

Demythologizing war journalism: Motivation and role perception of Dutch war journalists

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**Regina (Pien) van der Hoeven
and Bernadette Kester** 

Erasmus University Rotterdam, NL

Abstract

Although, in recent years, considerable research has been done on the hazardous experiences of Anglo-Saxon war journalists, Dutch war journalists have never been the focus of academic attention. The authors thought the experiences of the Dutch might put war journalism in a new light and so they conducted a series of in-depth interviews with 12 Dutch war journalists. In this article, they address two main research questions: what are war journalists' motives for practising this dangerous occupation and how do they perceive their professional role? The authors compared their findings to previous research on Anglo-Saxon war journalists and on Dutch journalism students and journalists. The most striking conclusion is that, compared to their Anglo-Saxon colleagues, Dutch war journalists are reluctant to present their motivation and work in moral dimensions too eagerly. Instead, all the interviewees frankly acknowledge that they are excited by the experience of war or at least seeking adventure. They equally admit to having chosen the profession partly because of career opportunities. However, this rational attitude of Dutch war journalists does not deter them from moral objectives.

Keywords

freelancers, gender, journalism of attachment, motivation, neutrality, role perception, war journalists

Introduction

‘Nothing in the field of journalism is more glamorous than being a war correspondent’, the American journalist Walter Cronkite stated (McLaughlin, 2016: 27). War journalists are considered to be the elite of the journalistic profession (Hamilton, 2009) or, as Andrew Marr puts it, they are part of ‘an unacknowledged aristocracy of journalism’ (in Tumber

Corresponding author:

Bernadette Kester, Erasmus Research Centre for Media, Communication and Culture (ERMeCC), Erasmus University Rotterdam, Burg Oudlaan 50, Rotterdam, 3000 DR, Netherlands.

Email: kester@eshcc.eur.nl

and Webster, 2006: 64). Their news makes for the biggest headlines – as long as it concerns conflicts where Western interests are at stake (Armoudian, 2017: 28; Wu, 2000). Thus, they usually enjoy a high status and autonomy (Ryfe, 2017). Since they are so close to death and destruction and they put their lives at risk, they are easily conceived as heroes and often romanticized in films, novels and other cultural representations.

Only quite recently the downside to their profession has gained attention: at what personal costs do war journalists gather information from conflict areas around the world? The South-African/Canadian psychiatrist Anthony Feinstein has conducted groundbreaking research in the field. He found that the lifetime rate of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) across all types of Western war journalists was 29 percent, about the same percentage as combat veterans and much more than, for example, police officers (7–13%) (Feinstein, 2006; Feinstein et al., 2002). Other research confirms the possible negative consequences for journalists working in dangerous circumstances (Himmelstein and Faithorn, 2002).

Although considerable research has now been done on the hazardous experiences of Western war journalists, Dutch war journalists have never been the focus of academic attention. Within the field of journalism studies, a strong bias exists towards Anglo-Saxon journalists. In our view, it is important to supplement the existing research with the experiences of other Western journalists and non-Western journalists. Therefore we have conducted a series of interviews with Dutch war journalists. In these interviews we have focused on several specific themes, of which two are presented in this article: motivation and role perception. In a forthcoming article we will address the hazards and horrors of the profession and how the journalists deal with these (coping strategies).

Before we continue, it is important to acknowledge that, although no research has been done on Dutch war journalists, Western journalists in general have always been of great interest to (Western) scholars. Local journalists, on the contrary, are often neglected. Although they are not the focus of our research, we are fully aware of the importance they not only have for their local community but also for many of the journalists we interviewed, serving as important sources of information, contacts, transport and translation. For this work, the locals receive hardly any recognition or payment (Bishara, 2006; Mollerup and Mortensen, 2018). In regard to motivation, local journalists find themselves in a fundamentally different situation compared to Western journalists. They do not actively seek the dangerous work but are caught up in the war. War is their daily life, whereas Western journalists (including Dutch ones) choose to report from the war front voluntarily. This free will makes the question as to their motivation all the more interesting.

One of the interviews we conducted became ‘the last interview’, as war journalists call it themselves. War photographer Jeroen Oerlemans died soon after the interview took place. He was shot by an IS sniper on 2 October 2016 in Libya. In 2012, he had been kidnapped in Syria, together with the English war journalist John Cantlie. They were freed after one week. Cantlie was kidnapped again later that year and still imprisoned when we spoke to Oerlemans in September 2016. Oerlemans was happy and thankful to be alive and free. A few days after the interview took place, he went to Libya to cover the war with IS. He left behind a wife and three children, who were more important to him than his work, he told us during the interview.

