



THE **BAFFLER**

Alienated

Rafia Zakaria, August 13

Stalking the Story

The journalist as patriot and predator

Journalists often become partisans in the "War on Terror." | Flag image by Richard Schatzberger, with podcast logo for Rukmini Callimachi's "Caliphate."

ONE NIGHT IN 2016, when Rukmini Callimachi's husband was working and she was

hunkered down for the night in her New York-area residence, someone started banging on the door and ringing the doorbell. When the banging and buzzing didn't stop, a terrified Callimachi called 911. Callimachi, who is the *New York Times* terrorism correspondent, [thought the Islamic State had come](#) to get her.

It was not the Islamic State. The reality behind Callimachi's nocturnal terror was in fact quite banal; it had been a public worker carrying out the dismal duty of telling people in the neighborhood that a water main had broken and the toilets were not going to flush. The story, which is recounted as an early example of Callimachi's refusal to be cowed by IS, is told in the *New York Times* podcast *Caliphate*. Billed as an unraveling of the mystery that is the Islamic State, *Caliphate* features Callimachi as star and narrator, an intrepid journalist who is human enough to be paranoid and yet journalist enough to be daring. *Caliphate* is also a new model of Western journalism, where the journalist is the moral hero, simultaneously a reporter and a protector of Western (read "good") values. If she hunts and preys on her subject, takes liberties with journalistic ethics and likely even in assurances she makes to her subjects, the sum of it is all forgiven, given the larger noble purpose of fighting terror.

Telling her story in gasping, short sentences, she plays her role well, shifting between the gendered performance of a woman who is vulnerable and a journalist who refuses to unclench her jaw and let her captive—er, subject—go. The first few episodes of *Caliphate* are to this effect, duly laden with promises of the coming *true understanding* of the Islamic State that is going to be provided.

It does not arrive. Instead we get a young man named "Abu Huzaifa," a chap Callimachi, through her extensive online trawling of various jihadist forums, has managed to cajole into an interview at a hotel in Canada. If you (like me) are wondering why this "real terrorist" would agree to such a thing, you will have to keep wondering. For Callimachi, the hunched and hoodied Abu Huzaifa appears forbidding and lethal precisely because he doesn't appear to be either of those things. It's his "everyday-ness," she tells us again and again; any brown man could be a terrorist, is the implication.

Abu Huzaifa, for his part, says a lot of things, all of them in the bored drone of the feigned cynic. He weaves a mediocre yarn about alienation and eventual migration to Syria, where he fired guns and took pictures by the Euphrates with his IS buddies. Then he participates in an execution, he says, gets frightened, and runs back to

Canada, to the comforts of his parent's suburban home. This takes several episodes and it is only after the fourth one that we are finally rid of him because he has stopped taking Callimachi's calls.

It doesn't particularly matter, because Callimachi is after his story and she has it. This should not surprise us; journalists prey on stories all the time. Janet Malcolm, the noted journalist, said as much decades ago: "preying on people's vanity, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse" are the tricks of the trade. If Callimachi acted, as Malcolm describes the usual method, "so friendly and sympathetic, so keen to understand him fully" to rope him in, many have done the same before her, greedily gulping down the story and then spitting out what they can't consume.

At the same time, while the larger project of duping a subject into giving up the story may be a well-worn maneuver, the predatory journalism of the War on Terror era has some unique dimensions. If the hunting journalists of Malcolm's observations glibly postured as truly wanting to understand their subjects before summarily abandoning them, vulture journalists, buoyed in their newfound position as moral heroes, subject them to a level of dehumanization even as they insist they are doing the opposite.

Westerners, journalists among them, see themselves as fighting the good war against terror and everyone else occupying the morally inferior positions of victim or supporter.

In Callimachi's case, it gives no one pause that she seems willing to hand off a person whom she is interviewing confidentially to authorities. Callimachi the journalist has to get the story, but Callimachi the terror fighter has to identify the terrorist, get into his head, and bring us back gems of insight. Once she does so, she even wonders why Canadian authorities aren't acting faster, arresting him and charging him. In this approach, it is impossible to tell where journalism ends and where terror fighting begins. Westerners, journalists among them, see themselves as fighting the good war against terror and everyone else occupying the morally inferior positions of victim or supporter. Predation and scavenging of their stories or selves is thus absolved from the immorality—or at least partisanship—that would otherwise be associated with it.

