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Too Much Information?

The release of battle footage sparks a controversy in Norway

By Lene Johansen

It is New Year's Eve in northern Afghanistan. A small group of Norwegian soldiers is en route to meet with a village leader to chat about the local security situation, at the request of Afghan authorities. Suddenly, the soldiers are ambushed from three sides. The tense skirmish that follows lasts seven hours, finally ending when the Norwegians detonate a grenade over the enemy positions.

"Ah! Delicious!" says one of the soldiers.

To American news consumers, this episode may not seem extraordinary. But video footage of the battle, caught on tape by helmet-mounted cameras, was journalistic gold for cash-strapped Norwegian newsrooms—and also fodder for a debate about how open the press, and the government, should be when it comes to the realities of war.

On New Year's Day, Gerhard Helskog, a correspondent for TV2, the largest private broadcast company in Norway, learned about the video from a military source and persuaded defense officials to release the uncut video. When it aired that night on the evening news (see video above), the footage gave Norwegian viewers a rare glimpse of battle.

But it proved to be too much for editors at *Dagbladet*, the nation's third-largest newspaper. In an editorial, the paper called the decision to release the footage "distasteful." Two days later, Anne Aasheim, then *Dagbladet's* editor-in-chief, repeated the argument on a talk show: "I find it uncomfortable, first of all, that the military, which controls news dissemination in Afghanistan, even let this through. I think everyone feels discomfort when they hear 'delicious' while the grenades are falling."

The critique was not widely shared in the media. "War is not a tea party," says Per Edgar Kokkvold, secretary general of the Norwegian Press Association. While the footage may have been "uncomfortable," it presented "a realistic picture of what is going on." And in a reversal of the customary battle lines between the military and the press, Norway's new defense minister, Grete Faremo, used the episode to tout her policy of openness. "If the goal is more transparency, then people have to deal with the reality they see. People wanted more information about Norwegian efforts in Afghanistan," she said.

To some, though, this case blurs the line between transparency and propaganda. "We used to be a nation of peace, who proudly sent our troops to serve with blue hats under the U.N.," says Jan-Erik Smilden, senior foreign correspondent for *Dagbladet*. Both Norway's commitment of five hundred soldiers to Afghanistan and the military's readiness to share the footage of the battle, he worries, are part of a push to establish a more macho, U.S.-style image of the military. Meanwhile, *Dagbladet's* acting editor-in-chief, Lars Helle (Aasheim resigned on January 21), says the editorial was not a call for the Defense Department to censor information. But he, too,

questioned Faremo's approach. "If the military wanted sympathy for the work they do in Afghanistan, this was not the way to do it."

The debate is part of a broader discussion over the media's commitment to covering the conflict. While *Dagbladet* and TV2 regularly send reporters to Afghanistan, and there's one Norwegian freelancer permanently in Kabul, none of the seven global correspondents at NRK, Norway's public broadcasting service, cover the war continuously. "Norway is fighting a war on foreign soil, and there is hardly a Norwegian reporter in sight," says Helskog. In that context, he says, the battle footage was an opportunity that couldn't be passed up. "It is not our job to window-dress something," says Helskog. "We should give a correct and comprehensive picture of the events."

Lene Johansen is a Philadelphia-based freelance reporter.