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From Paris to Johannesburg to Moscow, Allan has been on the front line of world changing events. He reported on the break up of Yugoslavia, the Gulf War, the trial of Slobodan Milošević, the aftermath of the genocide in Rwanda and the BBC's coverage of the Scottish Independence Referendum.

Allan now speaks on the ideal of truth and his early driving beliefs in the power of the press. So, distinguishing the truth from the lie is a challenge that Allan knows only too well.



Truth and lies

I don't know what it is that draws the young to war, but whatever it is, it was active in me, and when the chance presented itself I went and I kept going back. I immersed myself in other people's wars, grew mesmerised by the passions that fuelled the cycles of vengeance and counter-vengeance that propelled so much the conflict that I witnessed.

When you are in a war you want to understand its dynamic; what and who is driving it? You want to read and interpret and invest meaning in each new turn of fortune. Who's up? Who's down? What does it mean? You chew over the questions endlessly with fellow-obsessives, sharing meagre rations in the flickering candlelight of some bombed-out shell of a hotel building, and the privation of the experience, you think, connects you to the war, locates you in it, makes you susceptible to its highs and lows, its resiliences, its gallows-humour and its endless narrow escapes. It is exhilarating, seductive, irresistible. In the end, the war becomes an extension of your identity, a part of who you hold yourself to be and the values you think you represent in the world and seek to project.

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And for me, chief among those values was the idea that there was something called the truth, that it was knowable, could be communicated to others, and, through the privileges of my trade, to the public at large.

In the killing fields of Iraq and Bosnia, Sierra Leone and Afghanistan, Congo and Libya

and Liberia, I wore this certainty like a suit of armour. I came from a country with an entrenched commitment to human rights, and the rule of law; a country that defended democratic values at home and promoted them abroad. That country was part of a family of nations united by their commitment to these ideals. The idea that 'truth' was achievable, findable, lay at the heart of this conviction. It was a conviction in pursuit of which I and the tribe to which I belonged repeatedly put ourselves in harms way. And some of our tribe died, and are still dying, in the effort.

I think I must have believed that the truth could make the world a better place. Now, at this stage in my life, I think there is a kind of sanctimoniousness – quiet and benign and idealistic and selfless and even kindly in its way, but sanctimoniousness even so – in this youthful delusion, grounded, probably, in an unconscious conviction that human beings are inherently good, and that public opinion, when roused, inclines toward justice.

The ground no longer feels so solid beneath my feet.

Not long ago I came across a passage, written in the year I was born, by Martha Gellhorn, one of the twentieth century's greatest war reporters, and I found that its sentiment so matched my own that I wished I had written

it myself, though its eloquence is probably beyond me. This is what it said:

"When I was young I believed in the perfectibility of man and in progress, and thought of journalism as a guiding light. If people were told the truth, if dishonour and injustice were clearly shown to them, they would at once demand the saving action... I think I must have imagined public opinion as a solid force, something like a tornado, always ready to blow on the side of the angels."

Her faith in the benign power of the press, she found, could not be sustained.

"Gradually I came to realise that people will more readily swallow lies than truth, as if the taste of lies was honey, appetising; a habit... The manipulated masses could be aroused or soothed by any lies. The guiding light of journalism was no stronger than a glow-worm".

Social media has put weapons-grade fake news into the hands of anyone who wants it.

She wrote that in the 1950s. So 'fake news' is not new. The appetising lie is not new. Whole populations demanded it, relished it and swallowed it hungrily throughout the long and bloody twentieth century. But the digital revolution has weaponised it. Social media has put weapons-grade fake news into the hands of anyone who wants it. That is new. And the technology has run so far ahead of any attempt to regulate its use that it is now corroding civic life and democratic discourse.

In America the media landscape is so fragmented that multiple Americas have emerged, gazing at each other with bitterness across widening gaps of mutual incomprehension and resentment, each listening to its own radio stations, reading its own online news sources, sources that reinforce existing convictions in separate worlds of 'confirmation bias'. Americans no longer have a shared public reality: the common square where Americans could meet, exchange views, disagree, dispute, fall out, rage at each other, and finally resolve their differences at the ballot box is now vanishingly small.

You would expect me to make the case for the mainstream media; I have spent my life in it and have believed, still believe, in its intrinsic value. But its place in our world is changing fast in ways that might only become clear in retrospect when it is too late.

In 1991, when I was barely out of my twenties and the digital world we live in now was still unimagined, I drove with my friend and colleague Jeremy Bowen, who went on to be the BBC's long-serving Middle East Editor, up the long highway through the desert from the Jordanian capital Amman to Baghdad. We called that long ribbon of tarmac Scud Alley, for it was down that road that the Iraqis had sent Scud missile launchers to hurl missiles at Israel. We passed countless burned out vehicles, struck from the air by allied aircraft.

