

A new kind of war



PAULA SLIER writes about the minefield of covering the Arab-Israeli conflict.

TEL AVIV – I WRITE THIS JUST HOURS AFTER A BUS-bomb rattled central Tel Aviv – the first since 2006. My office is a few minutes' walk from where the attack took place, so our team was one of the first at the scene. We saw the shell of what had been the number 142 Dan bus, the shattered glass strewn across the pavement, and an incredulous expression of fear etched into the faces of both the victims and the passers-by.

A few hours later, much to the surprise of Israelis, Palestinians and journalists alike, Jerusalem signed off on a ceasefire agreement with Hamas, who had declared the attack "a victory from God".

I covered the eight days of what many thought would escalate into another full-scale war from Israel – and so was limited in terms of what I could report about the reality on the ground in Gaza. I was left to battle through a minefield of material in social media to balance my reports.

And what a minefield it is.

This was a war that took place in cyberspace as much as on the street. From the moment the Israeli Defence Force announced it had killed top Hamas military commander, Ahmed al-Jabari, social media became its weapon. Using the Twitter name @IDFspokesperson,

its communications centre tweeted a photo of Jabari with the word "eliminated" stamped across his face, and uploaded a video of the attack to YouTube. It posted photos of military operations and streamed images from drone (unmanned aerial vehicle) cameras to Twitter posts. Hamas wasted no time in returning fire, frequently uploading its own updates of mortar and rocket attacks on Israeli targets.

Experts say the extensive use of social media, especially by Jerusalem, marked a sharp turnaround from the Israel-Gaza war four years earlier when the IDF banned journalists from entering Gaza. This time around, however, not only was the border crossing between Israel and Gaza regularly open, but journalists were given advance warning of its operating hours. A 24-hour Israeli government press office was set up to issue press cards and media tours were organised by the Government Press Office to locations where rockets were landing from Gaza. I cannot talk about what it was like for journalists working inside Gaza. I imagine most were just trying to avoid the airstrikes.

But does all of this make for good journalism? It's one

thing to wade through volumes of tweets and Facebook postings – it's quite another to double check sources and know what's accurate and what's not.

Supporters on both sides of the conflict waged their own battles online. Some were regular viewers/listeners; others were inevitably media with an agenda.

On day five of the conflict, an Arab news site called Alarab Net released a photo showing a family that was allegedly "massacred" in Gaza on its Facebook page. The caption in Arabic roughly translated into English as "martyred massacred family in Gaza shortly before..."

It was later found out that the photo had originally been published a month earlier on a news site based in Dubai with the caption: "Syria killed 122 Friday... Assad Used Cluster Bombs." But not before thousands of furious people had left their comments.

It wasn't the first time that photos from the Syrian massacres were recycled into Gaza tragedies. Hamas uploaded a photo on their Twitter page of a dead child in his weeping father's arms, claiming it had happened during an Israeli airstrike in Gaza. The American news syndicate Breitbart found that the photo was a month old and had appeared in a slideshow about the Syrian conflict on the UK's *Guardian* website. The photo had in fact been

taken in the Dar al Shifa Hospital in Aleppo, Syria. The role of social media is something Israeli officials are trying to get their heads around. Former South African Paul Hirschson, who works for the Israeli ministry of foreign affairs, told me, "Today there is a battle, a campaign online, that's been offline in the electronic media for years, for the hearts and minds of public opinion. It is very, very important." One of the things that irks Hirschson and others is the lack of coverage given by mainstream media to the dozens of rockets that were raining down on Israel long before Operation Pillar of Defence. As soon as Israel retaliated, it became big news.

The irony is that when the story broke I wasn't even in Israel to cover it. I was in Barcelona attending an international journalism conference dedicated to debating the tricky journalist issues of the day – who sets the news agenda; whose responsibility is it to check sources; how social media negated the need for traditional journalism? When the story broke I immediately flew back to Israel and into the heart of a conflict that was still battling to find answers to these pressing questions. ■

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Hacking into the media



Just when PAULA SLIER thought she was safe, or at least safe in cyberspace, she discovered just how vulnerable she actually is.

SO THERE I AM SITTING IN A RESTAURANT – A NICE cosy artistic place in a trendy neighbourhood of Tel Aviv – laughing and chatting with friends. Suddenly a complete stranger interrupts our conversation.

