Two sides of the mountains and three sides to every story: Towards a study of the development of the BBC's multimedia newsgathering

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Abstract

Based on a comparison between two reporting assignments – one to the North Caucasus in 2000, and another to the South Caucasus in 2008 – this article tracks the evolution of BBC newsgathering techniques as technology and editorial demand evolved. In doing so, the article also takes in examples from other assignments which the author carried out as a BBC correspondent, and considers how changing technology shaped editorial agendas for the first generation of journalists to work in the multiplatform world.

Keywords

journalism

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Preparing to leave to report on a war, a journalist may see pictures from their eventual destination and know something that conventional news media struggle to convey: the smell. Since the passing of the days of pitched battles fought where two massed armies met, civilian

housing and shopping areas have often become conflict zones: places which reek of burnt buildings, and, sometimes, rotting bodies. Developments in the technology which reporters use in their daily work have not been able to fill this gap – which spares audiences the stench of warzones – but they have been behind the drive to fill others. As a member of the first generation of foreign correspondents to work in news media beyond conventional print, radio and television, I saw the techniques involved in multimedia newsgathering take shape, and perhaps even contributed to that process. As rapid change continues, journalists now find themselves having to satisfy two demands in addition to those factors – such as time pressure, access, the need to verify stories – with which they have always had to contend: working for different platforms, and for platforms which want new material around the clock. For news websites now offer audiences data and detail which would have been unimaginable even a few years ago. As Clay Shirky (2008: 12) has put it, 'the old limitations of media have been radically reduced.' Lightweight, easily transportable, and relatively robust equipment have led to expectations of live pictures from pretty much anywhere in the world at any time, as soon as a story breaks. How did we get here, and what are the consequences for reporters and reporting? These are the questions I address in this article, in the hope that my initial study of the evolution of multimedia newsgathering can provide a useful starting point for understanding developments yet to come and, perhaps, prompt alarm bells to ring where they should do so.

As Susan Carruthers (2011: 149) has written, 'What we understand by news has thus been radically altered by the arrival of 24/7 coverage – the most far-reaching result being, in at least some critics' eyes, a decline in the depth of coverage offered to viewers.' The suggestion that 'the arrival of 24/7 coverage has led to […] a decline in the depth of coverage' is one of the most frequent criticisms levelled at round-the-clock news services. I will address that concern in greater detail in my conclusion, but first I want to consider in

greater detail Carruthers's idea that 'what we understand by news has thus been radically altered' by looking at the effect not only of 24 hour news, but also of multiplatform journalism. As this represents a challenge to journalism, it also represents a challenge to journalism scholarship. As Bull (2010: xi) notes, a book about multimedia journalism can no longer be 'completely up-to-date'. So I will try to approach Carruthers's idea that 'news has been radically altered' by concentrating on my experience of two reporting assignments to the Caucasus, eight years apart: a trip to South Ossetia – the focus of Russia's short war with Georgia in the summer of 2008 – and one to Chechnya, in 2000. I will also make extensive reference to coverage of an Israeli attempt to kill a leader of the Palestinian political and military group, Hamas, in Gaza in 2003.

On the north side of the mountains: Chechnya 2000

By the summer of 2000, Russia's second war in five years against separatist fighters had left Chechnya in ruins. Grozny, the main city, had been reduced to rubble within a radius of a couple of kilometres of its centre. Russian Federal troops were in control – just. Their tricolour flew from those buildings which remained standing, but the soldiers there were nervous. They would only permit reporters to visit the city with a military escort, and during the hours of daylight. The war was considered to have ended with the Russian Federal Army's capture of Grozny some months earlier (after a renewed campaign against the separatists starting in the autumn of 1999, they had mounted a major assault on the city beginning on Christmas Day) but it would have been wrong to conclude that the Russians were in complete control. Soldiers told reporters of nights spent in bunkers to avoid contact with Chechen fighters who returned to roam the ruins after dark; civilians, destitute and traumatized, spoke fearfully of cowering in cellars at the sound of nocturnal battles. I wrote then, struggling to find words to describe the devastation, 'People seeing the ruins for the first

time silently stare, open-mouthed in astonishment.' (Rodgers 20000). I wrote that sentence as part of a piece that was then something new: a specially commissioned feature for the *BBC News* website. My colleague on that trip, the BBC cameraman Zurab Kodalashvili and I, had been given the then novel task of gathering material not only for television and radio, but also for the Internet. In addition to the text which I wrote for the website, we were also asked to provide still pictures.