We reached the Iraqi capital after dark and in the days and nights that lay ahead we watched from our fifth-floor window in the Hotel Al Rashid as American and British bombers systematically destroyed the infrastructure of the city. The missiles when they passed sucked the air out of your lungs. You heard the crack of their arrival, the metallic thud of their impact and then the low rumble of the explosion. You saw the orange and black fireball rise in the night sky and your sternum vibrated with the shock of it.

The allies said it was a military command bunker. It wasn't.

One morning we were taken to see a civilian air raid shelter that had been struck by bunker-busting missiles. Hundreds of people, mostly women, children and a few old men, had been sleeping in there. Almost all were pulled out of the smoking remains of the building dead.

The allies said it was a military command bunker. It wasn't. The Iraqis said two thousand had been killed. There was no

way to verify the precise number. I counted forty-something bodies laid out on the forecourt of a nearby hospital.

In those days TV reporters had to wait till the evening news to get their stories on the air; newspaper reporters waited longer still, for the next morning's editions. As a radio correspondent, my report went out within an hour, well ahead of everyone else's. It made a huge impact and provoked outrage and condemnation in the UK, something I would only learn about later. A colleague at the UN in New York told me that my despatch was transcribed and left on the desk of every UN diplomat in the building before they arrived for work that morning.

I thought then of eye-witness reporting as the purest and most decent form of the trade I and my tribe practised. But there was still dispute: I was asked again and again on the radio, by presenters in London, how I knew that hundreds had died; was I taking the Iraqi regime's word for it? Was I allowing myself to become a mouthpiece for an enemy dictator? Some backbench MPs were now so indignant about our presence in the Iraqi capital that they called for what we were doing to be criminalised.

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Another brave friend and colleague, Marie Colvin of the Sunday Times, suggested that we go to the morgue to count the dead. So we did. It was hot and the stench was overpowering. There were bodies, many of them charred black, on the floor, on the benches, piled up against the walls. We waded through blood. Marie and I began to count. We got to 311 and stopped, defeated by a pile of mangled body parts that seemed melted into one grotesque whole.

I choose this example because it is still, for me, a recent memory, and because it belongs to an age that is now gone – the age when the digital world we operate in now was still unimagined – at least by us.

I believed then and still believe that eye witness reporting is vital. It is the best way to close down propaganda and myth making – what we now call fake news. How did I know that hundreds had died? Because I counted them. Myself. With my own eyes.

Was I assisting the enemy? I believed then and still believe, that it is almost, without

exception, better that the public should know, reliably and verifiably, what has happened than that it should be deliberately kept in the dark so that any claim, however ludicrous, can be projected onto incidents of that kind...

...now you can pick and choose your reality and you can live in a world of your own making.

That world seems distant now. Nobody then had a Twitter account with which to float the idea that the whole thing was a false-flag operation put up by the Iraqis to discredit the allied bombing campaign. For now you can pick and choose your reality and you can live in a world of your own making. The claim that Grenfell Tower survivors were fake 'crisis actors' or that a school shooting in the United States was deliberately faked to undermine the National Rifle Association is available to you; you can take it off the shelf in the digital supermarket of manipulated lies and half-truths. We used to argue about what the events meant; now we question whether the events happened at all. The public square within which we all perceive the world from differing perspectives – our shared public reality – is diminishing fast.

Look to Vladimir Putin's Russia for a nightmare vision of one possible future – a future in which it becomes impossible to know what is true, and in which citizens, as a result, place their faith in the person who seems best to articulate their gut instincts and values. A recent book about contemporary Russia by the western journalist Peter Pomerantsev is called *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible*. In that world what you want to be true becomes true; anything that contradicts your settled world view must, by definition, be deliberately and maliciously faked. The danger in this is blindingly clear: it is the closing of the democratic mind.

Why, decades after losing faith in the transforming power of journalism, did Martha Gellhorn keep doing it? In that same essay of 1959, she wrote: "*Journalism is a means; and I now think that the act of keeping the record straight is valuable in itself. Serious, careful, honest journalism is essential, not because it is a guiding light but because it is a form of honourable behaviour, involving the reporter and the reader*".

We need, as citizens of an old and entrenched democracy, to catch up with the technology. We need, as a citizenry, to learn to sail these new waters; to learn to distinguish between news sources that try, with credibility and

authority, to get things right but which sometimes get them wrong, and sources that deliberately set out to distort and deceive.

If history teaches anything it is that the conditions under which we live are not permanent and inviolable, but contingent. And the condition of our democracy, and the freedoms it bestows on us, are contingent, among other things, on credible sources of news and information – on a sense that there is knowable, communicable truth, however imperfect; that there is a shared public reality, a common square through which we pass and where which we can disagree, argue, dispute,

fall out, rage, and, in the end, resolve our differences in civic peace.

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