It made our question on motivation all the more relevant. Why choose such a hazardous profession? This question is even more acute in the Dutch case, since the Netherlands and Flemish Belgium are a small linguistic area. Consequently, the mainstream media companies are much smaller compared to Anglo-Saxon media companies and have less money to spend, and thus also less protection to offer. As both McLaughlin (2016) and Armoudian (2017) have pointed out, the level of risk varies with the size and resources of the news organization. This was confirmed by our interviewees, who stated that in the Dutch case the safety training that is offered to journalists is shorter and less extensive. There is generally also less money available for preparations for an upcoming project, such as preparatory trips, and for hiring local personnel as fixers, translators and body guards. A thorough preparation and risk calculation can seriously diminish the working risks for a war journalist, but the budgets in the Netherlands for risk assessment are small.

Freelance war journalists are in an even more precarious position. Most of the war journalists we interviewed work on a freelance basis and complain they have no budget at all for preparatory work. Feinstein (2006) points out that, in general, freelancers lack money for good-quality equipment such as flak jackets and armoured cars, and they receive less support when they get wounded or killed. Since Dutch war journalists work for small companies and/or on a freelance basis, we assume that they in general are (somewhat) less well protected than their international colleagues. This makes the question as to how they are motivated to do this job even more poignant.

Research questions and historical background

In the light of the dangers encountered by war reporters, our main research questions concern the motivation of war journalists and, directly related to this, the perception of their journalistic role. How do Dutch war journalists motivate their decision to work voluntarily under such dangerous and risky circumstances? Furthermore, we assume that risking your life in order to gather information about war and conflict means you must have a certain idea of what your professional function and mission is, or ought to be. Hence we have included a second research question: How do Dutch war journalists perceive their professional role?

Journalists' motivations and role perceptions in general are widely investigated (Weaver and Willnat, 2012). This is true for war journalists as well, although mainly from an Anglo-Saxon perspective (e.g. Feinstein, 2006; Leith, 2004; McLaughlin, 2016; Tumber and Webster, 2006). There is no academic research on the experiences of Dutch war journalists, their motivation and role perception. The reason for this lack of attention could be due to the position of war (journalism) in Dutch history. Our assumption is that countries with a long history of warfare, like the UK and the US, also have a rich tradition in war journalism and thus also have a large war press corps. This empirically unverified inference is derived partly from the news values theory in which proximity is a dominant news value (Harcup and O'Neill, 2016; Shoemaker et al., 2007). The closer that events are, geographically, culturally or even psychologically, to the target audience of a news organization, the more journalists will report the news. Unlike the UK and the US, the Netherlands in recent history does not have a very rich tradition of warfare. On the contrary, during the First World War, the Netherlands was neutral and during the

Second World War it was occupied by Germany. The country was, however, waging war during the decolonization struggle in its former colony Indonesia and as a loyal ally of the US during the Korean War. Furthermore, the Netherlands has taken part in various military missions of the United Nations. Also, the country has supported NATO and the US in several recent air wars.

Nevertheless, compared to the great powers, the Dutch have only played a modest role in international wars, especially when it comes to ground war. This may be reflected in the relatively small number of approximately 40 war journalists (our calculation in 2017) on a total estimated press corps of 18,000 journalists (Kivits, 2015). In order to obtain answers to our research questions, we conducted in-depth interviews with 12 of them. The following sections proceed by explaining the theoretical underpinnings of our research with regard to the concepts of motivation and role perception, in general, and in relation to war journalists, in particular.

Previous research: Motivation and role perception

Motivation

As most Western war journalists start their careers as ‘ordinary’ news journalists, the question of motivation is raised at the very beginning: for what reasons does one want to become a journalist at all? To answer this question, ample research has been conducted, particularly in regard to journalism students (Coleman et al., 2016; Hanusch et al., 2015; Hovden et al., 2016). Findings of these international investigations show that, in general, a third of the students consider journalism to be an attractive profession, they simply like it, followed by the sheer pleasure of writing as a motive (e.g. Hanusch et al., 2015). More idealistic motives, such as the ability to change society, occupy a third position in the hierarchy of motivations (Hanusch et al., 2015; Hovden et al., 2016). Journalism students in the US are mainly motivated by the chance of becoming famous (Coleman et al., 2016: 8). The motivations of Dutch journalism students do not deviate much from those of international students. Using their creativity and pleasure in writing also ranks highest, followed by pursuing a mission and status (Kester and Ruigrok, 2019).

Within the large group attracted to journalism, only a minority is ready to go to the frontline. But indeed they do exist, students as well as professionals who seek the truth want to be close to history in the making, look for adventure and feel compelled to act as witnesses in order to open the public’s ‘eyes to the world’s brutal reality’, to quote and paraphrase the motivations that Tumber and Webster (2006: 66, 64–74) noticed in their conversations with American war journalists. The latter motive coheres with what Feinstein (2006: 46) noticed in his interviews with Anglo-Saxon war journalists, ‘a relentless drive to tell the story of war’. He identifies various motivating factors: biochemical, environmental, political and moral. According to Feinstein, motivation is a multi-conditional concept since none of these factors can stand alone. It is, as Feinstein describes, ‘a synthesis of many factors’ (p. 70).

