

COMMUNICATION

Interview with Fergal Keane*

Fergal Keane is a Special Correspondent for BBC News. He has reported from many of the world's major trouble spots, from Northern Ireland to Rwanda and Iraq, attracted widespread critical acclaim and won a string of awards for his reports. Among many other prizes, he was named Journalist of the Year at the Royal Television Society Awards (1995). He also took the Amnesty International Television Award for his 1994 Panorama report "Journey into Darkness" — an account of the genocide in Rwanda and the Index on Censorship prize for journalistic integrity. He won the George Orwell prize for his book on the Rwandan genocide "Season Of Blood."

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The ICRC has its principles, such as impartiality and neutrality. Does journalism need similar principles?

If you look at journalism through the ages, there have always been categories of journalism. So don't assume that there is only one kind of journalism. There are people who write commentaries in newspapers about international affairs, there are journalists who work for wire agencies who are meant to be simply purveyors of facts, and then there are people like me who go to places like Rwanda or South Africa and whose job it is to do more than purvey facts. People are going to be asking me for my analysis of the facts. At what point does that sometimes stray into opinion? As of course it does — you are asked to give an opinion on what you think is going to happen. In the sense of being strictly impartial, I don't believe such a thing exists in journalism. But I believe you can be fair.

Is there a need for a legal framework or ethical code for journalists?

I think a code is a different thing from a law, and by and large I don't believe in giving politicians the power to deal with the media. Given the chance, they will cover up their own venality and lying natures and that's the truth the world over.

1 The interview was conducted on 27 January 2006 by Toni Pfanner, Editor-in-chief of the *International Review of the Red Cross*, and Roland Huguenin-Benjamin, Spokesperson for the ICRC in London (UK).

However, I do believe there is a case for a more ethical code for journalists, but I fear we are talking long after the horse has bolted.

Are you saying that because of the 24-hour media environment?

Who's going to police that internationally? So what's your alternative, what's my alternative? You begin where people come into journalism and that is where you try and get them. I may be betraying my Catholic past in this, but I do believe that is the point at which you instil some sense of values. Whenever I hear people talking about the "media business" I really bristle, because I don't believe that's what it is. First and foremost, journalism is not a business. When you think it's a business and about market share and ratings, then the door is open to the polemicists, to the people who say, "Well, if we just tell it in this way, then our market share will go up because that's what the audience wants." That to me is the biggest danger in journalism. We are preoccupied by pressure from governments and lobby groups, but the real danger is money — "Follow the audience. If it pays to feed their prejudice, then why not?" I think we spend too little time focusing on that.

Are the media themselves changing their role?

It's a huge part of the process and, I have to say sadly, more often than not through the media being manipulated rather than through any kind of campaigning zeal on the part of the journalists. So unfortunately it tends to be the other way around. So much of what happens now in the age of 24-hour news is about media manipulation.

How do you report, engage in an issue and give your opinion without becoming an advocate of a cause?

In South Africa, as one example, it was possible to report on apartheid in a way that reflected the kind of morally odious nature of what was taking place, but without being a cheerleader for any political group or any lobby. As a journalist I believe absolutely that it is not my job to cheerlead for the ANC in South Africa or for a political group anywhere, no matter how ostensibly good the cause they represent. That's equally the case in Rwanda, as another example, where I'm not sure that journalists have fulfilled this role all too well since the genocide in 1994 because of the level of guilt that existed over the lack of reporting during the massacres. Many media organizations realized that they had failed to cover adequately what had happened, and the new Rwandan government was given a blank cheque in the aftermath. How else do we explain the kind of lack of proper reporting of what happened in Congo? The most appalling humanitarian crisis of our time, four million plus people dead, but you wouldn't know that reading our newspapers. That to me is an example of unfairness, of a lack of objectivity.

Were the media not reporting due to problems of access and security?

