

PARTI PRIS

# The Politics of Celebrity

## Marie Colvin, A Case Study

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t one point in her biography, Hilsum claims that Colvin never practiced “partisan journalism” of the kind that “adopts a cause and reports only the facts that advance it”. Yet, as this essay concludes, her reporting was profoundly *political and partisan*, in fact, for it tended to favor the “humanitarian” interventions of Western powers. In contrast, the reporting of John Pilger, Robert Fisk, Michael Kelly, Janine di Giovanni, Tom Engelhardt and Jonathan Steele over this period incorporated appropriate critiques of Western militaristic adventures, highlighting the myths and lies on which the “human rights” rhetoric was based.

Moreover, the conclusion highlights the way in which, throughout the period in which Colvin’s reporting helped her acquire celebrity status, the newspaper for which she worked, the Rupert Murdoch-owned *Sunday Times*, also gave rabid editorial support for all those military interventions.

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### COLVIN: ‘THE BEST AND BRAVEST WAR CORRESPONDENT OF HER GENERATION’

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*On the Frontline: The Collected Journalism of Marie Colvin* (Colvin, 2012) opens with sixteen tributes following her death in Homs while covering the Syrian

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conflict on 22 February 2022. They include prominent politicians (David Cameron, Prime Minister, William Hague, foreign secretary, Ed Miliband, leader of the Labour Party), friends and journalistic colleagues. Alex Shulman, editor of British *Vogue*, says: “To the many who read her despatches, Marie was one of the great foreign correspondents of her age, known to plunge to the point of deepest conflict and remain there for longer than anyone else.” According to Christiane Amanpour, ABC News journalist: “She was passionate, funny and deeply caring, Marie was a lioness – she seemed to be indestructible, she was indomitable.” For Lyse Doucet, BBC journalist and presenter: “She often wrote about the quiet bravery of the civilians. Telling the story wasn’t her job. It was the life she lived. She had guts and glamour, was brave and beautiful. She had a wicked laugh, she had a great sense of camaraderie in the field.”

Born in New York in 1956, she started her journalistic career with United Press International in 1978, a year after graduating from Yale University where she majored in anthropology. She was appointed Paris bureau manager for UPI in 1985 and in the following year moved to *The Sunday Times*, where she became Middle East correspondent.

In 1987, Colvin, accompanied by *Sunday Times* photographer Tom Stoddart, gained access to Bourj al-Barajneh, a Palestinian camp in the south of Beirut, Lebanon. There they witnessed and reported the wounding and killing by Amal snipers of Palestinian women as they ventured out of the camp to get food. Their story appeared on the front page of *The Sunday Times* on 5 April. Soon after Syrian forces ordered their proxy, Amal, to stop sniping, the International Committee of the Red Cross entered the camp and the militia retreated. In another example of heroic journalism, that added to her celebrity status, Colvin was one of only three journalists who elected to stay and cover the plight of 2,000 victims trapped in a siege of a UN compound by militia and Indonesia soldiers in the East Timorese city of Dili in 1999 (Boyd-Barrett, 2021, pp 865 - 866).

She went on to win many top awards: in 2000, Journalist of the Year from the Foreign Press Association, the British Press Awards Foreign Reporter of the Year for her despatches from Chechnya together with the Courage in Journalism Award from the International Women’s Media Foundation in the US. In 2010, she was again voted Reporter of the Year in the British Press Awards but the award that made her proudest was the Martha Gellhorn Prize. In her acceptance speech, Colvin said: “She reported just the way I think is important: put your boots on and get out on the ground where the people are” (Hilsum, 2018, p. 303). The ultimate celebrity accolade came in 2018 with the

release of the feature film, *A Private War*,<sup>1</sup> based on her life starring Rosamund Pike as the intrepid reporter and directed by Matthew Heineman. After she was shot while covering the Sri Lankan Civil War in 2001 she wore a black patch over her left eye which somehow added to her glamour, uniqueness and celebrity status.

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### IN EXTREMIS: BEYOND HAGIOGRAPHY

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It is interesting to consider *In Extremis*, the biography of Colvin by her friend and colleague, the Channel 4 News international editor, Lindsey Hilsum, as both literary journalism and a case study in how fellow journalists cover celebrity. The book received unanimous glowing responses from the international media. In her *Guardian* review, Lara Feigel wrote: “There are times when the book risks becoming a hagiography, but Hilsum avoids this by combining storytelling with asking important questions about what kind of service war correspondents perform and what ethical codes they should adhere to.”<sup>2</sup> In the *Washington Post*, Jill Dougherty wrote: “She wasn’t partisan, but as she told an Australian journalist: ‘When you are physically uncovering graves in Kosovo, I don’t think there are two sides to the story. To me there is a right and a wrong, and if I don’t report that, I don’t see the reason for being there.’ Words to live—and die—by.”<sup>3</sup> Curt Schleier, in a special to the *Star Tribune*, described the book as “vibrant portrait” of Colvin.<sup>4</sup> Fellow war correspondent Charles Glass said it was “one of the best biographies I have read about any journalist. Colvin’s trajectory, personal as much as professional, was fascinating by any standard for the passion and turmoil that shadowed her from birth to untimely death. This is a great story, well told.”<sup>5</sup> David Swick, in his review for the *Literary Journalism Studies*, the journal of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies, said the biography was “dispassionate, nuanced, and anchored in fact. The writing is clear, precise, and historically sound. Hilsum helps us understand the attraction, the deep seductive power of reporting on war. She also lets us feel and smell and taste how horrifying it actually is. ... *In Extremis* is inspiring but it is also sobering and dark” (Swick, 2020, p. 2012, 214). Politics nowhere intrudes into these reviews.