More generally, based on interviews with British war journalists, McLaughlin (2016: 9) differentiates between types of motivations: candid, pragmatic or idealistic. Candid motivations emphasize the wish to feel the thrill, a mixture of fear and excitement, and

glamour that some experience as the addictive part of the job (pp. 19–21). Pragmatic motives concern war journalists who want to be a witness, make a difference and show the public what is really going on in the outside world (pp. 21–23). As an extension of the latter, McLaughlin distinguishes an idealistic type of motivation: having a vocation to change the world, and subsequently considering yourself a foreign correspondent rather than just a war reporter (p. 24).

The urge to fulfil a mission is a recurrent motivation in Armoudian's (2017) book on 'danger zone journalists', as she calls them. Her research is based on more than 30 interviews with war journalists, including foreign correspondents (mostly from the US and the UK) and local journalists (p. 6). Apart from all the motives mentioned by previous authors, she particularly stresses the feeling of moral 'duty and public service ... of outrage, alongside compassion for victims and hope for change' that motivate war journalists to perform their hazardous profession (pp. 13, 19, 22).

With the exception of Feinstein's (2006) research, more systematic approaches to war journalists' motivations do not seem to exist. Together, though, these accounts and investigations provide a reasonably complete picture of war journalists' motivations, at least in regard to Anglo-Saxon journalists. The same accounts for how they perceive their professional roles.

Role perception

As mentioned in the Introduction, motivation and role perception are closely connected. Role perception is a widely researched concept in journalism studies (for an overview, see, e.g., Phil-Thingvad, 2015) and one of the most important findings is that journalistic role perceptions vary across national journalistic cultures and countries (see Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Mellado et al., 2017; Skovsgaard et al., 2013: 37). Traditionally, journalistic roles are put on a scale between a passive, neutral observer's role on the one hand and an active, engaged and participatory role on the other (Cohen, 1963). Fifty years later, in their study of Danish journalists, Skovsgaard et al. (2013) constructed four ideal-typical journalistic roles in coherence with this basic division. Journalists who professionally have a passive approach adhere to a 'passive mirror' or 'public forum' role, while journalists who represent an active approach take on a 'watchdog' or 'public mobilizer' role (p. 27).

Results from the international research project *Worlds of Journalism Study* (2012–2016) showed which of the 21 roles that were identified are the most popular among Dutch journalists: 'report things as they are' (92.9%); 'provide advice, direction and orientation for daily life' (72.1%); 'telling stories about the world' (69.4%); 'be a detached observer' (64.9%); and 'provide analysis of current affairs' (64.8%). Compared with the previously mentioned ideal-typical roles, these results would mean that Dutch journalists in general adhere foremost to a passive mirror role (Skovsgaard et al., 2013: 27).

War journalists from the UK and the US show more hybridity in their role perception. On the one hand, they clearly feel the urge to inform the public, analyse and contextualize conflicts, and, on the other hand, reveal atrocities and hold governments accountable (Armoudian, 2017: 16; McLaughlin, 2016). In comparison, the latter roles are less popular among Dutch journalists in general (28.1%) while their American counterparts, in particular, and to a lesser degree their British colleagues show a greater inclination

towards these roles (86.1% and 48.1%, respectively, see *Worlds of Journalism Study*, 2012–2016), which more or less confirms the results from Armoudian's (2017) and McLaughlin's (2016) studies on war journalists.

Method

In order to obtain more insight into the motivation and role perception of Dutch war journalists, we conducted in-depth interviews with 12 war journalists, most of them freelancers, 8 out of 12 ($n = 40$). This represents the situation in the Netherlands rather well, as the majority of Dutch journalists are freelancers. We took care to include all types of war journalists, including photographers and cameramen, and including both men (8) and women (4). Furthermore, we only interviewed journalists who had been active for at least 3 years in the field of war journalism, and had quit as war journalists no longer ago than 2010, ensuring that their experiences were still quite fresh. Some of the interviewees call themselves foreign correspondents instead of war journalists, and one sees herself as an investigative journalist. But all of them take considerable risks and experience danger in their work in or near war zones.

