

## **E-Mail Interview mit Giovanni Prozio**

*A. Would you please give a brief curriculum vitae ?*

Born 2/5/1951 in Milano, degree in Political Sciences at Milano State University, one year scholarship at Université d'Alger (Algeria)-faculty of Arabic language, literature, Islamic History and Civilisation. Spoken languages: Italian, English, French, Spanish, Arabic. First articles contributed to Corriere della Sera, la Stampa and Politica Internazionale. On the staff at Panorama since 1979: writer and photographer at the Foreign Desk, then Foreign Affairs Bureau Chief and Special Correspondent. Currently Senior Special and War Correspondent. Published six books on International Affairs, the Middle East, Somalia, the Gulf War, the last Iraqi war and a novel. Visiting professor at Universidad Complutense de Madrid (Journalism, war and propaganda). Received several awards, included the prestigious Max David Prize for his reports during the Afghan war. Twice married, 3 children.

*B. Where and in which period of time were you appointed as a journalist / photographer during the Iraq war? Were you embedded or not?*

Having covered the 1991 Gulf War (where I was taken prisoner in Basra in the last hours of the conflict.), written a book about it, traveled many times to Baghdad and speaking Arabic, it was just natural that I was assigned for the job in Iraq. I applied for an Iraqi visa in September and I traveled to Baghdad via Amman on February the 5th. Obviously, I wasn't embedded.

*C. What does the term "embedded" mean to you personally?  
How would you define it?*

It has a clear negative meaning. In Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War (1991) I had a preview of it. Embedded journalists were grouped into special "combat pools" supposed to take them near the frontline and see some action. Not so. They were in fact fooled around by press officers hundreds of miles away from the Kuwaiti border: they never saw anything interesting and never got any valuable piece of news. You couldn't even make free interviews with the soldiers without an explicit authorisation nor get any clue of the whereabouts of the ground forces. Colleagues were so pissed off that Cnn, Bbc and all major US and British media mounted an official (and unanswered) protest to the Pentagon. Most of the journalists left the combat pools. I did the same and made sure to stay as far away as I could from US troops and from the military police trying to arrest all journalists evading the Pentagon's so called "ground rules for the Press". The harsh criticism from the Media convinced the White House to change course during the last war. Embedding journalists was in fact a good step forward for the Pentagon and for the Press: this time you could really see some action and, if lucky, find yourself with real combat troops. But there are serious setbacks: once you are embedded you are supposed to behave like a soldier, follow orders, restrict your movements and submit your files and pictures to the censorship. It is understandable, but - from my point of view - this doesn't match a balanced and free standard of journalism, nor my personal way of reporting. We had the same problems in Baghdad, but at least we could sometimes try and avoid the strict rules and talk to the people in the streets.

*D. How was the moral atmosphere towards the Iraqis / the Allies in the country you reported from?*

Very diversified. And it changed before, during and after the war. Some people hated the americans, others welcomed the invasion. Between these two extremes, the majority of the people had a quite similar approach: we thank the US if they will be able to get us rid of Saddam's cruel dictatorship, but we hope they will leave our Country in a short time; we will not accept a foreign (and infidel) occupation; we think the main reason for Mr. Bush military campaign is oil, not democracy. A common refrain was: "Saddam is a son of a bitch; but is OUR son of a bitch". Iraqis are proud of their history and don't want to be ruled by a foreign army. This mood was shared by most sectors of civil society, including Shia religious leaders with whom I had several interviews (last ayatollah I spoke to, 10 days before his killing, was Grand Ayatollah Baqr al-Hakim, who expressed the same feelings). During the war there was a sense of anticipation, with people getting more and more anxious and scared by the bombing and killings of civilians. For a short time after the fall of Baghdad the Iraqi enjoyed a freedom rush, with hundreds of publications on sale and huge expectations on the future. But soon the mood changed. The american forces didn't bring what the Iraqis longed for: water, food, electricity, security. Instead, they killed and arrested scores of civilians, including women and children; raided and destroyed houses; and let gangs of murderers and thieves out in the streets. Discontent, delusion and anger are now rampant. Attacks on the allied forces are performed on a daily basis and US troops tend to see all Iraqis as enemies. Iraq has become a fighting ground for a new jihad, bringing together Sunni, Shia and al-Qaeda militants, arab terrorists and remnants of the old regime. No surprise if even the people who supported the invasion are now turning against the americans.

*E. Who put you in charge with your reporting in Iraq?  
For which agency/newspaper/channel did you give your reports?*

I was put in charge by the editor of my magazine: Panorama.

*F. Which medium did you use for your reporting? Where could your reporting be seen/heard/read? (TV, radio, internet, newspapers)*

I filed articles and photos for Panorama' weekly edition and Panorama's internet edition. I also contributed for several italian radio and Tv channels.

