

***reporting for change:  
a handbook for local  
journalists in crisis areas***

**institute for war & peace reporting**

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THE INSTITUTE FOR WAR & PEACE REPORTING supports local media in areas of crisis and conflict. Programmes include reporting, training and institutional capacity-building projects. IWPR is an international network of non-profit organisations.

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*Dedicated to the thousands of local journalists around the world  
working in challenging and often dangerous situations to report  
freely from the frontlines of crisis and change*

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# Introduction



*The journalist's struggle to deliver the news has always had to battle official efforts at control, restriction and censorship*

JOURNALISM HAS NEVER HAD A GOLDEN AGE, when the process of obtaining and transmitting the news was simple. And today is no exception.

From the first “war correspondent” who covered the Crimea, through the Vietnam generation to today’s intractable conflicts in the Middle East, the journalist’s struggle to deliver the news has always had to battle official efforts at control, restriction and censorship.

At the same time, journalists have increasingly become targets for attack. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 346 journalists were killed in the line of duty over the past decade. (Other journalist groups give even much higher figures.)

In conflict areas such as Iraq, where the death toll has spiralled, journalists are directly exposed to the line of fire; under repressive regimes they suffer attack and imprisonment; even in stable, democratic societies, they have been murdered for doing their job and reporting on crime and corruption.

And it is not just the increased physical threat that is taking its toll. In a globalised economy, when corporate multinationals are monopolising the media and, critics would argue, are “dumbing down” serious journalism, reporting budgets and foreign bureaux are being cut. International news is falling victim to insular and parochial perspectives. The focus is shifting away from serious issues of policy to personality journalism and headline grabbing trivia.

But amid these disturbing trends, there is some encouraging news. Clear opportunities are emerging for local journalists.

As some mainstream media organisations abandon serious international news, the opportunity for diverse local voices to make a difference at home and internationally is increasing. The shrinking world of instant communications is enabling local media to impact the international agenda as never before.

At the same time, a growing movement of international media development organisations is working, with support from private funding and western governmental development agencies, to strengthen local media to help create the conditions for peace, development and democracy.

The Institute for War & Peace Reporting (IWPR) is one such organisation, now working in more than two dozen countries in Southeast Europe, Eurasia, the Middle East and Africa. Its task is to support training, reporting and the building of capacity in media institutions for local journalists.

Our experience has underscored the enormous obstacles faced by local reporters. Often they experience direct repression, a chronic lack of resources and a dearth of professional support.

But we have also seen the capacity of local media, when given the right assistance, to demonstrate extraordinary courage and achieve the highest international standards of accuracy, objectivity and impartiality. The many international journalism

*Developing democracy means an essential, and expanding, role for local journalists the world over*

awards won by IWPR recognise the accomplishments of local journalists working throughout our network.

The wider picture is also positive. According to the UN Development Programme, in the past two decades, “81 countries took significant steps towards democracy, and today 140 of the world’s nearly 200 countries hold multi-party elections - more than ever before.” Developing democracy means an essential, and expanding, role for local journalists the world over. This presents them with great potential and a huge responsibility.

New communications technologies are also helping to level the playing field. It is now cheaper, easier and quicker to obtain and disseminate information than ever before. The once very separate and diverse areas of the media are converging, so that text, audio and video are all available online, all the time (depending, of course, on computer access and bandwidth). These developments are immensely empowering for journalists and populations at large.

But new opportunities also highlight the need for increased training and responsible reporting. And that is exactly what this handbook is about - it is a practical, hands-on manual designed to help local journalists in societies undergoing major crisis and change.

It outlines the core internationally recognised standards of journalism and provides essential guidance on many of the basic techniques of reporting.

The handbook reviews reporting on general, political, economic and humanitarian issues. It provides guidance on safety and security and sensitive reporting in conflict areas, as well as libel issues. Developed as part of our practical training programmes, it also reviews particular requirements for reporting for IWPR. Each chapter provides exercises and discussion sections and further references. The handbook is designed to be used in coordination with an international trainer or can be worked through on its own.

The text is available in several languages (see [www.iwpr.net](http://www.iwpr.net) for further details). Pagination between language editions is coordinated to assist multi-lingual training workshops.

Journalism is about rights but also about responsibilities. In many societies, for the first time in a generation or more, local journalists have the chance to report freely on what is happening in their own country.

How they establish professional standards and quality will not only set the scene for succeeding generations: it will put their leaders under the spotlight, assist their communities to reconcile their differences and lay the groundwork for stable and democratic development. This handbook seeks to support them in that essential task.

**Anthony Borden**  
Executive Director

*For the first time in a generation or more, local journalists have the chance to report freely on what is happening in their own countries*

## Chapter 1

# Why Be a Journalist?



*American actor Sean Penn visits an IWPR training session in Baghdad*

IF YOU ARE USING THIS BOOK, it is a pretty certain bet that you are already a journalist or you have an interest in the profession.

During IWPR training seminars, we have discussed with hundreds of people around the world why they became journalists. Everyone is different, of course, and there is no right or wrong answer. But certain themes occur again and again in these conversations. And certain common dilemmas are evident.

In this chapter, we describe some of the main reasons people become journalists and discuss some of the dangers and potential pitfalls. In an exercise later you can analyse your own reasons.

### Serving Society

Many people say they want to become journalists to serve society. Exposing injustice, holding politicians accountable to the public, helping the country in a time of crisis - good journalism does serve society in several ways. But so do other professions: doctors and teachers, for example, or politicians themselves (or so they say). The goal of serving society does not in itself explain why you might want to be a journalist.

## Telling ‘the Truth’

Aspiring journalists often proclaim their dedication to the truth. Getting the facts right, as this handbook outlines, is journalism’s primary challenge. But “the truth” is a complex concept. Indeed a central principle of international journalism is the aim of presenting competing “truths” in a balanced way. Does a journalist have the capacity to determine the truth, and what happens when you are proved wrong?

*Does a journalist have the capacity to determine the truth, and what happens when you are proved wrong?*

## Representing Your Homeland

Many reporters feel strongly about their kin and their homeland. This is natural, especially when they may be under threat. Journalists are, after all, human too, and often identify - consciously or not - with their community, which can be defined by region, language, religion, ethnicity or nationality. But does a partisan approach conflict with core journalistic principles of objectivity and balance? Journalism must be interesting and readable but a heavily one-sided or lecturing style can be dull and off-putting, especially in a world of “compassion fatigue”.

### Highlighting Issues

Journalism helps to inform those in authority of what is really going on in a country. Even with the best intentions, politicians and officials can become isolated from real conditions, surrounded by people anxious to please them and say what they think they want to hear. Journalism can be a valuable direct channel to them. But there are also dangers to be aware of. In seeking to inform VIPs, a journalist may risk succumbing to the same temptation of trying to please a leadership audience in order to maintain acceptance within that community.

### Public Watchdog

A well-informed public is the cornerstone of all civil societies. Hard-hitting but fair journalism about issues that matter to the public helps create pressure for change and improvement. This means access to reliable information about what political leaders and officials are doing. Is government policy fair and effective? Is a particular leader or official honest? Are promised policies and projects going ahead as planned? Are citizens' rights respected? If not, why not?

Yet this, perhaps the most classic of journalistic roles, also carries risks. Just like officials, opposition politicians and unofficial groups - including business and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) - will bombard you with partisan views, challenging your capacity to remain fair and balanced. Muck-raking is hardly a way to make friends (or income). “The definition of independence,” goes the old journalistic saying, “is when everyone hates you.”

*The definition of independence is when everyone hates you*

### Curiosity

An insatiable curiosity is a common - perhaps indispensable - quality for journalists. Good journalists have a natural nosiness, energising them to do a good job and enjoy their work day to day. They are quintessential “news hounds” and read everything they can get their hands on, including or especially newspapers they don’t agree with. They care about detail, and always want to know “why?” Then having found something out, they want to tell others.

But this instinct brings its own pressures. The news peg is relentless and requires dedication to stay on top of it. Many reporters tire of the feeling of ignorance, constantly having to brave the first “cold call” when they have to start afresh on a new story they know nothing about. Many journalists in time seek to specialise in particular topics, or yearn for the opportunity to develop detailed knowledge and pursue in-depth writing. Others simply burn out.

### Influence

Journalists can exercise a lot of influence and many journalists are attracted to the media for this reason. Building an audience can be good for your career, and can help you make a difference through your reporting. But it can be dangerous, too. A sense of power can ruin objectivity and impartiality and the reporter will lose credibility if he or she becomes too closely associated with those in power or in opposition. Complacency is fatal for good reporting. Constantly being fêted by those seeking to influence you can also have a damaging impact on your health, and in particular on your waistline.

