

Ethical Considerations in Foreign Correspondence

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An Interview with Lily Halpern
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Rod Nordland, international correspondent at large and Kabul bureau chief for the New York Times, has worked as a reporter in more than 150 cities, including Bangkok, Beirut, Baghdad, Cairo, Rome, Sarajevo, San Salvador, Islamabad, London, and Kabul. He has worked for the Times in the Middle East, Europe, and South Asia. Nordland came to the Times in 2009 from Newsweek, where he was the magazine's chief foreign correspondent, based in London. He began his foreign reporting career for his hometown paper, the Philadelphia Inquirer, covering the Far East and Central America. His honors have included being part of a Pulitzer Prize-winning team, and he was a finalist for a Pulitzer in international reporting. He has won two George Polk awards, several Overseas Press Club awards, the 2013 Heywood Broun award, and many others. A graduate of Pennsylvania State University, Nordland was also a Nieman Fellow at Harvard. He is the author of The Lovers: Afghanistan's Romeo and Juliet, the True Story of How They Defied Their Families and Escaped an Honor Killing (Ecco, 2016).

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Brown Journal of World Affairs: Your career as a foreign correspondent has spanned three decades, in which you've reported from over 150 cities. Could you speak briefly to the changes in the field you've seen in recent years, in terms of the resources being devoted to foreign correspondence and the changing security landscape, and what challenges or opportunities these changes present?

Rod Nordland: When the Internet revolution came along and sapped the finances of mainstream news organizations, for a lot of them, the one easy place

to skimp was on foreign correspondence because they were able to get their basic needs served by wire services like *AP* and *Reuters*; they could even get material from the *New York Times* news service, which a lot of papers take as well. And those other voices were really strong—Knight Ridder newspapers had built quite

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a big foreign staff of their own, in addition to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, which ended up being part of that. And I think that, too, shriveled up to maybe one correspondent when it was

bought by McClatchy. I think maybe they had one correspondent when they went into Baghdad, but not many more. And so this is a much sadder era to be a foreign correspondent for mainstream media. We've seen it very dramatically in Kabul. The *New York Times* has a three-person bureau with 25 support staff. The next biggest bureau now in Kabul is one correspondent with maybe half-a-dozen support staff or Afghan staff. *AP*, *Reuters*, and the *Wall Street Journal* all have one correspondent there, and I think for most of them now, when that correspondent is gone, like on vacation or a break, that means there's no correspondent there. And the *Washington Post* has gone down to basically one-half of one correspondent—the guy who works in Islamabad works in Kabul as well, and so he basically shares his time between those two places. So that's what we're down to.

And the major television media has stopped staffing it altogether. NPR closed its bureau a couple of years ago; they simply went from time to time on short visits. They had staffed it through much of the war, until, I think, 2014, when they pretty much closed up camp. There are a couple of other odds and ends. *Stars & Stripes* has a guy there; they obviously mostly cover the military. But it's a pretty sorry picture. None of the major American networks—ABC, NBC, CBS—are maintaining any permanent presence in Kabul, although they used to. I think all three of them made one trip into Afghanistan last year—I'd be surprised if it were any more than that. CNN made one trip last year that I know of—they might have made two, but they both would have been quite brief. BBC last year sent home its last British correspondent. The *Times of London* and the *Telegraph* have long since stopped covering the war, when the U.K. removed most of its forces from the country.

But it's even more alarming that the Americans have cut back like this because we still do have 10,000 troops there and they're very much involved in the fight, and we have an enormous financial commitment. We've spent 2,000

lives there and something like a billion, trillion dollars in military expenditures and direct aid over these last 14 years. To have such a small presence now is kind of shocking.

The *Times* is the big exception. We have not cut back our staff. We actually have an opening now—we only have two people, but we hope to fill that opening and keep it at three. As I joke with my boss Dean Baquet, we could cut the bureau in half, and we'd still have the biggest, best-financed bureau in Afghanistan. He has no intention of doing that. He's supported in that by the publisher and everyone else in management at the *Times*. They're going to cover it with as many staff as they feel is necessary to cover it well. That's their whole strategy. It's what they call the "last man standing strategy," where the *Times* will keep outspending everybody else, and as all these other news organizations fall apart, they're going to be the last one there that has a real presence in doing serious news gathering.

