

Before I begin I would like to ask the journalism students here to come up with one question they would ask of President Barak Obama if they had a chance.

When I am finished we will listen to a couple of the questions and discuss a little your thinking behind the question.

I am not sure if you have noticed but the level of skepticism and mistrust of reporters and our reporting has increased not just here but in most countries.

Some would say that is to be expected in countries where governments control the media but what about countries like here or in other western democracies where we have allowed the government to control the conversation, set the narrative, where our lack

of questioning, our assumption going into our questioning is too often ---first that there is a moral ground and second that we somehow stand on it?

I cover Pakistan and Afghanistan but have also covered the Central Asian Republics, Yemen, Iran, northern Iraq and in 2006 covered the war in South Lebanon between Israel and Hezbollah.

My friend and colleague Anja Niedringhaus, who died in last year's shooting, and I were the first western reporters to embed with the Afghan Army.

We told of an undertrained, poorly equipped army that were ill prepared to take on the country's security on their own. They complained about the inadequate training that most often lasted four weeks, occasionally for officers eight weeks.

It wasn't enough they said. Honest about their shortcomings, their US trainers and Govt officials dismissed their complaints as Afghan griping.

We did the stories at a time when the US and coalition narrative was about the money being invested and the goal of getting 350,000 Afghan boots on the ground and the successes of getting there.

It was frustrating to try to get attention focused on what the Afghans were saying.

Today as they die in large numbers, their inexperience killing them, their competence is being questioned.

Yet the conversation about the “why” of their incompetence is murky, with few difficult questions being posed about the quality of the

training and the reason for that is because the conversation and narrative originates in Washington and we, as journalist, respond to that conversation. Our questions reflect that conversation.

Because of that as the US unveils plans to train the Kurds there is little, to no conversation, about the quality of the training.

In part because those posing the questions haven't even entertained the thought that there might be a problem with the training. The assumption is that the difficulty is in either choosing the good recruits or their ability to digest the training and make it work for them.

This assumption that the US training is good influences our questions, limits our abilities to be probing.

In fact if you put a new US recruit through the same limited training given the Afghans or the Kurds would you get a good soldier or a frightened poorly trained man or woman in a uniform too easily killed due to inexperience.

As journalists our job is to inform and it comes with a price.

That price isn't only about facing danger, it is also about choosing to dig deeper, asking tough questions, researching and understanding your subject. It is about refusing to be intimidated and having the courage to step away from that "good vs, evil" precipice that has tainted reporting, impacted how stories, and conflicts are covered.

Let me use the topic of press freedom to explain my point because how we do our job and how we are allowed to do our job defines a free press.

The topic of press freedom is a tricky one. It sounds simple enough and certainly something we all can embrace and should embrace but I am not so sure we are all on the same page when it comes to the definition of “press” and by extension “press freedom”.

It is different from media, because media can mean everything from journalism to advertising to social media.

Press freedom for me is very simple. It is all about the right to do my job and the right of the public to know.

It is not about being an advocate, a torchbearer of human rights or some vaguely laid out set of values that is so often linked to the West as if we have a monopoly on all that is good and right.

We, as journalists, are not crusaders, champions or guardians of anything but the right to ask questions, investigate, understand and disseminate information.

I believe there is an important distinction between press freedom and say freedom of speech or expression.

I don't see them as one and the same. Press freedom is about access to information, the public's right to know and the freedom of the press to pursue information and publish it without fear of interference, prosecution or retaliation.

Freedom of speech or expression that's different. Important, but different. While it might not be possible to have one without the other there remains a difference.

As Journalists, photographers and videographers we are the press and we have a job to do and whether we are able to do that job depends greatly on a government's commitment, respect and protection of a free press.

It also depends on the ethics, honesty and competence of the press itself.

While a free press might be widely championed, in practice not so much.

___ Canada had a rule for photographers embedded with the Canadian military in Afghanistan. They were not allowed to take pictures of wounded soldiers. Why? My thinking is because they are difficult images to see and it could have eroded public support. It would bring home the cost of war. Yet those soldiers whose wounds the government did not want shown have to live every day with their

injuries. Their injuries as well as the lives lost are the consequences of war. We had the right and responsibility to bring that information home and the public had the right to know. Without that information the public perception of the consequences of war could be skewed.

But it is not limited to coverage of wars.