"Is there somebody here called Paula Slieber?"

"Yes," I reply.

"Your email address is paula@newshoundmedia.com?"

"Yes."

"And the password to your email is..."

I go pale. This man has correctly announced what I thought was a very clever seven-digit words-mixed-with-numbers-and-capital-letters password to everyone in earshot. I mean, talk about making an introduction!

No doubt it's a dubious marketing tool, but the young man explains that he owns a startup that deals with information security and he often hacks into people's private emails as a way of marketing his services. Next day I'm sitting in his office.

One of the biggest problems about being hacked is that most of the time one is not even aware of it. Or by the time you find out it's too late. Compare it to, for example, losing your notebook or wallet – chances are you'll notice before long. But, by comparison, by the time someone has copied or read all your emails, you might still be blissfully unaware you've become the latest victim of cyber intrusion.

The problem's compounded by the fast moving and intricately complex world of information technology. Even among those of us who are employing one or several of the dozens of intercept-resistant encrypted communication tools out there, nothing is foolproof.

A case in point is the recent bogus tweet posted from a hacked Associated Press (AP) Twitter account. A group calling itself the 'Syrian Electronic Army' targeted specific AP employees and sent legitimate-looking emails from trusted parties. The false message said there had been explosions at the White House and US President Barack Obama was injured. It sent the markets into a panic. Just one click on an innocuous-looking link – and the world's oldest and largest news organisation had been hacked.

"Assume you're being monitored" is the advice I repeatedly hear being given at journalism conferences I attend. Aside from hackers, those doing the monitoring could be governments (as the US Department of Justice recently illustrated by secretly obtaining two months of telephone records of reporters and editors of the same above-mentioned esteemed news organisation), criminals, or even one's own Twitter followers. Just how well do you know the profiles of each and every person eagerly awaiting and reading every one of your tweets?

One are the days when to be a good journalist it was

enough to understand and excel in the profession. Today it's as important to be adept in computer skills. Information sent over regular phone lines, text messages and emails are easy to intercept – and even Skype is not foolproof. Only slightly more secure than phones, it can easily be intercepted with commercially available interception software. Scary stuff.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) the volume and sophistication of attacks on journalists' digital data is increasing at an alarming rate. I'm told that in China one has merely to stand next to someone with your cellphone in your pocket – and all your data can be transferred without you even blinking an eyelid.

There was a time when as journalists we were able to protect our sources – we'd defy court orders and even go to jail so as not to compromise those who put their trust in us. The irony is that governments still go to great lengths to get journalists to reveal their sources, but none of this is even necessary if a journalist is lax about their communication security.

Phone tapping is incredibly easy – and a lot more prevalent than many of us may realise. The CPJ recommends using phones that are not linked to one's name and removing the battery on occasion to prevent detection.

Choosing a strong password is essential. Guidance is given at www.diceware.com.

Another idea is for media organisations to use a virtual private network (VPN) service to encrypt and send all internet data. To the online world it appears as if you are accessing the web and other internet services from the VPN server, not your actual location. In this way you can hide where you are and bypass local censorship systems.

The CPJ advises not using public computers in internet cafés or hotels for confidential conversations or to access your USB drive.

When you're finished a day's work, always make sure your computer is switched off. Even in the most credible of newsrooms, be wary of people peering over your shoulder to read what you're furiously typing.

There's a lot of advice out there – but what is sorely lacking is a greater awareness and strategy within news organisations to get professionals in our field to be internet security savvy; from the foreign correspondent working in the most dangerous of places, to the researcher sipping coffee in the newsroom.

So how did Aaron, the good-looking Israeli, hack into my email? Simple. Because I was linked to the restaurant's open wi-fi he was easily able to access the same network and as he explained to me, it took just a few clicks and he was reading my mail. ■

The unsung heroes of conflict journalism



PAULA SLIER considers the plight of those locals who work with, or for, foreign media in conflict situations.

