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How Do We Keep a Distance from Our Subjects, While Creating In-Depth
Stories?

By

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How Do We Keep a Distance from Our Subjects, While Creating In-depth Stories?

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Goma Rai was sold into prostitution in Bombay when she was thirteen years old. She was raped and brutalized and endured situations many of us only see in our nightmares. She escaped this life, but not without repercussions. Rai has AIDS, was shunned from her country and society, and now has to cope with these struggles. She formed an organization, Shakti Milan Samaj; to empower HIV/AIDS affected women by involving themselves in society through training and to change the negative attitude against HIV. The organization also pays for medications and medical treatment. I went to Nepal this summer for six weeks and while there captured the images and voices of those harmed by human trafficking. Goma Rai gave me an exclusive interview where she discussed with me intimate details of her situation. In my five-minute multi-media I show how this third world country is affected by human trafficking.

In my research paper I talked to journalists, Karen Coates, Jerry Redfern, Durga Ghimire, Kelly McBride, Thomas Nybo, and Holly Pickett to discuss with them how to report internationally on human dilemma stories, like Goma Rai's story. The reporters talk about how different it is when you are in the real world and faced with an ethical dilemma. After hearing their stories of difficult stories they covered, such as child labor overseas, poverty-stricken families in Chicago, human trafficking and other stories where people were hurting and needed help, I have come to the conclusion that international reporting on controversial social issues is a challenge. It is important for us to learn and think about what we will do in situations before they happen, but those conclusions can change with time and the situation.

How Do We Keep a Distance from Our Subjects, While Creating In-depth Stories?

“I saw winter come along, summer shining and spring passing unknowingly...All I had was the barred windows, four walls and a door with a pimp outside dealing with each ounce that I had to offer. Some have choices. Well I certainly didn’t,” (Rai, 2011). Goma Rai, a Nepalese woman, was sold by the sex trade industry at 12 years old to a brothel in Mumbai, India, where she was brutalized, raped and made to endure situations many of us only see in our nightmares. Around the world, approximately 28 million people are part of the human trafficking network. The majority sold into human trafficking are children, half of them beneath the age of 17. These children are forced into prostitution against their wills. Stories, such as these social dilemmas, pose ethical decisions for journalists. How close is too close for these journalists who report on them? What advice and help are they allowed to give? Can journalists be advocates and at the same time maintain their objectivity? Research and interviews with international journalists show that this is an ethical debate that has no concrete answer. As reporters we want to provide a detailed accurate report of a situation. As journalists, how do we tell in-depth stories without becoming too close to our subjects?

Since journalism began, organizations have developed ethical guidelines reporters should follow. The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) has been improving accuracy and protecting journalists since 1909, and in 1996 created a template for journalists to analyze their ethical decisions. Thousands of reporters, editors, and media staff, abroad and in the U.S, embrace the SPJ code of ethics ("Society of professional," 1996). Another global ethics campaigner is the Ethical Journalism Initiative, which was adopted by the World Congress of the International Federation of Journalists in 2007. Reporters Without Borders advocates press freedom and rights for journalists abroad.

The number of organizations that have guidelines for journalists is endless. Kelly McBride from the Poynter Institute said that although there are many guidelines, there is a standard set of best-accepted practices that journalists should follow. “Among the best practices would be that you do not give your subject anything of value,” she said. McBride said that in newsrooms there is often a dollar amount of things you can give to a source at the end of an interview, as long as the subject is not expecting it. The other best-accepted practice is that

journalists should always remain loyal to their audience, even if the advocacy of the source is a good cause.

Often after years of covering countries where death, suffering and poverty are seen every day, journalists change their careers so they can become advocates. According to *Witness In Our Time*, documentary photojournalist Wayne Miller agreed with this point, and said that at some point in life, one has to take a stand. “I was asked, ‘Why did you quit?’ For many years, I had been a spectator, an observer of other people’s lives. I wanted to be a more active participant in the world, no longer just a fly on the wall watching the world through my viewfinder” (2010). Nick Kristoff from the New York Times and winner of two Pulitzer prizes went from being a journalist to an advocate for UNICEF and Red Cross while continuing reporting for the Times. McBride says that Kristoff is “clearly an advocate now for a cause.” He saw while reporting in Third World countries that hunger, poverty, and murder happen every day and most people are not protected.

