

Death of photojournalists puts a lense cap on the truth

By Joshua Hammer, Newsweek

We depend on them for truth, for glimpses into human vileness, even as we cut their jobs and cut their space and treat their work as if it's the most disposable part of the ever-shrinking media. When photojournalists Tim Hetherington and Chris Hondros were killed last week in Libya, it made you furious. First, furious at the madmen who took their lives. Then furious at a world so bloody fatigued by war that Tim and Chris were two of the last on the scene to see it to its horrible conclusion. War correspondents—in particular, combat photographers—have always worked with their lives on the line. But in the last few decades the body count has risen dramatically. Since 1992, 861 journalists have been killed in the field, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. The worst years were 2006 and 2007, when more than 200 journalists died, most of them in Iraq. But this year is shaping up to be morbidly historic in its own right. Of the 21 media deaths so far this year, almost half were photographers or cameramen, many of them freelancers.

New York Times photographer João Silva lost both legs to a land mine while embedded with U.S. troops in Afghanistan. Speaking from Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., where he is recovering, Silva recalled his first firefight—the exhilaration, the terror, and the clarity that kept drawing him back to the front lines. “My motivation was always to be on the edge of history, to get the message out,” he said, even as he admitted that this reason was an attempt at self-justification. “If I could go back and do it all again, would I do it? Yeah, most certainly, because this is what I do...I’m fortunate enough to get to see people’s lives in some of the most intimate moments, and record history.”

The deaths of two vital young photographers serve as reminders of mortality—and reminders, too, that in the chaos of war, not even the most experienced combat journalists are safe. On the murky front lines of contemporary conflicts, they are no longer considered untouchable observers but rather legitimate targets for kidnappings and killings. “When something like this happens, of course I pause and think, is it worth it?” says Lynsey Addario, a friend of Hondros and a longtime war photographer who was captured with three New York Times journalists in Libya last month and held under often brutal conditions for days. “Do people really care? Is it worth one of our lives? Is it worth anyone’s life?”

Both Hetherington and Hondros would undoubtedly have answered yes. They were surely motivated by many things: wanderlust, the thrill of seeing history through the shutter, a curious feeling of comfort in conflict zones. But above all, say colleagues, they were driven by a sense of mission, dedicated to the principle of truth-through-proximity.

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