*G. Which steps did you take in order to get information which was important for you?*

That's was hard. In Baghdad, untill the fall of the city, we were all subjected to a strict control by the ministry of Information. We were assigned a "minder": an "interpreter" who never left us alone and reported back to the secret services. We were not allowed to enter iraqi homes

and we could not speak to ordinary people in the streets without the minder. We had to seek a written permission to visit hospitals, public institutions, make interviews with officials and professionals, travel outside Baghdad. Any "mistake" meant you were stripped of your press card and expelled from Iraq. We were under a constant blackmail, even financially: every journalist had to pay a daily fee of 100 dollars to use his own satellite phone (which only could be used inside the compound of the ministry), plus 100 dollars for the minder and 30 dollars for "general services". The amount was much higher for tv crews. Our car had to be registered and the driver had to file his name and address to the ministry. We were denied access to sensitive parts of the town and to many other places outside Baghdad. And we had to keep clear from military bases and presidential palaces. In such circumstances our job was very difficult and risky. I speak arabic, so I managed to get around the minder and get in touch with several people: ordinary citizens, priests, young students, intellectuals. I often worked at night, when my minder went home, and managed to travel in several locations out of town where controls were not so strict. I made friend to some doctors who allowed me inside hospitals without the ministry's permission. And sometimes I succeeded in fooling them: pretending I wanted to see some archeological sites up north, I managed to board a train to Mosul and Kirkuk. Posing as a scholar in islamic studies, I was able to interview many muslim religious leaders and visit the holy places in Karbala and Najaf. And so on. Twice they caught me on the wrong track and I had to plead and pay money to get my press card back. Taking pictures was also very difficult and risky: it was mostly a matter of luck. In the train station in Baghdad I was fast enough to take pictures of some iraqi prisoners before the the police started running after me. When the bombing started things got worse: no more individual cars, but only organized buses to see "the civilians killed by the bloody americans"; curfew after dark; ridiculous "press conferences"; and we all had to move to the Palestine and Sheraton hotels, surrounded by armed party and mukhabarat militias. We only started working more freely (but not totally freely) when the marines took the town.

*H. How important is characteristics of medial influence concerning the receptive person / reporter?*

*I. In your opinion, to which extent were you influenced in your reporting by others?  
Did you have the impression to be able to report in a free way?*

I couldn't report in a free way but I don't think I was much influenced. I had been many times to Baghdad before, I had friends and contacts. And I could check news and comments everyday on the Internet (Bbc, Le Monde, New York Times, El Pais, and all major media) through the sat phone that I hid in my room. I am quite experienced in propaganda wars and I knew exactly why we were shown this and that. They tried hard to fool us (well, the americans did - and do - the same.), but without really influence our reporting. We knew that many of the "civilian victims" were in fact soldiers (you could tell easily by their shoes!), that many of the wounded were telling lies (they were all, sistematically, answering to our questions in the same way: "I was standing in front of my house when the bomb came down.") and that some of the worst accidents (like the massacre at Shu'ala market) were not caused by american bombs but from anti-aircraft fire (you just had to measure the hole of the blast on the ground.). Of course the same attention had to be kept on the Internet news, in particular on every bit of information coming from the US command. But this is usual stuff for every serious journalist.

*J. To which extent were receptive persons influenced by your reporting in your opinion?*

This is difficult to assess since I was not back to Italy until early May when much of the war galore had subsided. I hope I contributed in shifting the ground under the feet of our readers and opinion makers: I insisted on the fact that Saddam was a brutal dictator but that the case for war was wrong (there were no WMD and no links with al-Qaeda), I stressed the risk of a unilateral preventive war outside any UN frame, I underlined the total absence of a viable post war strategy, the threat posed by ethnic and religious divisions, the risk of a prolonged guerrilla, of the resurgence of terrorism, and so on. I even wrote a book on that! And I think that many people now realize I was not far from the truth.

*K. Could you choose the manner and place of your reporting freely?  
Did anybody take you to certain locations from where you were supposed to report?*

I have already answered at G and I.

*L. How do you understand the term manipulation in general?  
Where do you see the difference between manipulation and influencing?*

Everybody is influenced by his culture, his religious or philosophical thinking, the family, the circumstances, the people he talks to, the books he reads, the women he loves. So yes I am influenced. But I fight every day to escape manipulation. Not easy in my job. To elaborate on this it would require too much time. There are books on this! It is connected to the whole history of information and to the ever changing complex world of global communication in the age of tv and electronic media.

*M. Did you feel manipulated during your reporting?  
Did you have the impression that some parts you were told or showed didn't correspond with the truth?*

I was bombarded all time by tons of lies. The Iraqis were brutal and naive in their attempts to manipulate the press. The Americans, of course, were much more subtle and sophisticated: and for that, much more dangerous. In the West we know how to play with the news. We know the power of the press. We can send subliminal messages through the tv screens and monitor the public's reaction. Editors and politicians have strong relations (in Italy we have the best case study in the world!). So you have to develop a very good and strong anti-virus strategy to cope with manipulations.

*N. To which extent do you think that recipients were manipulated by your reporting?*

To really manipulate your public you need a sustained and powerful effort, and a lot of money to invest: it's the politicians' job, not mine. If you refer to "influence" and not manipulation, I think my reports were not (unfortunately) so decisive: I work mainly for papers, and as you know people are most influenced by the tv.

*O. Which steps did you personally take in order to avoid a manipulation of your pieces of news?*

In some way I think I have already answered to this. I can add that I don't tolerate any change in my reports: not a single word. And that I closely monitor the way my editors put the title, captions, etc.

*P. Which role does, in your opinion, play the influence of media?*

Again my friend, I'll need a book to elaborate on this! Given for granted the role of news in the global communication system of nowadays, I can only stress the growing importance of electronic information and instant tv news in shaping the public opinion and orient military and political decision makers. This goes together with the growing risk of propaganda, manipulation and false informations. Look what's happening to Bush & Blair: they won the war, but they are plunging in the polls.

Why? Because the British and the Americans are concerned by Saddam or the fate of the Iraqi people? Because they don't approve preventive wars? Not so. It's just because they lied.