This was the first major assignment on which I had specifically been asked to gather material for three platforms, although we did not use the word then. I remember referring to it as 'trimedial' after the BBC's use, in the 1990s, of the word 'bimedial' to describe working to outlets both on television and radio. This had been considered a major development. Prior to that, most correspondents had been quite clearly designated as working for either television or radio. Although they might well work for both media during the course of a career, they rarely did so at the same time. It is very hard now to recreate in one's mind the media world as it was then. Charlie Beckett (2008) captures well the way things were, and the rapid transition which was just beginning, when he wrote,

> When I joined ITN's *Channel 4 News* in 1999, the newsroom had only a couple of internet terminals, and mobile phones were still rationed. When I left to set up a new journalism think-tank at the London School of Economics in 2006 these had become the basic tools of all journalists, including those I met in Uganda. (Beckett 2008: 1)

I had then been based in Moscow for the BBC since the spring of 1998. When I arrived, there was only one Internet connection which we shared in the office; most of us did not, in any case, have BBC e-mail addresses. We took turns to share the connection to read e-mails sent to our private accounts. The *BBC News* website did exist – it had started in 1997 – but not to

the extent that it made much difference to the way that we, in our Internet-poor environment, worked. Being given the camera two years later really felt like a new departure.

That became apparent on the trip to Chechnya in the summer of 2000. Working there was difficult, and potentially dangerous. The stories which the soldiers and civilians of Grozny told us of night-time fighting were not fantasies, but incidents which had inspired real fear. For that reason, we could never spend too long in one place. We were never allowed to go anywhere unaccompanied. These restrictions were as old as journalism itself. Reporters travelling with armies have often had to make the best of what they find. Philip Knightley (1989: 9), for example, shows us William Howard Russell in the Crimea in the 1850s, 'making several attempts to attach himself to the entourage of divisional commanders, all of whom sent him packing'.

William Howard Russell would have resented these restrictions as his counterparts did a century and a half later. The often tense relationship between combatant and reporter would probably seem familiar to him too. It was the way that we had to work within those restrictions that was changing. Journalistic tools and practices had evolved.

This was a feature trip – we were supposed to bring our material back to Moscow and edit it there, at a pace which gave us time to reflect on what we had seen. Still, because a trip like that was quite rare, and the story had been a very big one for much of the preceding twelve months, I tried to send a short news report for radio each day. These mostly contained impressions of the state of the region, and speculated, as far as was possible on the basis of what I had been able to see that day, how much control the Russian Federal Forces really had over the territory which they claimed to have 'liberated' from the 'bandits and terrorists', as they called their Chechen enemies. Sending the story involved setting up the satellite phone, offering it, and then filing if and when it had been accepted for broadcast. The key point is this: the initiative was left almost entirely to me. If I did not switch on the phone, I could not

be contacted. Within the confines of the restrictions which came with accepting a facility with the Russian military, my time, and my editorial agenda, were my own. No editor could speak to me unless I called in to the newsdesk, or to the bureau in Moscow, but I did not tend to do this more than once a day. All the same, the fact that I had a satellite phone did affect the way that I worked. Because I could file, I wanted to – even if some of the material which I was sending could probably just as well have been held to illustrate the longer pieces I would edit later once I was back in Moscow. The technology I had at my disposal was actually creating editorial priorities.

