WORKING IN A WAR ZONE

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Transmedia AIB entry
Working in a war zone

The multimedia war zone

Today’s war reporter has to adapt to a transmedia landscape. Gone are the days of a grisly square jawed writer scribbling away telegram ready prose into a dog-eared notepad. In today’s conflict environment, a smart phone, SLR camera, and laptop have all become as crucial as the bulletproof vest across your chest.

“Working in a war zone,” is a documentary about 24-year-old reporter Yusuf Omar’s time in rebel held northern Syria. From being smuggled across the border in bucket boats, to coming under mortar fire, nothing captured the immediacy and unpredictability of war like the constant updates which multimedia platforms allowed for.

Twitter

1. Live updates
Explosive tweets gave followers minutely updates about a group of 43 South African doctors who had set up a makeshift hospital in the town of Darkoush. Every attack, tragic death and miraculous recovery that Yusuf witnessed was encapsulated in a constant stream of tweets. When he saw twin babies born amongst the mayhem, he posted it on twitter. “Surviving in a war zone is about finding the humanity in all the madness,” says Yusuf in a post-trip interview. Those cute, unusual and outright bizarre moments were ideal twitter content. These were the details that wouldn’t make a prime time news bulletin, but engrossed the online audience.

2. Interaction
Are the foreign doctors safe? What’s the evacuation plan if the bombings intensify around the hospital? What happened to that young boy in ICU, is he going to make it?
Twitter allowed followers back in South Africa to interact with the war reporter, a conversation that historically never existed. Viewers followed the recovery of patients they had seen in the television packages. They grew attached to Syrian personalities.

3. Push
While effective, 140 characters don’t do justice to the horrors of war. Yusuf used twitter to post blog links, YouTube videos and direct followers to more detailed coverage reports.

Blog

It wasn’t just the doctors’ first time in a conflict environment. As a journalist, Yusuf’s blog became his debriefing. It gave readers the intimate details that are generally reserved for a memoir in years to come. Written in diary form entries, the blog started with ‘How to pack for a war zone,’ a comical, yet essential list of things you may never consider taking to Syria. Later blog posts became much darker, questioning the role of media and the guilt of returning to quiet suburban life.
Coverage pages

Yusuf did a lot of live crossings from the rooftop of Darkoush Hospital. But thousands of kilometers away in Johannesburg, the online team were listening attentively and writing detailed reports about the situation in Syria. These later, combined with Yusuf’s video uploads, formed the coverage pages.

Picture Gallery

There are few soldiers but many guns in Syria. The reporter soon noticed the amount of children with AK47s slung around their small shoulders. Stolen childhoods in a civil war soon became the focus of a picture essay online.

YouTube

Whether it was 6-year-old Mohammed Karkour struck in the stomach with shrapnel, or the doctors ducking and diving from gunfire during an operation, each day offered a different story. Everyday for two weeks, the team uploaded a news piece or feature from Syria onto YouTube.

‘Working in a war zone,’ was a 24-minute documentary aired online on return to South Africa. It’s a culmination of all the online elements into a multi-layered narrative about the effects of war on children, both psychologically and mentally. The piece is focused around the 43 South African doctors and a makeshift hospital. The reporter takes viewers inside his fearful mind, describing the sound of mortar shells exploding while he tries to sleep.

Reflections

Be careful what you wish for because you just might get it. That’s the closing remarks of Yusuf Omar, having come vividly close to his dreams of being a foreign correspondent. He learnt that there is nothing romantic about the job, and with cameraman Joe Komane, explains some of the challenges of working in conflict environment. The backstory interviews give viewers insight into what went into making the documentary and getting content out in a country where there is limited infrastructure. Both Yusuf and Joe continue the conversation with viewers over multiple social media platforms.