

STORYTELLING IN CONFLICT ZONES

To interview a reformed pirate in Somalia's Puntland, you need to pack right, move equipment resourcefully through airports and learn to film in armoured vehicles, says veteran news cameraman Alessandro Pavone in conversation with **Supriya Srinivas**

After seven years of reporting from conflict zones, Alessandro Pavone, a Dubai-based documentary filmmaker and news cameraman, knew the two-week PBS Frontline assignment early this year, to Somalia, was not one for a large camera.

He recalls: "I was inside an armoured vehicle and the space around me was restricted. You could barely move, let alone handle a large camera and lens. The good thing about the Canon C300 is that it allows me to use my shoulder in confined spaces, in addition to communicating better with my set of Canon lenses. The automatic tracking of faces is also a great add-on feature, given the dynamic nature of my assignments. Getting skin tones accurately is also a critical feature for me, as it reduces time spent on colour grading in post."

The only issue was following the Somali police at night.

"It was pitch dark," says Pavone. "I then used the Sony Alpha a7S mark II, a small mirrorless still 4K camera. I use it as a second camera as well, in situations where I need to do a two-camera interview. It is compatible with other lenses, and it is full-frame and great in low light. You can, for instance,



With the need to travel in armoured vehicles, escorted by armed guards at all times, Pavone uses equipment that allows for greater mobility.

go up to 8000 ISO. I got this great footage of Somali policemen under streetlights.

"The camera is also good for incognito filming. In Turkey, while shooting for Vice HBO on the issue of human smugglers in Izmir, the camera came of use when filming smugglers in busy markets. I was standing next to a taxi with the Alpha a7S filming the footage and it was perfect.

"In addition, I had a GoPro camera for the Somalia assignment. I put one on the armoured vehicle because at times, it was dangerous to be outside."

Pavone has made a career of covering major conflicts and humanitarian crises around the world.

"The feature story we did for PBS was part of a series of 10-minute documentaries on individual countries, with three or four stories for every country. We did three stories for Somalia – on piracy, climate change and security. In the two-week duration, we travelled from Mogadishu to Somaliland in the northwest of the country

and then to the middle, where we recorded climate change. I was accompanied by PBS correspondent Jane Ferguson."

Having cut his teeth as a news cameraman in Afghanistan seven years earlier, Pavone was prepared to spend the



Pavone covered the brutal urban war for the takeover of Mosul in Iraq for various news outlets including PBS.

me getting this great shot of the dry lands. It was tough to operate on that day, with no mountains to block the extreme wind conditions. Coupled with that was the limited experience I had with drones. In Dubai, you need a licence, and clients hesitate to use it because it costs a fortune – \$2,000 just for a 20-second shot!”

Travelling with drones offered its own special problems, but resourcefulness is one key attribute needed for Pavone’s chosen line of work. The other is compromise, he says.

“If you master the art of compromise, you will be a good professional. I sometimes work with magnificent cameras for corporate shoots, but for documentary shoots or the shoot in Somalia, you have to adjust your kit accordingly.

“People now have this kit acquisition syndrome, ranging from buying the next new lens to shooting in 4K. I don’t see the need to shoot in 4K either from the cost or editing points of view. Just because you can use fancy equipment does not mean you should. Arising out of necessity, I have had to build my equipment from the \$5,000 kit I had in Afghanistan to the current kit valued at around \$45,000. If you don’t

two weeks travelling in armoured SUVs, even occasionally telling the bodyguard armed with an AK47 standing “behind all the time” that he was in the shot. Packing for such assignments is a series of strategic decisions aimed at ensuring he can hit the ground running.

“On such assignments, I cannot carry three to four Pelican cases with equipment. All I carry is one backpack with a tripod and a camera. I also carry a flexible LED panel from Cineroid. I discourage travelling with Pelican cases. They are heavy, big and attract customs officers and thieves.”

Never, ever check in cameras and lenses, advises Pavone.

“I tend to carry everything on my person because you can lose the gear. Imagine you land in the country and you cannot shoot straight away. Along with the camera, I carry the lens and batteries since you cannot check in batteries. The whole gear can weigh up to 30kg and the limit is 8kg. I tend to arrive well in advance at airports because all the checking and questioning is time-consuming.”

Arguments with airport officials extend also to bulletproof vests, which understandably raise eyebrows.

