

MARCH 11

They shoot journalists, don't they?

To encourage restraint in war coverage, governments don't need to shoot journalists – though sometimes that's helpful.

Thirteen journalists were killed while covering the war and occupation in Iraq last year, says a new report by the Committee to Protect Journalists. The deaths were a subset of 36 on-the-job fatalities related to journalistic work across the globe in 2003.

CPJ's annual worldwide survey "Attacks on the Press," released on March 11, indicates that some of those deaths in Iraq were not just random events in a hazardous war zone. Journalists who were "embedded" with the American military tended to be safer. But as a practical matter, the tradeoffs shortchanged news readers, listeners and viewers. "The close quarters shared by journalists and troops inevitably blunted reporters' critical edge," CPJ reports. "There were also limits on what types of stories reporters could cover, since the ground rules barred journalists from leaving their unit."

Los Angeles Times reporter David Zucchino was embedded with the 101st Airborne. While he remained near American soldiers, he recalls, that "access could be suffocating and blinding."

Zucchino offers a blunt assessment: "Often I was too close, or confined, to comprehend the war's broad sweep. I could not interview survivors of Iraqi civilians killed by U.S. soldiers or speak to Iraqi fighters trying to kill Americans. I was not present when Americans died at the hands of fellow soldiers in what the military calls 'frat,' for fratricide. I had no idea what ordinary Iraqis were experiencing. I was ignorant of Iraqi government decisions and U.S. command strategy."

Meanwhile, journalists who were not imbedded with the invading military "faced a multitude of hazards and restrictions, limiting the reporting from non-U.S. military perspectives," the CPJ report says. In some cases, those journalists "faced outright harassment from U.S. forces."

On April 8, during a pair of assaults, the U.S. military killed three journalists and wounded several more. In mid-August, American forces killed an award-winning

cameraman. CPJ's report includes summaries of those events, and – if you read between the lines – they shed a lot of light on the Pentagon's lethally cavalier attitude.

* "In the first attack, a U.S. warplane struck an electricity generator outside the Baghdad bureau of the Qatar-based satellite channel Al-Jazeera, killing reporter Tareq Ayyoub. The attack occurred in an area of heavy fighting, although Al-Jazeera noted that it had provided the Pentagon with the coordinates of its offices weeks before the incident. The nearby office of Abu Dhabi TV also came under U.S. fire at the time. In October, a U.S. military spokesman acknowledged to CPJ that no investigation into the incident was ever launched."

* "In the second incident later that day, a U.S. tank fired a shell at the Palestine Hotel, which housed most foreign correspondents in Baghdad, killing cameramen Taras Protsyuk of Reuters and Jose Couso of Spanish television channel Telecinco. U.S. troops claimed that they were responding to hostile fire emanating from the hotel. A CPJ investigative report published in May concluded that the shelling of the hotel, while not deliberate, was avoidable since U.S. commanders knew that journalists were in the hotel but failed to relay this information to soldiers on the ground."

* "On August 17, soldiers shot and killed veteran Reuters cameraman and former CPJ International Press Freedom Award recipient Mazen Dana while he filmed a U.S. tank convoy outside Abu Ghraib Prison near Baghdad. U.S. soldiers said they mistook his camera for a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launcher. Dana had secured permission from U.S. forces to film in the area, and, according to eyewitnesses, there was no fighting in the area when the journalist was shot.

"On September 22, the U.S. military announced that it had concluded its investigation into Dana's killing, and a Centcom spokesman told CPJ that while the journalist's death was 'regrettable,' the soldiers 'acted within the rules of engagement.' No further details were provided, and the results of the investigation have not been made public. Observers have frequently pointed out that although a soldier might mistake a camera for an RPG at a long distance, a camera would be clearly visible from the estimated 55 yards at which Dana was hit."

Overall, CPJ reports, "the conduct of U.S. troops has exacerbated the tenuous security situation for journalists in Iraq." The occupation has brought a pattern of efforts by the U.S. command to interfere with independent news-gathering.

Al-Jazeera correspondents have been arrested many times, but American journalists have hardly been exempt from harassment. In Fallujah, when guerrillas shot down a U.S. Army helicopter in early November, "U.S. troops confiscated the camera of Knight Ridder photographer David Gilkey, of the Detroit Free Press, and erased all of his

photographs," CPJ reports.

In November, a letter to Pentagon press officer Larry DiRita – signed by representatives of 30 news organizations from the United States and other countries – complained that they had "documented numerous examples of U.S. troops physically harassing journalists and, in some cases, confiscating or ruining equipment, digital camera discs, and videotapes."

Commanders of occupying troops often see journalists as impediments to effective military activities. In the case of U.S. forces in Iraq, it's no secret – and it should be no surprise – that the Pentagon has adopted some of the Israeli military's occupation techniques. The similarities go beyond the deaths of two journalists in occupied Palestinian territories last year.

Nazih Darwazeh, a cameraman with Associated Press Television News, was shot in the back of his head on the morning of April 19 while filming a stranded Israeli tank at the corner of an alley in Nablus. Two journalists who were eyewitnesses said the shot came from an Israeli soldier under the tank.

In early May, the British freelance film director and cameraman James Miller, working on an HBO documentary in the Gaza Strip, was also shot and killed. Relatives, friends and colleagues commissioned an in-depth professional investigation, which found that Miller and his crew "were consciously and deliberately targeted by the IDF soldiers."

Darwazeh and Miller were shot while wearing jackets that clearly identified them as "Press" or "TV." Israel Defense Forces are notorious for targeting journalists in the occupied territories. There's a pattern of shooting at journalists – with the IDF hierarchy refusing to hold anyone accountable for the results.

"Over the years," the latest CPJ report explains, "the army has failed to conduct thorough investigations into cases where journalists have been wounded or killed by IDF gunfire, let alone punish those responsible for the attacks. The same can be said for troops who physically attack or otherwise mistreat journalists in the field."

For the authorities in charge of an occupation, the positive deterrent effects of such policies are self-evident when journalists know that their lives will be in danger if they try to document instances of brutality on the part of occupiers.

It's not necessary to shoot too many journalists. If the goal is to discourage overly intrepid coverage on the ground, some occasional killing can be a real disincentive.