There's one more gaping problem with the Abu Huzaifa story: Callimachi aired the early episodes without knowing how much of it was true. She had little in the way of corroborating evidence. Only by the sixth episode does she lead her colleagues through a belated "fact-checking" excursion. And even then, she doesn't get to the bottom of information that emerged later: Huzaifa told Callimachi he had participated in an execution. He told Canadian journalists at [CBC News](#) he had not participated in killings, saying "I was a low-level police officer." The question hangs in the air at the end of Episode Six: how much insight have we gained from this subject's story when we can't tell how much of it is true?

For a report in the *Women's Studies International Forum* published earlier this year, researchers Sherizaan Minwalla and Johanna Foster studied the experiences of Yazidi women who had been interviewed by journalists who were documenting the sexual violence perpetuated by the Islamic State. The women reported feeling pressure from journalists to share what had happened to them during captivity. The former seemed to have enlisted the camp managers into helping them pressure the victims into telling their stories. In the words of one survivor, "I said no at the beginning, but they said, 'This is for your own benefit. One day you will benefit.' So this is the only reason I talked to them. We have no benefit, no change in our situation."

The study also found that journalists identified the women in the media, exposing them and also jeopardizing the safety of survivors. As one woman interviewed by Minwalla put it, journalists came "from Europe and from the United States, and from Iraq. There [was one journalist who] came to us and he interviewed us and we told him 'Please don't put it on TV,' and he said, 'OK, I swear, I will not put you on TV.' But in the night we opened the TV and we saw ourselves. We called him but he didn't answer." Journalists out to get the ISIS and sex slavery story did not even spare children. In one case a woman reported that her son did not like his picture taken but when the journalists came around they moved his hand away from his face and took the picture anyway. Eighty-five percent of the women said that journalists did something unethical: disclosed identities, faces, tattoos, and names, all things that could seriously endanger women in captivity.

The journalists could do all this not only because of the vast power differences between them and the hapless and war-torn population of Yazidi women. They could do it because they saw themselves engaged in the two-pronged effort that is the project of journalist-soldiers in the War on Terror. First, they had to get the story,

which meant pressuring the women in any way they could, via camp managers, via relatives, via promises of benefits, into telling their story. Second, the larger purpose of pushing the narrative of the brutality of IS, the bad guys against Westerners (including journalists themselves), meant that the actual subjects of the story, the women themselves, were irrelevant. In the good and bad, Western-civilization-versus-Islamist-barbarism dynamic, the women had no role to play beyond the flat and passive characters who endured abuse; the active and heroic role went to the journalists themselves.

Like the War on Terror, the journalist as predator and moral hero was not born in the war against the Islamic State. The first theater of action, both for Western journalists and NATO soldiers was, of course, Afghanistan. The blurring of boundaries between terror reporter and terror fighter arguably began here and it did not begin and end with the many embedded correspondents who followed the troops. In her book *It's What I Do: A Photographer's Life of Love and War*, photojournalist Lynsey Addario talks about sneaking a camera into a secret underground school that was educating women despite the Taliban's ban on female education. She takes pictures without anyone, including the women, knowing. The fact that this may compromise the entire operation—and the lives of the fixer who has taken her there and, most important, the women themselves—does not seem to bother her. Like the journalists taking pictures of the Yazidi women in Iraq, the project is furthering a larger narrative of the West and the rest; the lost humanity of the people caught in the middle is simply collateral damage.

The journalist who sets out to “unravel” the mysteries of the Islamic State is as much a warrior in service of the Western “good guys” narrative as the soldier who visibly enacts its agenda.

Or consider the recent book by *New York Times* correspondent Rod Nordland. In *The Lovers: Afghanistan's Romeo and Juliet, the True Story of How They Defied Their Families and Escaped an Honor Killing*, Nordland presents an example of how predatory journalism, conducted in an environment where few or none will mind or monitor the ethics of Western journalists, actually led to endangering the very “lovers” that he is writing about. The photos of the pair, along with the story Nordland has written, he unselfconsciously tells us, may well have given them away and forced them to be on

the run again. Photos from the *New York Times*, you see, are often reprinted in Afghan papers. Those endangered once can be endangered again with just as much impunity. As soon as he says this, Nordland confesses to having bribed one of the couple's relatives to take more pictures and even videos of the two.