Yes, but there are other problems. I have gone to Congo five times in the last few years. My great regret as a journalist is that I didn't go there sooner. My excuse is that I was based in Asia when that war was taking off and there was an army

marching all the way across Africa to capture Kinshasa. But I'm not sure what excuses other people have. The story was huge, but we didn't stay with it long enough and we didn't investigate what really happened.

Do you think that it is the role of the media to investigate war crimes?

Let's forget about saying that there is one role for the media. There is not. There's a multiplicity of roles and many factors are influencing them. You report the facts as quickly as you can possibly ascertain them. Sometimes I think we too quickly report things that are not facts and that is a consequence of the pressure that people live in in this 24-hour media age. That's the first big crisis. The second factor I see is the rise over the last five to ten to fifteen years of very powerful lobby groups, not just concerning the Middle East but everywhere. Very sophisticated guerrilla movements with access to satellite phones now monitor the media very closely and are very adept at manipulating them. We saw that in Congo. Last, a journalistic community that I don't think has really woken up to the reality of the new situation. It's a very changed dynamic.

You asked the question: "Is it our job to investigate?" Yes, of course it is. How else do you get a fact? Too much of the problem is accepting information as truth from supposed eyewitnesses, from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), from lobby groups. We take them as truth, run with the story and then discover later, "Well, maybe the figure they gave for the number of people killed was inflated." The tendency to accept any information is an old journalistic tendency, but it really worries me in this age of 24-hour news when you are told: "Three million people have been put to flight in such a place. Well, somebody else says it's two. Well, let's go with the three". People want to go with the highest, most dramatic number and there isn't enough scepticism about that.

Is it a result of having to come up with news and not taking the time to investigate stories?

There is a mix of factors. In Northern Ireland, I observed inertia as a main factor. Things drag on. The story isn't "wrapped up" and people lose interest. Or it becomes reduced to a kind of formula where, for instance, an atrocity happens in Baghdad and somebody stands on a roof there and tells us about it. You may get a few images shot by local Arab cameramen of what happened, and that's it. If it's a really big deal like the stampede on the bridge, then it may lead the news. But in terms of investigating what is truly happening on the ground there, I think the fear of being attacked is a huge factor. But it shouldn't be. There must be ways. What worries me is the lack of creative thinking, the lack of energy about finding other ways to find out what's happening.

The advent of 24-hour news has changed journalism and journalists have not woken up to the information revolution, in that the power of information is going to be taken out of our hands by people with mobile phones. Bloggers are part of the new power. Look at what happened here in London on 7 July 2005 with the bombings. The news opened with 10 seconds of incredible video footage shot by a passer-by on a mobile phone. It flashed around the world.

It's sometimes criticized that journalists are good at pinpointing the shortcomings of government or politicians, but are less good at reporting positive elements or offering solutions?

Let's be very careful about this. When you look at this historically in journalism, it is important in the way it framed people's consciousness. We witnessed the genocide of Rwanda and the wars of the Yugoslav succession. In an age when you have people witnessing terrible things that the West did basically very little or nothing about, you create a very interventionist frame of mind in journalists. You couldn't throw a stone without hitting a journalist who had a solution to various problems, usually a solution that involved military intervention.

Carry that one forward to the more recent wars that we face now, Iraq or potentially Iran. I'm gravely, gravely worried about the idea of turning to journalists who are unelected, who at the end of the day don't represent anybody except the company they work for. In the BBC we can say, "Yes we represent the millions of people who pay for our licence fee." And that's important. At our best we can represent an ideal of trying to get at the truth, a difficult enough concept.

But when you get to saying that it's our responsibility to come up with solutions, I am afraid that you will find only too many people willing to offer you solutions. And you can get band wagons rolling from the left and from the right for intervention in places, and all of a sudden you are involved in a military intervention on the basis of pressure, on the basis of an intellectual argument as was the case with the United States' intervention in Iraq, heavily backed by very powerful sections of the American media while not scrutinized enough by other sections of the American media. If you look at the journalism of the Iraq war from the side of the proponents you notice that it enjoyed, I would say, an unparalleled degree of influence in terms of shaping public policy. Do we believe that was entirely healthy?