In the United States, we have the luxury of human rights being protected by the Constitution, but elsewhere in the world victims stand alone. For example, when an NGO found Rai locked in a brothel in Mumbai, employees tried to get her home to Nepal. Since she was kidnapped across the border, she did not have proper documentation proving she was Nepali. Instead she was thrown into a jail with the other sex slaves for six months. When she returned to Nepal she was HIV positive and her country shunned her when she arrived at the airport. Children in Nepal have been under the pressure of this global problem for decades. Nepal had a huge problem of kidnapping and selling sex slaves to India in the 80s. The amount of attention that foreign correspondents brought to Nepal on the issue of sex trade was what changed the laws and regulations on catching those who sell and trade in the business of sex trafficking.

Many journalists are covering stories on social issues to bring about change. “If you think about it, any story that you are working on as a journalist is some sort of human conflict or dilemma; that is why it is a story,” said Jerry Redfern, a University of Montana alumni and freelance photojournalist (2011). In a sense, the sources you are reporting on are trying to show you a broader world by looking at conflicts all over the globe. By reporting a story on repression of women in the Middle East we can see some of the hidden stories of women’s lives. McBride brought up the point that reporters need to be careful when releasing stories such as these; they could bring about more harm than good for the sources. Harsh justice could result in sources who

talked to journalists about their punishments and they could end up spending their life in prison or have to marry their rapists (McBride, 2011). The other conflict reporters would face when doing such an exclusive story is that they would develop a bond with the person who provided them access to the subject and their loyalty could change to the source instead of the public.

When reporters are dealing with a source that is in harm's way they often find themselves with an instinct to help the person. The subject has agreed to let this reporter into their life and they trust they will help them in some way. UM alumni and author of *Unexploded Ordinances in Laos*, Karen Coates, explains many situations where she helped her sources, including carrying a sick man to the hospital while conducting an interview. In Cambodia, Coates and Redfern also interviewed a man who lost his leg to a bomb found in his yard. After the interview, they gave the man a few dollars. The man was surprised because many foreign correspondents wanted his story, but his situation never changed. "Although it would never be talked about in an ethics class," said Redfern, "we sometimes give a few dollars to our sources after the interview, though they never expect it at the beginning. It would be inhumane not to," (Coates, 2011). They said that in the real world, ethics are different, as the sources are people and they want to do what they can to help them, whether it be getting the news out or giving them a few dollars for bread.

McBride told about a story she was covering in Cleveland, Ohio, that she felt a great need to get involved with. During a fire in a housing complex children were being thrown out a second-story window to bystanders nearby. After the fatal accident, the children were homeless without a mother. She thought about adoption, but a colleague explained to her that there was more she could do. "Helping this one family was not going to do anything to alleviate the overall problem, and if I really was interested in that problem, I had better options, as a human being and a journalist. I could recognize that these children showed a systemic problem. As a journalist I could report on that systemic problem and make people more aware of it. I could do more by staying distant and persevering in my ability to report without conflict of interest than I could with getting involved in one particular story," said McBride (2011). It is important to look at some of the best media ethics journalists in the country, like McBride, to see that they have also come across these challenging dilemmas. When and where can you help a source or should you help many by publishing a story about the systemic problem?

Journalists who are passionate about what they are reporting will bring change. In the chapter, *A Truer India*, Dayanita Singh told about working on an AIDS story in India for two

years. She wrote that she would “get furious when foreign photographers reduce India to blobs of color and exotica,” but said often journalists did good work. I admire them [journalists that show the real India] for being able to enter this alien culture, which often baffles me as well, not knowing the language or the nuances and coming away with such in-depth work,” (Singh, 2010). She said journalists who provide so much color and detail are the ones that bring about change.

Documentary journalists have the advantage of time to create more in-depth stories. Foreign correspondents who are only in a country for a short time, i.e. parachute journalists, need to know that they cannot reach a certain depth. In fact, parachute journalists can bring about great change and report compelling stories, but they need to be aware that they are just covering the surface. “Things look one way when you first arrive, when in reality they are completely different,” said Coates, and this is why she documents long-term stories in first person (2011).

Documentarians follow different ethical rules than newspaper or newswire reporters. Sebastiao Salgado wrote in *Witness In Our Time*, “In the end, I believe these documentary photographers are people that love to tell stories. You must strongly identify with the subject. Then when the photographer first actually encounters the subject all of his preconceptions change,” (2010). Photographing and writing about this universe is important for the structure of society.

