In light of the recent beheadings of journalists Steven Sotloff and James Foley at the hand of ISIS, this paper will examine the threats to life and freedom of expression that foreign correspondents face in war zones, ultimately arguing for greater protection for combat journalists. The paper begins with an overview of the history of war reporting, which began in the American Civil War and saw heightened repercussions in the Vietnam War. Next, this paper inspects the current extent of journalist fatalities, the problem addressed in this policy brief. Journalists in war zones are under considerably greater danger today because the changing nature of war makes the frontlines of battle less recognizable. Reporters are often specifically targeted as a result of their status, and fatalities of foreign correspondents are on the rise, with the highest death rate in 2012. With the growing importance of this problem, three solutions are offered in attempt to solve the growing issue. The plans presented in this policy brief intend to better protect foreign correspondents and the truth they uncover in war zones.

Mari Colvin was 56 when she was killed in battle. Colvin was neither a soldier nor an insurgent. She was an American journalist and foreign correspondent for The Sunday Times, a British newspaper. In February 2012, at the time of the attack, Colvin was writing on the battleground of Homs, Syria. She previously reported across enemy lines in the Gulf War, Libya, Chechnya, and Sri Lanka—where a bomb fragment struck her face, causing her to don her iconic black eye patch (Langer, 2012). She believed danger and physical vulnerability were inherent in her job description as a combat journalist, but felt it was her obligation to report the truth in war zones nonetheless. Colvin’s death was one of an estimated 133 journalist war casualties in 2012, with 39 localized in Syria (Death Watch, n.d.). Her death, while honorable, is futile unless actions are sought to reduce this occurrence.

By examining the potential of more stringent regiments for journalists, this paper presents a number of solutions aimed at reducing reporter deaths in war zones. Three operational plans will be discussed and briefly explained here. First, many advocates for the increased protection of combat journalists have begun an international campaign for a universally accepted press emblem, like the Red Cross symbol, to be worn by journalists on the battlefield for easy recognition among warring parties. Second, when an enemy country purposefully targets a journalist, the afflicted country could enforce a moratorium on exports or services as punishment for the attack. Ideally, national militaries could train with and embed journalists within their convoys. Although it is typically preferred that civilians stay out of war zones, having reporters in those areas ensures freedom to information through the press.

To begin, it is necessary to espouse the history of war correspondence and casualties therein. Reporters and photographers are said to have accompanied soldiers as early as the American Civil War (Farhi, 2012). Media coverage also abounded in the early Crimean War and the Spanish-American War in the nineteenth century. Robert Capa and Gerda Taro, two famous photojournalists, captured images throughout the Spanish Civil War. Both were eventually captured and later killed (Sivakumaran, 2012). However, some theorists argue that war correspondence did not maintain a consistent presence in combat zones until the Vietnam War in 1959. According to David Zentz, an author who studies combat journalism, this was a “rare exception” and a “pivotal” time for foreign correspondents (Zentz, 2003). The United States government censored little and the global public gained access to stories, images, and renderings of the brutality in Vietnam. After the war ended in 1975, the federal government reconsidered the loose restrictions and obstructed further access. In the 1991 Gulf War, for example, the Pentagon purportedly “restricted press access by forcing the reporters to travel in small pools…. [They] told the cameramen when and where to shoot and checked their images for
undesirable content…. [Those] who did not wish to submit to these restrictions were hunted down” (Zentz, 2003, para. 7).

Currently, the situation is less limited for reporters. Journalists worldwide have sought distance from their respective country’s governmental restrictions with the International Federation of Journalists’ press card. More than 130 countries supposedly recognize the card based on the universal tenet of journalism as a means of seeking the truth to inform the public (“IFJ Press Card,” n.d.). But despite open and receptive boundaries, recent definitions of war have created a less distinct battlefield fought less by nation-states and more by insurgency groups and nontraditional forces. These groups often specifically target journalists, labeling them as “unwanted witnesses” to the atrocities in war zones (Sivakumar, 2012). An anonymous *New York Times* report on the peace talks of Yugoslavia, held in Sarajevo, says that snipers in some countries are paid roughly $500 US dollars for the successful assassination of a journalist (“Conflict in the Balkans,” 1992). With the now greater access to battlefield reporting, journalists face heightened fatality rates.