The book does, indeed, tend towards hagiography in places. For instance, Hilsum writes: “Despite her agonies over dieting, she was slim and naturally elegant. Her abundant curls, cut now to fall just above her shoulders, were still the first thing anyone noticed about her, and then her intense green eyes. Heads turned whenever she walked into a room. ‘It’s hard to overstate how cool Marie was,’ says Tim Golden...” (Hilsum, 2018, p. 64). Later she writes on Colvin’s belief in the power of journalism to help the victims of

conflict: “Marie’s faith was a true faith and she believed it utterly. She still had her American seriousness of purpose, her heart proudly visible on her sleeve, uncorrupted by British cynicism. She was the champion of bearing witness so that even if no one stopped the wars, they could never say they had not known what was happening” (p. 311).

But in many other respects, Colvin’s life, loves and professional career are showed ‘warts ’n all’. Hilsum has clearly been given access by the family to some 300 notebooks and diaries, even some un-sent love letters, left by Colvin. Yet the important, associated ethical issues are left ignored: after all, what right have biographers to invade the privacy in this way of someone deceased? Somewhere in the text, either in the Preface or in a note at the end, this issue might at least have been considered. Significantly, when asked by Andrew Anthony in a *Guardian* interview whether she felt at any time she was intruding, Hilsum replied: “Yes, I did feel that at times” (Anthony, 2018).

All that said, these documents are used throughout to display for all to see Colvin’s emotional turbulence, her nightmares, her depression, her bulimia attacks, her insecurities, her miscarriages, her treatment for PTSD, her drunkenness, her notorious late filing of copy and her chaotic love life. Two marriages to journalist Patrick Bishop ended in divorce. Her marriage to the Bolivian journalist Juan Carlos Gumucio was marred by violence and excessive drinking; after they separated, sinking deeper into depression and alcohol addiction, he committed suicide, shooting himself in the heart (Hilsum, 2018, p. 249). Throughout all her heartaches, the book highlights the importance to Colvin of close female friendships, her love of sailing, her partying.

The final chapter makes for difficult reading. Colvin, against the advice of Patrick Bishop and her *Sunday Times* colleagues, is prepared to face extreme danger and return to Baba Amr, a neighbourhood in Syria’s third largest city, to report on the Syrian Army shelling for her newspaper, Channel 4 News and CNN. These are to be her last despatches.

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#### HILSUM’S CRITIQUE

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Hilsum is not afraid to criticise Colvin – these critiques largely ignored in the corporate media’s reviews. For instance, when trying to improve her credentials with the leaders of liberation movements, “she would hint that her father came from a long line of freedom fighters, a claim that had no basis in family mythology, let alone fact” (p. 48). Over the years, she also enjoyed special access to Col. Muammar Gaddafi, after interviewing him shortly before the American attack on

Libya on 14 April 1986. But Hilsum comments: “She knew that he played on foreigners’ fascination with his outlandish clothing and appearance and quickly saw through the myth of him as a desert Bedouin living in a tent, but she never investigated the political murders and disappearances of those who opposed him. *The Sunday Times*, like other newspapers, were more interested in Gaddafi’s antics abroad than the arbitrary cruelty he meted out at home” (p. 148).

Colvin’s coverage of Iraq also comes in for criticism. Here, she wrote a lot of sensational reports about Saddam Hussein and his sons, based mainly on information from exiles and often jointly bylined with a colleague who had close links with Israeli intelligence. “Some of the stories were true – Uday Hussein and his brother had, as reported, murdered their sisters’ husbands. But some stories were rumour from dubious contacts; over a period of months, Uday was gradually resurrected after Marie reported him possibly dead, then paralysed and eventually just impotent and depressed. Saddam Hussein himself was also reported impotent. It was not Marie’s best journalism, and the Iraqis responded by denying her a visa” (p. 176).

Hilsum also raises the question of whether *The Sunday Times* encouraged Colvin’s recklessness since the resulting stories would inevitably attract readers and consequently profit for the paper. “It was no longer just about getting a story no one else had, but also about showing how you had diced with death to get it. Some reporters were uneasy about the new direction, but not Marie. She liked the idea of being *fêted* as the boldest of the bold” (p. 177). Later Hilsum reports Patrick Bishop as being “not the only one who was uneasy about danger becoming the brand *The Sunday Times* was developing for Marie” (p. 221).