Society needs both newsroom journalists and freelancers to show all the sides of human dilemma. Thomas Nybo, a freelance reporter for the New York Times, CNN and UNICEF, said that he believes parachute journalists can provide nuanced stories. Nybo said that in order to be a great parachute journalist one has to do homework on the country, culture and customs of the area and, perhaps more importantly, be able to identify people who want to tell their stories. He said that he cannot classify himself as a documentary reporter or a parachute journalist, but as a little of both. Though he said if as a documentarian one spends enough time with someone the journalist will be exposed to more dramatic situations. “Once I spent a month following people living in the largest garbage dump in Central America. I was exposed to it all: hunger, poverty, murder. I went back 10 years later and half the people I was following were dead, including a couple of children,” (Nybo, 2011). In circumstances such as these, reporters sometimes feel they have to give a part of themselves to a story so they can make a difference, but in order to do this they have to take into account the customs and views of other people.

A reporter has to be educated in the customs of the culture, so he or she can make their reporting compatible. McBride explained that when she went to an Indian reservation to do a story she was expected to bring a small gift, because of their custom of outsiders bringing gifts in exchange for information. She said she did not feel that it would compromise her story since her gift was something of little value. Respecting cultures and customs is extremely important in reporting overseas, so that one does not disregard their beliefs. “If you are overseas you obviously have to do a lot of work to figure out the culture and work within the culture. It might include being sensitive in the way you dress, or how you address certain people, who you interview or how you interview them, and how you ask questions,” said McBride (2011). The Coates-Redfern couple said that respecting culture is how accurate reports are made. “We pick up on hand gestures, how people hold their head, what they have on the wall of their home and we realize even if you do not understand or read the language you can pick up on signs of what their life is like,” (Coates, 2011). Working together with the locals is important to accurately tell a story and also be able to know of unique events going on. “The locals tell me about when a fiesta’s going to happen. So we work together, it is not an aggressive confrontation,” said Graciela Uturbide when she wrote the chapter *The Indigenous of Mexico* in *Witness In Our Time* (2010).

Some journalists believe that one must acknowledge traditions, and learn the language at an expert level to get true stories. For Nybo, the most important thing is to be able to connect with your subjects. “If you worry too much about offending someone's sensibilities, you'll come across as cold and close-minded,” said Nybo (2011). He stated that it is essential that journalists put themselves out on the line, to take the first step toward being an approachable human being. “I’ve worked in 70 countries and that approach has worked pretty well so far,” he said (Nybo, 2011). This way the sources provide all of their information and feelings honestly.

In order to obtain an authentic in-depth interview in Nepal with Goma Rai, I had to open up to her. Before starting my interview I showed understanding and that I cared to tell her story. To start my interview I told her about my own experiences with rape. While on study abroad I was raped by a TV news broadcaster. It was something that I was shocked had happened. I remember blacking out in an elevator, but that it was not from being drunk. Later I knew I was secretly given drugs and that it was real, unlike what I wanted to think. I would not talk about what happened with friends or family for almost half a year. I was afraid that because of certain

social stigmas that when I finally came out about what happened, that people would shun me. It took me months of therapy and time to finally heal. I know that the flashbacks will always happen and that I just had to learn to deal with how I will react in the future. I knew going into the interview with Goma Rai that she too may have flashbacks and that as a reporter I needed to let her know it was ok and that we could take breaks when the conversation was difficult for her. “They have been through hell. As long as I ask my questions with a certain degree of sensitivity, that journey through hell is unlikely to include my interview,” Nybo said.

Rai overcame her fear and decided to help others who, like herself, were rejected from society. During my interview she told me why she formed Shakti Milan Samaj based in Kathmandu, Nepal. This organization helps rehabilitate women who were sold as prostitutes, and like herself, were infected with HIV/AIDS. Shakti Milan Samaj was built to empower HIV-infected women by involving themselves in society through training and to change the negative attitude toward HIV-infected women and children. Anger would show up on her face as she talked about Nepali society and the stigmas attached to women with STDs. When a man has AIDS no one shuns him, but if a wife has an STD she is thrown out on the street and shunned by not only her family, but also society. Rai pays for medication to help these women who are suffering from STDs. She cleans, feeds, clothes and ensures medical attention for these women who come to her for aid. Many of them are children, no older than 8 or 9 years old (Rai, 2011). During the interview with Rai, we had to stop a few times when I could tell that she was having flashbacks or when she was crying. I would have never been accepted into her home and welcomed to ask any question if I had not been able to sympathize with her and let her know that I would tell her story truthfully. It is important to show the good and the bad of stories to obtain objectivity, and remain an honest journalist. Rai provides the opportunities for these women and children to live, but it is not without the struggle of everyday searching for funding to help the survival of those affected with HIV from trafficking.

