INTERVIEW WITH FRANCESCA BORRI (Italian freelance)

Why did you decide to report about the conflict?

My initial goal was not to report about a war, but to tell the story of a revolution: I did not study Journalism, I graduated in International Right. I have lived in the Middle East since 2007, working for one the Major Palestinian Groups in Ramallah, as Human rights specialist. Then I started to work as communication specialist. When the Arab Spring started, I wanted to be there and report about that, as I felt it was an important movement. So I started to work as a Freelance and it was the time to report about Syria, as Libia, Tunisia and Egypt have already been covered. I entered Syrian passing through Lebanon in March 2012. Initially I was reporting about the demonstrations, then the battle of Aleppo started, so I went there and I never left. The movements radicalized and so the oppression by the Assad regime radicalized as well. When you live this situation every day, you do not realize how the whole situation was evolving, and from demonstrations it escalated into a real war. At that point, I had no intention to leave. I did not chose to be a war journalist, I chose to report about a story that then became a war. This is a process that is common to many journalists and photographers.

I still look at the Syrian war as a revolution. I am not really interested about what is happening at the frontline, but it is interesting to see and study all the aspects that a war generates. Of course it is important to report from the frontline, as if you are not there you do not understand the war. In every war it is possible to be in a safe place near the frontline. During the siege of Aleppo, I was in the part of the city that was constantly bombed and we used to watch the news and see the other half of the city, which was under Assad control, and it was perfectly normal. It was actually about 500 hundred meters from where we were. Even in Aleppo it was possible not to “feel” the war and not to be in a warzone. This is true in every war, especially for a journalist, as there are safe areas for journalists, that are not being targeted, so you are reporting from the frontline, but you are perfectly safe. So the conflict is not about the frontline, but it is actually about everything that is around the frontline and it is connected to it. It is difficult for a journalist to cover a war from every angle, as if you only focus on the frontline, you may risk to miss all the things that are connected to it.

How did you prepare yourself?

I wasn’t prepared, I did not attend any courses, however I was already in the Middle East working for Mustafa Bargouti. I have always been in contact with the locals, and I was “radicated” in the Arab world, and this aspect helped me a lot. I studied a lot about the culture of Islam, I built relations and a reputation, especially with the Palestinians. I did not study journalism, but I am happy about my educational path, as I do not know the techniques of journalism, but I was able to built my own space thanks to my previous experiences and the relations I built with local organizations. It took me about 3 or 4 years to create my own space. I realized I had the instinct to know where to look and what to look to build a reportage or a news story.

Did you work independently at first, or did you start to work with news agencies?

I have always been with those I write about and they helped me a lot. However I worked for different news agencies, in Italy I worked with “Il Fatto Quotidiano”, that gave me the chance to publish my pieces of journalism. Then I started to work for a weekly newspaper, “il Venerdì di Repubblica”, I write for the Israeli main newspaper, but I also have contacts with different news agencies and newspapers around Europe and the world, such as Norway, Poland, Germany, Japan. Initially they just asked me to do a reportage and then this relation evolves into a collaboration. This is important because as a freelance I have a lot of expenses. However I do have a Facebook page, on which I publish some pieces.

So, taking into account your background, how do you identify yourself?

I am a journalist and it is clear for me the difference between being a journalist and being an activist or being a book author. I am a journalist and this is my job.

Do you use first hand sources or secondary sources?

I usually use first hand sources. I do not rely on secondary sources. I am an old-style journalist, so I usually write about what I see. Of course if someone witnessed an event you have to trust him if you want to write a story about that, however I do not write about events if I am not there and I neither rely on the news provided by people that are present to build a piece of journalism. I do have however a big net of friends and contacts and I keep in touch with them on daily basis. All of them tell me about stories which might be interesting to cover and then I decide which one is worthy to be covered.

How do you select your sources? How did you decide who to work with and how do you keep in touch with them?

I built this net of sources and I can almost say that part of it built itself step by step. I did by introducing myself to people that then introduced me to other people. However, journalists usually have a list of stringers, local reporters and contacts that share with collegues. Concerning activists, which are more difficult to contact, for example, I asked to “Un Ponte Per” an Italian ONG working in Kurdistan to support civilians. This kind of organizations are in touch with a lot of activists that might be help you contact your sources. Even in a place where you have no contacts, it is possible to contact stringers or local reporters willing to help.

How do you select a story which is worthy to be reported?