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#### LITERARY JOURNALISM: THE DIALOGUE PROBLEM

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The biography sticks largely to a strict chronology – incorporating in the process data from more than a hundred interviews with friends, lovers and colleagues, diaries, letters, academic journal articles, books, newspaper articles together with sworn testimony in the Complaint against the Syrian government for the extrajudicial killing of Colvin, filed by her sister, Cat Colvin, and Cat’s daughter, Justine.

One way in which Hilsum tries to add colour, immediacy and an extra literary feel to the text is to insert sections of dialogue. They rarely work. While working for UPI foreign desk in Washington she becomes friendly with Lucien Carr who ser-

ved two years after stabbing to death a man with a scout knife and dumping his body in the Hudson. On one occasion the poet Allen Ginsberg asks Colvin what she thinks of Lou's drinking and this dialogue follows: "He goes into rages sometimes. Have you seen those?" he asked. "I'm afraid of them," she replied (p. 64). Later, Lou takes Colvin to the airport where, still drunk, she falls asleep. And then Hilsum carries this flat sentence: "Wake up, Marie, or they won't let you on the plane," he said (p. 66). When Alexandra Avakian, a young freelance photographer, joins Colvin on a secret assignment to follow Yasser Arafat, leader of the PLO, on his travels around the Middle East, Patrick Bishop and Gumucio become suspicious and corner Alex as she leaves a hotel. This (rather awkward) dialogue follows:

"I can't tell you," said Alex. She happened to be carrying a book about Gaddafi.

"Aha!" they said, grabbing it from her. "You're going to Libya!"

"Not true," she replied.

In another section, Hilsum focuses on some of Colvin's friends – such as Rosie Boycott, Alex Shulman, Helen Fielding. She continues with this flat dialogue:

And then there was Alan Jenkins.

"I used to be fun," she said to him.

"You still are, 'Rie," he replied.

#### THE POLITICS OF COLVIN'S CELEBRITY STATUS

The most serious problem, however, associated with Hilsum's biography and the accompanying media coverage, is its woeful failure to place Colvin's reporting in its broader political context, merely following conventional narratives. In this respect, Hilsum can perhaps be seen to be reflecting a dominant image of the corporate journalist as a brave, heroic, pursuer after truth – and the major scoop. It's an image captured in a broad range of Hollywood films – such as *All the President's Men* (1976), *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1984), *Philomena* (2013), *Spotlight* (2015), *The Post* (2017) and *She Said* (2022). And it's an image deconstructed and critiqued by Phillip Knightley in his seminal history of war reporting *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Kosovo* (2000 [1975]).

Hilsum's failure to place Colvin's reporting in its broader political context applies to all the major events she reported on.

#### BOMBING LIBYA 1986

Hilsum begins her account of the 14 April 1986 US attack on Libya with the "freedom of navigation" operation by a US battle group of aircraft carriers, cruisers, frigates and 250 aircraft over the Gulf of Sidra on 23 March – primarily aimed at provoking Gaddafi to retaliate (p. 75). The conflict is highly personalized: with President Ronald Reagan pitted against the Libyan leader whom he has dubbed "that mad dog of the Middle East". The Libyans take the bait and fire SA-5 missiles recently purchased from the Soviet Union at US fighter jets. It is at this point that Colvin secures two exclusive interviews with Gaddafi, at which he denies Libyan involvement in the recent bombing of the La Belle discotheque in Berlin in which two American soldiers and a Turkish woman had been killed. The interview is front page news throughout the world (p. 78). Then on 14 April, according to Hilsum, US F-11 fighter bombers struck at targets in Tripoli and Benghazi. She reports the Libyan claim that Gaddafi's adopted daughter, Hana, had been killed in the raid – but fails to mention that it had left around 100 Libyans, mainly civilians, dead, that it was to be condemned in a motion at the UN General Assembly in November and that it gained little support from the British public with Harris, Gallup and MORI all showing big majorities opposed (Keeble, 2017, p. 113 - 114). Significantly, newsrooms were informed of the planned air strikes beforehand – but all held back from reporting until after the raid, thus showing the complicity between the media and the state over the handling of military adventures (Trainor, 1991, p. 76). But this is ignored by Hilsum.

The 14 April attack, in fact, was a deliberate attempt to assassinate Gaddafi from the air. David Yallop quotes a "member of the United States Air Force intelligence unit who took part in the pre-raid briefing": "Nine of 18 F-111s that left from the UK were specifically briefed to bomb Gaddafi's residence inside the barracks where he was living with his family" (Yallop, 1994, p. 713). According to Richard J. Aldrich, Gaddafi escaped only by minutes because the Prime Minister of Malta warned him by telephone of the approaching military jets (2010, p. 457).