**Significance**

The International Press Institute reports on their annual “Death Watch,” a tracker that counts how many reporters have been killed, that each year since 2009 at least 100 journalists have been killed on the battlefield. From January to February 2015, 19 journalists were killed in just over a month (Death Watch, n.d.). The number of journalists slayed per year remains relatively stable over time—neither drastically increasing nor decreasing—until recent spikes. From 1998 to 2013, an average of 83 journalists were killed per year (Death Watch, n.d.). However, 2012 was the deadliest year for journalists with 133 fatalities (Death Watch, n.d.).

At first glance, it appears these numbers represent all those impacted by the problem of growing hostility toward foreign correspondents. However, many innocent journalists, aid workers, and other humanitarians are kidnapped, tortured, imprisoned, assaulted, and harassed globally (Targeting the Truth: IHL and the Protection, 2013). According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) in 2013 there were “211 journalists jailed for their work, the second worst year on record after 2012, when 232 journalists were behind bars” (Beiser, 2013, para. 1). Turkey, Iran, and China have the highest totals for press incarcerations, citing “anti-state” as the most common charge, and 45 of the 211 journalists jailed in 2013 were imprisoned under the designation of “no charge disclosed” (Beiser 2013, para. 12). In the CPJ report, Beiser states that missing and abducted journalists are too difficult to track; those numbers are not included in the totals, but they should be noted (Beiser, 2013).

Different conflicts and countries present different totals. Syria and Iraq are often considered the “deadliest countries” in terms of journalist deaths (Death Watch, n.d.). Nine out of ten times the perpetrator of attacks on a foreign correspondent does not face consequences for the crime (“UN Plan of Action, n.d.”). Furthermore, the problem is widespread—wherever there is a war zone, there is potential for reporter fatalities.

**Harms**

The harms associated with minimal protection of journalists in war zones affect a global audience in two regards. First, a threat to life stifles a journalist from fulfilling the basic objective of the job—to seek the truth. David Carr, in an article for *The New York Times*, explains that if insurgents succeed in “shaping or silencing different points of view by training missiles and bullets on journalists…the battle for the truth will disappear into the fog of war” (Carr, 2012, p. 1). It can be supposed that for every journalist killed in a war zone, a public readership of thousands, if not more, goes without accurate knowledge of the events in a conflict. This stifled reporting may physically harm a journalist, but it also causes irreparable damage in the public’s understanding of the truth. A United Nations Plan of Action draft argues that truth is invaluable in society: “Without…freedom of the press, an informed, active and engaged citizenry is impossible. In a climate where journalists are safe, citizens find it easier to access quality information” (UN Plan of Action, n.d., p. 1). Lies, propaganda, and inaccuracies will potentially fill the vacuum of truth without foreign correspondents at the scene to report—a dangerous replacement.

Next, the death of foreign correspondents corresponds to the level of perceived security in a war. Barry James, in the collaborative novel *Press Freedom: Safety of Journalists and Impunity*, says, “Every journalist killed or neutralized by terror is an observer less of the human condition. Every attack distorts reality by creating a climate of fear and self-censorship” (James, 2007, p. 7). This is damaging to the supposed reality of a situation, similar to the notion of truth. Shooting the messenger in a war zone can kill the original undesired report for the attacker, but the death also concocts an accompanying message of terror and censure for the public sphere that may or may not be accurate. The United Nations report states that societies “suffer” from a lack of information to “fully realize” the situation (UN Plan of Action, n.d.). Global perceptions of war situations are seen as more emotional and less secure when innocent reporters are killed—a vast and expansive problem.

**Inheritances**

Due to the magnitude of the significance and harms associated with the problem, effective policy prescriptions seem necessary. Current policies aim to combat the issue, but insufficiently. The United Nations has compiled a series of legislation on an international scale with a humanitarian lens to protect journalists, specifically fighting against impunity. Their solutions offer training for foreign correspondents, “encouragement” of protection on a national level, and lessons on the importance of a free press, among more preventive measures. All of this is addressed in the United Nations Security Council Resolution S/RES/1738, approved in 2006 (“UN Plan of Action, n.d.”). Other organizations, such as the Organization of American States (OAS), the African Union (AU), the League of Arab States, and the Council of Europe (CoE) aim to implement the UN policies on a regional level and “call attention to violations” (“UN Plan of Action, n.d., p. 4”).