Pavone explains: “I go to war zones and I need bulletproof vests for myself and the correspondent. Airport officials will want to know why I need the gear. I recall the jackets being confiscated for the whole length of the assignment in one airport.”

To capture the extent of water scarcity in the arid heartland of Somalia, Pavone opted for a piece of equipment he would normally eschew in Dubai owing to the cost and difficulties of getting permission – a drone.

“We travelled to central Somalia for a climate change shoot and the DJI Mavic drone was instrumental in

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Alessandro Pavone, Cameraman



“I want to tell the best human story. That is my ultimate goal,” says Pavone.

PRODUCTION

have the necessary gear, clients won't hire you. However, at the end of the day, it is all about how the story is told. And if you have a great story, you can film it with an iPhone."

The editing workflow varies with each project. With the Somalia assignment, Pavone spent five days editing on Adobe Premiere Pro on his return to Dubai. Paired with a reporter, as Pavone was with Jane Ferguson in Somalia, the duo collaborate to tell a story where words and images need to work in harmony.

"As a news cameraman, you are constantly thinking on your feet as to what shot will be relevant. You are editing and filming at the same time, and that is the great skill of a news cameraman.

"As a rule, I tend to ingest every day just to see that everything is in order. I also ensure one Lacie thunderbolt hard drive is with the correspondent and one with me. A typical daily transfer of files would range from 60 to 100GB.

"The actual process of editing for the Somalia assignment took five days for the three stories of eight minutes each. Once the correspondent wrote the script and it was approved by PBS, I made the rough cut. And following feedback from the channel, I proceeded to work towards the final edit.

"I do feel the pressure still after so many years in the field. When I watch my clips, I always believe there is something I could do better. And with news, there is something you always miss, and you essentially use that as a learning experience for the future."

It's difficult to judge what Pavone missed on a news story for PBS NewsHour covering the brutal urban battle in Mosul, Iraq, all through last year. In the clip, you see Jane Ferguson crouching on the roof of a house, interviewing the local commander of the Iraqi army as it attempts to wrest Mosul from ISIS. In the next clip, the army personnel and Jane, all clad in bulletproof vests,



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are escaping enemy fire and a soldier gestures to the cameraperson to do likewise – the only indication the viewer has of Pavone's presence.

"I was in Mosul from the beginning till the end of the final takeover of the city by the Iraqi army," he recalls.

Between flights to cover the crises in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, there are pretty clips of Dubai to be shot for *The Travel Show* on BBC. Pavone indulges the viewer with time-lapse shots and incredible camera angles.

"If it is not the place and the people, I experiment with filming techniques to challenge myself," he reveals.

For this writer, interviewing Pavone was a roller-coaster ride, from camera choices and packing tips to raw human stories. From covering rape victims of South Sudan to human smugglers in Turkey, professionals such as Pavone face the risk of becoming jaded by human suffering.

This writer can attest first-hand that the seven-year veteran does not seem anywhere close to that. Details about camera and gear were gleaned from an otherwise heartfelt narrative about the lovely people of Somalia, living their lives

in a country racked by famine, political instability and warlords.

Pavone declares: "I want to tell the best human story. That is my ultimate goal. Every single day, I think about the next story. I make good money; I cannot complain. But if I am not thinking about the next good story, I would quit."

Pavone's career began far from the killing fields of Afghanistan. With a degree in Journalism and Communication Studies, he began working as an assistant producer for the BBC. It was his job to arrange for budgets and permits, among other logistical duties.

"The BBC stint gave me a 360-degree view of production. However, I always wanted to be a documentary filmmaker. I was on assignment with the military in Afghanistan when I decided to master my camera skills. I quit my job and bought my first DSLR. I was lucky to be in a war zone and soon found myself in demand from the major channels. I don't like danger per se, but these opportunities would never have come my way had I stayed in London."

From keeping content concise for an episode of *BBC Minute* to being mindful of the viewer possibly watching the content on Instagram, challenges for content creators like Pavone have grown in strange new ways, keeping him fine-tuning his craft constantly. Also, shrinking production budgets worldwide have allowed him to use skills beyond wielding the camera – scripting and producing shows. The learning never ends, he admits.

"I am constantly watching my peers' work to learn new techniques."

En route to Syria at the time of the interview, Pavone was also excited about mastering the art of lens whacking, a method of shooting with the lens detached from the camera body.

Clearly, the craft and the storytelling go hand in hand. **PRO**