## Fame

Many journalists would like to be famous and it can be an incentive to excelling in the job. A young reporter may be inspired by world-renowned faces such as CNN's Christiane Amanpour, ABC's Peter Jennings or the BBC's Jeremy Paxman, and dream of having their own faces "on the box". The BBC's correspondent in Baghdad during the second Gulf War was dubbed the "Scud Stud" and signed a book contract straight afterwards. But if fame can bring benefits, it is also a drug and a distraction, and should never be more important than the story itself. The best journalists become famous because of the accuracy and consistency of their work, not the other way around.

*The best journalists become famous because of the accuracy and consistency of their work, not the other way around*

## Money

Journalism is a job and a way to make money. Famous names like those mentioned above do indeed pull down comfortable pay packets. In conflict areas, particularly when the international press pack turns up, working as a fixer, translator or assistant reporter can earn fair money, especially if you are bright,

*If you want lots of money,  
you would be better off  
looking for another job*

responsible and have good English. But few journalists are among the highest earners, and local wage inflation at the high point of a crisis can evaporate quickly as soon as the story moves on to the next war zone. As businesses, media are highly unstable, and more publishers go bust than retire early.

Worse, a focus on money makes you vulnerable to accepting bribes, dishonest payments, or gifts for favours. Such behaviour has absolutely no place in honest journalism, and has destroyed many a good career. If you want lots of money, you would be better off looking for another job.

### Adventure

Many people become journalists because they want adventure - the feeling of waking up and wondering what new awaits them. The ability to speak to a wide range of people and ask them all kinds of (often somewhat impertinent) questions can be exciting. So can foreign travel and, at the extreme, journeys to the front-line of human endurance, such as a disaster area or war zone. With this, too, can come a strong sense of camaraderie, leavening the usual fierce competition within the trade.

But most journalists face a lot of routine and boring work. Reporting on press conferences, business results and endless trials can test endurance in their own ways. Constant travel can be wearing. Waking up in a hotel in the middle of the night and not being able to remember which city you are in is very disorienting. Personal and family lives often suffer, made worse by alcohol and drug abuse and the ever-present cigarette. A growing movement within the industry recognises the extreme stress faced by journalists, providing hostile-environment training, counselling for those suffering post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and, all too often, memorials for those killed in action.

### Love of Craft

Many journalists do it for a very simple reason - because they love it. A radio or TV presenter in full flow during a live broadcast can feel very gratified in an exciting task well executed (although the inevitable flubs are horrifying). The best reporters pore endlessly over reports or doggedly pursue their sources because they are driven to do so. Top editors simply love words, cleanly and crisply presented. It feels great to be good at what you do.

But it is important to recognise what journalism is and what it is not. Most importantly, it is for the moment and not for the ages. Journalism is not literature and a news broadcast is not a feature film. Purple prose and over-dramatisation are signs of journalistic immaturity and can be embarrassing in the cold light of day. Concentrating too much on the writing and the precise turn of phrase can be an obstacle to good reporting and the need to concentrate on the facts. Speed often matters more than depth, and deadlines invariably undermine absolute quality. As Elvis Costello sings: “Yesterday’s news is tomorrow’s fish and chip paper.”

## EXERCISES

Review the preceding categories and try to decide why you want to be a journalist. Be honest with yourself, and try to discuss the subject openly with your colleagues and friends and compare your responses. What are the most common answers?

Ask yourself some typical questions:

- Do you follow news and current events carefully?
- Are you an actor, or an observer?
- What do you like to read, and do you read newspapers extensively?
- Are you interested in politics, and do you have a strong party affiliation?
- Who are the people you admire, and are any of them writers or journalists?

## ADDITIONAL READING & REFERENCES

A large number of web sites are dedicated to journalism, ranging from learned reviews to journalism schools and the latest hot gossip. Below is a short list of some of the main U.S. and UK sites that many journalists use on a daily basis:

- Media Guardian: [media.guardian.co.uk](http://media.guardian.co.uk)
- Poynter Institute: [www.poynter.org](http://www.poynter.org)
- Jim Romenesko on media news on the Poynter site (also contains links to many other journalism sites): [www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=45](http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=45)
- Columbia Journalism Review: [www.cjr.org](http://www.cjr.org)
- American Journalism Review: [www.ajr.org](http://www.ajr.org)
- UK's National Council for the Training of Journalists: [www.nctj.com/index.html](http://www.nctj.com/index.html)
- Institute for War & Peace Reporting: (see especially training pages) [www.iwpr.net](http://www.iwpr.net)

Media and media ethics are the focus of a burgeoning field of media studies, as well as extensive dramatization in fiction and film. Everyone has their favourites, but some key texts in the genre include:

A critical historical study of war reporting and a cautionary memoir:

- *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent As Hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Kosovo*, by Phillip Knightley (Johns Hopkins)
- *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, by Chris Hedges (PublicAffairs)

Two classic fictionalizations of war reporting:

- *Scoop*, by Evelyn Waugh
- *The Quiet American*, by Graham Greene

And two essential films about reporting for and running a newspaper:

- *All the President's Men* (Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford), from the book by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward
- *Citizen Kane*, by Orson Welles

## Chapter 2

# International Standards



*Most journalistic codes agree that accuracy, impartiality and fairness are the foundation stones of good journalism*

JOURNALISM IS AS DIVERSE as the world it covers. The hard-news reporter works differently from the feature writer who has different instincts from the celebrity profile writer or the weekly columnist. The habits of the American reporter are often quite distinct from those of the British journalist, both of whom write quite differently from their colleagues in the Continental European press. Styles in other regions and continents may differ still more.

Yet amid this diversity, journalist organisations around the world have sought to codify professional ethics.

Most agree that accuracy, impartiality and fairness are the foundation stones of good journalism, principles that also go to the core of IWPR training.

This chapter reviews those international standards, examining the key elements essential for good journalism.

Of course, there are differences, but quite often they are of tone, stress and degree. Take a look at the following, all of which draw on these core standards:

- Warnings against incitement and discrimination feature high in the Bosnian Journalists' Press Code.
- Impartiality and accuracy are at the top of the BBC Producers' guidelines.
- The Canon of Journalism of the Japanese Association of Newspaper Publishers and Editors pledges newspapers to "continued effort towards an affluent and peaceful future."
- The Association of Journalists of Kyrgyzstan has an unequivocal start to their Code of Ethics: "The journalist's duty is to serve the truth. The role of mass media is to look for the truth."

All the codes find it easy to agree on what journalists should avoid:

- Libel and slander (defamation)
- Plagiarism (passing off others' material as one's own)
- Accepting bribes
- Making the story up (fabrication and pure invention)

*'The journalist's duty is to serve the truth,' says the Association of Journalists of Kyrgyzstan*

*Fact-based reporting  
is the bedrock  
of all journalism*

There are many different strategies for handling specialist approaches to journalism – how to cover war crimes, how to report on victims and trauma, how to pursue “public journalism” or undertake “peace reporting”, the latter being a complex and sometimes controversial topic focusing on how reporting conflict and the aftermath of a conflict can be a force for good. Some of these topics are outlined later in this handbook.

But the bedrock of all of these, and the media’s core contribution to democracy and development, is responsible, fact-based reporting.

Providing reliable information to support responsible public debate, hold officials accountable, and inform the decisions of the electorate - these are the underlying tasks of the media in a democratic society.

Indeed, many professional codes stress the fundamental role of the media in providing reliable information to enable people to be free and self-governing.

## The Key Elements

Nearly every code of ethics agrees on at least three fundamental factors in the practice of journalism: impartiality, accuracy and fairness. These can be considered universal standards.

Ethical guidelines also stress honesty and decency in newsgathering. Many codes also cover protection of sources as an essential component of newsgathering.

### 1. Impartiality

Most journalists' codes of conduct and rules highlight "impartiality" or "independence" in reporting. But this concept can be difficult to define.

Impartiality means reporting should not support one political party, religion, people or ethnic group over another. It allows for fairly reporting one side's policies or pronouncements, and for including comments that one party or group may make about another. But the core principle is that the reporter should not directly express his or her own comments, opinions or political preferences.

Balanced journalism provides clear distinction between what is fact and what is opinion.

Publications in many countries find it hard to survive without some financial backing, and political parties, pressure groups or powerful businesses with political interests are the natural candidates to support them. In such cases the newspaper should at least publish details of its sources of finance, so readers can make their own judgements about its impartiality.

Responsible publications make clear distinctions between news reporting and editorial opinion. News appears on the front page and the leaders and comment appear in separate pages clearly marked inside. In some newspapers, articles which are “analytical” and thus may unavoidably reflect some of the journalist’s perspective are clearly marked as “news analysis” to distinguish them from straight news. In many newspapers, the editorial teams which produce the news and those which produce the editorial or comment sections are kept firmly separate, and may not even communicate with each other at all.

In the West, many media outlets and publications are owned by large companies and the issue of commercial impartiality is also sensitive. Editorial and business or advertising departments are separated by a “Chinese wall”. There have been cases where an

editor has resigned because a publisher or owner sought to influence the content of the publication. Similarly, failure to resign has led to the discrediting of some publications.

