

# Journalists and others

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(P. 10)

Anyone driving or walking along the eastern end of Islamabad's Agha Khan Road these days cannot fail to notice the much-increased activity in and around the capital's premier hotel. Entering the lobby, you could be forgiven for imagining yourself to have been transported to some country other than Pakistan. The hotel has, in fact, been taken over by the world's media, and that is not an exaggeration.

The other night I visited the place out of professional curiosity. Sitting in the lounge over a cup of tea, I saw a team from Spain's TVE network resting, having cold drinks and admiring each other's freshly bought souvenirs. Within just a few minutes, two trolleys packed with TV equipment for America's CBS network were wheeled in, followed by a lone correspondent carrying a metal case with a sticker that identified him as working for Italy's 'Corriere della Sera' newspaper.

The reception area was thronged with people from all over the globe. A young man was walking up and down, speaking excitedly into his mobile phone in what sounded like an eastern European language. Seemingly oblivious to his surroundings, his free hand and arm were moving all over the place. I'm happy to report that no one was injured while I was watching him. Why is it that people adopt this kind of strange behaviour and body language when they are using their mobile phones?

Having spent the past 24 years as a desk editor first in radio and then in television news, I just sat there soaking up the atmosphere. And I couldn't help wondering whether any of those foreign journalists had ever been to this part of the world before, and whether they had brought at least a superficial knowledge of its people, its history, its languages, its customs, its

religions. Mind you, the hotel bookshop provides everything for those to whom Pakistan is just another foreign stopover. Want

to know anything about the Taliban? There is at least one book on sale that looks as if it can be dealt with (not read) during a few hours off duty.

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**With international news organisations like the BBC and CNN (the latter is said to be occupying one complete floor of the hotel), one can be fairly sure that at least some of their staff know the region and its background**

know the region and its background. But with purely domestic organisations I have my doubts. It was the BBC's Lyse Doucet who took me up to the hotel roof where she got ready for her 10 pm live shot, ie, answering questions from the news presenter in the studio back in London. Lyse is having an extremely busy but, by her own admission, enjoyable time. She says she thrives on the adrenalin produced by doing these almost hourly TV live shots and by presenting BBC World Service radio's 'Newshour'. And many of you will know that Lyse Doucet is anything but a stranger to Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Next to the BBC camera position on the hotel roof was that of Germany's ZDF network. Uwe Kroeger was doing his live shot for the main evening news at 7 pm German time. He is the network's Asia correspon-



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## Mid-Week Focus

dent, based in Singapore. As far as I know, ZDF does have correspondents in Beijing and Tokyo, but apart from that this vast continent is one man's patch. When both colleagues had finished their jobs, Uwe Kroeger commented admiringly on how Lyse Doucet manages without any notes. He himself had a notebook with large and thick handwriting propped up on a chair below the camera in front of him.

There is, of course, a brand of

journalists quite different from those out in the field. They work in the newsrooms back home, or they sit at their PCs and write columns or editorials. In the 15 days that have gone by since those terrorist attacks in the US, many of the latter have been doing a highly responsible job. Others, I'm afraid, have not. Let me give you a particularly vicious example from Germany's mass circulation 'Bild' newspaper (rag would be more appropriate). German editorials are signed, so here are some excerpts from what a certain Ernst Cramer had to say on September 21:

"There have been letters to editors, babbling on about 'the USA's premature and brutal actions.' In the wake of such thinking, anti-Zionism, ie, veiled anti-Semitism is once again coming to the surface. America's support for the Jewish state, we are told, is the real

reason for such radicalism among Muslims. All of us - Americans, Europeans, Russians, Japanese, Indians, all free people - are today being threatened by a small but fanatic gang of terrorists. We've known that at least since September 11. If we stick together, we shall win against terrorism, just as free people jointly won against national socialism (ed-the Nazis) and later against world communism. But if we give anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism a chance, we make life easier for the terrorists and threaten ourselves."

So there you have it in seven punchy, inflammatory sentences. This is the kind of paper that is read by the proverbial man on the street. Not that there is much to read in it. It thrives on over-sized, often made-up headlines and on mostly sensational photos that leave little if anything to the imagination ('Bild' translates as picture, or photo). And what is Mr Cramer telling his readers? Be on the side of the US and Israel, or else. Those two will coax and blackmail the rest of the non-Muslim world into supporting their cause. Joined together for better or worse, these oh-so-free people will then proceed to threaten the Muslim world into submission or bomb it into non-existence.

Strong words, but that is the message coming from between the lines of this snotty piece of scribbling (words such as writing, prose or journalism forbid themselves in a case like this). No wonder then that we read about more and more cases of Muslims and people taken for Muslims being attacked and even killed in the streets of North American and European cities. Next time I'm in that media hotel I must find out whether 'Bild' has sent someone here as well. On second thoughts, I won't. The only reason why I go there is to see professionals at work.