We contacted them via news organizations, or found their contact information through their websites, as most of them are freelancers. It did not take much effort to convince them of the relevance of our research. Most of them were quite eager to talk to us about their work experience and gave us their consent to mention their names. Only a few journalists wanted to stay anonymous. The interviews took place from July 2016 to February 2017. We took care to find quiet interview settings so that the interviewees could speak freely about sometimes very sensitive and personal topics. The interviews took about 3–4 hours per interviewee and were semi-structured. The topics and questions were based on the previous research cited above and, to a large extent, were inspired by Feinstein (2006). We compiled a list of topics for the interviews and used the same list and questions for every interview, but not in a set sequence, so that the conversation could develop in a natural way. Subsequently we made a transcript of each interview that was authorized by the journalist. We systematically coded and analysed these transcripts, based on a thematic approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The topics we discussed all had to do with their experiences, the way they coped with these experiences, what motivated them to choose this specific kind of work and how they perceived their role as a war journalist.

The structure of the next section is largely based on the themes that emerged from the transcripts. Instead of using terms such as 'few', 'some', 'many' or 'most', we decided to be more precise and mention numbers, where we deemed it relevant. We are fully aware that this does not imply any representativeness, but it will make our conclusions more transparent (Maxwell, 2010; Sandelowski, 2001).

Results

Motivation

We identified five motivating factors as they emerged from our interview data: social background, seeking adventure, personal ambition, and feelings of privilege and morality.

Our interviewees always mentioned several motivating factors during the interview. This corresponds with motivation as a multi-conditional concept.

Social background. The first factor concerns ‘environmental influences’ as Feinstein (2006) calls it and encompasses, for instance, the profession of the parents (journalist, father in the military) or an example set by parents (an international outlook, sensitivity to injustice) and education. The backgrounds of our interviewees are very diverse and render no clear picture, although some similarities emerged. Almost all of the interviewees were born and brought up in provincial towns, outside the urban centre in the western part of the Netherlands. Most of their parents have a vocational education. The war journalists themselves were mostly higher educated. From an early age on, most of our interviewees had been interested in international affairs or in journalism.

Almost half of our interviewees mentioned their happy childhood; two of them said that this made them strong and stable enough to cope with this job. None of the journalists claimed to have an unhappy childhood, which is remarkable since Feinstein et al. (2002) found that 40 percent of his 28 interviewees had had an unhappy childhood. ‘I grew up in a war zone’, he cites one of them. One of our interviewees, Hans Jaap Melissen, attributed his fascination with death to tragic experiences during his adolescence: his ex-girlfriend committed suicide (‘my biggest private war’) and he lost two friends to a disease.

Adventure seeking. Although we have found only a few slight discernible patterns in relation to the interviewees’ backgrounds, the next factor renders a very clear picture. Every single interviewee mentions seeking adventure as a motive. It is the only factor that motivates all of them. They all want to travel the world and seek adventure. As one anonymous male interviewee says: ‘Of course I am motivated to do something useful, but foremost I seek sensation and adventure.’ And the young female Ana van Es, who is a Middle East correspondent for a leading Dutch newspaper, says: ‘Let’s be frank, war is also just fun.’

Feinstein (2006) calls this factor ‘war as a stimulant’ because there is an element of addiction to it. That war can be addictive is widely acknowledged within the field of war journalism. The American ITN cameraman Jon Steele (2002) wrote an autobiographical novel with the title *War Junkie*. Likewise Chris Hedges (2002), former War Correspondent of *The New York Times*, calls war a drug. Half of our interviewees acknowledge that war has an element of addiction for them personally. Van Es tells us: ‘If you survive the first half hour at the frontline and do not lose your mind, you probably want to come back.’ Jan Eikelboom, War Correspondent of a Dutch public broadcasting organization explains: ‘War journalism is an addictive profession. You have to be on your guard not to get dependent on the adrenaline that comes with it and not to need greater doses each time to get a kick out of it.’

Another war journalist from the same public broadcasting organization, Peter ter Velde, who quit the job in 2010 after 15 years of duty, became a war journalist by accident. But once he got into it, it put a spell on him. ‘The adrenaline rushes through my veins when there is shooting going on. It is addictive work.’ Freelance cameraman Joris Hentenaar says: ‘Adrenaline feels good. It certainly is one of the factors that drives me from home. After three weeks it starts itching.’ Probably the most active and well-known

Dutch war journalist is the freelancer Hans Jaap Melissen, who has travelled to 80 countries. About the addictive nature of his job, he says: 'I am not addicted to war, but it draws me in. After some time at home I get restless. The Netherlands is so boring.'

Often Western war journalists describe their work as a 'mix of fear and exhilaration', of 'danger and excitement' (Knightley, 2004: 448; McLaughlin, 2016: 19, 20). Phillip Knightley (2004) cites several war journalists in his chapter on the Vietnam War, with the telling title *War Is Fun*. One of them, the English journalist Peter Gill, says: 'I can't explain it, but there is something fantastically exhilarating about being terrified out of your wits' (p. 448). The Dutch war journalist Michel Maas writes in an autobiographical novel that he 'never was so excited and at the same time so frightened' as during the Kosovo War (Maas, 2017). Eikelboom, referring to Hedges' 'war is a drug' during the interview, adds: 'War is frightening and exciting at the same time. Life feels never more intense than on the edge of death. Sounds are sharper, colours are brighter. You feel so very much alive.'