Despite this support, the protections laid out by the UN have no enforcement mechanism. Subsequently, without punitive recourse, these plans are largely ineffective. Offenders that target journalists see no consequences, so there is no incentive to follow international laws in this regard. Furthermore, the few policies that are preventive can never ultimately be so. For example, the resolution vows to protect combat journalists, but the underlying vague terminology fails to be an effective solution in modern unstructured warfare. The resolution defines war, but excludes new quasi-battlefields that require the same legislative protection as the standard battlefield. Consequently, the guidelines of security for reporters need to adapt to the changing methods of warfare. The document openly admits that the solution is limited, requiring additional investigation into the issue. “Whilst there are many international legal instruments addressing human rights in general, only a small number are specifically concerned with the situation of journalists and their safety”...
Along with deployed troops, more than 600 journalists joined the military (UN Plan of Action, n.d., p. 4). While the current policies have their merits, they can be dramatically improved.

**Solutions**

The first solution to minimize journalism deaths in combat zones advocates for a universally recognized press emblem. The group promoting this solution is known as the Press Emblem Campaign, which formally supports a draft proposal that states: "In order to strengthen the protection of journalists and facilitate their identification in zones of fighting, the States Parties [sic] decide to adopt a distinctive international emblem and commit themselves to respect it and ensure that it is respected in all circumstances." (Draft Proposals and Resolutions," 2014, article 7).

The proposed emblem reads PRESS in black letters mounted on an orange circle and is intended solely for use amongst foreign correspondents. Previous adaptations of the emblem have been the same color, but included black triangles and other markings. In all cases, such emblems are intended to be "clearly visible at a distance" (Crawford, 2012, p. 21). The aim of the insignia is to signal to warring soldiers, much like the Red Cross symbol, that the person wearing the emblem is safe from attack.

The second solution is to place a reactive embargo on countries whose combatants intentionally attack foreign correspondents. According to an article by Graeme Bannerman, a Middle East Institute scholar, an embargo occurs "when one nation establishes a policy not to trade with another nation and not to allow its own ports or territory to be used for commerce with that nation" (Bannerman, 2010, para. 2). This measure could be used to reprimand countries for the undesired behavior of targeting foreign correspondents. The at-fault country is penalized with limited import and export possibilities, damaging their economic structure.

The final and preferred solution to protect reporters’ lives in war zones is to better utilize the concept of embedded journalism. Embedded journalists are foreign correspondents who travel within a military unit. Widespread use of embedded journalists began when U.S. forces invaded Iraq in 2003. Along with deployed troops, more than 600 journalists joined the military to report on the war (Paul & Kim, 2004). The reporters “traveled with the soldiers in their units, saw what soldiers saw, and were under fire when troops were—all while bringing live televised coverage of the war into living rooms around the world” (Paul & Kim, 2004, p. xiii). With this solution, journalists gain frontline access to the battlefield, while under direct and allied protection by the U.S. military.

**Advantages and Disadvantages**

While there are merits in each of the three proposed plans, it is necessary to weigh the advantages and disadvantages accordingly. In this section, each solution will be examined for its costs and benefits.

To begin, a universal press emblem is a relatively cheap option to increase security among journalists and force soldiers to acknowledge the presence of media personnel in a war zone. Despite this, the emblem presents a unique plethora of disadvantages. Current battlefields are much less clearly defined and journalists are often specifically targeted. To implement a visibly recognizable symbol may not be in the best interests of foreign correspondents. Crawford divides attacks against journalists into two categories: accidental and deliberate (Crawford, 2012). While those reporters being killed accidentally might be aided by the emblem, she argues that this is not true in every case. If foreign correspondents were to don the emblem in areas like Iraq or Syria, where reporters are specifically sought out, the conspicuous emblem could do a measurable amount of harm. “These persons are clearly sought out because of their status; thus, compelling such persons to wear identification that is highly visible may be detrimental… Journalists are now becoming a target of belligerents; it would seem counter-intuitive to make identification of them an easier process” (Crawford, 2012, pp. 23-25).

Furthermore, the emblem proposal lacks clear regulation—who oversees such emblems? How does a reporter go about attaining one? If there are no protocols, it seems as if anyone in a war zone could wear the emblem for supposed protection. And whereas the Red Cross emblem has strict rulings under internationally recognized laws in the Geneva Convention, wherein “misuse of the protected emblems is a war crime,” the press emblem offers no such global protection (Crawford, 2012, p. 27). In sum, the press emblem is limited in efficacy. Without international support and established penalties for those who disobey, insurgent groups will likely disregard the symbol and continue to attack foreign correspondents, resulting in possibly heightened damages and no improvement on security for a free press.