_____ here In the United States the Justice Department took countless phone records of Washington based Associated Press reporters. Their action had the potential to compromise sources, effectively prevent the free press from doing its job. As the AP story at the time said: The Justice Department secretly obtained two months of telephone records of reporters and editors for The Associated Press in what the news cooperative's top executive called a "massive and unprecedented intrusion" into how news organizations gather the news. The Justice Department did not even notify AP of

the confiscation of telephone records. In a separate incident the FBI planted a false story claiming to be AP.

Using national security as a rationale for controlling, or interfering with the press is a fool's argument.

Press freedom is not about whether images are too graphic, or whether reports involve national security, threats or dangers. Press freedom is about the right to know and it is also about honestly and accurately chronicling history.

At the annual White House Correspondents' dinner this year US President Barak Obama said the press's relationship with government was adversarial.

He was wrong. We are not adversaries, partners, or advocates. I cringe when I hear reporters talk about “our” troops.

We are separate, independent. That does not make us adversaries.

The government’s attempts to control, manipulate or outright lie -- that is what makes us adversaries.

Like governments the press itself has a great deal of introspection and soul searching to do.

The ‘press’ has a credibility problem, in part because of 24 hour television news channels that have blurred the line between information and entertainment.

Social media, so-called “citizen journalists”, twitter all have served to cloud the public’s perception of the “press”

Trust in what people read and hear has eroded and that threatens press freedom because it is easier to attack, control and manipulate the press when respect for the institution is lacking.

How are we to blame?

Sadly in many ways.

We were lazy after 9/11.

At a time when we should have been the most inquisitive we were the least. Questions that should have been asked in 2001 were asked in 2005 or 6 when it had become acceptable to question.

Patriotism, national security, fear all combined to cloud how we looked at stories, government statements, allegations.

There are those who hold that the New York Times single handedly sold the invasion of Iraq through a series of stories that shamed the press. The stories were single sourced and that source was an Iraqi opposition leader Chalabi – who died Tuesday – and who had everything to gain by the removal of Saddam Hussain.

We accepted versions of events put out by governments that we couldn't verify. We compromised for the sake of access. We were not always independent witnesses but rather on the side of one.

The Taliban were evil, rather than a combatant in a conflict. It colored our stories, limited our questioning which had we from the outset questioned we might have investigated the Afghans with whom the coalition allied and learned that their brutality matched that of the Taliban and in some cases was even more brutal.

Let me tell you a story of when the Taliban fell in November 2001.

I was the only journalist allowed into Kabul by the Taliban during the bombing by the US led coalition to oust them.

When they did flee the city I was already there – had been for more than three weeks -- as hundreds of journalists rushed into the city. One BBC journalist famously said he was liberating Kabul.

I got into Afghanistan because of AP's remarkable local staff and my contacts that came from years of covering the Taliban, going to frontlines.

For me it was a dream to be allowed in during the bombing, to tell the stories of those living through the attacks.

When my colleagues arrived, there were some among them that were accusatory. How had I been able to get in? Their questions suggested I had compromised, how could such a misogynistic, evil group like the Taliban let me in. Had I gone easy on them? Did I like them?

I was stunned and then I was outraged. Had they been jealous of my great contacts that I had gotten in I would have understood. After all they had all been trying, some even wearing Burqas to try to get in. But no. They were accusatory.

What was happening?

We are journalists. We are supposed to have good contacts. I don't care Taliban, President

Hamid Karzai, United States, we are supposed to have great contacts.

I did all the stories about women's rights being stomped on, Taliban affiliations, Arab militants in the country.

That there should be suspicion because you have contacts with all sides in a conflict is to me mind boggling and a little scary.

Coverage is often skewed depending on who is allied with the US.

Taliban treatment of women was horrible but did you know Saudi Arabia has more repressive legislation directed at women than any other country in the world and still the UN named Saudi Arabia to its Human Rights Council?

Did you know Saudi Arabia weekly publicly beheads convicted criminals weekly.

These criminals are given their defense lawyer, their trials are secret and there is no appeal.

Saudi Arabia has funded extremist Sunni Muslim groups in many parts of the world, where the local populations now suffer their wrath.

President Bush called Saudi Arabia Washington's moderate Muslim ally in the Middle East.

And just one last example of the distance we as journalists seem to have strayed from our one big job of asking probing questions.

I was watching a seasoned reporter, respected, on public television interviewing a presidential candidate.

His question to the man running for president of the United States. Wait for it: “Do you think the United States is the greatest country in the world?”

Thank you and now can I have someone to tell me their question for the US president.

Don't let it be: is the US the greatest country in the world? I am guessing his answer is yes.