A classic tension occurs if a newspaper or broadcaster has a story that may embarrass the owners or a company which takes out major advertisements within its pages or on its airwaves. If it publishes the report, then it may lose income. But if it suppresses the report, it is not being impartial and may lose its reputation.

Political impartiality can be difficult to maintain for many reasons. In some countries, media are directly attacked if they criticise the government and will be deemed partisan or “lackeys of foreign governments” even if they are only trying to maintain an independent line. It is an especially difficult position to maintain during times of conflict when societies become highly polarised.

Impartiality is also hard to maintain for more mundane reasons. The remarks of a state president will invariably be taken to be more newsworthy than a peasant’s, even if the national leader is spouting patent propaganda while the villager may be raising neglected concerns that go to the heart of government policy.

## 2. Accuracy

Every journalists' code stresses the need for accuracy. The urge to "get it right" is always strong and takes priority over speed. There are no prizes for being fast and wrong.

Writing for a journalist is the skill of presenting information clearly, concisely and effectively. It is based on hard facts, so the reporter must know how and where to find reliable information.

This means good observation, good listening, sound background reading and, above all, talking to the right people to find reliable information.

A journalistic axiom is that the best reporters are only as good as their personal contacts. So you must learn how to cultivate them and how to evaluate the information offered. This means assessing who is reliable (and getting their trust), and who is not. A critical challenge is how to reconcile conflicting accounts of the same event.

Many journalistic organisations insist on the "two source rule" - that means that every fact must be confirmed by two independent sources before it can be taken as reliable.

Journalists need to take extensive notes or tape record interviews when possible to be sure the report is as precise as possible. Dedication to this recognised principle is what maintains journalists' integrity and credibility - even if it is just getting names down correctly. Accuracy requires meticulous attention to detail, as one small, superficial error undermines the reliability of a whole report. This means checking and double checking facts whenever possible, even generally accepted information.

Getting the story straight may mean calling sources back to make sure what they said is portrayed correctly, especially if another source is disputing it. This is called fact-checking, and in some established publications entire articles are re-reported by a separate researcher or junior reporter to ensure accuracy, especially in a long or especially controversial feature article. Sometimes it may mean delaying the report to avoid mistakes if there is any doubt. Getting it wrong can affect future credibility and at worse can cause serious damage, including a legal challenge.

Accuracy is not just about facts; it is about proper context. Damaging information about a candidate before an election or

*The urge to 'get it right' is  
always strong and takes  
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*Accuracy is not just  
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proper context*

about a company's performance will have serious consequences. So the reader needs to know where it came from and whether this source has partisan motives. Are there hidden interests pushing the information that should make the reporter wary and should be exposed so the audience can make a fair judgement? It makes all the difference if some product is criticised by a consumer or by a representative of a rival company producing a similar item.

Many people complain that stories are sometimes not "objective". This may be a valid criticism, especially if the journalist has an obvious agenda. Or it may simply be a coded way of saying that the article does not fit their point of view.

Most experienced journalists would agree that pure objectivity in a news story is very hard, if not impossible, to achieve. A journalist's background or perspective could skew the presentation of a story in many ways. A journalist should always be conscious of his or her own perspective and strive to be impartial when reporting.

Above all, a journalist relies on facts, and testing the facts for reliability. Good stories may start from a journalist's excitement

or even anger. But they must treat honestly the search for information to support the story and accept that it may reveal unexpected and perhaps disturbing results. The method of getting and reporting the facts must remain objective or, to avoid a complex concept, at least strive to be objective.

### **3. Fairness**

To be fair to the people you interview means being fair both in how you gather the information and in how you present it.

Interviewees have the right to know what an article or programme will be about: what kind of contribution they are expected to make; whether a broadcast interview will be live or recorded, and how it might be edited. Subjects have a right to know if they are being filmed, and if so, how that film will be used. Investigative inquiries might require some variation of this, but fairness to the parties and the story remains the guideline.

The International Federation of Journalists says, “The journalist shall only use fair methods to obtain news, photographs and documents.” This means identifying oneself as a journalist under normal circumstances, and never using threats or displays of force to get information.

*Just because you know something doesn't mean that you can use it in an article*

Just because you know something doesn't mean that you can use it in an article. You don't "have" the information for publication until you have secured reliable and in most cases "on the record" sourcing through fair and transparent means. In particular, only in the most rare and extreme circumstances justified by higher public interest may it be considered acceptable to break the law in order to obtain information.

Fairness in presentation means allowing someone you are criticising the chance to respond to those comments within the same story. Someone may be unhappy about an article you write about him, but he should never be surprised because the reporter should always have discussed the critical points with him before publication.

If you do not feel comfortable discussing your criticisms with a subject of the story, you should feel uncomfortable publishing them. (Note: this does not mean reading out the story itself, but it does mean explaining the substance of your critical remarks.) Indeed, if you are criticising an individual, your report will be stronger if you also include all the counter-arguments and positive points of the individual. Your article will appear more balanced and more reliable, and the criticisms will have more weight.

#### 4. Honesty and Decency

The way journalists do their jobs and present the results - their standards of ethics and practice - is vital to keeping public trust. Whether written or not, a code of good practice is a healthy reminder of how important it is, in gathering, checking and distributing the news, to play by the rules. Given the complexities and occasional moral dilemmas faced in the practice of journalism, it is also helpful on an individual level to have a sense of one's own boundaries, guidelines and personal ethics.

As well as accuracy and fairness, most codes stress honesty, transparency and common sense in newsgathering. They balance the pressures to ferret out information at all costs with a concept of decency.

For example, reporters will invariably be persistent in their reporting, but must not use harassment or intimidation. Journalists should gather information openly, and should not, except for exceptional circumstances (and with explicit approval of their editor), use hidden recording devices. Anyone criticised by the press should have a fair right of reply.

Journalists should avoid undue intrusion where people have

suffered trauma and shock and should respect a person's right to privacy. Children and victims of sexual crimes must be treated with care, and legislation in many countries requires that they not be named or photographed. Business journalists should avoid reporting on a company in which they have a financial interest, and if they do must declare that interest, such as if they own stock. Many media organisations have detailed rules governing securities ownership and trading by journalists.

Yet due to the complexity of ethical questions, many journalists' codes and policies avoid declaring too many absolute rules. In extraordinary cases, well-established rules of newsroom practice must sometimes be reconsidered in light of a higher public interest. Codes of practice usually specify that journalists should never pretend to be something they are not. How can a journalist expose dishonesty if he is not honest himself? Yet sometimes the only way to expose corruption of officials conclusively, for instance, may require adopting a disguise or a subterfuge to trap such people. In such cases, consultation with editors and peers, and a strong sense of one's own ethical codes, provide essential guidance.

One other key ethical point is never to plagiarise. Each new piece of journalism naturally builds on previous stories already published. But do cite a colleague or even rival whose reporting you are drawing from, and never lift sections of other people's writing and present it as your own. It is (and should be) a one-way ticket to the end of your career.

*Plagiarism is a one-way ticket to the end of your career*

When facing an ethical dilemma, always ask:

- Is there another way to get the same information?
- Can you explain in good conscience your decisions to those affected?
- If a similar situation occurs, would you handle it in the same way?
- How would you feel if you were the subject, rather than the reporter, of the story?
- Have you done everything you can to be accurate and fair?
- Have you tried to find all the significant aspects of a story?
- Are the decisions free from outside and especially personal influences?

## 5. Protecting Sources

Journalists' codes of ethics generally emphasise the protection of sources, sometimes in apparent defiance of law. Some refer to a “moral obligation” not to reveal sources.

At IWPR, we consider protection of sources a journalist's fundamental right. But it is hard to make the case that such confidentiality has been universally accepted as an international standard. Sometimes confidentiality is breached and often with serious consequences for the journalist or source involved. Journalists' organisations like the International Federation of Journalists, the US-based Committee to Protect Journalists and the Paris-based Reporters Sans Frontières have all taken up cases where journalists have sought to protect the identity of their sources when faced with strong pressure – sometimes from courts, sometimes from repressive governments – to reveal names.

In a pragmatic sense, a journalist who promises to keep a source anonymous but then subsequently reveals the name will find it very hard to be trusted by sources in future. But when a whistleblower or political opponent gives a strong or revealing

anonymous statement to the press, officials may want to know the name so they can penalise the person and make other people afraid to make similar remarks in future.

Often the question is framed in legal terms. If a journalist receives confidential information from an anonymous source, the government may wish to take legal action against the source, arguing that the leak breached confidentiality laws.

The issue goes to the heart of the debate over freedom of information. Yet most countries do not guarantee a journalist's right to protect sources, and occasionally in the United States, UK and Australia, journalists have gone to prison over these issues. Some courts are sympathetic and look at whether the public interest is best served by such protection. The European Court of Justice has made decisions that might help journalists.