If the argument is couched in this way - do journalists have a responsibility when they analyse a situation to suggest possible avenues that governments and other actors can explore? Of course that's our job. If they say to me in Baghdad, "What do you think the internal government is going to do about this particular situation [let's say prison abuse]?", I'll say, "One of the options they have is to set up an inquiry. The other possibility is to ask for an outside investigator to come in. A further option is listening to the ICRC and what recommendations they make, or maybe a mixture of all three." What you don't do is stand on the roof and say, "My belief of what the government really needs to do now is institute a wide-ranging inquiry, and dismiss everybody who was involved in it".

The media therefore also have a constructive role?

Yes, but that's where we differ. Your interest is in getting things sorted out, whether it's a case of prison abuse or whether it's trying to move on to a situation where that doesn't happen any more. For you there is absolutely no interest in having a major public row in achieving that aim. For us it's not the same. It's about recording what's happening. There will be times when exposure about

something like prisoner abuse will not suit those who are trying to do something about it and get it stopped. As journalists, if we knew about it and did nothing, we would be in a dreadfully compromised position. It's when you start to suppress information and say, "I'm not going to report that massacre because that would have a very negative impact on the peace negotiations". Where do you stop when you go down that road? Our job is to tell the story, it's not your role and I have never had a problem with the role of the ICRC in that regard. Your job is to get things done. Ours is to find out what is happening, but it is not to be wilfully destructive.

An author who writes about the reporting on the two Gulf wars of 1991 and 2003 comes to the conclusion that if people consider a war legitimate, the media will report less about grave violations. If the war is not legitimate in the eyes of the general public, the media will place much more emphasis on violations and war crimes.

If you look at the Iraq conflict, one of the critical failures of journalism is what happened in Falluja. Let's assume the BBC had placed somebody in Falluja itself, not embedded with the Coalition forces, what do you think would have happened to that person? Probably the person would have been kidnapped and killed. By the very fact that you are dependent on people for your physical protection, reporting is going to be partial. You are only going to see a very limited side of the story and that's the bombs and the bullets heading one way. You don't see what's happening at the other end of it.

But is that underpinned in some way by an acceptance by us that there is legitimacy to what's being done there? I don't believe that. If you asked the average BBC correspondent sent to Iraq, and who was asked to report on a situation like Falluja, whether he or she thinks that this is a legitimate operation and is therefore willing to go a little more softly on the war as such? I don't think so.

You can report entirely independently?

Like every major organization, we are subject to pressures. Curiously enough, before this I worked in the Irish Broadcasting Service at the height of the conflict in Ireland, and it was infinitely more pressurized than here because the State and broadcaster were run much more tightly. Here, the British government cordially loathes us a great deal of the time. Frequently, it does not appreciate our reporting. I think that is a very healthy position to be in. But we've got to be very robust in the way we respond. We at the BBC went through our difficulties here, as you know, with the Hutton Report and Dr David Kelly. It was profoundly dramatic for this organization, and we have to watch in the aftermath that we are not cowed, that we don't pull our punches. We don't start backing away from issues because they might cause trouble or offend a particular group. If the truth gives offence, so be it. I mean, take it on the chin, and that's the message I spread as powerfully as I can within this organization.

But you are in an entirely different position when reporting on a conflict situation in which your country of origin is directly involved? Reporting about Ivory Coast is not going to reverberate in the same way as what you might say about the behaviour of UK troops in Iraq?

Of course it's not, because their sons and daughters are not watching and you are fully aware of this. But does that mean I would pull my punches if I came across a story in which British soldiers had been implicated in appalling behaviour? No, I'd rather walk out and not do the job. But, that's me speaking purely for myself.

You have to report for your constituency? Does this mean that your view will inevitably be influenced by your potential — national and international — audience?