That feeling of intensity and the heightening of the senses is mentioned by two other interviewees. One of them, young female war correspondent Van Es, says: 'In the vicinity of death all human emotions get more intense.' This intensity is also often mentioned in literature and memoirs. The Dutch correspondent for South America, Jan van der Putten (1988) described feeling more alive when his life was endangered. Feinstein (2006) refers to a journalist's vivid remembrance of making love while being shelled.

As Feinstein points out, there is a biochemical component to addiction (pp. 50–51). War journalists appear to be genetically and biologically primed to seek high levels of adrenaline. He explains that the sensation-seeking trait can be inherited and that sensation-seeking correlates with levels of an enzyme that breaks down dopamine, important in producing adrenaline. The American filmmaker and journalist Nora Ephron observes that:

Working as a war correspondent is almost the only classical male endeavour left that provides physical danger and personal risk without public disapproval and the awful truth is that for correspondents, war is not hell. It is fun. (cited in Knightley, 2004: 448)

Our research, however, finds that all four female interviewees equally seek adventure as a motive for their work. This is consistent with Feinstein's (2006: 124) study, which shows that a female war journalist differs more from the average woman than from her male colleague.

Personal ambition. This third factor we identify as a motive is not often distinguished in other research, but emerges clearly from our interview data. Out of the 12 war journalists we interviewed, 7 have chosen this profession partly because of career opportunities. As public broadcasting journalist Eikelboom puts it: 'War journalism is the quickest way to journalistic fame. The circumstances may be difficult, but the story is up for grabs.' Van Es, the young female war correspondent of a major newspaper, also underlines that 'in a way, war journalism is easy: you get the sensation and storyline for free.' She also says: 'This is a job which gets you a lot of attention. You get on the front page and on television. Everything you produce has impact.' Likewise McLaughlin (2016) cites the

English journalist Mike Nicholson, who was not only motivated by ‘the promise of excitement’ but also by ‘the certainty of getting all the big stories’ (p. 20) and the guarantee of a ‘pretty prominent place in the running order’ and a ‘high profile’ (p. 21).

Two of the interviewed journalists point out the downside of personal ambition as a motive. Eikelboom warns: ‘Too often war journalism is about the journalist himself. The journalist in a Humvee, etc. That is a waste of public money.’ One of the interviewed female war journalists, who wanted to remain anonymous, is very critical of war journalists acting as subject rather than as witness.

The focus is on the courage of the reporter, which leads to mythmaking. We shouldn’t let that happen. Our task is to debunk myths. We should act as witnesses, not as subjects. It is okay to report that you are safe, but often the attention for the reporter goes too far.

She adds: ‘To me it is narcissistic, all these appearances in talk shows and on social media.’

The factor ‘personal ambition’ includes creative aspiration, sense-making and self-realization. This creative drive thus implies not only the creativity that journalists express in their story writing, filming or photographing, but it also goes beyond their daily practice. The young freelancer Lennart Hofman says: ‘I want to be a war journalist to make sense of it all. I want to learn from it myself. I gain a lot of knowledge that I can use maybe later on in another job.’

The creative drive towards war has many classic examples, like Evelyn Waugh who arranged to be sent to the Abyssinian War as a journalist, did not take the work very seriously and wrote the hilarious novel *Scoop* afterwards; and, of course, Ernest Hemingway who was much more seriously involved in the Spanish Civil War as a journalist, but was accused of keeping the best material for his novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (2016[1940]) that was published shortly after the war and sold half a million copies in the first half year. Two of the war journalists we interviewed talked about their creative aspirations. The young female war correspondent Van Es told us: ‘It makes me sad when I have had such an intense experience and I have to write standard prose about it that has lost its value after a week.’ Freelance cameraman Hentenaar said:

To me it is important to stay creative, otherwise I feel I have no ‘raison d’être’. In fact, I am deeply insecure, but creating gives meaning to my life. Creating means to produce, produce, produce. Although I’ve won many prizes, I am still looking for recognition.

The privilege of witnessing history in the making. The fourth factor that we have identified in the motivation of the war journalists is a feeling of privilege, which is often expressed by Western war journalists. McLaughlin (2016) cites the long-serving BBC War Correspondent Martin Bell who cherished his ‘front row seat in the making of history’ (p. 23) and the Middle East Correspondent Robert Fisk who describes his work as ‘a job where we are uniquely witnesses to history’ (p. 23). A small majority of the war journalists (7) we interviewed referred to a similar feeling of privilege. They appreciate being ‘witness of history in the making’, or ‘having a ringside seat to history’. Van Es says it is fantastic to work at ‘the frontline of history’. Natalie Righton, who was Correspondent of a leading Dutch newspaper in Afghanistan, felt privileged ‘to be sent ... to the most important

place in the world in journalistic terms, at that moment Afghanistan, when the War on Terror was waging there’.