*No one has a  
monopoly on  
the truth*

**6. Things to watch for:**

- Present all sides of a story. In a dispute, you must try to speak to “both sides”, but remember that may not be enough. In a conflict, there will be “warring factions”. But there will also be international official observers or diplomats, independent nongovernmental parties and unaffiliated civilians. No one has a monopoly on the truth, but the less affiliated a person is, the more reliable their information may be.
- Where an accusation is made against someone, make sure that it is presented in a fair context. That means including balancing information or other important factors, particularly a fair right to reply to any accusations.
- Be transparent about the journalistic process. You are a journalist serving a public role, and should be up front about what you are doing. The more clear you are about this in your own mind, the more confidence you will bring to the task of coaxing sensitive information out of your sources.
- Avoid conflicts of interest or situations that might create such conflicts. Impartial journalists should generally not

hold public office while working in the profession, take important jobs in political parties, participate in public demonstrations when reporting on them, or do anything that would suggest to the public that their reporting is being influenced by such events.

- Avoid financial conflicts or any appearance that personal gain (other than salaries) is a motive for the report. Accepting payment from a source to influence your reporting is entirely unethical. Reporting on a company in which the journalist has a personal interest is unacceptable. While it may be necessary sometimes to accept a meal or a drink, for instance, nothing should suggest that a favourable report is being promised in return or that an unfavourable report might be dropped. Similarly, do not pay for information except in extreme circumstances, which should be cleared with your editor.
- Journalists have to ask difficult questions. A journalist is serving the public's right to know, so has a responsibility to probe. But that does not mean being rude or discourteous. BBC editorial guidelines say be "searching, sharp, sceptical,

*Whatever your own  
opinion, above all respect  
your sources*

informed and to the point” but not “discourteously or emotionally attached to one side of an argument”.

- People should know how their words or images are going to be used (though careful exceptions may be necessary in undercover or investigative stories). Be clear about ground rules for interviews and ask permission to take photographs or video. This can be especially important when reporting a conflict when sometimes, however unwelcome it may be, the military can set the rules. Whatever your own opinion, above all, respect your sources.
- Use unnamed sources with extreme care. Journalists will sometimes cite “senior diplomats”, “high ranking officers” or other anonymous witnesses, who request to be protected. But this is not a licence to allow them to make unreliable accusations, or for the journalist to make up the source (another fast-track career spoiler). If the name is withheld, provide the closest possible description to indicate the credibility of the source. In all cases be transparent, especially with your editor, who may require you to try to convince a source to “come on the record” before enabling you to publish especially sensitive information.

If your information is too good to be true, maybe it is. Use common sense and always ask yourself:

- Have you obtained your information in a reliable and ethical way?
- Have you done everything you can to be accurate and to corroborate your facts?
- Are your decisions free from unfair influence or bias?
- Have you provided balance and context, in particular the right of reply and fair comment to anyone criticised in your article?
- Is there no other way to get the information, especially in the case of an unnamed source?
- Are your sources reliable and have you spoken to all sides of the story?
- Is the information reasonable and does it make sense?
- Most of all, can you stand by your story?

## EXERCISES

In this section, you've reviewed:

- The universal concepts of impartiality, accuracy and fairness.
- The journalist's obligation to protect sources.
- Common principles of codes of ethics and practice.
- Various tips and things to watch for in reporting and publishing a story.

### Exercise 1

The police let you know “off the record” they are about to arrest a well-liked local businessman known for his charitable works and public service. They say they are looking at fraud and bribery charges. It is late evening and no formal documents are immediately available.

You call the businessman, who confirms that he knows about the allegations and expects to be arrested the next day. He declines to give a direct answer on the accusation. He asks you wait a day before publication so he can tell his family. He says he will “look after you” if you can delay the story.

- What are the ethical dilemmas?
- Are there any other practical problems?
- Should you discuss it with anyone?
- Do you need more information?
- Should you write the story?
- How might you write it on the few facts above, and what do you need in order to expand it properly?

## **Exercise 2**

You have reported on a war crime and published an important story that mobilised international attention to an atrocity. In so doing, you have observed all the classical ethical guidelines of journalism: respecting your sources, keeping your notes carefully, only publishing exactly what you can confirm.

Years later, an international tribunal summons you to testify. Your notebooks are subpoenaed. You are called upon to break your pledges as a journalist and reveal the names of sources and other information which you would not, as a journalist, publish at the time.

Do you participate in the tribunal in order to support the prosecution of an alleged war criminal? Or do you refuse, even at personal risk, in defence of ethical journalistic codes?

### ADDITIONAL READING & REFERENCES

Many web sites contain references to international journalism codes. For example see:

**[www.uta.fi/ethicnet](http://www.uta.fi/ethicnet)**

**[www.presswise.org.uk](http://www.presswise.org.uk)**

**[www.ifj.org](http://www.ifj.org)**

See also the Project for Excellence in Journalism:

**[www.journalism.org](http://www.journalism.org)**

For a listing and links to several major individual codes, see:

**[www.asne.org/index.cfm?id=387](http://www.asne.org/index.cfm?id=387)**

Plus: **[www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=32&aid=16997](http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=32&aid=16997)**

For *The New York Times*:

**[www.nytc.com/pdf/NYT\\_Ethical\\_Journalism\\_042904.pdf](http://www.nytc.com/pdf/NYT_Ethical_Journalism_042904.pdf)**

For the Associated Press: **[www.apme.com/index.shtml](http://www.apme.com/index.shtml)**

For Reuters: **[about.reuters.com/aboutus/editorial](http://about.reuters.com/aboutus/editorial)**

## Chapter 3

# Story Structure

PROFESSIONAL NEWS REPORTS use generally accepted international norms of structure, designed to present the information directly, concisely and clearly. Different countries have different traditions and one style is not necessarily better than another. But the news writing style outlined below reflects what is usually accepted internationally, especially in English-speaking countries.

The central principle is that the *reader comes first*.

This means that reports must be written with a view to the people who will be receiving the information. The prose must be direct, attract their attention and make them want to read the report. This is what sets good news writing apart. What do the readers want - or need - to know? Why should they read the report?

In literature or films, the audience expects to be entertained and may be held in suspense. The writer starts at the beginning, weaves a plot, holds the reader in suspense, especially through the quality of the writing or imagery, and works to a climax. The audience sets aside time to go through this experience.

Not so with news. People want information and they want it up front.



*Before the newspaper can be put together (as here, in Kabul), the stories themselves must be carefully constructed*

*The main purpose of news writing is to convey information*

Feeling engaged is a plus for a news audience and can be an important factor in television news. But the main purpose is to convey information. In newspapers or on the web, there is no guarantee a reader will take time to finish the story, or indeed will look at more than the beginning of the report. So the writer must cater especially for that.

Watch someone reading a newspaper or a web page. The pattern is very different from reading a book. With a newspaper, the reader scans the page, the headlines and then the first sentence of a story that attracts. Readers make a decision about what to read and how much, turning pages slowly or quickly, depending on how well the reports attract them or what information they spot of their special interest. There are many different “places” within a newspaper or a web site for the reader to go, and many articles competing for attention. There are also many different newspapers to read, and literally countless web sites. It is with reason that the fast skimming of vast numbers of online information sources has become known as “surfing”.

The way a news story is built - the structure - must cope with this. In the international tradition of journalism, the climax - the

most important material - is therefore generally presented right at the beginning or introduction. This is called the lead. The most important facts are packaged as succinctly as possible, with the barest necessary explanation, in that first paragraph. The story then moves, paragraph by paragraph, into the detail or body of the story by covering the facts in a diminishing order of significance and importance.

### Inverted Pyramid

This form of writing is commonly known as the inverted pyramid style, because when made into a diagram it appears as an upside-down pyramid with the important foundation at the top and the least important point at the bottom. It caters to the needs of a newspaper reader, as well as a newspaper editor.

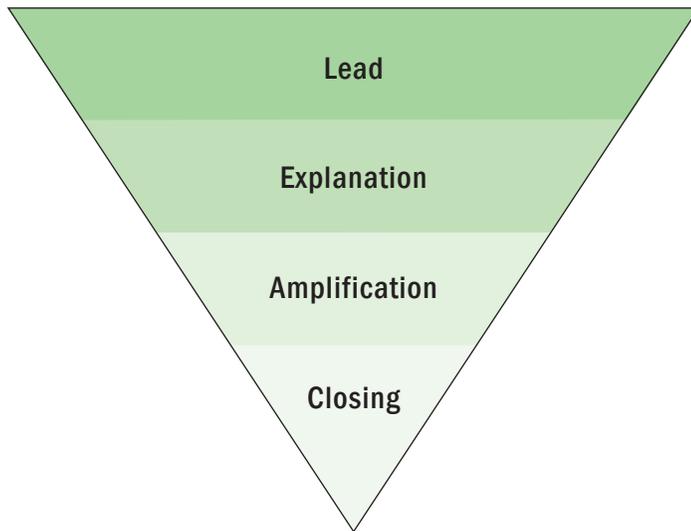
This style of news writing saves the time of readers, who can see at a glance from the first sentence whether the story is worth following. The lead contains the most important material. A successful lead, generally 25-40 words, provides the main points of the story, and aims to attract the reader's interest. A good test of a lead is to assess whether the opening itself could stand alone as a comprehensible news brief.