Those editorial priorities were becoming far more numerous. As Martin Bell (1995) noted early in the era of continuous news, during the wars of the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia

> There were days in Sarajevo when my radio colleague, who was already working for a rolling news service, had to broadcast as many as twenty-eight separate reports. Not only did he never leave the Holiday Inn, he hardly had time to pick up the phone and talk to the UN spokesman. (Bell 1995: 28–29)

It is a dilemma which has been fairly extensively discussed (see Paterson and Sreberny 2004: 6; Tumber and Webster 2006: 93–94), but not always in the way that it changed reporters' working patterns. Even before this trip, I had often kept in my notebook a list of material which I needed to gather. It was a means of ensuring – when time was short and trains of thought liable to distraction – that all the necessary elements for a finished piece would be there when it came to editing. When you were just working for television or for radio, such a list could usually just be kept in your head. Now, working with a third medium – which included the unfamiliar territory (for me as a professional, at least) of still pictures – I found myself making a list every day, checking it as we went along, and checking it again and

revising it every evening after we had finished filming. This seemed to affect the newsgathering process in two contradictory ways. First, it seemed that the list-making and checking improved editorial thinking because the reporter was forced to reflect in detail on the emerging story. Conversely, list-making and checking also impeded editorial thinking. It encouraged too close a focus on details. It took away important time which could and should have been spent trying mentally to distil the story into its purest, simplest, form: the one-line summary, the single idea, which is often useful as a starting point for explaining context and complexity. New challenges were emerging in this new journalistic world, and new techniques were needed to begin to meet them. The core priority of the reporter had not changed. That remained to establish as fully was possible what was happening around you, and then tell that as fully as possible. The way in which you did that was only just beginning to evolve, but the transformation was significant, and permanent. Telling a story as fully as possible was starting to mean telling it in at least three ways. From now on, there would be three sides to every story. My initial experience of this, as I noted above, was a loss of time which could have been spent on serious reflection about how best to understand the story. As Charlie Beckett (2008: 29) says in *Supermedia*, 'Talk to experienced journalists and they will say that if you reduce resources – especially time – then editorial corners will be cut.'

Resources and the new way of news

Resources and the way they are used are two of the most important factors to consider in any assessment of the changes in journalists' work which have occurred in a multiplatform era. That is because of the link which Charlie Beckett highlights in the quotation above: the link between the abundance or paucity of resources – personnel, money, equipment and time – and the way that it affects editorial priorities. In many ways, resources have been substantially reduced in the last decade. One has only to look, for example, at the most recent

round of cuts to *BBC News* (Plunkett and Sweney 2011), or at Nick Davies's (2009: 85) calculation that the number of public relations agents in the United Kingdom now exceeds the number of journalists to see the way that budgets are now significantly reduced. It is important to note that this is principally true of industrialized, rich countries such as the United States or members of the European Union. The rise of television channels such as Al-Jazeera, and the expansion of Chinese international media (such as China Network Television, or CNTV, who have expanded the number of languages they broadcast in to include, for example, Russian in September 2009), suggest that the fall in budgets is not true across the world. As the former head of BBC Global News, Richard Sambrook (2010), wrote in his paper for the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism *Are Foreign Correspondents Redundant?*

The economic pressures of maintaining overseas newsgathering have seen the numbers of bureaux and correspondents persistently reduced by major western news organizations over the past twenty years or more. This has led to a downward spiral in the quantity of international news being reported – particularly in the United States. It is principally a western phenomenon. In Asia, with the prospect of major economic growth, news organizations may be set for an era of expansion. (Sambrook 2010:1 7)

This background of 'the numbers of bureaux and correspondents being persistently reduced', is one which news executives recognize. Technological change has coincided with 'a time when news organizations in general have been under cost pressures', says Mary Hockaday, Head of the BBC Newsroom. (This quotation, and all subsequent ones in this article, are taken from an interview with the author in London on 8 November 2011). She identifies two main changes. 'The primary one is that there are more platforms that people, that audiences, expect to use to access news,' she suggests. 'The other is about the technology

available to reporters and correspondents in the field – the way that the technology has got smaller, and cheaper, and digital and connected.'