There are some encouraging signs. While mainstream media came into Afghanistan very little last year, *Vice* sent eight teams in during the course of the year, and these are teams of three people each, spending a lot of money. Those people are not children who are doing it for nothing, they're professionals who are getting paid decent money for their work. There has been a lot of foreign correspondence that's getting done by foundation-supported efforts and charities and so on, but *Vice* is a commercial operation, and that's a really good sign because I don't think that the foundation model is sustainable. The *Guardian* in Britain is a foundation-owned newspaper; they don't cover Afghanistan anymore. It is expensive and it's dangerous, somewhat, and that's chased a lot of people away, plus people are tired of the story. But just in general, in other parts of the world where the story is of more interest, you did have this phenomenon in Syria—and also in the Arab Spring, generally—where you had a lot of newcomers, new media, often very poorly financed, people from *Global Post* who write stories for \$50 a pop and are happy to. Basically they're just donating their labor to that organization. Maybe they get paid a little more than that now sometimes, but I don't think it's much. And again, that's basically a one-man charity operation. So it's an encouraging sign that some of the new media are starting to pay people a living wage for doing this kind of work. Another example is that both *Buzzfeed* and *Mashable* are now paying people—commissioning journalism and paying actual fees to journalists to do work. So maybe as the new media grow up in a way, that will happen more and more. So that's it in a nutshell in terms of the overall trajectory.

In terms of risk, when I was first a foreign correspondent in Thailand and

Cambodia in the early '80s, late '70s, and for a long time after that, you kind of felt like you were bulletproof. Everybody went to great extremes not to hurt you. And journalists did get killed, and they did get shot from time to time—Pol Pot's fanatics did murder some journalists—but for the most part, you were assumed not to be a party to the conflict and were treated like that by all sides, and that was actually, looking back at it, quite wonderful. There were times I saw—in fact, I was the beneficiary of—a cease-fire in the middle of a hot firefight in order to allow me, and a number of other journalists who got caught in the wrong place, to get out of harm's way by both sides of the conflict. I don't think that would happen again. Increasingly, we're becoming useful targets for one

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side or the other. That protection just doesn't exist anymore. Some places, like Syria, we don't go into because they want an American journalist so badly that they'll do anything to get

their hands on them. There are even some colleagues who have to be careful working the border regions in Turkey for fear that kidnappers will come and grab them. Because the last time they tried to ransom an American journalist—Jim Foley—in Syria, they were asking for \$100 million. Of course, they didn't get it. But that kind of money puts you at risk almost anywhere, and nobody has any illusion anymore that we're not very much at risk.

The other thing that's changed, too, is the whole phenomenon of Strat-Comm. I'm saying it from the military perspective, but it infects relations between the press and government and institutions throughout. Every big organization now has a Strat-Comm person as well as a public affairs person or department. Strat-Comm means strategic communications, and it is basically a department of propaganda. Public affairs are seen as the people who try to get the message out and try to get access for journalists and put them in touch with sources at that organization and so on. But Strat-Comm is seen as often working behind the scenes—often journalists never meet them, but their whole job is a propaganda job to get around the news media and to get that organization's message directly to the public without being filtered by the press. It's a venal, ugly, evil phenomenon that was pioneered by the U.S. military and taken to its highest form there—they have an enormous Strat-Comm operation.

So, for instance, I have never interviewed General Campbell, who's the U.S. military commander in Afghanistan, even though I am the Kabul bureau chief for the *New York Times* and have been for three years, for the whole time

that he's been in charge. However, if I were an anchorman in a Dayton, Ohio television outlet, I could get a video conference with General Campbell in a flash because Strat-Comm would be on to me, offering that to me directly. And they do that all the time. He's given numerous interviews like that. When he goes to the States, his Strat-Comm people will arrange meetings for him with key editors and so on. My editors have talked to him at various high levels at the paper, and Strat-Comm kind of thinks that's how they're going to get around us. I don't think that works at the *New York Times*. I think the *New York Times* has a healthy contempt for efforts like that. But I think it does work at lots of other places, and it certainly influences the message, and that's happening more and more.