Following on from the lead, the story proceeds to the explanation, laying out the main facts of the article, the individuals or organisations involved, and the issues of debate.

The amplification takes up further points of interest, delves into more detail, elaborates initial perspectives in more depth or provides more colour or extended quotations from participants.

The closing may tie-up the piece, pulling together various strands of the story, or offering a speculative tone, often through a direct quotation from a participant. But it should not contain fresh information or introduce an important new theme or concluding point, which should have already been covered. In general it is a light touch, and in many cases may be left out altogether, or be cut for space.

### Story Structure: Inverted Pyramid



This structure recognises that the purpose of a news story is not to keep the reader or audience guessing but to present facts rapidly, clearly, accurately and simply. Crucially, it also helps editing, allowing stories to be quickly cut down to fit into a smaller space on the page, and readily adapted for changing circumstances.

*Good journalism is  
about satisfactory answers  
to the six questions*

Suppose an editor has asked for 800 words on one story, then something more important happens, such as the assassination of the country's leader or a bomb blast - and such events do happen suddenly and unexpectedly. The editor must act quickly to cover the breaking story. This means less space for the other story (sometimes even no space).

If a story is structured in the inverted pyramid form, it is a relatively simple matter to cut the material from the bottom up without losing the essence of the information. It might even end up as a single paragraph. But if properly structured, it will still be clear, self-contained and informative.

It will answer the six key questions.

## The Six Questions

Good journalism is all about satisfactory answers to questions. There is nothing more annoying than a news story that raises questions, then leaves them unanswered. It may not always be possible to address all questions in the lead paragraph without cluttering it up and making it difficult to understand. But that is what journalism aims to do, and certainly basic questions should be addressed in the first few paragraphs. A good news lead is not usually more than 25-40 words.

### Who, What, When, Where, Why, How?

Note the active nature of these questions. Journalism is about events - whether a dramatic moment or a trend, it covers things that actually happen in the world, and tries to do so in a succinct way to communicate them simply and clearly to a broad audience.

Read the following example:

**OPPOSITION AND GOVERNMENT  
TRADE ACCUSATIONS OVER KILLING THAT  
ROCKED MONTENEGRO**

*By Nedjelko Rudovic in Podgorica*

*The arrest of two suspects for the murder of a prominent journalist has failed to quell a war of words between the Montenegrin government and the opposition over the shooting.*

*The murder of Dusko Jovanovic on May 27 has fuelled an atmosphere of fear and insecurity in the republic, widening the chasm between opposition parties and the government.*

*Damir Mandic, a well-known martial arts sportsman, and his brother Almir were arrested last night in connection with the investigation.*

*Jovanovic, 40, editor of the Podgorica daily Dan and a critic of the pro-independence coalition, was shot dead around midnight in front of his office.*

*After Jovanovic got into his car, a vehicle with tinted windows pulled up close by and a gunman opened fire from it. The car sped off in an unknown direction.*

*The killing is an embarrassment for Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic, as the opposition has claimed the murder was carried out on the orders of figures close to - or even in - his government. At an opposition march held to honour Jovanovic's memory on May 29, protesters shouted "Milo - murderer" as they passed government buildings in the capital, Podgorica.*

*The ruling coalition insists the murder was carried out precisely to destabilise the administration.*

*Determined to dispel any suspicion that the government had a hand in the killing, Interior Minister Dragan Djurovic announced he would resign if the crime was not solved, and offered a million-euro reward for information about who ordered or carried out the murder.*

*Djukanovic himself said the killing was "an attack on the peace and stability of Montenegro. This is why it is important to analyse who might have had the motive to send such a message by perpetrating this criminal act".*

*The interior minister has asked French, British, German and American police to send experts to crack the case. German experts have already arrived.*

[Story cut here for purposes of this example]

This is not a “hard” or “spot” news story, but a news analysis following the overnight arrest of two suspects in the killing. But it too requires a clear structure. Let’s test the inverted pyramid rules in the story:

The scene is set out in the first paragraph. Afterwards the story is expanded - particularly adding context, titles for the individuals named, and balancing information. But notice that the lead contained the essence of the report concisely.

### Other Leads

While a straight lead is the simplest and safest, sometimes you might want some variety or novelty. The purpose is to attract or intrigue - in which case answering the six key questions may come later. A hard news lead may be inappropriate for a trend or human interest story. But do not wait too long or you will lose your audience. This technique is sometimes called the “delayed drop”.

For instance:

*People in Oslobsk have been living in fear for the past five years, but finally the government took action that will save lives in the region.*

The word “fear” may intrigue an audience. But the six key questions remain to be answered. So the next sentence may be:

*After first evacuating some 500 villagers, special military units yesterday blew up live mines and shells left behind after a conflict six months ago.*

Novelty or intriguing leads should be used sparingly and only where they are truly more interesting or compelling than a straight lead.

Sometimes you may want to create an atmosphere in the lead:

*The smell of death and a pall of smoke hung over the debris-strewn street. This was all that was left to mark the massive shelling that began here last night and continued unabated for 12 hours.*

Sometimes you might want to jolt the reader’s attention:

*“It’s totally unbelievable,” said the general, expressing shock at the destruction uncovered by the clear light of dawn.*

*He was surveying the battered remains of the town pounded throughout the night by enemy shellfire, leaving dozens dead, hundreds wounded and most buildings in the centre shattered.*

In any event, information should be given quickly and clearly, and the “set-up” in any alternative lead should itself be short and to the point. Brevity is the soul of wit.

Details make stories live and credible. That does not mean packing in too much detail. It does mean letting colourful facts rather than adjectives tell the story. Adjectives should only be used if they really tell something extra, not just paint a pretty picture. Tell your story through action, rather than description. Adjectives sometimes undermine a story’s objectivity and impartiality.

Compare these two sentences:

*The noisy room was abruptly cleared by the furious chairman because of an abuse-shouting delegate.*

*The chairman banged the table with his gavel and ordered the delegates to stop shouting and leave the room immediately.*

The second gives telling detail of what actually happened in an active manner.

If you do use adjectives, ask yourself whether they can be explained by details in the story, and are not just the writer’s

personal opinion or assumption. Do not overdo the detail. The rule is: enough to make the story clear, interesting and even dramatic - but not so much that the audience forgets what the story is about.

When in doubt, put in all the details you think make the story better. Editors can always take them out, but as they are not on the spot, they cannot add them.

*If you are unsure, go back and ask again*

## Background

The journalist should always ensure that she or he has enough background information to be able to understand and write the story. Remember, if you do not understand, it is unlikely that your audience will. If you are unsure, go back and ask again.

The reporter must always remember that the audience will probably not know as much about the background as the writer. So ensure there is enough in the story for the audience to understand the context.

Always give people's full titles and spell out all acronyms in the first usage. As a reporter working in your own country, you are

fully aware of the name of the prime minister. But a reader coming to the story from a world away via the Internet or syndication may have no idea. Political party affiliations can also be very complicated, so ensure that on first (or in rare exceptions second) reference within a story, the full name of the party is spelled out with a brief indication of its approach: left- or right-wing, religious or ethnic, social democratic or conservative, etc.

It helps the audience to know that Ali Beg is a tailor in the main shopping street of the district of X rather than a tailor in a suburb, or whether he owns the business or works for someone else. What is his age? Does he have a family? Is it relevant, or does it help the reader to understand the story better?

Audiences may need to be reminded of some facts even about a well-known personality - The basketball player renowned for shooting with his left hand . . . the deputy who was released from jail only a year ago after serving a sentence for hitting a policeman . . . and so on.

Try to anticipate and answer complications. If two people in the story have the same last name, indicate whether they are related

or not. If an event takes place in the countryside, find a moment to indicate how far it is from the capital, and whether it is north, east, south or west. If an opposition party makes a statement, remind the reader whether it is a large and influential party with the potential to take power in time, or a smaller grouping.

Sometimes you may have to add some words, such as “the desert town”, as many will not know it is in the desert, or “the industrial suburb” or “the southern city”.

The key is: How can I help make it clearer for the audience? Avoid boring or extraneous detail but enable a reader unacquainted with the subject to follow the story. Give exactly the information, no more and no less, that can help the reader understand.

