

THE ALTERNATIVE TO NYT'S SUBSERVIENCE: ACTUAL JOURNALISM

The Guardian has its version of the Arthur Brisbane article approving of NYT's decision to withhold all mention of Raymond Davis' identity. One of the two main reasons why the Guardian chose to publish even as CIA and MI5 were warning that that might endanger Davis is the one I keep pointing out: all the people who might harm Davis **already knew** he was some kind of spook.

But the deciding factor was that Davis's CIA link wasn't actually a very big secret in Pakistan. For days newspapers had been describing him as a spy; by Sunday morning, 20 February, the headline in one of Pakistan's national newspapers, The Nation, was "Raymond Davis linked to CIA".

"Those who might wish to harm Davis – inside the prison, or outside – had already made up their minds about who he was or what he represented. They don't need our story to motivate them," our correspondent said.

The Guardian, it seems, actually thought through the logic behind the claim that revealing Davis' identity would endanger him and, like me, found it dubious.

But the other reason is even more interesting, given the NYT's claimed helplessness in the face of the government request that it sit on the story: the Guardian did additional reporting to check the claims of the government agencies.

The Guardian's correspondent in Islamabad, an experienced journalist, investigated and wrote the story. He said:

"We took the CIA's suggestion that Davis would be at risk if we ran the story very seriously. I interviewed the Punjab law minister, Rana Sanaullah, who described the conditions of Davis's incarceration. He said there were teams of dedicated guards and Punjab rangers deployed outside the prison, and visits from embassy personnel. I also interviewed a senior intelligence official who said 'all possible measures' were being taken to ensure his safety, including moving 25 jihadi prisoners to other facilities."

Our correspondent also spoke to human rights groups about the conditions in the prison and what was happening in there.

In other words, having been told something by people in authority, the Guardian's reporter actually checked the truth of the matter, and assessed the government's claims against that truth.

Last I checked, that's what newspapers are supposed to do. The NYT, by contrast, describes only having assessed whether the State Department's warnings were "credible" or not.

As profoundly unpalatable as it is, I think the Times did the only thing it could do.

[snip]

In military affairs, there is a calculus that balances the loss of life against the gain of an objective. In journalism, though, there is no equivalent. Editors don't have the standing to make a judgment that a story – any story – is

worth a life. I find it hard to second-guess the editors' assessment that the State Department's warning was credible and that Mr. Davis's life was at risk in a country seething with anti-American feeling.

And, having been told Davis' life is at risk (an assessment I agree with), the NYT didn't think further to weigh whether his life would be at **increased** risk if NYT's American readers knew what Pakistanis already knew, that he is a spook.

Such critical thinking, apparently—along with the extra work to check official government sources that the Guardian did—appears to no longer be the job of the NYT.