Another thing that Strat-Comm does is blacklist journalists. They do that all the time. I'm on a lot of blacklists for stuff that I've done before. Because I work for the *New York Times*, it's pretty hard for them to ignore me completely, but they certainly make life miserable for me when I try to request anything. That's a new feature, too. There used to be a sense of, well, this is a free press, you take your knocks from the free press, and that's just the way it is. But Strat-Comm does not have that attitude. Strat-Comm has the same attitude that Goebbels and all those people had in Germany, that the media was there to be manipulated, and the public was stupid, and you just had to harness that to your own ends. It's a great undermining of the democratic tradition and the free press tradition—not that I feel strongly about it. It's like the voice of evil come back from 1939 to haunt us.

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Journal: In your career, you've covered every war involving the United States that's happened during that period. As a representative of a U.S. news organization in such situations, how do you gain credibility and trust on the ground from people who might harbor some anti-American attitudes, especially in a country like Afghanistan where our presence has been so pronounced and prolonged?

Nordland: Well, in Afghanistan at least, there's still a reservoir of trust with the press. I think because the military hates us so much, that gives us a little bit of credibility with all sides, including with the Taliban.

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I don't think they tell the truth any more, but I don't think they tell the truth any less than the U.S. military does. With Afghans, there's a lot of hostility toward our long-term presence, that's true. And there are cases where we have to be very careful, particularly on the street or in mass gatherings because that reservoir of hatred for the foreigner is quite deep and can blow up very easily. But on a one-to-one basis, it's not really too much of a problem being an American journalist. I think people respect the American press. The American press is a lot freer than any other press. We're not a party press like the British press, for the most part. Basically, if you're a British journalist, except for the BBC—which is kind of different, but even that's establishment government in a way—all the papers are associated with one party or another. And that's very much true of the European press. I think people see the American press in a pretty positive light in that regard.

Journal: That's good to hear. What are your interactions with news organizations based in the country you are reporting in like? Would you say they are competitive? Collaborative? Do you just operate more or less in separate spheres? Does what you are reporting on have any influence on what those organizations will cover or vice versa?

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Nordland: Well, I think the *New York Times* has always set the agenda, and I think that's even more true in Afghanistan because we have such a big presence there compared to everybody else. I am sad to say that I no longer read my competitors in Afghanistan very much because they don't produce very much. They're usually way behind the curve, with occasional exceptions. But it's not like every morning I open up my computer and see what the *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal* do because on most days they haven't done anything, or certainly nothing that I would feel threatened by. Occasionally, if they do have something—and they do sometimes, they have some good people—I'll hear about it anyway, you know, someone will shoot me an email from the desk or something. So I've just stopped reading them, which wasn't the case before. That was the first thing you would do, even late at night: see if they broke something late that you would have to chase. And that just doesn't happen anymore with the *New York Times*, just because of our great presence there. Maybe that's less true in other parts of the world, where other news organizations are a little bit more present, but even there, they're just not committing the kind of resources that we are. And it's not to blow the *Times'* horn, but they've made this decision, a historic decision really, that they're not going to cut back on foreign

coverage. They see the future in the international market for their website and digital products, and they've decided not to skimp at all. And everybody else is trying to find ways to save money because they see that as the only way they're going to preserve themselves.

Journal: What about any interactions with the Afghan press?

Nordland: In Kabul, I have four Afghan reporters working for me—well, actually three right now, since one is on leave. They do most of the interaction because most of the Afghan press do not speak English very well. I see them at parties and functions and press conferences and so on. And I have a lot of respect for what they try to do. They're sometimes very much at risk, and they're walking a tightrope between powerful and not-very-friendly elements on the government side, as well as on the insurgent side, and that's a difficult thing for them to do. Our Afghan reporters interact with them all the time. They share information and contacts, the way most journalists do—especially in war zones, where I think everybody feels like they're in it together, much more so than they would in a safer, first-world situation. There's a lot of information exchange. If we see a story that we're interested in that an Afghan journalist has done, we'll contact them and ask them to put us in touch, and they often do, and they know that they can ask us for the same thing. I don't do that with my American colleagues because I don't really believe in working with the enemy, although I guess if we were out in the field somewhere, that would probably be different because you do feel like you're in it together.

