

# freelancers on the front line

BY VAUGHAN SMITH

*Vaughan Smith pays tribute to friends and colleagues and says the industry must think again over its attitudes to independent freelancers*

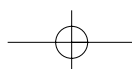
**Vaughan Smith** remains an active freelance news video-producer and occasional award-winning independent gatherer. He is a trustee of The Rory Peck Trust and has been a consultant to journalist hazardous environment courses. He helped build the Danish Army's safety course for Scandinavian journalists and has instructed on it for the past eight years. Smith was an infantry Captain in the British Army before moving into journalism.

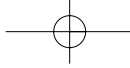
I have a neighbour across the street called Yasmina who works for ITN. She came over just as I was arriving home from the office one evening and asked if I had any contact details for Richard Wild's parents. Yasmina had suggested to Richard that he come and meet me a fortnight or so before. Now, I already knew something awful had happened and dreaded hearing her say it: she had just been told Richard Wild had been killed in Iraq only a few hours earlier. Journalists in Baghdad were trying to ensure that Richard's parents had been informed before the news was reported. They had contacted ITN in London and Yasmina had come to see me.

I run a small agency for independent television news journalists and camera-operators in London called Frontline Television News Ltd. and news of this nature is not *new* to us. Within only the last 12 months we have lost three associates. Roddy Scott who had been with us for more than six years was killed in September last year, when the Chechen guerrillas he was filming were ambushed by Russian forces. Then, in May this year, James Miller, who left us to pursue a career in documentary eighteen months ago, was shot by the Israeli Defence Force in Gaza. Now Richard Wild, our newest freelance, has been killed too.

In all, we have lost eight friends and colleagues since we launched the agency 13 years ago, including two of my three original partners. Nick della Casa, his wife Rosanne and Charles Maxwell were murdered together in 1991 by their guide in Northern Iraq. Rory Peck was killed in crossfire in 1993 outside the Ostankino television station in Moscow. Carlos Mavroleon was found dead in 1998 in his Peshawar hotel from a large dose of heroin, many of his friends and family believed him to have been murdered.

We have all spent much time reflecting on this catastrophic tally, and the terrible suffering that each loss has caused their families. I would rather not calculate our rate of "attrition" doing this work, but we are small





and it is by far the highest I know of in television news-gathering. I would not be surprised if it were the highest in the entire current western media.

It started just over a decade ago, as did all the independent television journalism in news that I know of. Rory Peck and Peter Jovenal were both freelance Afghan veterans. They were joined by Nick della Casa, who had survived an 18-month hostage ordeal in Mozambique, and myself, a former soldier, who had managed to develop a few of his own photographs. We set up a small freelance news cameramen's collective out of a room in my London flat.

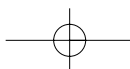
We were joined by a number of people like us who might earlier have become photojournalists and we took advantage of new consumer video recorders that were small and cheap in order to become video journalists. At Frontline, we found that broadcasters would accept the reduced image quality if the pictures or stories we filmed were strong enough. We joined an international, but still small, community of television news independents many of whom had already worked in the industry.

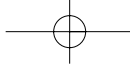
Our journalism, along with that of other independent outfits, has complimented the mainstream quite well. Our strongest offerings have often been where larger broadcasters have had greatest trouble. Purchasing a story from an independent can be less likely to jeopardise future access or the freedom to maintain a bureau in sensitive countries.

Television news independents are normally multi-skilled, needing to be flexible to survive, but often they have areas of very particular expertise or detailed knowledge of key parts of the world. Max Stahl is a good example, I know of few western journalists who know Indonesia as well and have so consistently and courageously covered East Timor. Robert Adams, of Frontline, set up APTN's bureau in war-torn Sarajevo. Peter Jovenal was the first cameraman to film stinger missiles in Afghanistan and went on to facilitate one of very few Bin Laden interviews recorded by the western media, for CNN.

Frontline freelances secured the best contacts with Kosovo's shadowy KLA, perhaps better than any other non-Albanian journalists in the world, gained by spending months researching them before the conflict properly began. It led to a BBC reporter being teamed up with a Frontline independent to join the KLA safely in the hinterland of Kosovo during the NATO bombing campaign. They were the only camera to get pictures out, doing so using runners. Nigel Chandler's filming of the Chechen rebels in late 1994 and early 1995 led the television story worldwide. As did Rory Peck's footage of Christmas 1989 in Bucharest.

Freelances can be very flexible and highly motivated. In the Gulf War





of 1991 it was a freelance who disguised himself as a British Army officer to film the only uncontrolled footage of the ground war. Employed journalists were subjected to strict military control, controversially agreed to by their bosses. There are very good reasons for governments and military press officers to have a particular anxiety reserved for independent journalists. We are almost impossible to control.