There was a sense, when the age of 24 hour news began, that the required resources would come, to some extent, from existing spare capacity. As one of the journalists who launched BBC News 24 (since renamed the BBC News Channel) in 1997, I remember a senior editor on the channel comparing the number of words to be found on the front page of *The Times*, with that spoken during a conventional, 27- or 28-minute UK television news bulletin. The word count of *The Times* was, needless to say, much higher. The editor's point was that broadcast correspondents were not getting the space enjoyed by their print counterparts, even though they had more to offer in terms of expertise and analysis than their airtime then allowed. The extra time offered by a round-the-clock news channel was an opportunity to redress this. Today much less goes to waste. Convergence has meant that broadcasters can not only post complete interviews on their websites, they can also transcribe long extracts. Newspapers which would not have had space on their printed pages for a complete interview – unless exclusivity or other editorial imperative might have created that space – can similarly put material on their websites. In June 2011, for example, the *Financial Times* interviewed the then Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev. That newspaper's website (Wagstyl 2011) not only offered video of a discussion in which experts, including Neil Buckley, the *Financial Times*'s Eastern Europe editor, who had conducted the interview, analysed Mr Medvedev's answers, but also links, on the same page, to video extracts of the interview, and a transcript. The same video extracts were placed on the *Financial Times*'s channel on *You Tube* (FinancialTimesVideos 2011) to maximize the global audience. The multimedia possibilities offered by technological change meant that the interview appeared in many more places than on the *Financial Times*'s printed pink pages (although, in a respectful new media nod to tradition, the *Financial Times*'s web pages have a pink background).

This has caused a profound shift in the way in which journalists work. I go into this in greater detail in my section, 'On the south side of the mountains – South Ossetia 2008', and in my conclusion, but it is worth stating here that change has happened in two main ways: first, journalists have had to learn to work in different media for different platforms. Second, I would argue that it has also changed the way in which stories are planned. The need to satisfy more than one platform means that much more careful preparation is required. The advantage of this is that if such planning is carried out well, it lends maximum impact to a story. The disadvantage is that extended time spent on logistics, as I noted in my section on Chechnya, above, usually means reduced time spent on thinking about the story, and on writing it: the two factors which are generally indispensable to high-quality eyewitness reporting.

The reporter as resource: Pressures and priorities

Although the focus of this article is newsgathering, an examination of the way that newsgathering has evolved would be incomplete without a consideration of how the multiplatform age has affected output. In an earlier era, when a reporter was usually working for print, radio or television, they would talk to the editor of their publication or programme and discuss what they could offer, and when. The advent – and proliferation (Thussu 2003: 117) – of 24 hour, multiplatform news changed that. The reporter themselves became a resource. In the purest sense, this had always been the case: having a journalist at the scene of a story was the way a news organization told that story. When the news organization's need to tell the same story for different platforms increasingly became the norm, the reporter's status as resource became more, strikingly, apparent. The reason: the resource was suddenly in much shorter supply. As Mary Hockaday of the BBC says, 'None of these new platform technologies substitute for previous ones. They end up adding. So we still have television. We still have radio. It's just we have all these others.'

Editors and reporters alike had to think again about how they use their time. More thought needed to go into creative use of logistics. The reporter working for more than one platform could no longer be relied upon to provide material, or content as it increasingly became known, in the way that a conventional print, radio or television correspondent once had. As the correspondent in the field strove to get the best access, so output editors had to fight for access to the correspondent. From the perspective of those working in a newsroom rather than at a news conference, on a stakeout, or even on a frontline, Charlie Beckett's idea, cited above, of a reduction of resources leading to a cutting of editorial corners was just as relevant.

The idea of editorial priorities became especially pressing because there was an increasing recognition that, on major breaking stories, the correspondent or the team on the spot would not be able to give everyone what they wanted. The next news story to be considered illustrates that point in more detail.