## EXERCISES

Read newspapers with an eye to the lead and answer the following questions for different kinds of stories:

- How many words, or paragraphs, does it take the journalist to set up the story?

*The key is: How can I help make it clearer for the audience?*

- Is it is classic hard news lead, or an alternative, atmosphere-setting or other approach?
- Does the lead address the six key questions?

Monitor your own newspaper or Internet reading. Try to figure out what makes you read different stories. What in one article “grabs” you enough to read the entire text and what in another article causes you to turn off and move on? When does the right amount of detail keep a story interesting, and when does the detail become a bore?

Compare your results with colleagues and see if you come to the same conclusions.

## ADDITIONAL READING & REFERENCES

The Poynter Institute's web site contains a number of "tip sheets" on how to write, construct stories and edit:

[www.poynter.org/subject.asp?id=2](http://www.poynter.org/subject.asp?id=2)

## Chapter 4

# Sourcing



*Get your sources lined up well and the story will write itself*

SOURCES ARE THE BUILDING BLOCKS of your story. Get your sources lined up well and the story will write itself. Miss a key source and your story - no matter how elegant the prose, important the topic, or hard your effort - is unpublishable.

Be strenuous and self-critical in assessing your sources. Are they in a position to know the information they are giving you and are they reliable or are they just passing on hearsay? Would your reporting stand up to rigorous fact checking or other independent scrutiny? Are corroborating sources truly independent of each other? If you are reporting from a document, do you have it in your possession or have you only been told about it?

In addition to strong sourcing, good journalism also ensures that sources are transparent. A solid news story allows the audience to form its own judgement on its reliability and accuracy based on the sources provided. Clearly identifying sourcing is essential in stories about conflicts, disputes or any controversy. It is the journalist's own protection against accusations of bias or partiality and adds credibility.

Sourcing addresses the question “How do we know?” and requires active attribution. We would know “12 people died in fighting” either because somebody told us or because we personally counted the bodies. But if a guerrilla leader is the source, how do we know he is telling the truth? We might know production of pistachios is up this year because a government statement said so. But do we trust government statements? Do we need to check with others? The key is to identify sources clearly so that the reader can come to his or her own conclusions.

*The key is to identify sources so that the reader can come to his or her own conclusions*

### Planning Your Reporting

The first step for any story is to plot your sourcing and plan your reporting accordingly. Break the story idea into its simplest components, and chart the essential and optimal human sources, as well as documents, eyewitness or other accounts you would need to make the story work.

Much sourcing is common sense and core principles, but it is remarkable how often these basics - in the light of time, resource or other pressures - are neglected:

- If you are writing a profile of an individual - especially a critical one - it is imperative that you speak to that person or at least try very hard to do so. If you cannot, or the person refuses, state this in the story.
- If you are writing about a conflict, make every effort to speak to both sides, and to find a non-aligned source for independent assessment.
- If you are writing a reaction piece, for example, about a major public event, speak to a diverse selection of people on the street, as well as experts.
- If you are writing from a specific location, bring the reader there by presenting some notable details and human colour from your own eyewitness observations. Make clear to the reader that this is you, the journalist, on the spot.
- If your article is based on a report or document, do everything you possibly can to gain access to the original, and to have sources confirm its legitimacy. Be transparent and tell the reader, for example, “according to a document seen by this reporter” or “according to a document obtained by this newspaper”.

Remember the fundamental principles of international journalism are impartiality, fairness and accuracy. These goals can only be delivered through careful selection of your sources.

One further note, plan your time as well as your sources. It is essential to be well prepared before interviewing any source. But do not leave the most important source until too late. It is the reporter's nightmare to require a last call with a source to confirm a fact or obtain a balancing comment, only to find they are unavailable. Allow for the difficulty and variability of contacting people within your deadline.

*The fundamental principles of international journalism are impartiality, fairness and accuracy*

### Two-source Rule

The golden rule of sourcing is that to treat something as publishable, you need to confirm it from at least two reliable and independent sources. This means that one of the sources did not learn the information from the other or that they themselves did not learn it from the same source.

In general one should never present anything as certain until it has passed this "two sources" test. If you have only one source for a particular detail but you feel it is important to report or

there is a good reason to believe it is true, then write it as “source A says” or “source A alleges”. Where you know a fact to be in dispute, do not hide the complexity but make clear that different people have different opinions on the question.

Using a single source in such a case depends on assessing the reliability of that source and the likelihood of the facts being correct. In such cases, the source should almost always be named. Sometimes of course, only one person can know some information but be sure that is the case. Two or more sources are always best.

### Identifying Sources

In identifying sources, provide relevant detail so that the reader can come to a fair judgement about the person’s reliability. This means explaining clearly the basis of the source’s expertise and the potential points of conflict or bias.

The more scrupulous you are about this, the more trustworthy your reporting will appear. It may be necessary to include a short sentence of background to clarify context for the reader, for example to explain if a source has a financial or professional

interest in the subject, has had a long-standing dispute with the person he or she is criticising, or has some other personal involvement.

For example, if you are quoting a critical comment about government policy, the citation “commentator Hassan Ali said” is not as precise as “said Hassan Ali, a regular columnist for the leading opposition newspaper Tribune”. Or if you are quoting a comment supportive of the government, “said Randall Braithwaite, an independent expert on the region” would be misleading if the following applied “said Randall Braithwaite, a consultant who has regularly advised the government on regional issues”.

*Just because something  
is the official position  
does not mean it  
should not be checked*

### Authoritative Sources

A good source is always someone in authority who is in a position to know. A defence minister is clearly an authoritative source on matters of defence policy; so is a senior official in his ministry, especially if you can use the person's name. But he may not be the best authority on other matters such as finance or foreign affairs. Where possible always give the person's full name and title, such as Secretary for Defence Stanley Smith.

Remember also that an official or authoritative statement may not provide all the relevant facts, and indeed may be designed to hide some. Just because something is the official position does not mean it should not be checked or a contrary view should not be sought in the interest of being fair and reliable. This would especially be the case, for example, if asking a defence minister about the detailed progress of an on-going military campaign where he is a partisan and therefore may be specifically unreliable. Despite, or indeed because of, his authoritative position, he may not tell the truth or may be adding pro-government "spin" in attempt to portray events in a favourable light.

## Reporter or Eyewitness

A strong source is of course the reporter him or herself, or another reliable eyewitness who hears and sees what is being described.

It must always be clear from the context of the rest of the story that the reporter personally witnessed the events. Otherwise, the source should be mentioned: “IWPR got to the scene about 20 minutes after the blast. Correspondent Sayyid Jamal reported five bodies on the ground and dozens of policemen trying to move the crowd away.”

## No Sourcing

Specific sourcing is not necessary if information is not disputed by anyone, for instance when relaying a clear historical fact, such as “Mithalistan became an independent republic in 1654”. But remember that many historical “facts” are disputed, so be careful.

### Official Sources

An official source is someone with access to information because of his job, although not necessarily the person in charge. A police officer might be an official source about a security story, a civil servant on a story about government policy handled by his or her department, a UN or NGO worker for a story about humanitarian affairs they are working on, and so on. Always seek to quote the full name and title of the person if possible, though sometimes you may get information on the understanding that the person is not named. But always be sure then that you are not being misled.

In all cases the key is to demonstrate why the source is in a position to know the information they are telling you.

For example, “Abdel Baseer Mohammadi, a deputy at the Ministry of Economy, said prices had fallen 20 per cent since the same time last year” is better than “an official said . . .”

When sources are unnamed, describe their position as closely as possible. If the deputy in the example above refused to allow you to name him, referring to him as “a senior official at the Ministry of Economy” is, again, better than simply “an official”.

Do not make sources plural if they are singular. One policeman is “a policeman” not “police sources”. If one diplomat says something, the source is “a diplomat” not “diplomatic sources”. In all cases, avoid the imprecise term “western diplomatic officials”.

### Avoid Passive Sourcing

Passive sourcing should be avoided. Terms such as “it was understood”, “it was reported” or “it was believed” are not appropriate for international journalism. They are unclear and lazy. The report must say who “understood” or who “believed”. “It was reported” is especially irritating since that is what you are supposed to be doing. The same is true of the ubiquitous term “reportedly”. But “Radio Kabul reported” is fine if that is the source. “Everyone knows that” is definitely not a valid source.

### Location of Sourcing in a Story

Sourcing should be near the beginning of every story. Its precise location depends on how controversial the material is. If a story is about a forthcoming official visit by a president, it will

*Always tell your reader how and from where your information was obtained*

probably be an undisputed fact (unless it is a secret visit), so the sourcing need not be in the first paragraph. If it is secret then the story must show right at the beginning how the reporter knows his facts, and will require reliable sourcing.

If the visit is actually taking place and everyone can see it, then it may not even need a specific source. What happens on the visit will need clear sourcing. Any facts that could be challenged or are doubtful will need a source close to the stated fact. With an allegation especially, the source usually needs to be at the beginning.