And the war photographer Oerlemans, who died on duty in Libya, told us:

I want to be witness to the making of history with my photography – more to record than to change. I have no great expectations of the power of pictures. Few photographs lead to a better world.

Morality. To change the world for the better or to record its evils can both be moral driving forces to work as a war journalist. This moral dimension is the last factor we identified in the motivation of the war journalists. We subdivided this factor into two separate motives: truth seeking and witnessing the human cost of war. To begin with the latter: 7 out of the 12 interviewees feel connected to victims and want to stop the violence. A female war journalist with a lot of experience, who wants to stay anonymous, judges her own work partly in relation to the amount of lives it has saved. ‘I think you have to do your best to help [the victims]’, she says. She can be seen as a practitioner of what Martin Bell (1998) advocated in the Bosnian War, journalism of attachment. This female journalist said: ‘If I didn’t feel engaged [with victims] any longer, I would quit this job.’ We will deal with the matter of attachment or detachment later on in the section on role perception.

War journalism as a vocation can also mean that the journalist wants ‘to pursue the truth’, as McLaughlin (2016: 23) puts it. Half of the interviewees mention truth seeking as a motive. The young freelancer Hofman wants ‘to document what has really happened and should not be forgotten’. Public broadcasting journalist Eikelboom feels the inner urge to tell stories: ‘I am not a starry-eyed idealist, rather a teacher who tries to explain how the world works.’ The most well-known Dutch war journalist Melissen is a truth seeker in a scientific way, as he explains: ‘I want to check the sources and verify the information. I want to offer more context and add more layers to the news. And I want to cut the crap stories out.’

Eikelboom also has an analytic approach:

For me it is not enough to show how tragic war is. You don’t need to travel to conflict areas to discover that. I want to analyse the situation in my reports. For example: how did IS develop?

For Eikelboom, the decision to take on a project or not is a very rational one:

An element that I take into consideration every time I have to decide on a journey is the news it will generate. What will be the added value? Is the story I will be able to tell important enough to put my life in danger?

As far as motives are concerned, we can conclude that seeking adventure stands out. It is the only factor that was named by all 12 interviewed war journalists. Dutch war journalists appear to be reluctant to present their motivation and work in moral dimensions too eagerly. Perhaps this can be related to the difference mentioned earlier between Western war journalists and local journalists. Western journalists are able to leave the war-torn area whenever they choose. This luxurious position might be the reason they are reluctant to stress their own moral motives.

Demotivation and changing motivations

The reasons why Western war journalists quit their job is an issue that is hardly ever addressed in research but can complete the picture of occupational motivation. We have distinguished four major factors in demotivation in the group of interviewed journalists: getting older and settling down, family life, the death of a colleague and, lastly, financial problems to make ends meet.

Getting older affects the motivation of the war journalist. As Feinstein (2006) has pointed out, age is the variable that controls which motivating factor predominates. He cites an elderly war journalist: 'The reasons I started doing this as a young man, and the reasons I still do it, are probably largely different' (p. 67). Our interview data confirmed this finding. War photographer Oerlemans told us:

My motive to do this work is certainly also the desire to travel and the longing for adventure. I think that is mainly the motivation of a starting war journalist. Once you do this work, the responsibility to do this job well follows naturally.

A female freelancer, who wants to stay anonymous, said the same: 'At the beginning I sought sensation and adventure, but later on this changed to a strongly substantive motivation.'

Getting older and physically slowing down also has a biochemical dimension, as Feinstein (2006) has pointed out, since the demand for adrenaline diminishes as years advance. Public broadcasting journalist Peter ter Velde denies that his decision to stop as a war correspondent had to do with getting older, but he couldn't cope with the living conditions anymore: 'poor and little food, little sleep, no shower, 1500 kilometres through the desert in a Toyota Corolla ...'. A middle-aged war photographer, who wants to remain anonymous, travels less because he is in need of more stability and peace and quiet, and because he now has his own home. Settling down is not only a question of age, but often has to do with family circumstances.

Six of the interviewed war journalists named family life as a (possible) reason to cut down on travelling or stopping altogether. Firstly, many said that it is hard to hold on to a relationship, while doing this type of work. The young female correspondent Van Es confesses: 'I am married to the job. The newspaper always gets priority. I've had to cancel many a date. Men find that charming at the beginning, but after a few times they check out.'