Next, an embargo can be an effective reactive measure to unwanted behavior, but it is limited in that regard. Embargoes serve as a punishment, in this case to admonish a country for blatantly attacking reporters in war zones. Carla Anne Robbins argues in *Bloomberg Business*, “In a world bristling with bad actors, and especially at a time when the country is wary of another war, sanctions have an obvious appeal—and limited impact” (Robbins, 2013, para. 2). Because an embargo is reactionary, it can never be proactive. An embargo does not prevent journalist deaths, but rather reprimands after-the-fact. Robbins insinuates that the U.S. has never had an effective embargo, citing failures in North Korea, Iran, and Syria (Robbins, 2013). She describes embargoes as having a “limited impact,” an impossible be-all and end-all. Once an embargo is placed, if a country decides to target more journalists, a second embargo cannot be placed, hence the impracticality. Furthermore, an embargo doesn’t always limit a country’s access to goods. According to Andrea Ovans with the Harvard Business Review, it often opens up more contraband channels and underground routes to obtain products illegally, which can hurt the rural people of a country (Ovans, 2014).

Additionally, a moratorium on goods hurts a country, but may have little or no direct effect on small insurgent groups, such as ISIS, that are targeting journalists. Robbins says, “squeezing dangerous regimes can signal strong global disapproval and impose some pain on rogue leaders and their cronies, [but] it’s unlikely to change their behavior” (Robbins, 2013, para. 14). Last, if a state is self-sufficient, an embargo does little harm to their economy; and for an embargo to be effective, a large group of nations is required to enforce it. A group, in similar politics to the United Nations, can effectually pressure a nation due to the supposed disadvantages of defying a large number of countries, but a lone country has little political bravado and power for intimidation. In sum, an embargo is limited by its reactionary nature. While penalties have a possibility of deferring a country (or neighboring countries) from attacking journalists in war zones, the possibility is remote. An embargo may, in actuality, have no effect in changing the desired behavior of a belligerent state and only punishes, but does not reduce journalist deaths.

Last, embedded journalism poses a distinct series of concurrent costs and benefits. The advantages of having reporters travel in foreign war zones under military protection begin with safety. Because of the convoy system, reporters are not traveling in a foreign country on their own, but rather...
in the protection of trained soldiers. According to a report from the Committee to Protect Journalists from March 2003 to October 2009, 132 non-embedded journalists were killed in Iraq, whereas only seven embedded journalists were killed (Iraq: Journalists in Danger, 2009). While that number is not finite for every foreign correspondence situation (as some areas have higher concentrations of non-embedded reporters versus embedded), the statistic draws a stark parallel between reporting with military protection and the potential woes of reporting without. A journalist may still face war threats, but with greater security and less risk of fatalities.

The disadvantages of embedded journalism occur when examining the type of news coverage offered. Many feel that embedded journalists are unable to report without bias in war zones due to patriotism, political and propagandist pressure, and one-sided perspectives of battle. David Verdi, an NBC reporter, says he was initially afraid “jingojism,” radical patriotism, might become another “battlefield casualty” that would “creep into the reporting and objectivity” (Verdi, 2004, para. 27). And an article in The Washington Post by David Ignatius voices the same concerns. He worries journalists will be trapped in an “American military bubble” without “a full picture” of a war zone (Ignatius, 2010, para. 3). Ignatius travelled as a non-embedded journalist into Iraq and says he learned from his experience that “it is too dangerous, in most cases, to cover modern warfare without protection from an army... [but] I was able to see things that the embedded journalists could not” (Ignatius, 2010, para. 9).

Additionally, others are concerned that journalists are used as tools by the government or military to propagandize, i.e., paint the military’s actions in a positive light, conceal negative imagery, and alter the truth. In contrast, Verdi argues that claim is invalid. He says, “I was certain the Pentagon would waste our time and money...The military’s actions in a positive light, conceal negative imagery, and alter the truth.” Military censors would control our correspondents and cameras, and the ‘government spokesperson’ would spin events. We were wrong. Instead, for the most part, the Pentagon made good on its promise to allow unfettered, sometimes unflattering coverage of fighting military units” (Verdi, 2004, para. 6-8). He argues the “insight” gained from embedded journalism enables a news organization to gain a more comprehensive coverage of war than they would otherwise. Embedded journalists, Verdi continues, are not confined to reporting on selected incidents of violence, but rather have access to the real-time events of the war in their entirety because of the unique first-hand perspective offered by embedded journalism (Verdi, 2004). Sometimes embedded reporting, being fully immersed in a battle, is the only way to see the unfeigned incidents of a war.