I think that is what you need to avoid. I grew up in Ireland and we used to get the Irish editions of the English newspapers, and if you took a story that they wrote about Northern Ireland and then read the version they gave to us, the Irish version, it was totally different in the way it was written. It was watered down for Irish consumption. In the UK it would be “brutal terrorists.” You can't get into that kind of “versioning” your truth depending on your audience, you've got to have a basic standard that you stick by.

The BBC's audience may be made up of classes or clusters worldwide, but not necessarily of geographical constituencies. Now the BBC is about to set up an Arabic-language channel and al-Jazeera is going to establish an English service. People deliberately listen to only one media channel as opposed to another, and most people can't listen to both sides because of the language barrier. Even if we are going to see an Arabic BBC, you may have a large segment of the Arab population who will not listen to it.

Do we try and match al-Jazeera on that channel? You can't try and compete with al-Jazeera. You've got to stick to what you do best. A person may not trust the media in his own country and believe information approximating to the truth from the BBC. Are we perfect? Absolutely not. Are we prey to the pressures of lobby groups and misinformation? Of course we are, as all media organizations are. Let's not be sanctimonious about it. Are we doing our best to tell the truth? I think we are, but we have got to acknowledge limitations. We are getting better at saying when we've got it wrong, but we are still not better at saying, “We can only do so much here because of this and that fact.”

Do you see a space for maintaining credibility in view of the fact that you will have certain audiences who will just dismiss a certain media source because of where it comes from?

The great tragedy of the age in which we live, and the Iraq war absolutely epitomized this for me, was this retreat from rationality. I watched what happened around the Iraq war on both sides and this phrase came into my mind, “an ecstasy of righteousness.” It is absolutely the defining criteria of the media age

in which we live — both domestically and internationally. People want to have their prejudices confirmed, not challenged. It's a retreat from the values of the Enlightenment, from the ideals of argument and open discussion. Partisans of the left or the right deal with each other in the most hideously abusive terms. It's about nastiness and bile and minds that are closed to questioning. There are no rational arguments, and most of the time it's not even funny but only dangerous. We can only change this through a very, very long process. It has more to do with the kind of movements of history than it does with anything that we are going to be able to change. It will have to do with the gradual working out of whatever is going to happen in Iraq and the Middle East.

Can famous writers and journalists still influence big movements despite the multiplicity and scale of the communication tools that are available?

I believe there are people nowadays, in America in particular, who have an enormous impact. They're greatly influential in terms of forming public policy. Conservative columnists like Irvine Kristol or Robert Novak and to a lesser extent people on the left, simply because the right is in power, are hugely influential. My gripe with them is that unlike the thinkers of the Enlightenment they are not rationalists. It is the age of the polemicists, not the time for rationalists. People may not sit around in universities and in cafés discussing the ideas of Robert Novak, but believe me, they are taken seriously in other circles.

To come back to the field, in the last 30 months over 70 journalists have been killed in the most recent war in Iraq. Is embedded journalism, as done in Iraq, simply a necessity if you want to have reporting?

I wonder. There were journalists whom I respect, embedded with the US Marines. But it was an Italian documentary crew who finally exposed the use of white phosphorus in Falluja. Why did it fall to them? Why was it so long after the events? Again, there is a kind of inertia. We are not, to the best of my knowledge, actively and properly pursuing stories like that. If we were, we would have got that story. Somebody would have found a way to see the siege from the other side. But we didn't, we didn't do it at the BBC and I'm not aware of anybody else who did apart from the Italians, and great credit to them for doing it.

Humanitarian organizations in Somalia, Iraq and other areas where it is too dangerous to operate look for alternative means of reaching the victims of war: by placing more emphasis on local employees, etc. In the media you probably have to evaluate other options for how to report in very dangerous situations?

You have raised an interesting point that I'm going to push here, because it ties in perfectly with what I was saying about Falluja. If it's too dangerous for me to be on the ground or someone who looks like me, why aren't we investing in Arab journalists? Why not? Aren't they able to tell the story? Who can work for us who is going to be in a position to do that job in that place? We have got to find alternative means. It would be suicidal to send someone like me into Falluja

at the moment. But does that mean that we can't have any coverage? And why is it that we have waited, all of us in the western media, all this time to try and come up with solutions?

