

Opinion: What happens when reporters don't cover news in person?

By Bill Keller, New York Times

In a smart, disheartening piece in the *New York Times* magazine last month, Robert Worth surveyed the frustration of American diplomats who signed up to engage the world – even dreamed of changing it – and now find themselves encumbered by the safeguards and protocols of a risk-averse Washington. It is hard to change the world when you live in a fortress and travel in an armored motorcade.

The article was prompted, of course, by the death of J. Christopher Stevens, the ambassador killed in a Sept. 11 jihadi attack on the American mission in Benghazi, Libya. His death, Worth wrote, “set off a political storm that seems likely to tie the hands of American diplomats around the world for some time to come. Congressmen and Washington pundits accused the administration of concealing the dangers Americans face abroad and of failing Stevens by providing inadequate security. Threats had been ignored, the critics said, seemingly unaware that a background noise of threats is constant at embassies across the greater Middle East.

“The death of an ambassador would not be seen as the occasional price of a noble but risky profession; someone had to be blamed.”

That phrase – “the occasional price of a noble but risky profession” – struck rather close to home. It is a calculus familiar to the tribe of foreign correspondents who work, as Bobby Worth often does, in places that can blow up in your face. If diplomats are withdrawing behind blast walls and armed escorts, and if that is costing us some useful

understanding of the world, is the same thing happening to those who cover the news, and with what consequences?

Like the truly committed diplomat, the truly committed foreign correspondent is something of an endangered species. News organizations began their retreat from the world long ago, driven by economics and a wrongheaded belief that Americans don't care that much about foreign news. The *American Journalism Review*, which began charting the decline of foreign reporting in 1998 (that first article was entitled "Goodbye, World"), reported two years ago that 18 American newspapers and two entire newspaper chains had closed every one of their overseas bureaus. Other news outlets, including most TV networks, have downsized or abandoned full-time bureaus in favor of reporters or anchors who parachute in when there's a crisis. They give us spurts of coverage when an Arab Spring breaks out or Hamas fires rockets into Israel, but much less of the ongoing attention that would equip us to see crises coming and understand them when they erupt.

The *New York Times* and a few other news organizations – NPR, the BBC, *Wall Street Journal*, CNN – have bucked the trend. This is not so much out of altruistic spirit as an awareness that our identity (our brand, to use the obnoxious term of art) promises the world. And, not incidentally, our fastest-growing audience is the world.

But the *Times* is not immune to the dangers that have caused so many diplomats to play safe. My most haunting memories of the eight years I spent as executive editor are phone calls to parents and spouses to say a correspondent had fallen into the hands of bad people, and reckoning with the evacuation of a photographer maimed in the field, and sitting vigil with the families of *Times* employees killed in Kabul and Baghdad. On the 15th floor of the New York Times Building, the meeting rooms are named for *Times* journalists who died pursuing news. We are running out of rooms. The "occasional price of a noble but risky profession" is only a little consolation.

Anthony Shadid was our Chris Stevens: a passionate correspondent, fluent in the language, culture and history, a voracious listener, a beautiful writer. Careful, but impatient to see for himself. Anthony's death earlier this year – after a severe asthma attack while on a surreptitious reporting trip in Syria – was a freakish horror. But following on the kidnapping of four *Times* journalists in Libya and David Rohde's seven-month ordeal in Taliban captivity and other incidents, it prompted the paper to ratchet up already rigorous security, causing some correspondents to worry that an added layer of precaution would mean a little more distance from the truth. That does not seem to have happened yet to any significant degree, as readers can see from recent coverage of places like Gaza and Congo, but correspondents – I checked with half a dozen – are watchful.

"Everything is the balancing act," Alissa Rubin, who travels widely in her coverage of Afghanistan, told me in an e-mail. "I know the paper has gotten a lot more careful and it's a good thing – but only if it doesn't go too far." In Kabul, she said, there are major news organizations that simply do not let reporters venture outside the capital and others that take "stupid crazy risks." The *Times* has long employed security experts in dangerous places, whose mandate is to find the balance between getting the story and getting home safe. To travel with Alissa into the war-wracked countryside is to fully appreciate the meaning of the word "meticulous." Reporting ventures are planned, mapped and timed in exquisite detail, and everyone is alert to signs of potential danger.

In the end, you have to trust trained, experienced correspondents to judge how much risk is too much. And that brings me to the main point. To my mind, the bigger question for our business is not whether we sometimes err on the side of caution, but whether we are hiring, developing and deploying the next generation of trained, experienced correspondents to make those calls. That also happens to be

the best possible investment in security.

Diplomats and journalists serve different masters but both need proximity. Yes, “citizen journalism” has been an asset. YouTube videos from Iran’s 2009 uprising kept the story alive after foreign reporters were expelled, and tweets from Tahrir Square provided real-time guidance to the Arab Spring. But tweets are no substitute for being there.

That’s why Anthony went into Syria, and why some of my colleagues worry that in our response to the very real and increasingly unpredictable perils of that place we could lose a dimension in our reporting. We have local stringers on the ground, and correspondents like C. J. Chivers have produced illuminating stories based on well-planned forays into Syria. But British, European and Arab news outlets are there full time – perhaps foolishly, but it’s possible we miss a layer of an immensely complicated story when we are not.

The price we pay for not being where news happens can be reckoned not only in less good journalism, but in less good policy. Because, make no mistake, some portion of the information governments call “intelligence” is nothing more than an attentive reading of the news.

It is ostensibly a scandal that the Obama administration initially described the attack that killed Chris Stevens not as a terrorist plot but as a protest gone bad. How could the “intelligence community” have gotten it so wrong? How could United Nations Ambassador Susan Rice have gotten it so wrong? Well, go back and read the first online reports after the Benghazi attack.

The Wall Street Journal: Stevens was killed “amid angry protests over a film by a U.S. producer that mocks and insults the Prophet Muhammad.”

The Associated Press: “... protesters in Libya burned down the U.S. consulate in the Libyan city of Benghazi, killing the

U.S. ambassador. ...”

The *Washington Post*: “In both Cairo and Benghazi, protesters said they were demonstrating against a U.S.-released film. ...”

CNN: “The Benghazi consulate was one of several American diplomatic missions that faced protests. ...”

The *Los Angeles Times*: “Angry crowds attacked U.S. diplomatic posts in Egypt and Libya ... after a video appeared on the Internet. ...”

The *New York Times*: “Protesters angry over an amateurish American-made video denouncing Islam attacked. ...”

It is not irrelevant that every one of the online reports I just cited had a dateline somewhere other than Benghazi – Cairo, Washington, New York. In the ensuing news cycles some excellent reporting by journalists on the scene set the record straight: there were no protesters in the street, but the perpetrators of the attack were, by their own account, infuriated into violence by reports of the offensive video. By then it was too late. The story had been hijacked for partisan spin and counterspin. But I strongly suspect that one reason Susan Rice got it wrong at the outset is that most of us in the press weren’t there.