Hilsum's major failing is to place her account of Colvin's reporting of the Libyan attack in an appropriate historical and political context. It is built essentially around the warring personalities of Reagan and Gaddafi and presented as a discreet event whereas it was, in fact, the culmination of years of largely secret Western moves to remove the Libyan leader. Seizing power in Libya by ousting King Idris in a 1969 coup, Gaddafi quickly established close links with the Soviet Union – and so became the target of massive covert operations



by the French, US, Israeli and British (Keeble, 2020, p. 201). Throughout the early 1980s Gaddafi was demonized in the mainstream US and UK media as a “terrorist warlord” and prime agent of Soviet-inspired “terror network”. According to Noam Chomsky, Reagan’s campaign against “international terrorism” was a natural choice for the propaganda system in furtherance of its basic agenda: “expansion of the state sector of the economy; transfer of resources from the poor to the rich and a more ‘activist’ (i.e. terrorist and aggressive) foreign policy”. Such policies, driven by the demands of a constantly expanding military/industrial complex, needed the public to be frightened into obedience by some “terrible enemy”. And “Gaddafi” fitted the bill perfectly (Chomsky 1991).

Then in 1982, away from the media glare, Hissène Habré, with the backing of the CIA, Egyptian and Israeli troops, overthrew Goukouni Wedeye, leader of Chad, the country situated significantly on Libya’s southern border (Cockburn & Cockburn, 1992, p. 123). Bob Woodward reveals, in his semi-official history of the CIA, that the Chad covert operation was the first undertaken by the new CIA chief William Casey and that throughout the decade Libya ranked almost as high as the Soviet Union as the *bête noire* of the administration (Woodward, 1987, pp. 348, 363, 410-411). US official records indicate that funding for the Chad-based secret war against Libya also came from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Morocco, Israel and Iraq (Hunter, 1991).

The April 1986 US attack on Libya, then, represented a shift in the US government’s strategy against Gaddafi – from covert to overt warfare. But there is no acknowledgement of this crucial political context in either Colvin’s reporting or Hilsum’s biography.

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#### THE 1991 “DESERT STORM” GULF CONFLICT

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Hilsum again merely reproduces the dominant, essentially ahistorical, simplified narrative in her account of the 1991 Gulf conflict. Saddam is predictably represented as the bogeyman: “On 29 November 1990, the UN Security Council gave Saddam Hussein a deadline: get out of Kuwait by 15 January 1991 or face the consequences. President George H.W. Bush and his advisers believed that allowing Iraq to occupy Kuwait would give a green light to any dictator eyeing up his neighbour’s territory” (p. 128). In the lead-up to the outbreak of hostilities on 17 January 1991, Colvin’s *Sunday Times* stories “were full of colour and insight” (p. 129).

One of the biggest myths of the conflict focused on the supposed “precision” of the allied bombing. And here Hilsum writes: “The bombing had been carefully

targeted on military, government and communications facilities” while in her *Sunday Times* report datelined Baghdad, 27 January 1991, Colvin “marvelled at the behaviour of cruise missiles” (so strangely anthropomorphising the weapon): “I thought it was going to hit the hotel and I yelled out. But it turned right and skirted the building, as if following a street map, and hit the old parliament building about half a mile away, sending up a pall of white smoke” (p. 131).

In fact, this stress on precision warfare, consistent throughout the corporate media in the UK and US, served to detract attention not only from the majority of bombs which missed the targets but also from the most commonly used bombs which were the opposite of precise. They were part of the secret war (Keeble, 2017, p. 207). As Paul Rogers argues (1991, p. 26): “Alongside the ‘precision war’ of laser-guided bombs and pin-point missiles, there was a second type of war. It was fought with munitions specifically designed to kill and injure people on the widest possible scale. ... Their use was largely censored during the war – sometimes by and sometimes from the media.” We will never know how many Iraqis died as a result of Desert Storm. Gen. Colin L. Powell, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, suggests in his personal account of the conflict that 250,000 Iraqi soldiers perished (1995, pp 525-526) while the Medical Educational Trust in London also reported that a quarter of a million men, women and children were killed or died as a result of the US attack on Iraq (Pilger, 1998, p. 53).

Most seriously, Hilsum and Colvin both fail to place their coverage of the 1991 conflict in an appropriate critical, historical context. For following the rapid assaults by the Western powers against puny Third World powers (Falklands 1982, Grenada 1983, Libya 1986, Panama 1989), celebrated in the corporate media as “humanitarian” interventions, a Big Victory *needed to be seen to be won* against a Big Enemy – if only to “kick the Vietnam syndrome”. And with the Soviet Union appearing in terminal decline, this military adventurism served to provide a *raison d’être* for the rapidly expanding military/industrial/intelligence/media complex (Keeble, 2017, p. 2). Hence the manufacture of “Saddam” as a global threat and credible enemy. Yet the spectacle of the conflict mostly served to hide (and effectively, keep secret) the reality of one slaughter following another in the 42-day assault.