Interviews with subjects such as Rai, who have overcome such great traumas in their life, are especially important for journalism. Women like Rai brought about change in Nepal, such as the prosecution of people in the sex trade industry. Coates explained that difficult questions need to be asked during interviews to bring about this change. Over the years Coates developed a technique to cover sensitive interviews with fragile sources, including stopping the interview

process when the person is uncomfortable, letting the subjects talk instead of asking dark questions and letting them have time to breathe and adjust their thoughts (2011).

Coates also said that she tends to deal with local NGOs rather than Western-Run NGOs, because the international groups often put heavy restrictions on what questions they can ask, and what they can theoretically look at and take pictures of. The foreign NGOs, United Nations and World Health Organization do not allow photos of children in shelters. Coates's husband, Redfern, said that he always has the courtesy to take photos that blur the faces of the subjects of sensitive issues. "The foreign NGOs are being protective and often the people in those countries do not want to be protected. They want the 'right to speak out,' but another group is saying 'no' to the journalists to get the story," said Coates (2011). Sources often want to tell their story. In *Witness In Our Time*, documentarian Earl Dotter wrote about how he took truthful photos in coalmines in frontier America. "I've learned that before I ever bring my camera out of the bag, the first thing I try to do is to let folks know who I am, why I want to take their picture. Then, if they are satisfied with what I'm up to, they are better able to respond and live out their life in front of the camera rather than act it out," (Dotter, 2010).

Whether a subject is fragile or strong, a reporter must take into account that talking about certain issues may make them uneasy. Most journalists believe that you should always respect their dignity as a human being even if the ideals they have are opposite of yours. It is common knowledge that one should treat their experiences and perspectives with respect, but treating someone with respect and nurturing them is a different thing. Nybo said: "I think with new journalists too frequently there is almost a tendency to coddle the subject. I try to talk to them, person to person, and hear their story. Right now I am in Haiti, and I am constantly talking with children who've lost parents or siblings in the earthquake. It has also been my experience that people in these situations are tougher than we give them credit for."

Even if a source is strong, journalists should always maintain certain qualities so they know how to interview a certain type of person. Charisma, listening skills, and a love for what one is doing are essential. "You can tell when someone is taking a photo of something they are interested in; the pictures look better because the person is giving away part of themselves to take that picture," explained Redfern (Coates, 2011). A true passion and curiosity shows in the images and the way a reporter can tell his or her story. Unfortunately, passion can also get in the way of being an objective journalist. McBride understands that a reporter has to be able to report

and observe with authenticity. It is important to not become too close to sources or distort information to make it sway one direction. Some journalists have transitioned from reporting at a newswire or newspaper to becoming advocate journalists working for NGOs and other organizations like the Red Cross and UNICEF. Advocacy journalism is a genre of journalism that, unlike propaganda, is fact-based, but supports a cause on only one side (Jensen, 2008). Some journalists, even if they occasional work for organizations like UNICEF, still call themselves journalists who cover the news with objectivity.

Maintaining objectivity while caring about a project is not that difficult. The boundary lines between advocate and journalist can be slight, but it is possible to provide feature and documentary stories with all sides of the controversy. Nybo said that he always feels that he can cover stories both with accuracy and passion. “Curiosity is key. And at a certain level, speaking for myself, it is my love of people and my love of hearing their stories that serves me best,” said Nybo while discussing the skills journalists should have to make compelling, in-depth, accurate stories (2011). It is important that journalists can be able to find stories anywhere they go and make them interesting. McBride said that a journalist she knows, Anne Hull, has an interesting perspective when it comes to reporting. Hull, who works at the Washington Post, has been covering social issue stories for years, and her uncanny way of telling these stories keeps readers constantly interested in her work. One of the reasons that so many readers tune in to Hull’s work is that she has a reputation for being accurate and gripping in her stories.