However, over the years, television journalism has become much more corporate and very much less interested in buying material from independents. Even publicly funded broadcasters have felt no duty to air independent news material despite its benefits to society. The BBC, for example, tries to broadcast a quota of independent material, but its newsgathering arm is exempted.

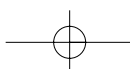
We saw the effect of this loss in the coverage of Afghanistan after 9-11. For several months before the fall of Kabul there were more than 2,000 journalists near Hoji-bi-din, a small town a few miles inside Afghanistan, many scraping an Afghan dateline for their 24-hour news channels or filming the various facilitated stories offered by the Northern Alliance. There were only 200 or so who had ventured further over the dangerous passes and roads to the northern Kabul plain.

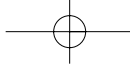
Conspicuously, almost all of the independent news operators were working for broadcasters as hired hands. Had there been a market for their own material many would have been there as they were before, in local dress, living with Afghans and dispersed around the country. Some had good enough contacts to have worked in the then Taliban controlled territory.

It is 10 years now since Rory Peck was killed. I cannot imagine that the man who took the first news camera into Muslim Bosnia's Gorazde wouldn't have had a go. He knew Afghanistan well. Most of today's television news journalists are unable often to travel too far from normally immobile satellite dishes, as demanding deadlines don't allow for it.

So at Frontline we have decided to throw in the towel. We have been losing more money than we could afford for years and have only kept going out of an absolute conviction of the benefits to society of independent journalism and a determination not to let our fallen friends down by quitting too easily. It has been difficult to let go.

So when I heard that somebody called Richard Wild was coming in to see me about distribution, I was irritated that we had made an appointment with him at all. We were wasting his time. We couldn't reach him to cancel as he was obviously on his way, so Richard came and we all talked for about an hour.





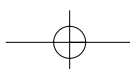
I had been seeing between two and three budding freelances each month for years. They are normally rather special people and we have been fortunate to meet them. Richard though, was different. He was easily the most interesting of them that I remember for a very long while. Actually he was superb. Richard Wild was one of those people who you think has some quality that you don't, regardless of whether you do. He had studied medieval history at Cambridge, had been a soldier on a short commission and had worked as a researcher at ITN.

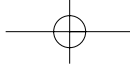
We apologised, explained our embarrassing situation and commercial failure and went on to discuss his Iraq plans and how he might best succeed there. We agreed with him that he should find some work in Iraq but warned him of some of the difficulties of working independently, keen to be sure that he fully understood the nature of his undertaking.

We discussed how leading broadcasters now pay very much more money than they used to for absolutely exceptional news-film but that the dangers in acquiring enough of this rare footage to prosper, after funding one's own travel costs, were currently too great to be the basis of a sensible career in journalism. Richard said that he wasn't going to chase danger and that he simply wanted to gain experience and prove that he could work effectively on a foreign news story.

We discussed safety at length, and both agreed that his military experience, though short was arguably as valuable as any of the hostile environment courses available to journalists, so long as he could learn quickly how to relate it to his new profession. However, Richard did not have a flak jacket and when we strongly recommended that he buy one he protested that he hadn't got the money. I suggested that it was possible for less than half the price to just take the two plates, one front and rear, that can be fitted into a harness and still give the wearer similar protection against high velocity bullets. Richard said that he had spent all available money upgrading his camera equipment. He said that if he was going outside Baghdad, or somewhere considered dangerous, a friend out there had offered to lend him one if it were spare.

Concerned that Richard was going to Iraq with or without our help, we decided to support him anyway and became his agents. It was going to take us a few months to wind down the operation and Richard had impressed us. He was organised, determined and had won our confidence. We advised about crewing rates, worked out how we would communicate and took down his next of kin details. We knew that there is nowhere else that Richard could go to in our industry to get even this basic level of support for the type of work that he wanted to do. If nothing else we are like-





mindful and experienced and on the end of a telephone.

In the event, Richard wouldn't have been saved by a flak jacket. The bullet that killed him did not hit a part of his body that would have been protected. He was shot at point-blank range in the back of his head, by a pistol fired by an unidentified assailant outside Baghdad's notorious museum.

Richard's death is a most awful tragedy. His family hardly had time to get used to the idea that he wanted to be a foreign correspondent, before he was violently murdered more than 2000 miles away. Everybody else who knew him understands that a charming and exceptionally gifted young man was killed before he could achieve a fraction of his potential. It leaves us feeling quite desolate.