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#### THE 1999 “HUMANITARIAN” WAR AGAINST YUGOSLAVIA

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Hilsum begins her account of the attacks on Yugoslavia between 24 March and 10 June 1999 with an account of the Račak massacre which, in the conven-

tional narrative, sparked the “humanitarian” intervention by Nato to halt the ethnic cleansing of the Kosovo Albanians by Serb forces. She writes: “The conflict reached a turning point in January 1999 when Serbian forces marched forty-five Kosovar Albanian farmers to a forest at Račak and shot them. It was an atrocity too far, and Nato determined to intervene – but only by air because Western governments thought voters wouldn’t tolerate their troops coming home in body bags” (p. 186). Yet the Račak massacre was manufactured by the media and the military to legitimize the intervention. In 2001, Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DP-A) reported: “Finnish forensic experts in a final report on the circumstances of the deaths two years ago of some 40 people in the village of Račak in Kosovo found no evidence of a massacre by Serb security forces.” DP-A noted that Belgrade authorities at the time insisted the bodies were slain rebels of the KLA, which they said had deliberately set up the scene to make OSCE [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe] observers believe there had been a massacre.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, research conducted since the end of the Nato bombing suggests that the reports of mass killings by Yugoslavian security forces and paramilitaries were grossly exaggerated for propaganda purposes. One team of Spanish pathologists sent by the European Union to investigate the “killing fields” discovered just 187 civilian corpses and not the thousands reported (Keeble, 2017, p. 258).

Colvin’s courageous reporting embedded with fighters of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) was celebrated in *The Sunday Times*: “Marie Colvin, the first reporter to enter Kosovo from Albania, is with the KLA unit fighting to open supply lines. She braved sniper fire and shelling to send this report” (p. 190). Hilsum adds: “Whether she really was the first reporter is open to contention – teams from CNN and the BBC had been over the border briefly during the initial fighting...” But both Hilsum and Colvin failed crucially to acknowledge that the KLA was essentially a creation of the CIA – a fact which even *The Sunday Times* reported on 12 March 2000 (Walker & Laverty 2000).

Despite the rhetoric by media, military and politicians, Nato’s intervention was far from “humanitarian”. According to Phillip Knightley (2003, p. 514), following the 79-day bombardment, Belgrade lost 600 soldiers and police and 2,600 civilians. Only 2 per cent of Nato’s precision-guided missiles hit military targets, but this was only “fleeting news” (Pilger, 2002, 143). In all, the attacks caused \$60 billion of damage. Thousands suffered traumas following the relentless bombing of the country, thousands lost their jobs and were thrown into poverty; the bombing of petro-chemical factories sparked an environmental catastrophe in the region; water supplies were threatened for millions while the bombing of bridges over the Danube

seriously crippled trade in the region. Serbia was transformed into the poorest country of Europe. In January 2000, Human Rights Watch, a New York-based organization, accused Nato of deliberately bombing Serbia’s civil infrastructure in breach of international law and condemned the use of cluster bombs (Norton-Taylor, 2006). Amnesty International (unsuccessfully) appealed to the International Criminal Court to rule that the US air campaign had violated the laws of warfare (Der Derian, 2009, p. 199). None of this information could be incorporated into Hilsum’s biography of Colvin since it might problematize both her celebrity status and the “humanitarian” warfare rhetoric which *The Sunday Times* and their star reporter promoted so vigorously.

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## COLVIN AND THE MYTH OF GULF WAR 2

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Hilsum stresses Colvin’s over-reliance in her reporting on Iraq on Ahmed Chalabi, head of the opposition Iraqi National Congress and the man the Americans initially favored as the country’s next leader. She remained committed to Chalabi even after the CIA and State Department concluded that the intelligence he was providing was unreliable and so did everything possible to block the Pentagon from backing him (p. 257). “His team fabricated evidence that Saddam retained weapons of mass destruction when in fact he had destroyed them” (p. 258). Throughout, Colvin backed the Western intervention even though, based on the WMD lies, it was clearly illegal. Oliver Boyd-Barrett places her reporting within the “well-established, mainly Anglo-American tradition” of “humanitarian journalism”: along with Kate Adie, Christiane Amanpour, Oriana Fallaci, Sue Lloyd-Roberts, Judith Miller and Carole Walker, Colvin helped form “an influential band of journalistic warriors in defence of human rights, observers and sometimes uncritical proponents of Western humanitarian intervention in 1990s and early 2000s” (Boyd-Barrett, 2021, p. 859).

Most crucially, Hilsum fails to place the 2003 invasion and Colvin’s reporting in its appropriate political and historical context. Again, the conflict is hyper-personalized with a stress on the responsibility of the demonized Saddam Hussein who is pitted against the American president: “Twelve years on from the Gulf War, which Marie had covered from Baghdad, Saddam Hussein was once again on the minds of Western leaders. ... Now in the wake of 9/11, the US President George W. Bush, elected in 2000, and his ally, the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, were preparing to attack Iraq again” (p. 255).