Not every audience cares about the reporter showing his or her compassion or humanity. In fact, most newspaper readers only want to hear the facts. Often though, journalists without in-depth knowledge of a place will misguide their audience by statements made in their articles or captions that go along with photos. There were recently many parachute journalists in Egypt who were there to cover the riots with no intention of learning more about what was going on behind the scenes. One young photojournalist published his photos with the New York Times, Associated Press, etc. Although the photos were phenomenal, his captions were off base. The newspaper had to change his captions, including “with new democracy comes peace” and that these were “the times of great change and freedom for the people” (Coates, 2011). According to several journalists, including Redfern and Clem Work, a UM media law professor, when democracy first starts it takes at least a decade to find peace and prosperity. It is important that journalists, including freelancers, make sure their reporting has consistency with the facts.

Most often audiences for international news are people far removed from the conflicts and struggles of other nations. Only a month ago, Clem Work's son, a professor at UM, was overseas in a riot when a young man next to them was shot in the eye. Brendan Work picked up the young man and was running to an ambulance when he saw a foreign correspondent snap his picture and then run off to capture more dramatic photos. I think it is just as important to capture the photos that will bring about change as an individual helping. Once another reporter is helping someone the other should capture images to bring about change. As a photographer and human being I think we need to be able to help others as well as capture the images that will change lives.

The question of how important it is to not become attached to a human dilemma is a huge issue that many journalists say will not become apparent until a reporter is in the real world and it happens in front of them. Before going overseas, Coates said she thought she would make sure she did not become too involved with subjects. Once she was on the ground in Southeast Asia, she said, she saw more death and poverty than NGOs could help. "Honestly if you are in a situation where someone is bleeding in front of you, really are you going to walk away? I can't," she said in an interview (Coates, 2011). Situations are not always life or death scenarios in front of a journalist, but instead life struggles and social issues.

Some life struggles are hard to understand when reporting. Graciela Uturbide wrote in *Witness In Our Time*, "My photographs deal with the dignified aspect of humanity, even if I'm photographing the worst of situations. And there is a very deep complicity or dialogue between the person who is being photographed and myself. Of course, one of us is holding the camera. But if that dialogue does not exist, it just doesn't work," (2010). As long as reporters asks questions when they do not understand and know that their source is struggling, they can report a precise article.

"A journalist never loses his or her humanity. We are still human beings," said Coates in the end of an interview on international reporting (2011). Making sure we remember that we are human beings first, but always journalists, is one of the most important lessons we can learn in media ethics. We have to follow our heart and common sense, but also the guidelines set for us by international organizations on how we should make sure we maintain our ethical boundaries. Redfern explained that as a documentary journalist he has more leeway to report with passion, but that he also has to follow guidelines. "The only way you can tell a large documentary story is

to be personally involved,” Redfern said (Coates, 2011). His wife agreed, but also said that journalists can be either detached from a story and not know what is going on, or they can be a part of the story and try to hide their affiliation. “You cannot write a book on something if you are not in some way involved in it. You cannot stand away from the situation. The story is going to be about you on some level. And to completely remove yourself from that, I do not think you can do a proper job,” (Coates, 2011). It is nice to think that we can be involved in the stories we are passionate about, but unfortunately, sometimes we need keep ourselves at a distance.

Being reserved is a part of the job of being a journalist, Nybo argued.

At the end of the day, we are professionals and we need to be able to do our job. Just like a doctor, you need to approach an unrelenting stream of tough stories (as I see throughout the year) in a way that touches you but does not render you unable to move forward and get your work done. That said, there have been a handful of stories that I have done that have reduced me to tears and stick with me, years later. One story was the tale of three sisters who lived alone in a straw hut in rural Mozambique. Their parents died of AIDS and one day when the girls were in school, one of their neighbors broke into their hut and stole all their belongings. They were intelligent, sweet girls, and they literally had nothing (Nybo, 2011).

The truth is we are just like doctors. Sometimes we can do more by printing a photo, publishing an article, or airing a program on TV. We have to look at the outcomes and see if not helping one individual will do more good in the end.

After several conversations with Karen Coates, Jerry Redfern, Durga Ghimire, Kelly McBride, Thomas Nybo, Holly Pickett, and Goma Rai I have concluded that international reporting on controversial social issues is a challenge. But it is a challenge that I want to seek. All of the journalists and sources I talked to say that what is taught in class and what happens in the real world can be different. It is important for us to learn and think about what we will do in situations before they happen, but those conclusions can change with time and the situation. I first became interested in journalism because I am curious and I want to learn new things every day. Over time that curiosity and yearning to be knowledgeable has grown. Without preconceived notions and with an open mind I can cover stories with in-depth detail and obtain objectivity all over the globe.

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