BEIRUT, LEBANON – CNN SENIOR INTERNATIONAL correspondent Nic Robertson tells the story of how when he was in Libya, before the fall of former dictator Muammar Gaddafi, he and his crew randomly flagged down a taxi driver. It didn't take long before the vehicle was stopped and all of them were brutally detained by Gaddafi's men – including the driver who'd innocently pulled over to give them a ride. But whereas Robertson and his crew were later bundled into cars and dumped at their hotel, the last time they saw that unfortunate man "he was being driven away... shaking, could barely speak, appeared traumatised by the utter bad luck that had befallen him for simply giving us a ride", recalls Robertson.

That was in March 2011. I was in Libya at the same time and I remember talking to some children in a schoolyard. Gaddafi was still in power and it was impossible for journalists to work independently. If you tried, you were picked up by the police and arrested, detained or worse. The only option was to have one of the government-appointed 'minders' take you around – they'd determine where you could film, whom you could talk to and, naturally, what people would tell you.

On this particular occasion our minder had left us for a few minutes to check on something inside the school when I, and some other journalists, quite fortuitously, suddenly found ourselves alone with some students. One girl in particular was talking quite freely – and passionately – against Gaddafi. It was great material and rare to see such courage. All of a sudden, out of the corner of my eye I saw the minder making his way back to us. From a distance he slowed down to take in every word the young woman was saying. By the time she noticed him it was too late. Before we were ushered into the waiting van, one of the journalists slipped her a note and whispered, "This is our number and the hotel we're staying at. If anything happens to you, or you need some help, call." I don't think I need to tell you that call never came.

Libya was abnormal, though. Most times, one was free to find and use local services – although that didn't diminish the risk they took in choosing to work with the foreign press. It's no secret that in Iraq, Afghanistan and a growing number of other places, the foreign correspondent is a target – with or without the locals who assist us.

But the locals, by comparison, become a target the very moment they align themselves with us. We're both considered spies, but, whereas the foreign journalist is considered an infidel, the locals are regarded as worse – as apostates and traitors.

As difficult as it is working in conflict zones, without this local assistance it would be near impossible. It ranges from the simple taxi driver, to the translator, to the fixer – who is really a fully-fledged producer. There is today an effort among many journalists to ban the word 'fixer' as an

acknowledgement of the important work they do – that they are really journalists in their own right.

For most journalists, the responsibility of finding and hiring locals is entirely up to us. But in all the years I've worked as a foreign correspondent I've never been briefed on what the policy is should that person get into trouble. Part of the problem is the complexity of these relationships – from the producer who is hired for three days to the freelancer who files only when there's a story. In truth I've also never asked my editors and I've never hired a local by explaining how my employers (or I) would respond if something bad had to happen to him or her. There was one Egyptian producer who asked – it was an uncomfortable moment that went unanswered. I suspect most of us, and the news organisations we work for, haven't thought through these difficult questions.

A deep source of embarrassment for me is the use of bulletproof vests. We travel with enough for our crew. We don't carry spares. I've heard other journalists complain about the same thing and you see it – the entire crew, except for the local hires – all kitted out in protective gear while the bullets are flying. Of course, it can be argued that the locals know full well what they are getting themselves into and it's their decision to be there. We pay them handsomely for it, sometimes an entire month's salary in one day. But of course moral and ethical issues remain. It reminds me of climbers scaling a mountain while their porters carry most of the luggage. We get all the glory; they get the leftovers.

There're also double standards at play. In September 2009 a British journalist Stephen Farrell and his Afghan translator, Sultan Munadi, were kidnapped by the Taliban. Four days later a British army raid freed Farrell but Munadi reportedly died in a hail of gunfire. His body was left behind. The media club of Afghanistan was furious. It said it was "inhuman" to do this while the military had managed to retrieve the body of a British soldier killed in the operation. If it can happen once, argued Afghan journalists, it can happen again. As one local producer put it, "All of us here are risking our lives to work with the international media. We deserve better."

Ours is a dangerous industry. But as dangerous as the assignments are, we leave when they're over. And when we do so the world turns its attention elsewhere. The very people we'd relied on day-after-day, sometimes hour-by-hour, are now left to fend for themselves. Sometimes this can involve cleaning up a mess that my colleagues and I unknowingly may have left them in.

For Robertson, the day after the Libyan government gunmen so brutally detained him and his crew, they were told the innocent taxi driver had been released. They later found out it was a lie. The poor man was still locked up. It's anyone's guess what eventually happened to him. ■