

Wherever There Is A Conflict There Is A Story

In July 2011 Swedish journalist Martin Schibbye and photographer Johan Persson crossed the Somali border into the Ethiopian region of Ogaden. They wanted to work on a story dealing with Lundin oil company's activities in the area and the connected allegations of human rights violations. Since the Ethiopian government would not give media representatives any access to Ogaden, they entered Ethiopia illegally and travelled with the local guerrilla group Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). During a clash between the ONLF and the Ethiopian governmental forces, Schibbye and Persson were wounded and captured. Ethiopia accused both of terrorism and subsequently sentenced them to 11 years in prison. The case rallied much public support for the two imprisoned journalists, but also caused serious diplomatic tension between Sweden and Ethiopia. After more than a year of increasing public pressure the Ethiopian government pardoned them in 2012, and finally let them return home. The Pike and the Hurricane talked to them about the role of journalism in conflicts and the importance of media freedom.

In your career, even before you went to Ethiopia, you've been to numerous places that were not particularly safe. What made you choose this risky career path?

Martin Schibbye: Wherever there is a conflict there is story. Wherever people take up arms and fight to change their situations, there is a story. I studied to become a journalist at Stockholm University. But it was quite academic. Afterwards I started working as a freelancer and there was one interview that really put me on the track of risky stories: I was doing a story on human trafficking and had done lots of interviews with people, who had been rescued from brothels in India. I interviewed a young girl called Gita. She was 17 and had just told me her horrible life story. I was about to leave when all of a sudden she asked me: 'Why do you want to know this?' I was taken aback, because usually I'm the one asking the questions. She said: 'I've been interviewed by journalists for five years now. I tell them the same story over and over and over again and nothing ever happens. What will happen after your article is published?' I didn't have any answers, but it really made me think. What I did back then was kind of easy: I was just going to those rescue centres and interviewed victims. But why wasn't I talking to the guy who sold her, or the owner of the brothel, or trying and follow the traffickers? From that point on, I tried to do my work more properly. I don't want to just talk to the victims; I also want to talk to the perpetrators.

Johan Persson: I think we have a similar way of approaching journalism, and there are plenty of other, easier ways to do it. If you work in Africa for example, you can just go with one of those big NGOs. It's almost some kind of industry. You ask them for the 'good victims', and they will get them for you. But, if you want to understand the world, and why things are happening, you have to try to see all sides. For example, I've done a lot of stories on Neo-Fascists in the US. It's the same thing. It's very easy to find the immigrants that got beaten up and all these people in Anti-Nazi movements. They can give you a lot of information, but for me it is more interesting to speak to the fascists themselves. I mean, the Second World War ended over 60 years ago, and

they are still following this ideology. Why? We have Neo-Fascist movements happening all over Europe. To stop them, you have to understand why it appeals to certain people. It's of course trickier, but the result is worth it.

Was it this attitude that also brought you to Ethiopia?

MS: Johan had just been to a refugee camp in Dadaab in Kenya. There the refugees had a lot of stories about a place called Ogaden in Ethiopia. We hadn't even heard of that place before these stories. And they were horrible. So we thought, that there was a story, but we figured that again, we didn't want to limit our research to the refugees, the victims of that conflict, but we wanted to go and see what was happening on the ground in Ogaden.

JP: The Ethiopian government kept pretending, that there wasn't any conflict, whilst the refugees and rebels claimed that there was a war. Swedish media had reported on that before. They made their interviews with the refugees in Kenya, but then turned to the oil companies, who told them that those were all lies. So Martin and me decided to go to Ogaden, to figure out, who was lying and who was telling the truth.

During your career have you ever encountered other dangerous situations, and how was Ethiopia different?

MS: More than once. I was working on a story on the communist Naxalite in India for example, where we noticed that someone had searched our hotel rooms. In the Philippines I was embedded with a guerrilla group and the Philippine army bombed us. It's not like Ethiopia was the first time something went wrong. As a foreign correspondent, there has always been the risk of being injured or even killed, but now there is also a new risk: being prosecuted for interviewing one particular side of a conflict. That is the real scandal about what happened to us. We got shot at – tough luck – but we were also convicted for terrorism and got sentenced to 11 years in prison, just for asking questions. Ethiopia has basically outlawed journalism. If you're only allowed to talk to the government, it is impossible for a free press to function. I'm of course glad that we got out of all of this, but it's terrifying, that Ethiopia could do this and keep us imprisoned for 14 months.

Are there other media freedom related developments that you find worrisome?

JP: If you look at all the conflicts and wars that are going on at the moment, one side is always the 'terrorists' opposing the government. We don't have wars between states anymore; nowadays it's always the government versus some sort of terrorists. I don't allow myself to make judgments on who is a terrorist or not, but that labelling is dangerous. It becomes very difficult for journalists to speak to all the parties in the conflict when one party is being criminalized.

MS: If you compare for example Syria to Iraq, Iraq was a much better covered conflict. Even when the bombs were falling, there were journalists on the rooftops in Bagdad. Today in Syria there is almost no one there, also because no one respects the journalists. The Assad regime is arresting and shooting them and the rebels are kidnapping and shooting them. So it has become really, really dangerous. That is a challenge that cannot be solved on the state level. Look at the

Geneva Convention or the Convention on the Protection of Journalists: In conflict zones we are considered civilians, and we are basically without any protection. Those conventions need to be changed, to get the same support for journalist that for example the Red Cross has. Not to give us unlimited rights of course. I'm not asking to be allowed to cross borders as I please, just because I have a press ID, but the point should be to make it possible for people, who don't have a voice, to get in touch with journalists.

During your imprisonment, were you actually aware of all the attention on your case, and what did it feel like going from being a reporter to being reported on?

MS: We couldn't fully comprehend it then, but we had an idea. That was also what kept us going in jail. Our worst fear was to be forgotten. This is also why we try to keep the attention on the Kaliti prison, where we were imprisoned. It is still open, and we have eight colleagues there. We know what all this international attention actually means. It might not set them free, but it gives them a certain amount of protection and helps them keep their heads high.

JP: It wasn't really possibly to comprehend all the information, when we were still in prison, because our main focus was survival. After we got free, everyone at the embassy and our family told us that it was going to be very big. But, when we finally got home, it sort of just exploded around us. All of a sudden we were recognized on the streets.

MS: We had great support from our colleagues and the public. Media has been covering the whole thing from the beginning, and that was also part of why we got out. It was the public opinion that made our foreign minister and the government work very hard for us. As the months went by, we became a political problem for both Ethiopia and Sweden. Compare that to our fellow journalist Dawit Isaak who has been in an Eritrean for over 12 years but is neither a problem for Sweden nor for Eritrea.

You have written a book on your experience. What was it like going through everything again?

JP: It was almost like being in prison again. But for us, it was also a kind of therapy. So now that the book is out, we finally feel free for real. I think we have basically made the best out of what happened to us.

MS: It puts a purpose to the suffering in some way. Of course writing the book was tough, but we are journalists, and now we got to tell our story. All we can hope for now is, that politicians and others are listening to what we have to say, and that it will have a sort of impact for the ones that are still left behind in Ethiopia. All their stories are still going on, all the people, you will read about in the book, are real people, and they are still there in Kaliti or other similar places. Talking about it, keeps it alive.