The last issue regarding military protection of journalists is money. The U.S. military is funded by taxpayers, which means citizens would ultimately be paying for news coverage in those zones. According to the news outlet Common Dreams, 53% of civilian tax payments go toward funding military endeavors (Lindorff, 2010, para. 13). To account for the safety of journalists with troops, that amount may need to be increased, but it’s worth it because reporters have a similar goal in mind as military personnel: democracy.

Solvency: Preferred Solution

Having considered both the benefits and drawbacks of the three plans, embedded journalism is the preferred solution. It most effectively solves the problem of the lack of safety for foreign correspondents with minimal threats to freedom of the press.

There is, however, one drawback to the plan that must be acknowledged. In order to protect journalists through embedding, the military must actually be present in those war zones. This solution is not intended to promote war in places the U.S. is not already involved. In some cases, journalists will have to be independent and decide, much like Steven Sotloff and James Foley, if the story is worth the danger. Additionally, journalists, such as those killed in the Charlie Hebdo attack in France, are often attacked outside of war zones. There is, unfortunately, no comprehensive plan to address these cases, but embedding is one effort to reduce the senseless murdering of those reporters that can be protected.

While a universal press emblem is a fitting solution for unintentional deaths among foreign correspondents, the growing hostilities towards journalists makes the emblem a belfry’s-eye for insurgents, thus adding to the harms of the problem. The option is cheap in material, but costs in lives and security. Additionally, the lack of regulation is concerning. Without careful control, insurgents could potentially abuse the emblem. The solution requires more forethought before implementation.

An embargo is a beneficial reactive solution to journalism deaths, but is not successful in proactively preventing the fatalities. It acts as a reprimand, not deterrence. Furthermore, a moratorium on a country has potential to change behavior over time, but only with certain stipulations. If the embargo hurts a country, but not those actors within the state who are targeting journalists, the benefits are moot. If the embargo is placed on a self-sufficient country, the country will not be impacted by the punishment. And if the embargo is placed and additional attacks on foreign correspondents occur, a second route to reprimand is difficult to determine. Embargoes work best with a coalition of nations to enforce it. If those needs are not met, an embargo results in a pointless political maneuver of words without consequential outcome.

Embedded journalism enables a wall of protection surrounding members of the press in war zones, protecting lives and open reporting. There are incongruences between the goals of the media and those of the military with embedded reporting “as is to be expected,” but “despite these key differences, the military and the press do share certain commonalities. Both aspire to a high level of professionalism, and both focus on serving the public” (Paul & Kim, 2004, p. xiv). With the similarities between the two entities at play, the persisting threats and disadvantages of embedded journalism, those of limited perspectives and propagandist manipulation, can be countered with preventive measures. To ensure that journalists gain a multilevel perspective of war, unilateral reporting can be expanded by stationing reporters in more than one military unit, more than one country, and fostering open exchanges between journalists of different organizations to fill in the gaps (Verdi, 2004). To ensure the needs of confidentiality in the military, journalists can agree to “not broadcast the location and size of military units or identify the wounded and dead before the military could notify their next of kin” (Verdi, 2010, para. 16). Reporter bylines can include advisories disclosing whether a journalist is embedded or otherwise affiliated with a military unit to alert readers of any impending biases.

Embedded journalism is not a foolproof plan with zero fatalities, but amendments can be made to ensure objectivity and increase reporter protection, while also reducing the harms associated with foreign correspondence. The impediments of press emblems and embargoes are not as easily patched. Ultimately, the ability to accurately report the truth in a war zone and the need to reduce the deaths of journalists coincide with this option more than the other two plans. There are ways to safeguard the freedom of the press from manipulation, but human lives need concrete protection.

Conclusion

To conclude, war reportage will never be without risks. To report at the heart of a battlefield is to knowingly put oneself in danger. Crawford explains, “People who place themselves in proximity to armed conflicts will always
be vulnerable to violence” (Crawford, 2012, p. 30). While violence is unavoidable for journalists who choose to embark on war zone coverage, fatalities can be lessened with heightened protection. The three solutions offered in the course of this paper—a universal press emblem, reactive embargoes, and embedded journalism—all offer distinctive costs and benefits to foreign correspondents. While each solution has merits, embedded journalism is ultimately the preferred solution. Indeed, it most effectively placates the harms associated with foreign correspondence by employing military protection, while maintaining the dignity of a democratic nation founded on a free press.

Marie Colvin, the foreign correspondent slain on assignment in Syria, once said, “If journalists are to report on what really happens in war, on the atrocities and pain and death, they are going to face risks” (Langer, 2012, para. 22). For Colvin, the story was always worth the risk, but protection by the military might help to lessen the number of similar reporter deaths.

References