From 2002 to 2004, I worked in the Gaza Strip. At that time, Abdel-Aziz Al-Rantissi was a senior member of the Palestinian Hamas movement. He had a higher international profile than his fellow Hamas leaders because he regularly gave interviews, in both English and Arabic, to global news organizations. He was killed in an Israeli missile strike in April 2004 (*BBC News* 2004). On the morning of 10 June the previous year, he survived an Israeli attempt to kill him by launching rockets from helicopters at the car in which he was travelling (*BBC News* 2003). I was not far from where the helicopter gunships struck. I heard the explosions and saw smoke rising from an area a few streets away. My initial task was to try to confirm who had been the target – this was obviously not a random strike, because it had clearly been directed at a particular house, or vehicle – and whether they had survived. My Palestinian colleagues worked swiftly to try to establish from their extensive network of contacts in the Palestinian security forces the answers to those most important of questions.

My first call on such occasions was usually to the Israeli Army press office. Until it was a little clearer what had happened – whether or not, basically, the intended victim had been killed – they would often refrain from comment, or offer only an off-the-record confirmation that an attack had been carried out. While the situation remained unclear, the 'phone-bashing' – as British journalists call continuous calling – had to continue. Israelis might decide from one minute to the next that they were willing to confirm their intended target. It was therefore necessary to keep calling every few minutes in order to catch the update as quickly as possible. All this is part of the journalist's conventional job in the midst of a breaking story. The difference then, compared to a few years earlier, was the number of programmes wanting a live report. Since the launch of BBC News 24 (mentioned above) in 1997, the BBC had had continuous news channels for both television and radio for both domestic and global audiences. That was in addition to the many television and radio news bulletins and programmes. The demand was managed, to some extent, by the duty editors on the various intake desks. The direct link between programme editor and reporter was all but broken on such a busy news day. That could not prevent the fact that my attempts as a correspondent to call contacts and local colleagues in order to try to compile even a basic initial report were hampered. It seemed that every time I took my phone to dial, it rang. Most of the callers were trying to convey important logistical (time of next broadcasts, for example) or editorial (a new line from a wire service, perhaps) information – but that did not mean it was always helpful. Questions such as, 'Can you confirm Rantissi was the target?' might almost have been met with the correspondent's replying, 'Maybe I could if you would get off the phone.' Live broadcasts were so frequent that they also frustrated attempts to gather facts to report in them. Susan Carruthers's (2011: 149) view of reporters for a 24 hour news channel, 'Forced to be endlessly available to on-camera performance, television reporters can no longer do the real stuff of journalism: cultivating contacts, deepening their local knowledge, and

triangulating different points of view,' is not true of every news day – quiet days are the days that you can use to 'do the real stuff of journalism', the better to be prepared for a future breaking story – but it certainly was true of this one. I was a resource, and as the only non-Palestinian journalist then permanently based in Gaza, I was a scarce resource. While I was able to keep up with the demand for shorter news reports and live broadcasts as the day evolved, putting the assassination attempt into context was much harder. For this was the most important task for a journalist that day. Israel had tried to kill a senior figure in Hamas just at a time when the then president of the United States, George W. Bush, was publicly supporting a peace plan, the Roadmap (United Nations 2003), designed to end the decades-old conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. This was reflected in the coverage – the BBC website's piece that day, for example reported that

> US President George Bush said he was concerned that the attack on Mr Rantissi would itself put the roadmap in jeopardy. 'He is concerned this strike will undermine efforts to bring an end to terrorist attacks,' said a statement from the White House. 'It is important in this new environment for Israelis and Palestinians to work together on the path to peace.' (BBC 2003)

This was the true import of the assassination attempt: the possibility that it put an end to an already uncertain process. Reading the Roadmap now, in 2012, one is struck by the optimism of the phrase 'The destination is a final and comprehensive settlement of the Israel-Palestinian conflict by 2005' (United Nations 2003). That optimism, of course, was not at all justified by what followed. Context in the reporting then, in 2003, was vital to demonstrate just what kind of a – probably unrealistic – objective that was. When Greg Philo (2004) wrote,

