

# War reporting – then...

LONDON FREELANCE Branch's September meeting looked into how World War One was reported at the time. Our speaker was LFB's own Nigel Fountain, author of *When the Lamps Went Out: from Home Front To Battle Front – reporting the Great War*, which took a detailed look at how the *Manchester Guardian* in particular covered the conflict.

Nigel, a freelancer for the nationals, for *History Today*, Radio 4 and BBC TV and a former *City Limits* editor, quickly found he "knew bugger all" about World War One. When war broke out on the Continent in August 1914 the *Guardian* predicted that once Russia had brought "its forces into decisive action" the war would last at most three months. For much of the war, none of the commentators had "any idea of when it was likely to conclude... in the Spring of 1918 everyone from our grandparents to Field Marshall Haig thought it was likely the Germans would win".

In the war's opening weeks, the *Manchester Guardian* saw a "screed of letters against going to war: why

were we allied with the Russian barbarians?" But on the day the British finally declared war, the *Guardian's* editor CP Scott took the attitude that "now war was declared, we'd better fight it". His correspondents followed suit. But the *Guardian's* support for the war remained more muted than the "much more gung-ho *Mail*" and the *Times*.

A pool of five to six correspondents did all the coverage on the Western Front for 1915. Even if they didn't get a full report from the newspapers, people knew what was going on. The casualty list from the first day of the Somme in 1916 "filled the centre pages" of the *Guardian*.

Morgan Philips Price, reporting for the *Guardian* in Russia, had more freedom to "work out what was going on with the revolution". Price got a scoop when Trotsky's secretary handed to him the secret Anglo-French Sykes-Picot Agreement carving up the Middle East. Another eyebrow-raiser amid contemporary *Guardian* coverage was that Lawrence of Arabia "didn't appear at all. Some myths are created later."

The *Guardian's* Philip Gibbs recalled that "we identified ourselves absolutely with the armies in the fields – there was no need for censorship": the correspondents censored themselves.

Gibbs was briefly imprisoned for running a freelance war reporting operation in 1914, but he and the other four war correspondents covering the Western Front were knighted after the war for their services. Gibbs later spilled the beans in a book, in which he described how the senior staff officers "in their cha-teaus" were "universally loathed".

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Nigel Fountain  
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## ...and war reporting now

PROVIDING AN update on war reporting today was Al Jazeera's senior reporter Juliana Ruhfus, also on the Europe board of the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma. Juliana is "not a war correspondent... I make films in regions of conflict... not so interested in the 'bang-bang' but what happens after and in between."

Local journalists in conflict zones "were always at risk", says Juliana. But even after 9/11... I was relatively safe, I wasn't the target." American journalist Daniel Pearl, murdered by Al Qaeda in Pakistan in 2002, was among the first Western journalists deliberately targeted.

In the 1990s, post Cold War, when Africa exploded, we had the privilege of reporting on other people's wars. Now journalists "are becoming the target again. We are no longer seen as neutral... Conflicts are more deadly than ever. In the Congo we could go to warlords to get different opinions, in the Niger Delta too. How can we get different sides of

the story" now? "We cannot anymore as journalists get both sides of the story."

And "digital media have made it harder" to report on conflicts. In 1994, CNN's Michael Bergen got an exclusive with Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan as bin Laden "needed him to put his message out, now they don't need that, they put the message out themselves via digital media" and executing journalists is now part of the message.

It's become a "multiplayer world in terms of influences: Qatar, Saudi Arabia, their rôles in Libya, for example". Al Jazeera's based in Qatar, a country that sent quite a bit of money into conflict. Juliana reported from the Libyan mountain town of Zintan, "on condition that we didn't say we were from Al Jazeera" – the local commander was afraid local militias would attack her Al Jazeera team.

The Rory Peck Trust has asked freelance journalists not to go to Syria anymore. Juliana advises that

"people should go who are educated about the choices they are making" and are properly trained. Vice published stories by some "very young journalists [who] go into conflicts, a journalist who filmed with ISIS... Is somebody that young experienced enough to have strong editorial judgement and to assess the risk they were taking? I wouldn't go and meet ISIS." Anyone who commissions you has an obligation to provide training, she adds.

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Juliana Ruhfus  
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## We redirect you to the Freelance Directory, with a caution

FOLLOWING messages from a few members, it seems useful to clarify how the NUJ's Freelance Directory works. It forwards messages entered from your entry automatically. The NUJ neither checks nor endorses them – that would be an intrusion

on your private communications!

The Directory prevents automated mass mailings by demanding that those sending each message complete a puzzle to prove they're human. The public need not have to have your real email address. You can

see what has come from your public entry, and exercise the necessary caution.

The Freelance Directory offers free listings to all paid-up freelance members and is at [www.freelance-directory.org](http://www.freelance-directory.org) – sign up now!

## Timely tax warning!

The deadline for paper tax returns has long gone. It's online only from now on. Your return for tax year April 2013-April 2014 return needs to be filed online with HMRC by **31 January**. If you haven't already got a log in and password for your online tax filing, contact HMRC now, as they'll need to send you a password by post for you to enter to set up an online account. Should you fail to file by 31 January, fines starting in three figures are now in most cases automatic. Don't say we didn't warn you!