In fact, the assault on Iraq was a long-term plan of the US right and Blair government. Following the Gulf massacres of 1991, President H.W. Bush authorized the

CIA to topple the Iraqi leader. In 1996, some 120 CIA-backed former Iraqi officers were executed after the Iraqi secret service penetrated a CIA team. Two years later, Congress refused to back another CIA covert plan and instead agreed \$97 million in overt assistance to Iraqi opposition groups (Woodward, 2004, p. 70). Also in December 1998, Jonathan Powell, chief of staff of the Blair government (1997-2007), was stating in private conversation with journalists at the *Guardian* that the government was contemplating the removal of Saddam Hussein and his henchmen (Keeble, 2017, p. 268). By 2003, the Iraqi economy and society were collapsing under the weight of UN sanctions imposed following the invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Here was hardly a credible enemy. The “greatest battles since World War Two” were predicted and celebrated in the corporate press just as during the 1991 conflict. But in the end there was no real warfare: in a matter of days the world’s mightiest military power inevitably crushed a ragtag army of conscripts and no-hopers. Some 115 US troops were killed in combat and 23 in accidents and so-called “friendly fire” incidents; 19 British troops died in combat and 25 killed in “non-hostile situations” (Beaumont & Graham, 2003). According to John Pilger (2003), as many as 10,000 largely nameless Iraqi civilians were killed during the invasion, with up to 300,000 more injured. Some US generals estimated that as many as 60,000 Iraqi soldiers had been killed (Woodward, 2004, p. 408). War is about killing but these figures never appear in Colvin’s reporting nor in the biography.

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#### SYRIA 2012: COLVIN’S FATAL DECISIONS EMBEDDED WITH THE FSA

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Hilsum’s background section on the 2011-2012 Syrian Civil War covers just two pages (pp 337-338). In protest against President Bashar al-Assad’s clampdown, a group of military defectors had formed a rebel group called the Free Syrian Army (with whom Colvin embedded) while another group had created the Baba Amr Media Centre to spread news of the rebellion to the international media. But, as Boyd-Barrett comments, Colvin and other Western journalists had little idea who was funding the FSA. Moreover, there was “little to no evidence that the FSA and other jihadist militia, as they evolved in this period 2011-2012, were democratic or progressive – arguably, they were a good deal less so that the Ba’athist regime that they sought to overthrow” (Boyd-Barrett, 2021, p. 862). Boyd-Barrett does not doubt Colvin’s “humanitarian impulse” to report on behalf of the victims of conflict yet her “parachute” journalism tended to promote Manichean narrative structures “that omit historical dialectic and avoid mention of the relevance of the current crises of pre-

vious and ongoing imperial and post-imperial perfidies” (ibid, p. 865).

Hilsum records how Colvin was briefly smuggled out of Baba Amr but then chose to return (perhaps recklessly). On her last day she reported the grim story of witnessing a baby boy die as his mother wept. But her final despatches have been contested by investigative journalist Rick Sterling (2019). He argues that there were significant elements of missing context from her reporting. For instance, in December 2011, militants blew up the pipeline to Homs oil refinery, a major source of oil for the country, thus explaining the importance of securing the city to the regime; in early February, FSA militants attacked a government checkpoint, killing the soldiers and taking 19 prisoners. The following day, 3 February, the bombardment of Baba Amr started (Boyd-Barrett, 2023, p. 872). Sterling concludes that Colvin aimed to incite Western intervention and that her reports were “missing crucial facts, sensationalized the suffering on one [anti-government] side, ignoring the suffering on the other side and demonized the government which was the target for overthrow” (ibid).

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#### CONCLUSION

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At one point in her biography, Hilsum claims that Colvin never practiced “partisan journalism” of the kind that “adopts a cause and reports only the facts that advance it” (p. 185). Yet, as this essay has shown, her reporting (though often courageous) was profoundly *political and partisan*, in fact, for it tended to favor the “humanitarian” interventions of Western powers. In contrast, the reporting of John Pilger, Robert Fisk, Michael Kelly, Janine di Giovanni, Tom Engelhardt and Jonathan Steele over this period incorporated appropriate critiques of Western militaristic adventures, highlighting the myths and lies on which the “human rights” rhetoric was based (see Keeble 2017).

Moreover, throughout the period in which Colvin’s reporting helped her acquire celebrity status, the newspaper for which she worked, the Rupert Murdoch-owned *Sunday Times*, also gave rabid editorial support for all those military interventions. Significantly, in 2003, of Murdoch’s several hundred global media outlets, only one did not back the illegal, US-led invasion of Iraq (McSmith 2016). Moreover, Colvin was so profoundly committed to *The Sunday Times* she was prepared (however reluctantly) to do Murdoch’s ‘dirty work’, promoting his campaign against the BBC. On one occasion, she was persuaded to write a piece about how Kate Adie, the corporation’s celebrated foreign correspondent, in her desperation to secure exclusives, was driving her minder to a nervous breakdown. Adie never spoke to her again (p. 146).