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Journal: Due to your location and your focus right now on the Middle East, you've written a lot of articles on the Islamic State. While the *Times*' coverage of IS is more nuanced than a lot of the other media attention the group receives, I was wondering if you could still speak to some of the concerns that have been expressed regarding the sensationalism and perhaps exaggeration that is informing the U.S. public, as well as to what you feel the media's role is in creating some of the hysteria that has surrounded terrorism in recent months. How do you try to go about reporting on such issues in a way that's not going to stoke hysteria, that's going to provide the information that needs to be provided without contributing to a lot of the panic we've seen lately?

Nordland: The people that create hysteria are people like Donald Trump; they're not the journalists that report the stories. It's what they do with those stories and

the way they twist that information. I think our job is just to report things as well as we can—I don't ever sit and think to myself, I'm going to have to write this differently so I don't promote hysteria about terrorism. I mean, there are a lot of really bad things about terrorism; some of the hysteria is probably justified.

A very good example of what you're talking about is the decision in Sweden and in Cologne, Germany originally not to report on the sexual abuse and even rapes of women by what were clearly asylum seekers, who were clearly from the Middle East and/or Afghanistan, and to pretend like it was just some sort of unknown people that maybe happened to happen by there and grab some women. In fact, in some cases, they suppressed the news altogether. And I think that was a really terrible mistake. When it did come out, which inevitably these things always do, it just made it that much worse. I think that the immigrant

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communities in those countries need to deal with that issue themselves and persuade their young men that they're guests in another country where women

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are not allowed to be touched, and women who are on the street in what they consider skimpy clothing are not allowed to be assumed to be prostitutes who can be assaulted on the spot. I think it was a disgrace that there were news organizations in those countries who withheld that news and that there were police organizations that suppressed it. I'm glad it eventually came out. I can't think of any instance in which I would want to withhold news about terrorism, with the exception of hostages who've been taken, where publicizing their cases might make things worse for them. We routinely withhold that kind of information, but that's a very specific kind of case.

Journal: Let's move now to your book, *The Lovers: Afghanistan's Romeo and Juliet*, which was published in January and follows a teenage couple who defied sectarian differences, cultural conventions, and Afghan civil and Islamic law to be together. How did you first come across this story? Given everything that you witness on a daily basis, how did you decide that this was a story that was going to make a great book?

Nordland: It kind of happened to me. I stumbled across this couple—somebody emailed me and told me about them, and I went and took a chance. And again, this is a good example—this book would not have happened if I'd worked at another news organization. I'll tell you why. The woman who contacted me

and told me about this case emailed every journalist in Kabul. In my case, her email went into my spam folder. Fortunately, I saw it there and realized it was something that was really worth following up on. Also fortunately, we had, at the time, three American correspondents in Kabul, so I was able to detach myself. It was a run-up to elections, a really busy news time in Afghanistan, and I was able to take time off because I had two other people who could back me up in the country at the time. Where this couple was, up in Bamyan, doesn't look far on a map, but during the winter, it's a difficult trip logistically, and the flights are constantly cancelled by snow. So I had to go knowing that I might well have to spend at least two weeks to do one day's worth of interviews if the flights were cancelled. I was lucky that didn't happen. My first trip, I only had to spend a week there. And that's something that nobody else in Kabul was able to afford to do, if they even saw the email. I think probably some of them did, they just didn't have the resources to take that kind of gamble, to get stuck up in a snowy place with poor communications for two weeks in the middle of a hot story. So I was a beneficiary of that, definitely.

What made me realize it was a book was that the response to the news articles based on the story was so huge from readers. I was deluged with reader mail to a degree that I've never been before, and they kind of persuaded me. At some point, the newspaper was not going to keep doing stories on them because news is no longer news if it's not new, and that's what happened, actually, after a couple of months. But a book was a way to keep that alive, and until the book came out—even just weeks before publication, because a lot of people didn't realize a book was coming—I kept getting emails from people saying, "what's happened with this couple, why won't you continue to follow it up?" In this case, I actually think the editors at the *Times* got a little bit overcautious about over-covering this story because interest was so high from readers. I could have done a story on almost any day in the last two years and gotten a lot of reaction from people on it. In any case, now the book's out, so that's solved.

Journal: This project did raise a few concerns related to journalistic ethics. Firstly, your reporting on the couple brought publicity to them in Afghanistan, possibly increasing their chances of being caught. Furthermore, at one point, you helped the couple escape state forces that were on your tail to the location where they were staying, and you did this without informing your higher-ups at the *Times*. What role did ethical considerations play in reporting this story, as well as in foreign reporting more generally? Have you frequently found yourself in tension with the *Times* as an organization and your own notion of what you

felt was the right thing to do?