At the same time, the large majority of journalists killed in Iraq were Iraqis. It's not just because you are an international person that you get killed in Iraq. You get killed because you have a camera in the wrong place at the wrong time.

But that's more like the situation we are used to confronting, whether it's in Africa or anywhere else. That's the calculated risk we take. What elevates it and makes it different is that the price on my head is going to be way higher than it's going to be on the locals'.

Our problem is the physical restraint of getting at the story, not political pressure. I was in Iraq in the weeks after Baghdad fell and did stories on cluster-bombing. When I rang London I was asked, "Are you absolutely sure you have your facts right?" I doubt that I would have been asked that question if it came to a suicide bombing. There is a much more heightened awareness when reporting potentially controversial and provocative facts and figures related to Coalition forces. But is that so great that it puts people off doing stories? I don't think so.

The real problem is therefore the physical danger?

What stopped me from doing a film on the siege of Falluja? What stopped me is that I don't want to get killed. It's just as simple as that. It doesn't matter who they are or how influential they are. I'll take them on, but I don't want to die.

One of the things that I have belatedly come to realize — and this may sound a very late age in life, 45 years, to face this particular truth — but there are questions which don't have an answer. There are situations that don't have a solution. You, too, walk an impossible road a lot of the time.

The ICRC still has a rather conservative approach towards the press. How do you see the relationship between humanitarian workers and the media?

Curiously, I would have been more critical of the ICRC a few years ago. The more I see of the way in which the media operate hand-in-glove with non-governmental organizations, the better I understand the slightly hands off and distant approach that the ICRC adopts. I think it's better for both of us. The media and NGOs in many situations manipulate each other in order to get what they want, and I'm not sure that's beneficial in the long term. If a journalist were operating with any other lobby, I mean other than the humanitarian lobby, he would regard what is happening as totally unethical: he reaches a place and effectively has a good story handed to him on a plate by a humanitarian organization, he talks to the director in the refugee camp and his story is done. It may trigger funding for the NGO in the short term, but I don't believe it's in anybody's interest in the long term, neither for NGOs nor for the media. We

end up criticizing each other all the time because we are in this sort of tangled relationship. I recognize that I myself have fallen into that trap. We do need to stand back. The ICRC is more worthy of trust because journalists know that you are not desperately seeking media attention. You don't need the attention. That's the difference.

A journalist made the point that he could not differentiate between who is telling the story, what the victim said, and what the NGO was saying.

Yes, the other aspect of what tends to happen is that you get a narrative, particularly in Africa, which is essentially defined by foreigners. You see the white journalist talking to the white NGO worker telling the story of the Africans. That's not good. It promotes helplessness, dependency. It takes the story out of people's own mouths and appropriates it: the old myth about pointing a camera and stealing someone's soul. There is more to that than simply a myth. In terms of the ICRC, because we live in a media-obsessed and -saturated age, the pressure to change and to conform will be massive. But you can then kiss goodbye to the kind of work that matters most for your organization. Once you dip your foot into that water, my friend, your leg is gone. You know that. I'm not telling you anything you don't know.

You are saying that legitimacy and credibility shouldn't be jeopardized now by a quick step into this kind of 24-hour reporting?

Exactly! There are other ways of being moral than running after publicity. I have changed pretty much in the way I see things. I was much more prescriptive, much more willing to say, "I think this should be done and that should be done." I just think that the way you achieve your aims is somewhat different, and that is why my position on the ICRC has changed. I no longer desperately want to get to where there is more fighting. What do a lot of other journalists tell you in their reporting? "There's more fighting and it's awful." Tell me something I didn't know! You've got to recognize when that thing gets hold of you, and step back. I'm just uncomfortable with sanctimony. But I'm still a great believer in the things that have always moved me, in the fundamental principles of human rights. They moved me long before journalism ever did.