Most crucially, both Hilsum and the international corporate media reviewing her biography fail to acknowledge the essential propaganda function of the corporate media in promoting dominant military, industrial, political, cultural and media interests (Herman & Chomsky 1988). Thus, Colvin's celebrity status can be represented unproblematically as *unpolitical*. And since her reporting is compatible with her newspaper's and government's stances, it can even be celebrated as "non-partisan". Such is the power of the dominant ideology to eliminate certain critical perspectives and histories – as this essay has demonstrated.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/a-private-war-2018>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/nov/03/in-extremis-by-lindsey-hilsum-review-life-war-correspondent-marie-colvin>.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/why-one-correspondent-gave-all-including-her-life-to-report-the-horrors-of-war/2018/12/20/0a3f4a34-fd91-11e8-83c0-b06139e540e5\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/why-one-correspondent-gave-all-including-her-life-to-report-the-horrors-of-war/2018/12/20/0a3f4a34-fd91-11e8-83c0-b06139e540e5_story.html).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.startribune.com/review-in-extremis-by-lindsey-hilsum/500084852/>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://theintercept.com/2018/11/04/marie-colvin-biography-in-extremis-review/>.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.medialens.org/2002/a-tale-of-two-massacres-jenin-and-racak/>.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Noam Chomsky on the Nato bombing of Yugoslavia. <https://chomsky.info/20060425/> and Keeble, R. L. (2000) New militarism and the manufacture of warfare, in Hammond, Philip & Herman, Edward S. (Eds.) *Degraded Capability: The Media*

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<sup>8</sup> See an archive of John Pilger's writings and documentaries at <https://johnpilger.com/>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.commondreams.org/news/2020/11/02/greatest-journalist-his-generation-robert-fisk-veteran-war-reporter-and-fierce>.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.historynet.com/classic-dispatches-highway-hell/>.

<sup>11</sup> See her *Madness Visible: A Memoir of War*. Bloomsbury, 2004 and *The Morning They Came for US: Dispatches from Syria*. Liveright, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> See [tomdispatch.com](https://tomdispatch.com).

<sup>13</sup> See his *Defeat: Why America and Britain lost Iraq*. Counterpoint, 2008.



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**The Politics of Celebrity: Marie Colvin, A Case Study**

**Les enjeux politiques de la célébrité : le cas de Marie Colvin**

**La política de la celebridad: el caso de Marie Colvin**

**A política da fama: o caso de Marie Colvin**

**En** This essay examines the representation of Marie Colvin (1956-2012), the distinguished war reporter, as a case study in the depoliticization of celebrity. It first outlines the major features of her career, stressing her remarkable bravery (amounting at times to recklessness) and her genuine commitment to the victims of war and violent oppression. The essay moves on to consider, in particular, both the contents of *In Extremis* (Hilsum, 2018), the biography of Colvin written by her friend and fellow war correspondent Lindsey Hilsum and its reception by the international media. More specifically, it examines in detail the failure of both Hilsum and the book's reviewers to acknowledge the deep political underpinning of Colvin's reporting and celebrity status. The essay, then, highlights the power of the dominant ideology to silence certain political perspectives. At one point in her biography, Hilsum claims that Colvin never practiced "partisan journalism" of the kind that "adopts a cause and reports only the facts that advance it". Yet, as this essay concludes, her reporting was profoundly *political and partisan*, in fact, for it tended to favor the "humanitarian" interventions of Western powers. In contrast, the reporting of John Pilger, Robert Fisk, Michael Kelly, Janine di Giovanni, Tom Engelhardt and Jonathan Steele over this period incorporated appropriate critiques of Western militaristic adventures, highlighting the myths and lies on which the "human rights" rhetoric was based. Moreover, the conclusion highlights the way in which, throughout the period in which Colvin's reporting helped her acquire celebrity status, the newspaper for which she worked, the Rupert Murdoch-owned *Sunday Times*, also gave rabid editorial support for all those military interventions.

**Keywords :** Celebrity ; War journalism ; Depoliticization ; Political engagement ; Media representation

**Fr.** Cet article propose une analyse de la représentation de Marie Colvin (1956-2012), grande reporter de guerre, en tant qu'étude de cas de la dépolitisation de la célébrité. Il retrace d'abord les principaux traits de sa carrière, mettant en lumière son courage exceptionnel – parfois à la limite de l'inconscience – ainsi que son engagement sincère envers les victimes de guerre et d'oppression violente. L'article s'attarde ensuite sur le contenu de *In Extremis* (Hilsum, 2018), biographie de Colvin rédigée par son amie et collègue correspondante de guerre Lindsey Hilsum, ainsi que sur la réception de cet ouvrage par les médias internationaux. Il met particulièrement en évidence l'incapacité, tant de l'autrice que des critiques, à reconnaître les fondements politiques profonds du travail journalistique de Colvin et de sa célébrité. Cet article souligne ainsi le pouvoir des idéologies dominantes à occulter certaines lectures politiques. Dans sa biographie, Hilsum affirme que Colvin ne pratiquait pas un « journalisme partisan », entendu comme une forme d'engagement où seules sont retenues les informations allant dans le sens d'une cause. Pourtant, nous arrivons à la conclusion que son journalisme était bel et bien profondément politique et partisan, dans la mesure où il tendait à soutenir les interventions dites "humanitaires" des puissances occidentales. Par contraste, les travaux de journalistes contemporains tels que John Pilger, Robert Fisk, Michael Kelly, Janine di Giovanni, Tom Engelhardt ou encore Jonathan Steele intégraient une critique des interventions militaires occidentales, en déconstruisant les mythes et les mensonges sur lesquels reposait la rhétorique des "droits humains". Enfin, l'article rappelle qu'au moment même où Colvin gagnait en notoriété grâce à ses reportages, le journal pour lequel elle travaillait – *The Sunday Times*, propriété de Rupert Murdoch – soutenait ardemment, sur le plan éditorial, l'ensemble de ces interventions militaires.