Nordland: Actually, this is the only time I've had this kind of a crisis. It was a particular set of circumstances where, because I was drawing so much attention to them in the first place, that attention quite likely, almost certainly, saved their lives. But it also made it very hard for them to hide. When I went to try to find them when they were on the run, my presence with a big entourage—a videographer, a photographer, drivers, translators—was enough to draw attention to them. On the other hand, they were going to get caught sooner or later anyway. Afghanistan is not a country where two people like that could hide for very long. And they were out of money, out of resources, they had no vehicle.

And so that's where I finally caught up to them, when they were out of luck—in fact, the police, as it later turned out, were three hours away—and it was clear they were going to be taken. And they were going to be taken and arrested on total bogus charges nobody took seriously. He was accused of kidnapping her, and she was accused of committing bigamy with him, having married him, and then her father went and married her behind her back to somebody else without her permission. So was I going to respect that completely absurd set of charges against them, knowing full well that when they arrested them, she would be taken inside and raped in the police station—which is what happens to all women who are picked up by male policemen—and he would be thrown in jail, and that would be the end of them? And quite likely, her family would then get hold of her, and that would be the end of her life. Faced with that, I think I did the only thing any decent person could do, which was intervene and save their lives and give them money to help them escape and a getaway car to avoid the police. Having done that once, I continued to do so because, having saved them once, I couldn't just say, "Now you're on your own and go get caught next week." Because that's what was going to happen. I ended up being involved throughout their case. I don't have any problem with doing that because I think I did what was right in that case.

I certainly don't think it's something that anybody should seek out as a journalist because we do have to maintain our independence. Not all stories are as black-and-white as theirs was. But I also liken it somewhat to being, say, a photographer and coming across a car crash with people lying, bleeding on the street in front of you. Do you take the picture first or do you call 911? I don't have any question at all as to what I would do first, and I think anybody that does deserves the contempt of any decent person.

Journal: Lastly, one critique of your book by Rafia Zakaria that ran in the *Times* highlights the power differential between you as a reporter and this young couple. She comments, “It is in [your] efforts to mold the story into an example of the righteousness of Western intervention—and of their ultimately feminist intentions—that [you falter], as indeed have those efforts.” How would you respond to this assessment? Do you think foreign reporting, especially if done for U.S. news organizations, can reflect a savior complex? How can correspondents avoid these tendencies?

Nordland: What is a savior complex? The notion that it would be better for me not to get involved in their case so that they could be killed, and that would be the more ethically responsible course? I don’t have a right to intervene and save their lives? Because there weren’t any Afghans who were going to save their lives, that’s for sure. That’s A; B—look up Zakaria and her record, okay? Look up what she has to say about the Islamic State. She thinks it’s quite understandable that women would join the Islamic State because of the colonial oppression that they’ve been subjected to. This is a woman who’s a columnist for *DAWN* newspaper in Pakistan. *DAWN* is a newspaper that believes, and has frequently published columnists who have adopted the view, that 9/11 was carried out by Mossad. And you know what the evidence for that is? It’s very compelling. No Jews went to work at 9:30 in the morning on 9/11, did you know that? I mean, that’s an article of faith from her newspaper, and that’s where she comes from. The big mystery to me is why the *Times* would choose such a person to review this book.

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Journal: In terms of separating this from your book and from this particular review, sometimes there is a tendency for foreign reporting to take on a viewpoint similar to that of the occupying country. So perhaps you could just touch upon that more generally?

Nordland: I take issue with that notion. That a woman has a right to choose her own husband and that it is wrong for her to be killed for doing that, that I have that attitude and that’s an attitude imposed from outside, well, it’s not. There are a lot of Afghans and even Afghan law that hold that that’s true. Nonetheless, I think there’s a basic human rights issue at stake here. People do have the freedom to choose who they want to marry; they do have the freedom not to be murdered by their families because they make such choices. And that has nothing to do with Western attitudes. That’s a basic, fundamental human right

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that's respected and recognized all over, except maybe by *DAWN* newspaper in Pakistan and by a few other people who really don't have their heads screwed on straight. So I don't think I have any apologies to make for that. Saviordom? Okay. 