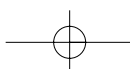
Richard fared relatively well in the subsequent industry chatter that always follows the death of a journalist. Independents rarely die on assignment without the quality of their judgement, or the value of their work, being questioned by employed colleagues who seem to feel that their work is not as serious as their own. They forget that independents must fund their own journalism and, impoverished by appalling rates, arguably subsidise news gathering as a whole.

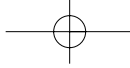
Richard, a particularly engaging man however, had impressed so many that though comment was sometimes condescending, his extraordinary talent was recognised. It was quite different when Roddy Scott was killed in Chechnya. His reputation was treated with much less consideration by reporters and editors less brave and with less integrity. Britain's Times newspaper wrote an article that appalled even its own most experienced war journalists in the manner in which it belittled Roddy as a freelance.

But worse was to come: Reuters and the European Broadcasting Union got hold of Roddy's final footage either from the Russian security services, who picked it up from Roddy's corpse, or via one of the Russian broadcasters who obtained it. They distributed it as if it were their own, while both appearing to know its source.

Roddy's family hasn't presently got the funds to challenge them in court for what they consider to be theft. The cruel final insinuation is, of course, that Roddy Scott wasn't a professional journalist at all and the footage that cost him his life did not require paying for. Yet Roddy's self-funded and lonely trip was largely motivated by his perception that regular journalism was failing Chechnya and increasingly lacked the will to face the dangers necessary to cover it.

Independent freelancers face the same threats as all foreign correspondents, but often the risks can be greater. It is obviously more dangerous to work alone and under-resourced in foreign newsgathering than





it is to do so with the financial, administrative and logistical support of a publisher or broadcaster. Roddy Scott travelled from London to Chechnya on £500. Without a healthy market to sell to and the support of a working relationship based on mutual respect with broadcasters, independents cannot be expected to subscribe to the safety requirements thought desirable by the wider industry.

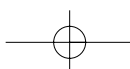
So while the news industry moves to develop a safety infrastructure in foreign newsgathering and wants to see a similar standard of safety amongst freelancers, in television news it faces great difficulty in even relating to its independent community. Broadcasters are no longer trusted. I hear the question asked, “do they really want us to be safe or are they worried that they will be shown up by the fact that independents will continue to cover the world, whatever the risks?”

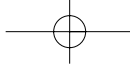
Organisations like The Rory Peck Trust do excellent work helping to bridge the gap between the independent sector and the industry and it is encouraging that the International News Safety Institute is currently consulting the freelance community in producing its safety guidance. Ideas are floated for the provision of safety equipment that can be loaned to freelancers. Broadcasters have provided funds to The Rory Peck Trust for the use as bursaries for freelance hazardous environment courses. These are excellent initiatives and certainly help. Importantly, they allow broadcasters to increase the safety of independents without having to take any direct responsibility for them, with the added benefit of encouraging freelancers to invest in their own skills.

Schemes where broadcasters might loan flak jackets to freelancers in the field are unlikely to work. There are too many problems with the assumption of responsibility, for any broadcaster to comfortably lend to those freelancers whose need is greatest. Most of these are going to be locals and there can be a thin line between help and encouragement. Yet it would be difficult without this sort of facility to help even local journalists, this is exactly where independent news work is on the increase according to The Rory Peck Trust’s ever-growing and increasingly global freelance database.

Yet the current industry trend towards paying large royalties only for the most dangerously acquired material is less responsible than helping to develop committed independents. Instead it promotes risk-taking by those who may not be subscribing to, or understand, the proper ideals of journalism. They are not often the people who take safety precautions or seek a future in the trade.

Working with independents, using them to improve the product,





crediting them as such and paying them fair royalties that reflects their costs is the only way to improve their safety properly. Only then is it reasonable to expect them to meet industry safety standards. Providing a few flak jackets and course bursaries will help, but it is a limited and irregular contribution to freelance safety.

However, an industry insurance policy, made affordable by its wide subscription, that news independents worldwide could contribute to without significant surcharge would be enormously positive. The Rory Peck Trust has spent many years improving the insurance arrangements available to freelancers but more can be done with wider support.

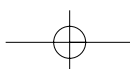
At Frontline, our independents often exchanged safety information. Were any of the emerging industry safety websites and databases to give affordable access to independents, it would be another development that would not only improve freelance safety, but that of all journalists.

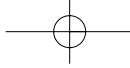
Many in media are still troubled by the ethical dilemma that surrounds this whole issue. Where is the line between fair treatment of television news independents and providing enough help to encourage people to go and get themselves killed? But they fail to understand that the staff journalist is no longer necessarily the best journalist, nor the safest operator.