### Context

Always tell your reader how and from where the information was obtained. For example, “said at a news conference”, “in a statement to reporters”, or “in an interview with this newspaper”. Avoid the showy and overused term “exclusive interview”.

If some quotations from a source come from a previously published report, a document or public statement, and other quotations within the same article come from a direct interview, clearly identify which is which.

## Sourcing Opinions

If the story involves a dispute between two or more parties, and only one side of the dispute is immediately available, use sources for facts not opinions and make sure it is clear that the story has been sourced from only one party.

An opinion can be important, however, if it has a relevance to the dispute in question. It might be proper to report, “A Mithalistani diplomat today accused Sakhestan of promoting evil policies”, as such an accusation obviously represents a factor relevant in the dispute between the sides.

But opinions should always be openly sourced. In such cases, do everything you can to avoid anonymous sourcing. If someone has something harsh to say, they should be willing to stand by it and put their name to it.

Finally, remember the rules of impartiality and balance. Your report should not take sides in the dispute, and must take care to present the opinions as viewpoints, not as facts. If you are writing a critical report, you must allow the other side a fair response.

*Opinions should  
always be sourced*

### Explaining Sourcing Ground Rules

It is imperative to explain journalistic ground rules carefully, and to observe them scrupulously. This is especially the case with members of the public, who will not be acquainted with the way the media works. People who have made you welcome deserve to know what will happen, so be open with them if you are going to quote them. Public figures and officials will be more used to dealing with the press, but it is always useful to clarify the ground rules before you begin an interview:

- *On the record*: this means the journalist may use the information in full, and name the person speaking. You should always try to gain the interviewee's consent to speak on this basis, such as by citing the public interest of his or her remarks.
- *Not for attribution*: this means the information and the quotations may be used, but the name must be withheld. The journalist should agree with the subject how he or she will be identified, and should negotiate to make this as specific as possible (ie, "member of the army general staff" is much better than "an officer").

- *On background*: this means that neither the name of the source nor the information or quotes may be used. It provides the journalist with facts that can help direct his or her reporting, but which cannot be used unless independently verified.

Similarly with images or voice recording, ask permission before using a camera or other device and make it clear if you intend to publish someone's photograph.

A journalist must never break his or her own commitments to these rules, and while interviewing must indicate clearly in notes if the ground rules during a conversation change. Sometimes it may be possible to bring "background" information on the record through a subsequent conversation, such as by explaining that other sources have provided corroboration, but only by clear and cordial agreement. Note that the term "off the record" is common, but may be taken to mean either "not for attribution" or "on background" and thus its usage should be clarified.

*Explain journalistic ground rules carefully, and observe them scrupulously*

*If a source is unwilling to put his or her name on the record, be sure you are not giving them a free licence to spread lies and rumours*

### Anonymous Sources

If a source is unwilling to put his or her name on the record, be sure you are not giving them a free license to spread lies and rumours. They may have a legitimate reason, such as fear of reprisal for speaking out. But if they won't put their name to something they have said, think carefully whether you are willing to put it in your story under your own byline, too.

*The New York Times* has had a few scandals in recent years, but it also has one of the most detailed codes of conduct in the business. As highlighted on the website of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, former executive editor Joseph Lelyveld developed a simple two-question test before using anonymous sources:

1. How much direct knowledge does the source have of the event?
2. What, if any, motive might the source have for misleading us, “spinning” the story, or hiding important facts that might alter our impression of the information?

Only after these questions were answered satisfactorily, would *The Times* run with the source. And then, as far as possible, the paper would suggest how the source was in a position to know

the information it provided (“a source who has seen the document”, for example) and what special interest that source might have (“a source inside the office of the general staff”, for example).

## EXERCISES

Sourcing a story can often confront journalists with difficult professional and ethical choices. Take a look at the examples and questions below and discuss your views with colleagues:

1. A source has read you an extract from a secret government document on serious safety problems with the country’s nuclear reactors and you have made a note of the text. The source is aware you are going to use the information as the basis for a story and has allowed you to cite “sources close to the government”.
  - What are the potential pitfalls?
  - Would you try to verify the story with another source?
  - If you cannot verify the story, would you publish what you have?
  - Are there other sources you might want to speak to?

2. This same source is called out of the room abruptly on an urgent telephone call.
  - Do you sit patiently and wait, or quickly rifle through the secret report left in open view on his desk?
3. A car bomb has exploded in the centre of Baghdad and word is filtering back to the press that many civilians have been killed and injured. It looks like the bomb may have been outside one of the hotels used by foreign journalists but the area has been cordoned off and no one can get near.
  - Who can you ring to get information? Think of all the possible sources that could be approached, ranging from hard facts about the number of dead and injured to a detailed description of the scene.
4. What is wrong with the following phrases:
  - It is reliably understood...
  - People say that...
  - Word in the capital is that...
  - It was patently obvious that...

## ADDITIONAL READING & REFERENCES

Help on finding experts:

**[www.ibiblio.org/slanews/internet/experts.html](http://www.ibiblio.org/slanews/internet/experts.html)**

Policy.com, a non-partisan site for links to policy issues:

**[www.policy.com](http://www.policy.com)**

Poynter Institute tips on evaluating the value of sources:

**[www.poynter.org/content/content\\_view.asp?id=4634](http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=4634)**

Use the helpful search engine on the website of the Project for Excellence in Journalism (**[www.journalism.org](http://www.journalism.org)**) to find various tips and discussions on sourcing problems.

## Chapter 5

# Interview Techniques



*Getting people to tell you what they know can be very difficult*

DETERMINING WHO HAS THE INFORMATION you need for a story is often straightforward. It may be the victim of an attack, the officer who made an arrest or the official who oversees an organisation.

But getting people actually to tell you what they know can be far more difficult.

There are many reasons for people not to share information with you:

- The victim of a disaster may be traumatised.
- A politician may be busy or simply tired of speaking to journalists.
- A local citizen may have a general distrust of the press, may have had a bad experience previously, or may find the formality of an interview off-putting.
- A potential whistle-blower may fear that talking could put him in danger or jeopardise his career.
- Many sources will be less than forthcoming because they have something to hide.

The underlying approach is to have confidence in your public role as a journalist. The issues you are working on are of public importance, and your right and responsibility to obtain information is a central component of any democratic society. You don't want to belabour the point, but you are working in the public interest, and this should give you confidence to press on.

Beyond that, every journalist adopts his or her own manner for getting people to talk. Some reporters may be abrupt, challenging a source to give a crisp and clear reply; others may be more conversational, seeking to coax information out slowly.

In general, the best method is to put people at ease, show respect and attentiveness, and be honest, serious and straightforward. No one wants to talk to someone they feel they cannot trust.

Careful preparation is essential. Avoid asking a busy source basic factual information you could obtain elsewhere. Boring or annoying a source is not a good idea. Demonstrating your understanding of a topic - not by talking endlessly yourself but through thoughtful and informed questions - will command respect in return.

*The best method to get a source to talk is to put him or her at ease, show respect and attentiveness, and be honest, serious and straightforward*

*It is typical to begin interviews with friendly queries, building trust before driving in on harder issues*

It is important to know what you want to ask, and to pose your questions in a structured way. Following the chronology of an event is the most straightforward, and often best, method. In many cases, especially for short news articles, you should know the kind of quotes or replies you are seeking to fill out your article. But if an interview shows that the story is developing differently, do not try to force it into your earlier assumption.

If you need to ask difficult questions, it is typical to begin an interview with more friendly queries, building trust and a relaxed atmosphere, before driving in on harder issues. If you are seeking to query someone about a contradiction, try to get him to express it first, and then try to explain it. If you confront him bluntly, he may just go into denial.

In all cases, your information should be well documented, especially if you are asking critical questions. “Going fishing” with a large unsubstantiated allegation is not only bad form, it loses you the opportunity to solicit valuable information or at least a usable response. Your source will be able to dismiss the charge too easily and may also bring the interview to a precipitous close.

It is essential to observe excellent habits of accuracy and transparency in dealing with people you interview. This means keeping a note of the exact time of every conversation and making a log recording all calls, messages left and faxes sent to a party (e-mails create their own records). This is especially important to be able to prove that you have made a reasonable effort to obtain a fair comment before publishing a critical article, particularly in the case of a legal dispute. If a source disputes quotations or information you have attributed to him, your editor may ask to see your notes.

Remember that many sources speak to journalists not only to impart information but also to obtain it. They are willing to tell you something, if they feel they are getting back some fresh facts in return - and perhaps an inclination of what you learned from whom. This is not necessarily a problem as long as you do not break confidence with other sources and only share information you intend to go public with anyway. But try to avoid being used by your sources.

