

Murder Without Borders

*What makes a journalist stay on a story
after being threatened with certain death?*

By TERRY GOULD

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Earlier this year, as I was completing a book about the lives of murdered journalists, a crusading newspaper editor in Sri Lanka was gunned down near a military base in Colombo. I was not surprised by the details of his murder, just as the Sri Lankan editor was not surprised that he'd become a target for execution: Like all the journalists in my book, Lasantha Wickramatunga had known he would be murdered.

Wickramatunga was famous for exposing his government's corruption and atrocities committed against minorities. In retaliation, he'd suffered two beatings and a machine gun attack on his home. In the days leading up to his death on Jan. 8, his phone was filled with messages that promised death if he continued his exposés. As usual, he ignored the threats and drove off to work – right into the sights of an eight-man hit squad. Three days later his newspaper published his last article, “And Then They Came for Me.” The article condemned the murders of Sri Lankan journalists and then foretold his own murder. It also pointed to the likely masterminds. “When finally I am killed,” he wrote, “it will be the government that kills me.”

In the world's most dangerous places for reporters, such predictions are not uncommon. In Latin America, South Asia, Eastern Europe and the Middle East, many journalists have foretold their deaths – if not in print then in conversation with their colleagues. Tomorrow is World Press Freedom Day, an occasion when Wickramatunga will be posthumously awarded UNESCO's World Press Freedom Prize. It is also a day for us to remember that most journalists who die for a story are not war correspondents caught in a crossfire. Almost three-quarters of the more than 730 journalists who have been killed in the line of duty since 1992 have been targeted and murdered. The vast majority of the fallen – more than 85 per cent – were local reporters. Almost all the masterminds of their murders – 95 per cent – have escaped punishment.

Exactly four years ago today I decided to tell some of their stories. The Committee to Protect Journalists in New York had just published a list of the five countries where the most journalists had been murdered since 2000. They were, in order of most killed, the Philippines, Iraq, Colombia, Bangladesh and Russia. I chose representative cases in these countries and set out to visit their hometowns to interview their families, colleagues and, if possible, the people who had ordered their murders. My previous reporting in regions where impunity

reigned had taught me that retribution was guaranteed against local journalists who defied the rulers. I therefore had one question uppermost in my mind: What makes a local journalist stay on a story after being threatened with certain death?

I encountered a lot of unexpected events in the five countries I visited, including the murder of a journalist I was scheduled to interview about her slain colleagues. Her name was Anna Politkovskaya, and she was shot to death in Moscow while I was in the air on my way to meet her. The world-renowned journalist became one of my subjects for study.

As I moved from place to place, I found that each of the assassinated journalists had been very different people; among them was an easy-going 23-year-old in Iraq, an angry left-wing economist in Colombia, a self-effacing humanist in Bangladesh, and a mother of four in the Philippines who'd been tormented by the problems her journalism had caused her children.

Despite these differences, they'd shared one remarkable trait: They had reached a point where they were willing to accept death as a consequence of their reporting. To find the source of their psychology of sacrifice, I conducted a series of life investigations, not murder investigations.

What I discovered was that they had all experienced an event early in their careers that had transformed them, wedding them to the principle that the powerful should be prevented from oppressing the weak. While fallible themselves, they went to work each morning with the conviction that the calling of journalism was to defend the defenseless.

The men and women they investigated believed in the opposite principle: that the weak offered opportunities for the enrichment of the powerful. These predators dominated the five countries in which the journalists lived. I think anyone can identify with the deadly risks the journalists took if one recognizes that they were standing up for their homes. They did not arrive from somewhere else to seek adventure in their corrupt and violent lands. They lived where they died, and they tried to defend the people where they lived.

Since I began my research, Sri Lanka and Mexico have been elevated to the list of the most dangerous countries for journalists. That list is always changing, but the motives of the killers, and the ideals of the journalists, remain the same. Last November, in Juarez, Mexico, a severed head was placed in a park known as the Plaza of Journalists. It was probably put there by one of the drug cartels that had been connected to the murder or disappearance of at least a dozen Mexican journalists since 2005. Some reporters fled Juarez, but neither the symbolic warning nor a personalized threat could stop Armando Rodriguez, the city's most prominent crime reporter. He continued his work and, a week later, was shot to death in his driveway.

There are probably thousands of journalists at work today who are no less courageous than the fallen. Courage is not a quality we can assign only to those who have not survived their pursuit of a story. I have met many reporters in the countries I visited who have escaped murder only by dint of good luck and quick reflexes. They are living examples of the values for which their colleagues have died. They awake each morning knowing that at any moment they too could be killed for their work. All of them could easily have written the words contained in Wickramatunga's last article: "If we do not speak out now, there will be no one left to speak for those who cannot, whether they be ethnic minorities, the disadvantaged or the persecuted."

It is something to think about the next time you hear about journalists who have been murdered in faraway places. Often enough, they will have followed in the footsteps of colleagues who pressed on, knowing the fate that awaited them. They refused to bow to threats, wrote their last exposé, and would have written their next had not the expected assassin arrived to stop them.

Terry Gould is the author of Murder Without Borders: Dying for the Story in the World's Most Dangerous Places (2009, Random House Canada). Gould has won over 50 awards and honours for his reporting. He has recently received the 2009 Tara Singh Hayer Press Freedom Award, sponsored by the Canadian Journalists for Free Expression. The award is named after a murdered journalist.