> TV audiences have in general very little understanding of events in the developing world or of major international institutions or relationships. This is in part the result of TV coverage which tends to focus on dramatic, violent and tragic images while giving very little context or explanation to the events which are being portrayed. (Philo 2004: 222)

It could be argued that he was making a general point about editorial priorities – priorities summarized conversationally in British newsrooms as 'if it bleeds, it leads.' Taking this a step further, and considering the resource constraints which are the reality of the 24 hour, multiplatform world, then if those editorial priorities apply when time is even shorter (the idea cited by Charlie Beckett, above, of a reduction of resources leading to editorial corner-cutting), then the chance that context will be given adequate prominence is further reduced. On this particular day, I had so little time between short news reports and live broadcasts that I was barely able to send a properly constructed account of the day's events and their significance. I only did so – in the form of a longer report for the BBC World Service's *Newshour* programme, with the assistance of a colleague in London who collected and edited interviews and other material supplied by news agencies. I was greatly helped by my colleague from the BBC Arabic Service, Fayed Abushammala, who had the presence of mind to do a brief interview in English with a Hamas official whom he was interviewing in Arabic. The overall point was that the context which I, as a resident correspondent in Gaza, was able to offer was squeezed to the side. Time – my most precious resource – was given over to satisfying the demands of 24 hour news. It could perhaps have been granted in greater share to putting the assassination attempt carefully into context. I had a similar experience the next year in Iraq, when I reported on the capture of Saddam Hussein.[1]

On the south side of the mountains: South Ossetia 2008

That task of telling the story to a satisfactory extent – has become, in some senses at least, considerably harder. Time spent on refining angle and relevant detail, on deciding on the greatest significance of a story for a particular audience, may now increasingly be spent on reversioning, or going live for different outlets. In other ways, it has grown easier because the journalist now has access to multiple platforms. Where the TV reporter, in possession of a good story, but lacking the pictures to tell it well on television, might once have been damned to a dull report, he or she now has the chance to have a greater impact in either audio or text. The final case upon which I wish to focus in detail is a reporting trip to South Ossetia, some weeks after it had been the main battleground in Russia's brief war with Georgia in 2008. The Russians were due to withdraw from territory which they had occupied near the Georgian village of Karaleti. The significance of this particular withdrawal was that Karaleti lay beyond the administrative border of South Ossetia, in undisputed Georgian territory. Russia wanted to show that it was willing to give some of the ground it had undertaken to cede under the terms of a French-brokered ceasefire which had ended major hostilities. They wanted the media to be there to see it.

Our working day began long before dawn. It was not then considered safe for us to spend the night in South Ossetia – at least, that is what the Russian Army led us to believe. I suspect, though, that part of the reason we had to make a journey of some four hours through the mountains was so that we could not spend any time talking to civilians in South Ossetia, and perhaps getting a story which the Russian government did not want told. This suspicion was strengthened by the fact that, once we were inside the territory, we were made to transfer from a bus into an armoured military truck. This again, was for 'security reasons' as our Russian military minders explained, but it was hard to avoid the conclusion that the true purpose was to prevent our looking – more than to protect us from harm. For the armoured

truck had no windows, and our only view of the places through which we passed was that which was afforded by the open back of the truck. This did not stop our seeing the burned ruins of ethnic Georgian (as opposed to Ossetian) villages, but it did stop our filming them properly. The multimedia tools – laptop editing, and software to send video reports to London via the web – which we then had at our disposal could not make up for a couple of hours of decent access to the location. Matheson & Allan (2009: 59) have written of the 'oft-repeated claim that digital technology creates a more accurate or truthful mode of reporting, one capable of evading censorship while simultaneously offering a heightened sense of immediacy from the war zone'. This was an occasion when simple restrictions – not letting the journalist take a look at the place where they were – provided a kind of censorship not easily evaded.

