conflict-parties' PR-strategies) is linked to that phenomenon.
- The intensity and quality of the media coverage of a crisis is dependent of the amount of media observation a region already has before the crisis breaks out.
- Therefore it might be recommended to rethink the factors of newsworthiness.