And Righton, another relatively young woman, found out that:

It is extremely difficult to keep your relationship going, being a war journalist, because your partner isn't going through the same essential experiences. He or she can try to empathize, but there is an end to understanding and the will to listen. Moreover, the partner makes sacrifices to enable you to be a war journalist. So if you suffer from it, he or she will probably tell you: 'It is you who wanted this job.'

In her experience, everybody who goes on being a war journalist for a long time will eventually get a divorce. Although, in our group of interviewees, only a minority are divorced, Feinstein (2006: 36) proves Righton right: over half of the 140 war journalists he surveyed were either single or divorced.

Secondly, family life of course becomes more demanding when there are children. Young freelancer Hofman says he is planning to stop as a war journalist as soon as he has children. A middle-aged female war journalist, who wants to remain anonymous, says that if she had children, she would not be working as a war journalist. Of the four female war journalists we interviewed, only one has a child and that child was born after she stopped working as a war journalist and became a political correspondent. According to Feinstein (2006; Feinstein and Sinyor, 2009), childbirth is an experience that sets female war journalists apart. Although his study shows that female war journalists do not differ from their male colleagues in terms of audacity and emotional resilience, childbirth changes that. It leads to more empathy and is also a trigger to a delayed onset of PTSD.

Another factor we identified as a stop-the-job agent is the death of a colleague. This is one of the life events that is a game changer for war journalists according to Feinstein (2006). In our research, we came across one war journalist who was triggered to stop work by the death of his colleague Jeroen Oerlemans.

Finally, several freelancers talk about their problems of earning enough money, and two of them mentioned this as a possible reason for quitting the job.

Role perception

As noted above, questions on why our war journalists chose this profession overlap with the professional role they see for themselves. Here we found a divide between those journalists who want to engage with the victims of war, in the way Martin Bell (1998) has suggested, and those who want to keep a professional distance and neutrality, which they see as a necessity for doing their work well. Between these two extremes of attachment on the one hand and detachment on the other, there is a gliding scale. Some of the journalists we interviewed are somewhere in the middle of this scale and see both roles for themselves. However, Eikelboom, journalist at the Dutch public broadcasting organization, is certainly at the far end of detachment. He is very principled about being neutral in every way:

I see a strict boundary between a journalist and an activist. That's why I do not partake in fundraising for relief campaigns. That is not even a dilemma for me, it is evident. I don't give aid and I don't feel bad about that at all. For me the moral dimension is to provide information. Additional goals obscure my neutrality.

For cameramen and photographers, it is more difficult to keep a professional distance because they have to get close to capture the image. Robert Capa's 'If your photographs aren't good enough, you are not close enough' is often cited in this respect. Knightley (2004: 446) cites the Welsh war photographer Philip Jones Griffiths, who has said:

Your job is to record it all for history. You can't not feel involved, but you have to steel yourself and do your job ... It's no use crying. You can't focus with tears in your eyes.

But, for some of the journalists we interviewed, emotions are not an impediment but an inspiration. Cameraman Hentenaar says: 'I work from my emotions. What you feel

and observe you have to translate into shots. I have to feel connected to the people I film.’ Another cameraman we interviewed, Eric Feijten, tells us he is proud that some of his work has brought about certain humanitarian interventions or political changes.

At the far end of commitment on the scale between attachment and detachment is the experienced female war journalist we interviewed. As already mentioned in the section on morality, she says that she would quit the job if she did not feel involved anymore:

Some people whom I interviewed in war situations for my work are still part of my life. For example, I am still in contact with an Iraqi family, who have fled to the United States. I consciously look for that kind of intimacy ... By sharing the lives of people in conflict situations for some time, I also share the dangers. In this way, I try to understand the situation from the inside out, even though I always remain an outsider. Emotionally I get close.

For her, it is logical to attach herself to the victims of war, as she does for example to Syrian refugees today, and as she has done in many places and on many occasions before.

It is because of this role perception described above that Victoria Brittain, a former Associate Foreign Editor of *The Guardian*, claims that women are generally better war journalists than men. In her opinion, women are less driven by vanity and are less ‘careerist’ than men. Brittain names the Dutch journalist Irene Slegt as an example of a typical female journalist who is ‘prepared to feel an emotional sympathy for the people she’s working among’ and is willing to cover ‘unfashionable stories’, like East-Timor in 1999. Along with two other female journalists, Slegt refused to leave 1,500 Timorese behind in the compound of the United Nations. This forced the UN to stay and send reinforcements, saving the lives of the assembled Timorese.