Advances in technology and the development of the media internationally will ensure that independents will remain part of the landscape and perhaps increase as a proportion of it. Is it not better to acknowledge the inevitable fact that television broadcasters own the means to broadcast but not the sole right to report?

While the industry debate about freelance safety continues to patronise independents it will go nowhere. Even without the 'freelance question,' international newsgathering faces a monumental challenge in reducing the apparently increasing risks to field operators while not impairing the quality or scope of its journalism. As fewer news editors and managers have relevant field experience it becomes, disturbingly, very rare to hear employed journalists say anything good about the level of support and understanding they get from their organisations while deployed on dangerous assignments.

We will not adequately meet this huge challenge until we give field producers formal training in logistics and crews going on hazardous trips get selected for their ability to work as part of a team with greater consideration being given to their mental and physical suitability for the job. When we recognise that the length of time it takes to replace a broken camera affects the safety of the cameraman waiting for it, we can move forward from safety equipment and courses.





We know much less about safety than we think. Our industry is less sophisticated than armies and well-organised aid agencies in supporting our people in the field. Yet statistics point to the media being at greater risk. It can only be a matter of time before the families of deceased journalists highlight this discrepancy in the courts. Soldiers and aid-workers have found it useful to maintain separate control structures for operations and field logistics. News safety might well improve if logistical priorities were not the headache of stressed news editors as they are currently in most news organisations.

There is very little time. Television news is crowding battlefields and some journalists are taking unorthodox means to protect themselves. Broadcasters that can afford it have fallen in love with the SAS, or other tough but often illiberal men, who have become our bodyguards and, on occasion, might be asked to shoot people for us. I have met two highly regarded newspaper journalists who discreetly carried pistols recently in northern Iraq. Neither were independents and neither saw any great ethical difference between their conduct and having armed special forces at one's disposal. It is surely only a matter of time before we report a colleague actually killing an assailant.

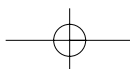
In my opinion, both of these options carry too great a penalty to merit the extra security they might deliver and could make it more dangerous for all in the long run. But journalists are feeling more insecure than ever.

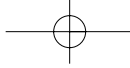
In the end, the greatest contribution to news safety will be to find a way to convince more of the world that killing journalists is wrong and that there is likely to be a cost attached to doing so? Only by a concerted effort, involving as much of the world's news media as possible, will pressure be brought to ensure people who kill journalists are brought to justice.

It is in our collective interest to find the resources to support investigations and prosecutions when independents get killed too. I doubt if our assailants often see the distinction. It is difficult to see that Richard Wild's death will receive a great deal of investigation, but James Miller's case, following his killing in Palestine, is more promising, benefiting from greater industry support.

So after a long and painful demise, the end has come to one of international television news-gathering's very few independent institutions. Our competitors, colleagues and friends at Insight News Television continue, but their future, too, is uncertain.

Broadcasters only ever viewed the Frontline agency as commercial competition and treated us with the sort of care that Starbucks offers independent high-street coffee shops. Few will notice our demise. It will





not greatly reduce the number of independent freelances working or make their work any safer, they will simply operate with even less support and understanding from an industry that no longer has the imagination to include them in the mainstream of journalism. Instead, corporate sclerosis is killing the independent story-teller and throttling enterprising, uncontrolled, honest and revealing investigation.

In the last 12 years, independents in the United Kingdom and elsewhere have won the most prestigious international awards in our industry; Royal Television Society, BAFTAs, EMMYs, indeed it is a rare award night where there is not one independent who walks away with a coveted prize. Yet many staff broadcasters continue to disparage their work and cheat them with impunity.

There exists a shocking hypocrisy in television journalism. The treatment meted out to television independents by the news industry as a whole is inconsistent with the standards of integrity that these organisations demand elsewhere in public life. It's time to shame those people who preach morality to their audiences while demonstrating a twisted envy in their ruthless treatment of independents. Their attitudes betray fundamental insecurity and their tendency to "rubbish" dead independents is a disgrace to the craft of television journalism.

As for independents, perhaps broadband internet or some other technological advance, will reduce the barriers of entry to news-casting enough for another young group of pioneers to launch their careers in independent news journalism on the back of wondrous new technology. It is possible that these men and women will be prepared to take greater personal risks, than broadcasters will allow their own staff to take.

This may continue to make the relationship difficult. Any meaningful industry safety initiative must be inclusive, reaching out to independents, and developing a professional safety culture to which the best of them will want to subscribe. Any attempts to restrict independent journalism under the banner of safety will not work, and would not be right. Instead, we need to break down the barriers, real or imagined, that divide journalism and make our work safer for everyone.

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