

Can one then reasonably argue that if the media had played a more serious and restrained role, the hostage crisis in Iran would have ended differently? I believe the answer is yes. By playing excessively on the feelings of national humiliation, the American media also became hostage to a crisis which they thought they were covering “objectively.” The more the press demanded a rapid end to the crisis, the more this played into the hands of the ayatollahs who simply raised the ante. The taking of a hostage is, by definition, a negotiation, and it is in the interest of the kidnapper to control the timing of deadlines. If the media plays along with the giving of ultimata, then they are dancing to the terrorists’ tune.

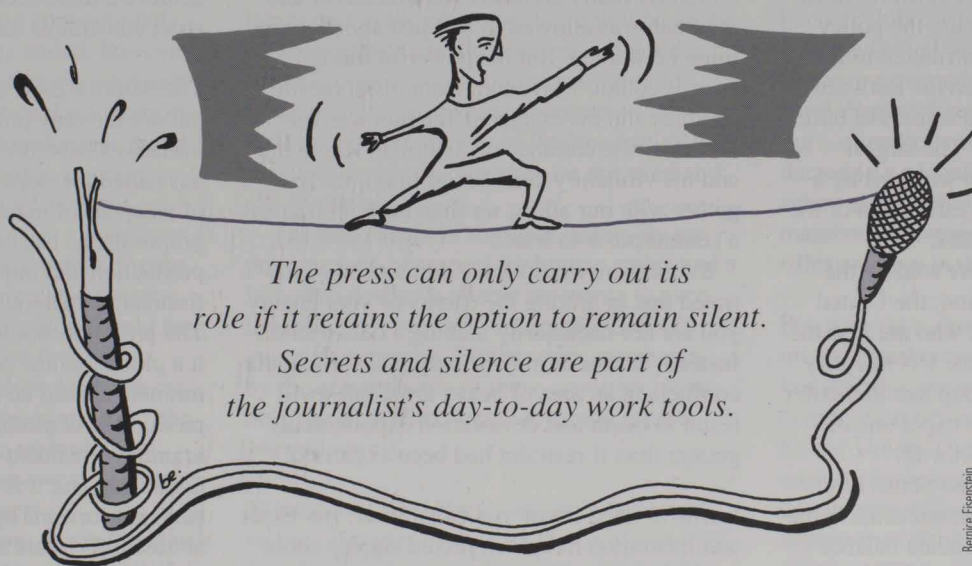
JOURNALISTIC ETHICS demand that the press not takes sides when reporting facts and information. They also demand that a certain distance be maintained between journalist and subject. The journalist who allows himself or herself to be used as go-between risks a dangerous compromise. For example, should a TV crew agree to board a plane in which the passengers are being held hostage? What if the hostage-takers then declare that if their message to the world is not broadcast without editing or commentary, a passenger will be executed in front of the cameras?

One can see right away how the original decision by the journalist to participate leads quickly to some very difficult dilemmas. On the other hand, no one can say that in choosing not to get involved, a journalist is helping the hostages either. But we need to be aware from the outset that by taking hostages, modern terrorists also try to take the press hostage as a means to achieve their ends. It is therefore incumbent on the press to resist these efforts. In the case of terrorism, this means that from time to time – and to preserve its professional integrity – the press should adopt a self-imposed silence.

The argument that freedom of the press can only be assured by rejecting all forms of censorship under all circumstances reduces the role of the press to that of mere loudspeaker and transmitter for any and all voices, be they those of murderers, or dictators. As members of the media we should have no illusions; the

press can only carry out its role if it retains the option to remain silent, to keep “off-the-record” statements secret, to respect confidentiality, to delay the broadcasting of facts under certain conditions. Secrets and silence are part of the journalist’s day-to-day work tools; it is naive to pretend otherwise.

WE SHOULD NOT CONCLUDE FROM ALL THIS, however, that the media ought to ignore the taking of hostages. Had it not been for the stubbornness of the press in keeping alive the issue of hostages in Lebanon, who knows whether or not governments would have forgotten about them. The search for truth demands caution and a sense of what the boundaries are,



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but caution and a sense of proportion do not mean only silence and forgetting.

IN THE 1990s, ISSUES SURROUNDING THE ROLE of media in conflict cannot be raised without mentioning Cable News Network (CNN) and the effect it has had on contemporary mass media. While CNN has released televised news from the straitjacket imposed by the US networks’ monopoly, the central question posed by its success is whether broadcasting everything live and direct amounts to progress? Just because CNN transmits live, unfiltered and unedited does not mean its news contains more truth than the others.

It is in some ways peculiar that this question still constitutes part of the journalistic debate in the ‘90s, for it was first raised in 1939 when American radio, notably the CBS network, would air only “live” news broadcasts. CBS maintained that any tampering with the raw information was contrary to its news ethic. Contemporary journalists like Edward R. Murrow and William Shirer argued the opposite. Live broadcasting only made sense if there was still the option to produce edited programmes which permitted a more reflective, measured handling of the news.

The search for balance between these two formulas must continue. “Live” does not replace research, much less serious reflection. We know that the presence of a video camera can influence the event it is covering, which is why the presence of journalists in the field is still essential – journalists who go beyond merely expanding upon what the camera sees and seriously examine the subtleties missed by the camera.

FINALLY, WE COME TO THE QUESTION OF whether journalists contribute to the resolution of international conflicts or their prolongation. What we can say for certain is that there is no going back to the good old days. The citizen who has had access to a free, high-technology press, capable of relaying events live from the other end of the world, will not be content with only wire services or the radio. To imagine that we can return to the era of totally secret diplomacy, of no information at all, is an illusion. A parallel development is the fact that media is now part of the event – the number of press attachés in governments is proof.

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This new dynamic can increase the rapidity with which solutions to problems are found. But perhaps it also serves to multiply the number of crises we have to face. By simplifying the means of mass communication, modern media has given the even most marginal interest groups the opportunity to express themselves. The collapse of the Eastern European bloc would not have been possible without television, facsimile machines, and communications satellites. But at the same time, the Hezbollah terrorists would never have been able to impose themselves on political events without these very same instruments.

Obviously the media must defend its right to know and systematically oppose censorship. But with equal vigour we need also to uphold our obligation to make sound judgements about when to speak up and when to remain silent. □

(translation by Veronica Baruffati and Michael Bryans)