

Covering Kidnap Victims

The case for restraint

By Judith Matloff

In June 1994, I faced one of the more blurred ethical questions of my career. I was running Reuters's southern Africa editing desk on a quiet Sunday afternoon. The day was so atypically uneventful that I actually had time to write letters. Suddenly a colleague called with some news. A mutual friend from The Associated Press, Tina Susman, had been taken hostage in Somalia. The caller lowered his voice. "Could you please not publish anything?" he asked. The AP, he explained, feared that publicity could endanger negotiations for Susman's release.

My first thought was, "Of course." Our familial press corps had been traumatized by the slaughter of three other colleagues in Somalia. Having experienced close calls myself, I projected myself into Susman's terrifying situation — blindfolded and powerless. Who wouldn't want to protect Tina?

But the professional in me felt uneasy. Shouldn't we report that an American reporter had been seized? Sure, Susman was a buddy; she had been to my house and was dating a photographer in my office. But weren't we suppressing the news solely because we knew her? Silence implied a double standard. After all, we routinely covered the abductions of aid workers. Shouldn't we extend the same courtesy of an embargo to someone of another profession?

Protocol resolved my quandary; in good conscience I passed on AP's request to my supervisor. The embargo orchestrated by the AP had grown to fifteen news organizations, and with the words, "Tina is a close personal friend," my boss declared that Reuters would join it.

After twenty days, Susman was freed unharmed. The dilemma receded from my thoughts — until last October, when I received an e-mail from none other than Susman. She informed me that a young freelance photographer from Oklahoma, Paul Taggart, had been pulled from a car in Baghdad. The press corps there, with apparent approval of editors back home, had agreed to a collective silence while his release was sought. They feared that reporting on the case would give the kidnappers their desired publicity, and end with yet another sinister beheading video.

Perhaps twenty news organizations took part in the embargo, including al-Jazeera, Abu Dhabi TV, and al-Arabiya. Only a stringer from The Washington Times didn't respect it, but his story so distorted the facts that little harm was done. The news cartel treated Taggart's liberation, after two days in captivity, with equal discretion. Just a handful of media organizations reported on his release, and their dispatches were tersely worded. Since October, I've been mulling over the practice of not reporting on kidnapped colleagues. I keep returning to a few questions: Are we doing a disservice to the public by withholding information? Does an embargo entail censorship and, just as bad, favoritism?

Here's where I came down: no story is worth a life, and news should be withheld if we can reasonably assume that we could save a hostage — fellow journalist or anyone else

— and make sure that we can get the facts out eventually. We should by no means suppress reporting on troubling stories such as the beheadings in Iraq. But we must give equal treatment to civilians from other professions who have been taken hostage, something that hasn't been addressed adequately so far. There was no similar embargo on news for aid workers or contractors kidnapped in Iraq. That might be because their employers didn't request silence, or the news got out before they could. But we should be wary of preferential treatment — an issue that I know makes editors squirm — and be as conscientious about an abducted Turkish truck driver as a kidnapped photographer from Tulsa. Do we even consider calling fellow journalists and asking, “Are we endangering a life by publishing this story?”

By saying this, I realize that I'm inviting charges of censorship. Some will argue that the press should honestly show war's consequences. If people get kidnapped, it's news. But embargoing news isn't really censorship, in that the information will eventually be printed. It's simply making a call about when to publish.

The fact remains that the customary ethics that govern our profession grow murky when one is covering an armed conflict. Professional detachment melts away with the prospect of saving a fellow human. I've seen cameramen put down their lenses to avoid inciting mob violence. Some journalists who felt compelled to testify at war crimes tribunals would never have done so in a domestic court. You're essentially paying a bribe when you furnish Marlboros at an armed roadblock, but the alternative could mean death. Following this logic, I don't see anything wrong with holding a story for a few days or weeks to protect someone. The news will ultimately get out.

The British police have advocated a similar position, according to Stephen Claypole, the chief executive officer of World Picture News, for whom Taggart was working when he was captured. For many years, Scotland Yard discouraged reporters from publishing the details of criminal kidnappings while they were under way. The full story could be printed once the abductions ended. The police argued that such blackouts helped prevent violence and similar kidnappings.

Taking this argument further, I'd call for limiting coverage of those barbaric snuff videos coming out of Iraq. Giving beheadings front-page treatment or broadcasting scenes of **hostages** begging for their lives plays right into the abductors' hands. The news embargo on Susman's capture extended to a tape that showed her kneeling before her masked captors. We should exercise similar discipline on such propaganda tools today.

That said, I realize that it's impossible to generalize about the correctness of sitting on news about civilian **hostages**. In retrospect, Susman's captors just wanted money, so coverage probably wouldn't have jeopardized her release. (Ransom wasn't paid.) At the time, we were unsure of the captors' demands, so we were right to be safe. Sometimes publicity can help resolve a kidnapping, though it might have made Taggart's situation worse since Iraqi captors generally use their victims for propaganda purposes. Thus, it was wise to keep a lid on news while his freedom was being negotiated. At the same time, it would have been futile for the American press to withhold coverage of the beheading of **hostages** in Iraq already aired on al-Jazeera.

More than 150 foreigners have been kidnapped in Iraq. It's likely more will be taken. Practically, it would be hard to get the disparate press corps to agree to exercise restraint in covering all such stories. Consensus is often elusive during wartime, precisely because traditional ethics fade away. For every journalist who drives bleeding victims to the

hospital, you'll find another who doesn't want to influence the course of events. Some intervene in beatings, others look away. Moreover, given the changes in technology and the media industry, it's harder to sit on a story today than it was in 1994. The hostage-takers know how to exploit the voracious 24-hour news cycle: If their gruesome videos fail to attract coverage from mainstream networks and papers, they can always turn to bloggers, wagering that the noise generated on the Web is enough to bait the mainstream press into reporting on the videos.

But with the number of news organizations based in Baghdad dwindling, it could be less difficult to get everyone to agree on a common strategy, one that errs on the side of caution when it comes to reporting on kidnap victims. The diverse press corps — Arabic and Western alike — demonstrated with the Taggart case that it can pull together on stories. We should see more such efforts for those **hostages** who aren't our colleagues. There is no simple formula for deciding whether to report on a hostage case, in Iraq or anywhere else. But the general rule should be to ask ourselves whether we have made a serious effort to determine whether publicity would put the victim at risk when we report on the capture of anyone other than a press colleague. Are we implicitly responsible for someone's death by maintaining a double standard? Or do we just report the news and find out later?

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