Basically I read and travel a lot. It is important to have your own ideas but it is also fundamental to be aware about what is interesting for the readers and what the editors or the news agencies want to publish, taking into consideration that you have limited space on the platform or the newspaper to tell a story. I have priorities about stories I am interested in, as the topic is particularly interesting for me, in other cases you have to report about stories because of a moral obligation or choices, for example I would like to return to Idlib in Syria. You have to select among your choices, your opportunities, your interests. The criteria are different. Then you also have to talk with your editors or news agencies, they usually give you priorities and you follow their indications. It depends on different factors and it is complicated. As a freelance it is sometimes difficult, as you might not understand which are the priorities for the editor.

You work with Western, Middle East and Arab News agencies, How do you provide them with the content you create and is there any difference in the way of working with each of this media organizations?

It is a different kind of journalism. Every country has its own way of reporting. Western Journalism (especially English and American Journalism) usually gives you guidelines and standards you have to respect, while other countries are more into narrative journalism, such as Italy, France, Germany, Poland. They are more interested in feature stories and long reportages. However, Western journalism is based on objectivity, it seems more aseptic if you let me use this term. In the Arab world a piece that is based on pure objectivity might not work. In Israel for example it is different, In the case of the Syrian war, I had to cover it more in depth, as they were more interested about the situation, but also they let you report about it more in depth. Working for an Israeli newspaper, I have the possibility to choose a particular point of view from which report the story, also because they will be asking for a second piece in a week or two. This gives me the possibility to report from different frames and perspectives, creating different pieces and features that, combined together can provide a more complete picture of the story. In reporting the Syrian war, I was then able to focus on a particular side of the conflict, tell their story and then focus on the other side just a week later. I also usually focus on the description of the places from where I am reporting, and I try to explain the situation to the reader as if he was there. In Italy for example this approach is usually refused and I was accused of not being objective and support one side or the other. This kind of coverage must be seen as part of a longer reportage, so you have to bear in mind the whole picture.

What do you think about objectivity?

In my opinion it does not exist. You are in the field with your political and cultural background this might influence you while reporting a story, as you might not even realize it while working. Sometimes my cultural background greatly influence my thinking, even if I have been living in the Middle East for 15 years, for example, the concept of guilt and of justice is really different, it is almost a philosophical concept. On the other hand, it is easier to avoid taking a recognizable side, as It is evident that it is against any journalistic principle. In addition, usually in a war the situation is “grey”, you cannot identify who is right and who is wrong. When you report from the field it is easy to avoid this trap. You need then to explain the perspective from which you are describing the situation and the world. I usually tell my stories using the first person, in order to specify that I am reporting from a point of view which is mine. I also tell readers which contact me, to read about other journalists, in order to know different points of observation; if I am in Aleppo I can describe that reality, but you also have to read about other journalists reporting from Damascus or Idlib. I usually want to explicit my point of view and I am happy when my perspective is compared to others.

Do you work with citizen journalists, stringers or local reporters? How? How do you process the content they provide?

I have always worked with them, especially with local reporters. Sometimes they also worked directly with me. In my opinion the best combination is to work with a local journalist (acting as photographer or co-writer). I usually consider them as co-author, as they build the story with me. I usually work with local journalists but I also had the opportunity to work with stringers and in this case you get an advantage, as it is easier to collaborate with them as they have a clear idea about the journalistic standards you need to follow. Sometimes local journalists come from small news agencies and they can almost be considered as activists. In the Western conception, they would not be considered as journalists. I witnessed this episode in Syria when a local journalist who was with me, stopped to report, took a gun and started to shoot and fight alongside the Syrian Free Army. Sometimes it also happened with western journalists, especially when we were reporting about the Islamic state. On the other hand, sometimes these local journalists can provide a different point of view, especially activists (who are more self-critical), who I consider citizen journalists. I do not usually use this term, I call them witness or activists. I therefore make this distinction. A large part of those who were trapped in Aleppo were activists who acted as citizen journalists. In my experience most of them made a great work reporting from zones where journalists could not go, however it was very easy to destroy their reputation, and this was a great limit, as news agencies did not believe them, even if they provided videos and photos. It was dramatic to be there, sometimes with them, and see that they were not believed. The other limit of the citizen journalists, as most of them were supporting the rebels , was that they were not able to explain the situation in Damascus and describe it properly (citizen journalists who were supporting Assad were seen as propagandists and they had no credibility). The problem was that there were no journalists in Damascus, except these citizen journalist who had not credibility and were seen as almost influencers. Therefore they had no possibility also because they had no support from western news agencies and their reputation was easy to be destroyed. In my opinion then because of all these factors and the fact that western journalists were forced to leave, the coverage of Syria was a total disaster.