

The Daniel Pearl Standard

By JUDEA PEARL

This week marks the sixth anniversary of the murder of my son Daniel Pearl, a reporter for this newspaper. It is a fitting occasion to step back and reflect on what this tragedy has taught us.

I am often asked why Danny's death has touched so many people and why he, of all victims of terror, is so often singled out as an icon of the troubled journey of the 21st century.



Ken Fallin

My first answer is that he was a journalist, and journalists, more than any other professionals, represent the strength, beauty and vulnerability of an open society. When an unarmed journalist is killed, we are reminded of both the freedoms that we treasure in our society, and how vulnerable we all are to forces that threaten those freedoms.

But this still does not explain the attention given to Danny's tragedy. After all, 30 other journalists were killed in 2002, and 118 journalists have been killed in Iraq alone since that war began.

The shocking element in Danny's murder was that he was killed, not for what he wrote or planned to write, but for what he represented -- America, modernity, openness, pluralism, curiosity, dialogue, fairness, objectivity, freedom of inquiry, truth and respect for all people. In short, each and every one of us was targeted in Karachi in January of 2002.

This new twist of killing journalists for what they represent has changed the course of journalism as well as the rest of society.

It was through Danny's face that people came to grasp the depth of cruelty and inhumanity into which this planet of ours has been allowed to sink in the past two decades. His murder proved that 9/11 was not an isolated event, and helped resurrect the age-old ideas of right and wrong, good and evil. Moral relativism died with Daniel Pearl in January 2002.

And unarmed journalists in regions of conflict became many times more vulnerable. They are no longer perceived as neutral, information-gathering agents, but rather as representing political or ideological entities. The press and media has indeed become more polarized and agenda-driven. Journalists today are pressured to serve the ideologies of those who pay their salaries or those who supply them with sources of information. CNN's admission, in 2003, that it concealed information about the Iraqi regime in order to keep its office in Baghdad is a perfect example of this pressure. In the recent Gaza chaos, Western news agencies have willingly reported Hamas propaganda stunts as truth.

One of the things that saddens me most is that the press and media have had an active, perhaps even major role in fermenting hate and inhumanity. It was not religious fanaticism alone.

This was first brought to my attention by the Pakistani Consul General who came to offer condolences at our home in California. When we spoke about the anti-Semitic element in Danny's murder she said: "What can you expect of these people who never saw a Jew in their lives and who have been exposed, day and night, to televised images of Israeli soldiers targeting and killing Palestinian children."

At the time, it was not clear whether she was trying to exonerate Pakistan from responsibility for Danny's murder, or to pass on the responsibility to European and Arab media for their persistent de-humanization of Jews, Americans and

Israelis. The answer was unveiled in 2004, when a friend told me that photos of Muhammad Al Dura were used as background in the video tape of Danny's murder.

Al Dura, readers may recall, is the 12-year-old Palestinian boy who allegedly died from Israeli bullets in Gaza in September of 2001. As we now know, the whole scene is very likely to have been a fraud, choreographed by stringers and cameramen of France 2, the official news channel of France. France 2 aired the tape repeatedly and distributed it all over the world to anyone who needed an excuse to ratchet up anger or violence, among them Danny's killers.

The Pakistani Consul was right. The media cannot be totally exonerated from responsibility for Daniel's murder, as well as for the "tsunami of hate" that has swept the world and continues to rise.

Ironically, the increase of independent news channels in the Arab world, a process which is generally considered a positive step forward, has contributed significantly to this spread of hatred and violence. On the one hand, this process has led to the democratization of the media, for it allows viewers to examine alternative viewpoints, occasionally opposing the official party line. On the other hand, democratization has led to vulgarization. Competition has forced news channels to echo, rather than inform, viewers' sentiments -- to reinforce, rather than examine, long-held prejudices.

Eager to satisfy their customers' appetite for self-righteousness, these channels have not thought through the harmful, in fact lethal, long-term effects of choreographing victim-victimizer narratives as news coverage.

Surely they have an obligation to expose villainy and excess. This is what journalism is all about. But in a world infected with fanatics who run around with lit matches, journalists cannot simply pour gasoline into the street and pretend they bear no responsibility for the inevitable explosion.

In one memorial service for Danny, a Catholic priest made an interesting observation that, serving as a mediator of reality, the modern journalist can be likened to the Biblical prophet. My first reaction was that the comparison is too far-fetched. Yet on further reflection I came to understand his point. Who serves today as the moral compass of society, and, like the ancient prophets, risks his or her life by exposing corruption, institutional injustice, terrorism and fanaticism? The journalist.

But the Bible also offers us a foolproof test for discerning false prophets from true ones. The test is not based on the nature of the reported facts, but on the method and principles invoked in the message. Translated into secular, modern vocabulary, the true journalist will never compromise on universal principles of ethics and humanity, and will never allow us to forget that all people, including our adversaries, need be portrayed with dignity and respect as children of one God.

Accordingly, to distinguish true from false journalism, just choose any newspaper or TV channel and ask yourself when was the last time it ran a picture of a child, a grandmother or any empathy-evoking scene from the "other side" of a conflict.

I propose this simple test as the "Daniel Pearl standard of responsible journalism." Anyone who reads Danny's stories today, and examines the way he reported the human story behind the news, would agree that adopting the proposed standard for the profession would be a fitting tribute to his legacy.

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