

For journalists, Ukraine is a WhatsApp War | Columbia Journalism Review

By Joel Simon

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Lindsey Hilsum, a correspondent for Britain's Channel 4 News, is one of the most experienced conflict reporters covering the Ukraine war. But she never heads out without an electronic tracking device that allows editors to monitor her every move. She is in constant and nearly instantaneous contact with her desk, and works closely with a security team with resources both inside and outside Ukraine. WhatsApp and Signal groups connect her to colleagues in the field—and provide a level of real-time battlefield information that, a decade ago, would have been available only to a top general.

It's a far cry from the way Hilsum worked forty years ago, when she started out as a Nairobi-based freelancer covering Africa's wars. "I would send a telex to headquarters in London saying we are heading to South Sudan for a couple of weeks and I'll contact you when I get back," Hilsum told me last week from her hotel room in Kyiv, where she was observing a daylong curfew. "There were no phones and no way of communicating. We were on our own."

Ukraine has been called a TikTok war because of the way its images have been shared on social media. But for journalists it's all about WhatsApp, Signal, and Telegram. What's changed, says Cameron Barr, senior managing editor at the *Washington Post*, is the "scale and severity" of the Ukraine conflict. The *Post* relies on a WhatsApp group with about two dozen reporters, editors, and security consultants to manage the reporting teams on the ground.

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