**Mots-clés :** Célébrité ; Journalisme de guerre ; Dépolitisation ; Engagement politique ; Représentation médiatique

**Es** Este artículo analiza la representación de Marie Colvin (1956-2012), reconocida corresponsal de guerra, como estudio de caso del proceso de despolitización de la celebridad. En primer lugar, se repasan los principales aspectos de su trayectoria profesional, destacando su valentía excepcional –a veces cercana a la temeridad– así como su compromiso genuino con las víctimas de la guerra y de la opresión violenta. A continuación, el artículo se centra en el contenido de *In Extremis* (Hilsum, 2018), biografía de Colvin escrita por su amiga y también corresponsal de guerra Lindsey Hilsum, así como en la recepción de la obra por parte de los medios internacionales. Se examina, en particular, la incapacidad tanto de Hilsum como de los críticos del libro para reconocer los profundos fundamentos políticos del trabajo periodístico de Colvin y del carácter político de su notoriedad. El artículo destaca el poder de las ideologías dominantes para invisibilizar determinadas perspectivas políticas. En un pasaje de la biografía, Hilsum afirma que Colvin no practicaba un “periodismo partidista”, entendido como aquel que “adopta una causa y presenta únicamente los hechos que la favorecen”. No obstante, este ensayo concluye que su trabajo periodístico era, en realidad, profundamente político y partidista, ya que tendía a favorecer las intervenciones “humanitarias” de las potencias occidentales. En contraste, el trabajo de periodistas contemporáneos como John Pilger, Robert Fisk, Michael Kelly, Janine di Giovanni, Tom Engelhardt o Jonathan Steele incorporaba críticas pertinentes a las intervenciones militares occidentales, desenmascarando los mitos y las falsedades en los que se apoyaba la retórica de los “derechos humanos”. Por último, el artículo destaca que, durante el mismo periodo en que Colvin alcanzó el estatus de celebridad gracias a sus reportajes, el periódico para el que trabajaba –*The Sunday Times*, propiedad de Rupert Murdoch– brindaba un apoyo editorial incondicional a todas esas intervenciones militares.

**Palabras clave:** celebridad ; periodismo de guerra ; despolitización ; compromiso político ; representación mediática

**Pt** Este artigo analisa a representação de Marie Colvin (1956-2012), uma renomada correspondente de guerra, como um estudo de caso do processo de despolitização da celebridade. Primeiramente, traçam-se as principais características de sua carreira, destacando sua coragem excepcional – às vezes beirando a imprudência – e seu engajamento genuíno com as vítimas da guerra e da opressão violenta. Em seguida, o artigo se debruça sobre o conteúdo de *In Extremis* (Hilsum, 2018), a biografia de Colvin escrita por sua amiga e colega correspondente de guerra Lindsey Hilsum, bem como sobre a recepção da obra pela mídia internacional. Em particular, examina-se detalhadamente como tanto Hilsum quanto os críticos do seu livro falharam em reconhecer o profundo fundamento político do trabalho jornalístico de Colvin e de sua notoriedade. O artigo, portanto, ressalta o poder das ideologias dominantes de silenciar certas perspectivas políticas. Em um trecho da biografia, Hilsum afirma que Colvin nunca praticou o “jornalismo partidário”, entendido como aquele que “adota uma causa e relata apenas os fatos que a promovem”. No entanto, chegamos aqui à conclusão de que suas reportagens eram, de fato, profundamente políticas e partidárias, pois tendiam a apoiar as intervenções “humanitárias” das potências ocidentais. Em contraste, os trabalhos de jornalistas contemporâneos como John Pilger, Robert Fisk, Michael Kelly, Janine di Giovanni, Tom Engelhardt e Jonathan Steele incorporavam críticas pertinentes às investidas militares ocidentais, desvendando os mitos e as mentiras em que se baseava a retórica dos “direitos humanos”. Por fim, o artigo lembra como, em todo o período em que Colvin ganhava notoriedade por meio de suas reportagens, o jornal para o qual trabalhava – *The Sunday Times*, de propriedade de Rupert Murdoch – apoiou com veemência, em sua linha editorial, todas essas intervenções militares.

**Palavras-chave:** Fama; Jornalismo de guerra; Despolitização; Engajamento político; Representação midiática