Yet much had changed since my trip to Chechnya eight years earlier. Driving into Vladikavkaz (the town in North Ossetia, on the other side of the Caucasus mountains from South Ossetia, where we were told to spend the night before our early departure) from the nearest functioning airport, I had been able to consult the Internet on my mobile phone, and make calls to colleagues in both London and Moscow. There was no need to beg for a break in the itinerary to set up the satellite phone. Editors' expectations had altered accordingly. The time of going away for a few days and returning to edit at relative leisure had long passed. Even though this was a news story, it was not one of such huge magnitude that the BBC would definitely pay for a satellite to send the material that day. As it was, that kind of expenditure was no longer necessary. We would send our material over the Internet at a fraction of the cost: an example of what Mary Hockaday calls 'smaller, and cheaper, and digital and connected', technology.

Meeting the increased expectations – realistic, if demanding – required careful planning. I was joined on this trip by my colleagues from the BBC Moscow bureau: Daria

Merkusheva, producer; and Anton Chicherov, cameraman-editor (or 'shoot-edit' as the BBC slang of the time had it). We knew that by the end of the day we would have to have an edited TV report, one long and a few short radio reports, and a news feature for the Internet – all in London. We did not have any specific deadlines – in the early part of the day, at least. We needed, if possible, to make sure that our material was there for evening programmes, especially on the BBC World Service, but that apparent lack of deadlines made our task in a way harder. The earlier our material made it to London, the wider the audience it would reach. In the 24 hour, global news environment, as in a conventional news environment, any story has a shelf-life. That shelf-life is potentially prolonged the earlier in the news cycle it is first broadcast. Even if you are not up against direct competitors (an increasing rarity after the proliferation of news outlets in recent years, even if those competitors are more meagrely resourced than say the BBC or CNN).

Our journey from Vladikavkaz to Karaleti took about six hours. Our route followed that which the Russian Army had taken some weeks earlier, through the Roki Tunnel, a passage blasted through the rock of the Caucasus, linking North Ossetia, in the Russian Federation, with South Ossetia. When we arrived at the positions from which the Russians were withdrawing, all seemed ready. We were able to film the final preparations for their departure, as European Union monitors and Georgian police officers looked on (the latter more nervous than the former). Then we were taken further up the road to a point at which we could film the Russian column heading northwards. The whole process took less than two hours – a reminder of how very important access is for any reporter, especially in a conflict zone. I would have welcomed the chance to stay longer in South Ossetia, and find again some of the people I had met on a previous visit, but our Russian minders hurried us on, back to their base, back into the bus, and back through the tunnel. It had all been very rushed once we got there, and only thanks to careful planning, and our experience of working to tight

deadlines, we ensured that we had all the material we needed for the three media: text, audio and video. During our brief stay on location, we had made sure to film a piece to camera (the only opportunity that day, and a vital part of demonstrating to the audience that the correspondent had been there). Anton and I had worked on that, while Daria gathered extra sound effects and interviews for the radio piece. Now we had all the material we were going to get that day, the clock was ticking. The longer it took us to get to a place where we could send our material, the less it would be seen. We had to use every minute as wisely as we could.

I wrote a story for the BBC's website[2] as the bus battled with the steep road back up to the tunnel entrance, and dictated it over my phone while we waited at the checkpoint on the other side (new technology had not evolved to an extent that I could type it and e-mail it). Then we set to transferring our material into the laptop for editing, and I wrote a rough script so as to use as little time as possible before sending it once we were back at the hotel. Once there, we finished editing, then Daria and Anton sent the television report. This was not done in real time. It took around an hour per minute of edited material to send over the Internet[3] (much longer, of course, than a conventional feed of videotape would have taken – an example of technological change being both a boon, and a burden, to correspondents). While they sent that, I worked on the radio piece which we sent later (and more quickly, audio packages containing much less digital information than their video equivalents).

That day we were simply not in a position to go live every couple of hours even had we wanted to. That – while giving a sense of immediacy to the story – would also have eaten into time we did not really have. This is an issue for executives with overall responsibility for coverage, as well as those who are providing it. Mary Hockaday sees it in these terms:

> I am clearer and clearer that there are two kinds of stream. They connect, they feed each other, but they are distinct in some ways. The technologies have undoubtedly created a new focus on the stream which

> is about fast, now, up-to-date, speed, and that audiences and us are increasingly receptive, and interested in news as it is unfolding: incomplete, fragmented, partial, but happening under our noses.