Looting of stories is not the only sort of pillage that partisan journalists are up to. In the case of Rukmini Callimachi, the release of the *Caliphate* podcast was accompanied by a larger controversy. In the aftermath of the fall of Mosul and the defeat of the Islamic State, Callimachi, along with her team from the *Times*, went into buildings and homes and police stations vacated by the IS and began filling garbage bags with papers she found lying around. In the "ISIS Files," the series of articles that followed, Callimachi says she was looking for an "ISIS diary," a way to show (sigh) how the group actually operated. In the ensuing exposé, she reveals name after name that she found in the "over 16,000" documents that she managed to seize without any formal permission from the Iraqi government. That exposing the people who were named in these documents could pose a threat to those who remain, their relatives and their friends, was not—is not—of any concern.

It is ironic that it was in the case of the plunder of these materials that Callimachi was criticized and her seizure of documents called into question. The Committee on Academic Freedom of MESA, the Middle East Studies Association, wrote an open letter to the editors of the *Times*, expressing their shock and dismay at the looting of Iraqi records by the journalist. Underscoring another one of Callimachi's half-truths from the article, that Iraqi security forces had accompanied her team "most of the time," MESA noted that, even if that was true, such forces could not have authorized the taking of documents. Callimachi, who often boasts of having done the same thing in Timbuktu following the fall of an Al-Qaeda compound there, had simply used the lawless and chaotic moments after the fall of Mosul to get the scoop and seize what she wanted—and further her own career. It would become the basis of the "ISIS Files" and the *Caliphate* podcast.

Notably, not a single journalist's organization criticized her actions. The *Columbia Journalism Review*, a watchdog focused on media ethics, featured her on their podcast. Among the questions never asked is why the *New York Times*, which so often makes a show of neutrality and fair mindedness in domestic politics allows itself so easily to cross over into adversarial or partisan journalism in other cases. It was never ethics or even fair-minded reporting that guided Callimachi's actions; it was instead the conviction that Westerners, herself among them, who were fighting the War on Terror, deserved the real understanding of IS and what motivated it.

The predator journalist is a creation of the War on Terror, whose narrative requires all that is Western to be anointed while everything else is reduced as a tool in service of it. The journalist who sets out to “unravel” its mysteries is thus as much a warrior in service of this narrative as the soldier who visibly enacts its agenda. All this would at least be less objectionable if it were owned and admitted, if those searching for rape stories among Yazidi women or taking pictures of women attending secret schools did not pretend to be journalists or aligned with a code of ethics that requires consent of subjects, respect for their humanity, and a commitment to confidentiality.

The lethal aspect of the predator journalist is the pretense, the implication to readers that they are in fact “objective,” bound by ethics, even when no such moral restraint inhibits their actions. This is a debasement of the idea of truth, now reduced to an outmoded goal of journalism's past, whetted by a now-debunked idealism. The remainder is a crass predation, a reduction of insight to access, and deeply reported stories to orchestrations of pressure and predation on hapless subjects. In the theater of the War on Terror, the United States need no longer send predator drones; it can avail the talents of predator journalists, whose sly shape-shifting is a much sleeker and at times a more lethal weapon.

Rafia Zakaria is the author of *The Upstairs Wife: An Intimate History of Pakistan* (Beacon 2015) and *Veil* (Bloomsbury 2017). She is a columnist for *Dawn* in Pakistan. She writes regularly for *The Guardian*, *Boston Review*, *The New Republic*, *The New York Times Book Review*, and many other publications.



You Might Also Enjoy

Fresh Hell

Fast Times at Sears Department Store

A writer's task isn't so much to hoard one's privacy, but to share the shame and the glory with your readers in the world.

The left's most persistent—and giddiest—Melania fantasy: that she's secretly one of us, can't stand Trump either, and will go rogue one glorious day.

Your email address

New email subscribers receive a digital copy of our current issue.

Reader: Are you someone who is angry in an inchoate way at the Trump

administration as an institution but who would prefer. . .

So You've Been Punched in the Nuts

Niela Orr

Sacha Baron Cohen's Who is America? and the legacy of the macho prank show.

The Permanent Vacationer

Amber A'Lee Frost

Your friend's life is a 24/7 holiday.
Don't hate—no one likes a Bitter Betty.

[Donate](#)

[Events](#)

[Store](#)

[Subscribe](#)

[Publishing](#)

© The Baffler 2018

THE
BAFFLER



Heads Up: We recently updated our [privacy policy](#) to clarify how and why we collect personal data. By using our site, you acknowledge that you have read and understand this policy.

OK, I Accept