According to Brittain:

She [Slegt] is a good example of the kind of woman who’s not a journalist because she wants to make a big career or a big name or big money. She’s a journalist because she wants to find out what makes the world tick and communicate that to other people and I think that’s why I identify with her because that’s what I have tried to do. Men, particularly younger men, they want to be big. (cited in McLaughlin, 2016: 49–50)

Concluding remarks

In our research, two main questions are addressed. The first concerns the motivation and the second the role perception of Dutch war journalists. With respect to motivation or what it is that moves Dutch war journalists to voluntarily report from dangerous conflict zones, an adventurous nature, personal ambition, the privilege of witnessing history in the making and moral commitment all play a part. Regarding role perception, a small minority of Dutch war journalists are on either extreme of the scale between detached, neutral or passive journalism and attached, engaged or active journalism. Most Dutch war journalists can be positioned somewhere in between the two extremes, although in general closer to detachment than engagement.

To further explore our results, we asked ourselves how Dutch war journalists stand out and how the relation between their motivation and role perception can be interpreted.

The first three motivating factors (abbreviated as adventurous, ambitious and privileged) are related to a more individual drive and are more or less self-centred, whereas the last one (moral commitment) can be considered more altruistic. Thus, the first three motivations correspond to a more passive and detached journalistic role, whereas the last one can lead to a more active role in the sense of journalism of attachment. This is the case when the journalists want to connect with the victims of war to stop the violence. But when the journalist is motivated by the quest for truth, his or her moral commitment tends to enhance the tendency to stand aloof. Passiveness and detachment sound rather negative but, in the context of Western journalism, they are usually considered the key concepts of the profession. Research shows that a large majority of Dutch journalists generally tend towards this passive role, which among other things means 'reporting things as they are'. Most motivations of Dutch war journalists fit this picture. They express their motivation and role in pragmatic and rational terms, and consider pursuing the truth, reporting the facts and analysing and unravelling the complexities of war as very important features of their job. In many ways, their motivation conflates with their role perception.

At the same time, Dutch war journalists seem to deviate from the majority of Dutch journalists by showing at least some kind of engagement with their subjects of reporting. In this sense, some of the Dutch war journalists we interviewed seem closer to their Anglo-Saxon counterparts.

More importantly, although a few Dutch war journalists show an inclination towards active engagement, they generally refrain from defining their motivation and role in moral or 'idealistic' (see McLaughlin, 2016) terms. In this sense, our results deviate from the conclusions derived from most Anglo-Saxon research. For instance, contrary to Armoudian (2017), whose interviewees almost all denied that thrill seeking was part of their motivation and often refer to their job in terms of a vocational calling, Dutch war journalists tend to emphasize, and certainly do not deny, the adventurous, addictive and status-enhancing side of their job. Also, most of our interviewees frankly admitted to having chosen this profession partly because of career opportunities, although some also criticized the excessive attention the war journalists themselves get in the media. It is interesting to see how more or less egocentric motivations mingle with ideal-typical qualities of mainstream journalism. In McLaughlin's (2016) typology, the Dutch show a combination of pragmatism and candidness. We conclude that, in our research, Dutch war journalists display a kind of unpretentious sobriety that tends towards demythologizing war journalism as such.

An interesting question for further research is whether this pragmatic and rational attitude relates in any way to the high number of Dutch war journalists working freelance. There might be a relation between the higher risks freelancers are exposed to, as argued in the Introduction, and the no-nonsense attitude we encounter among Dutch war journalists.

Related to our concluding remarks, we also want to reflect on a methodological issue. With respect to motivation, we need to reflect on the limitation of interviews as a method and source of information. Regarding motivation, the subjective view of the interviewee is particularly problematic, since he or she can name motives that seem appropriate or socially acceptable. But, on the whole, we were surprised how candid the interviewees

were. So much so that all journalists acknowledged that they were thrilled by the experience of war, or at least seeking adventure, and idealistic motives were less mentioned. There seems to be some common notion among these Dutch war journalists that you should not talk nonsense about ideals. Debunking the myth of Western war journalists as heroes seems to be the norm within the group of Dutch war journalists. This is something they clearly discuss amongst each other; they say they talk a lot with each other and we recognized similar lines of reasoning. As Eikelboom expresses the common feeling: 'If you do not like this profession, you will not last. The ones who say they act only on moral grounds, don't speak the truth.' And another war journalist, who wants to remain anonymous, says: 'It is bullshit to say, as I once heard a colleague saying: I merely operate the camera to show the world what's going on. No, you do this work entirely for yourself.'


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ORCID iD

Bernadette Kester:  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6145-2551>

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Author biographies

Regina (Pien) van der Hoeven, PhD, is a historian and independent researcher. She has been affiliated to Leiden University, the University of Groningen and the University of Amsterdam, and currently teaches at HOVO (Higher Education for Elderly).

Address: as Bernadette Kester.

Email: pienjap@xs4all.nl

Bernadette Kester, PhD, is a Senior Assistant Professor, Erasmus Research Centre for Media, Communication and Culture (ERMeCC), Erasmus University Rotterdam.