Her second 'stream'

> is about the more considered, the more curated, let's sum up the day as a whole, what are the priority stories, what are the most important things of the day, what's the analysis, what's the in-depth, what's the original journalism?

That day in South Ossetia, I feel we succeeded in telling the story – simple as it was – and, I hope, providing some background and context to the day's events. That was partly because we had been able to plan in advance. Nothing unexpected had occurred. We all knew the story well, having worked in the region prior to the war. We were used to working with each other – extremely important for working quickly, and, in conflict zones such as this, safely. Journalism education and training today rightly stresses multi-skilling, principally to prepare journalists to work on their own where once they might have been part of a bigger group. Teamwork and collaboration, though, remain important – especially on occasions such as this when there is so much to do and to remember.

Conclusion

The evolution of multimedia newsgathering since the last years of the last century has offered many new possibilities to journalists, and taken some away. There are many more outlets for work which might not once have gained the exposure it deserves, but there are also occasions when material is required to be reversioned, even if it does not work especially well. Editors have come to expect that. I would echo Bradshaw & Rohumaa's (2011: 17) suggestion that, 'you may have a good story, but that does not mean you have to tell it five different ways for

five different platforms just because you have the technology to do so.' Theirs is a new book, and hopefully that kind of thinking may come to prevail in the future. Squeezed resources suggest that it may not.

Among those resources, as Charlie Becket identifies above, are time – and the link he describes between cutting time and cutting editorial corners is an uncomfortable one. Tumber & Webster's (2006) diagnosis from the last decade proved to be prescient

Frontline correspondents work on short notice of assignments, making it difficult for them to be informed about every country. Research time is often very limited. Journalists can be told to get on a plane straight away to cover a conflict or disaster. With the spread of presenter/journalists reporting live from location rather than the studio this may be happening more frequently (Tumber & Webster 2006: 77).

In the preface to her textbook *Convergence Journalism*, Kolodzy (2006: vii) says, 'Convergence is about being flexible enough to provide news and information to anyone and everyone, anytime and all the time, anywhere and often everywhere, without abandoning key journalistic values.' This, alas, reads more and more like a statement of the ideal rather than the real.

For it is an uncomfortable truth, which senior editors of any news medium rarely acknowledge publicly, that while multimedia journalism has got more news onto more platforms, it has not been a reliable friend of good reporting. The BBC has implicitly recognized this in recent years, often permitting senior correspondents to spend the day working almost exclusively on a piece for flagship programme. As Mary Hockaday stresses,

> If we don't go on doing that, then we just die. Because what are you saying in your breaking news? What are you saying in your updating, or your live, or on your continuous news services? Actually you haven't got anything to say, because you haven't allowed the correspondents and the reporters to find out what's going on.

In some senses, I would take issue with Carruthers's (2011: 149) suggestion that, 'What we understand by news has thus been radically altered.' 'Man bites dog' will still fight its way onto running order or web page. But resources undoubtedly do have an effect on the kind of news we get. Take away time, and we take away time to reflect, define, distil, clarify. Multimedia reporting on that trip to South Ossetia did give me the chance to mention the stench of death and decay that day – but you still could not smell it in any medium. You had to be there, and have time to tell the story.

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Notes

[1] I have published a detailed account of the coverage of this story in my article 'Capturing Saddam Hussein: How the full story got away, and what conflict journalism can learn from it', J*ournal of War and Culture Studies*, 4: 2, pp. 179–91.

[2] 'Grim reminders as Russian troops leave', *BBC News*, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7659556.stm. Published 8 October 2008. Accessed 5 September 2012

[3] The report 'Russian troops withdraw' was aired on BBC television, and posted on the *BBC News* website 8 October 2008 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7660232.stm. Accessed 5 September 2012..