Indeed, if you build a critical case carefully, the subject of your story will have to talk to you and will want to talk to you. If you

*Healthy scepticism is one of the reporter's best tools and should be second nature*

gather your facts responsibly and credibly, and demonstrate trustworthiness, even a source you are going to criticise in print will want the opportunity to hear your arguments and information first, and to provide a rebuttal. But this is only as long as they have confidence that you will treat them honestly by fairly portraying their views in the story.

Even if a source is forthcoming with information, a reporter must assess its accuracy. That means listening carefully. But, of course, do not accept everything as the truth. People may want to mislead you, they may believe they know something they do not, or they may pass on hearsay and rumour as fact. Sometimes they may try to tell you what they think you want to hear.

Healthy scepticism is one of the reporter's best tools and should be second nature. But do not act accusingly. Take the role of seeking better understanding. "How do you know that?" can sound accusing. It may be better to find a more sympathetic tone that makes the person want to share his or her knowledge. Express interest in how knowledgeable your source is and how he or she could know such things. Avoid intimidating them, and they may be more likely to explain if their information comes

from their own knowledge or from another source. When you do challenge your subject, do so with facts, not opinions.

Asking a person to explain how something happened when other reports or sources show other possible causes or effects may give that person a greater sense of importance. Remember different people may have differing views of an incident, so you may need to clarify where people were standing. Someone might say the left wing of a plane hit the ground and another might say the right wing. It could depend on whether they were in front or in back of the plane.

Remember too that a truthful person may omit or forget relevant facts and seemingly minor details that would help clarify the information. This is another reason for getting clarification (as well as for multiple sourcing).

Careful listening may also help you assess if a person is fabricating events. Ask sources to start at the beginning and tell you what happened in order. Ask straightforward, factual questions and don't pre-empt their answers. Often allowing for a bit of silence compels the source to think, and answer more truthfully. If something seems unclear or incorrect, come back

*When you challenge your subject, do so with facts, not opinions*

*Seeing through the fog  
of misinformation  
requires keeping an  
open, curious mind*

to the subject later, and ask the same simple question again.

Most of all, seeing through the fog of misinformation requires keeping an open, curious mind. Do not jump to conclusions. Life is much more complicated, and far more interesting.

### Interview Strategies

- Ask your questions and let the news source talk. When you are talking, you are not getting information.
- Your attention makes the source feel more important, even valuable - a feeling everyone likes. But be attentive to them, not showy or off-putting.
- Demonstrate empathy, without compromising yourself. Show that you understand the person's position, even if you don't agree with it.
- Some people never get to talk. They are always spurned, their presence ignored, their opinions discounted. Treat such people sensitively and they are likely to be more open with information and offers of help.
- Journalism demands accuracy. Paying strict attention to the

person interviewed will avoid making errors. Don't hesitate to check unclear notes with the source. It is better to admit that you can't read your handwriting than to garble your facts.

- Watch for inconsistencies and important facts. You might not get a second chance to spot them.

If a source refuses to speak with you, a useful strategy is to address them shortly before publication with a specific list of questions in writing, indicating the nature of your reporting. Explain clearly that you wish to hear their views, and give them a firm deadline. Often when the subject of an article sees the information you have uncovered, they will feel compelled to reply to get their side of the story across.

## EXERCISES

To recap, in this section you have learned:

- Sources are people too, and have many reasons for not talking.
- Always be sceptical, but do not sound like an accuser or a cynic.
- You learn more by listening than by talking.
- Show empathy, but do not suggest that you are taking sides.
- Start with soft questions to put people at ease before getting to tough ones.
- Listen for nuances and inconsistencies in answers, and probe them.
- Use your senses - especially your eyes and ears - in assessing the truth.
- Research and prepare your questions carefully; know your source well.
- Keep questions short and to the point but give people time to think.
- Listen to the answers, do not harass, and always keep an open mind.

Look at the following examples and discuss with your colleagues how you would react:

1. In an exercise in Chapter Four, a government official leaked part of an official report outlining safety problems at a country's nuclear reactors. As part of your investigation you managed to find the senior manager of a nuclear plant who was ready to "blow the whistle" and go into details of what he claims is an extensive cover-up programme aimed at hiding the danger from the public.

The whistle blower agrees to meet you at a hotel for an interview but sets four pre-conditions:

- a) That you come alone.
- b) That you do not tape the conversation or take notes.
- c) That you guarantee that you will never reveal his name even if the government prosecutes you.
- d) That your news organisation will compensate him financially if he loses his job as a result of the story.

He is very nervous and tells you on the phone that he is worried he is being followed and could be put in jail and tortured for revealing state secrets.

- Do you agree to his four conditions?
  - What is the balance between the risks and benefits of the potential story?
  - Who would you talk to at your news organisation before proceeding?
2. A low level official at a relief agency calls you and says he wants to tell you the “real story” of bribery in the organisation and how western aid is being siphoned off to corrupt government officials. He says the story is dynamite and you have to pay him \$10,000 for it since he was sacked from his job last week and has to feed his family. He will meet you for an interview if you agree to his demand.
- How do you proceed? Would you interview this man and would you agree to his terms?
  - What are the potential pitfalls?
  - If you think this story is worth pursuing, what other routes might you take?

## ADDITIONAL READING & REFERENCES

*Violence – A Guide to Ethical Reporting about Victims & Trauma*, by William Cote & Roger Simpson, published by Columbia University Press.

“Getting the Most from Your Interview”, from the Project for Excellence in Journalism:

[www.journalism.org/resources/tools/reporting/interviewing/themost.asp](http://www.journalism.org/resources/tools/reporting/interviewing/themost.asp)

## Chapter 6

# Use of Detail



*Always ensure your story passes what journalists often call the 'so what?' test*

THE CORRECT AMOUNT OF DETAIL is vital. Think of it like working the zoom on a camera lens. Zoom in too far and you will have lots of detail but no sense of the broader picture and why it is relevant. Zoom out too far and you will see a broad expanse but nothing detailed enough to be of real interest in the photograph.

The key piece of information in your story, of course, is the news - a politician elected, a development project implemented, the number of people killed or injured. But be sure to include the detail that makes it relevant and newsworthy: Is it the first outbreak of violence in a certain region? Is it a key opposition victory in a local election which signals trouble for the government in the coming general vote? Has a central plank been laid in the West's development strategy?

In each of these examples, it is important to give the news and say why it is news. Always ensure your story passes what journalists often call the "so what?" test.

Supplementary detail is essential to help the reader keep going without stumbling over simple questions - the name and orientation of a political party, the location of a town, the

background of a leader. The reporter's job is to provide information, not to give the reader a news quiz.

Yet in providing this detail, try to find concise and discreet ways to tuck the information into your story, without breaking the flow. This may mean folding details in paragraph by paragraph. For example, a sharp lead for a story may highlight a breakthrough for the country's "leading opposition party", but then not give the full name of the party until the second or third paragraph, in order to get the main news into the very top of the piece. The idea here is not to clutter up the top of the story with too much detail too early.

Note that English is particularly well suited to this purpose, allowing supplementary clauses to be added easily between commas, following a long dash or in very short informative sentences. The process may not always be as straightforward in some other languages.

*Do not assume prior knowledge from your readers*

### **Basic Identification**

The main rule is to provide basic identifying information for all people and organisations you mention in your story. Do not assume prior knowledge from your readers.

On first reference, provide the full name and proper title of all individuals - Lieut. Gen. George Jackson, not General Jackson; Deputy Prime Minister Martin Smith, not Martin Smith.

Include basic geographical information: Tetovo, the Albanian-majority city west of the capital; Nakhichevan, the Azeri province west of Armenia; Hohenwald, a rural town 100 miles south of the state capital, Nashville.

Give the full name of a political party or organisation on first reference - the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), not simply the initials. Provide a brief identification for context unless it is entirely clear - Party for Democratic Action (SDA), the leading Muslim party.

Major international organisations and other very common acronyms do not need to be spelled out, but err on the side of caution. EU, UN, U.S., NATO are acceptable on their own, but

you need to spell out in full organisations such as the Office of the High Representative (OHR), International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). (Note that in Associated Press style, the acronym for the United States includes full stops, in order to distinguish it from the plural pronoun “us”).

It is always best to avoid the over-use of acronyms. Do provide the acronym in first use in parenthesis after the name, as in the above examples. But only do so if the initials will be used later in the story on second reference, or for clarity’s sake, if the common acronym is taken from the local language and would not be readily apparent in the English translation - eg, Party of Democratic Action (SDA).

In extended articles, especially where there are many names, provide a short reminder to re-identify a character or a source if he or she re-appears in the story long after the second reference, as in: “Dr. Faizal, the opposition leader . . .”

*It is important to provide adequate detail to explain how a character relates to the subject of the story*

### Background Detail

As with sources, it is important to provide adequate detail above and beyond basic identification to explain how a character relates to the subject of the story. Again, this is part of passing the “So What?” test, telling why someone is important or authoritative.

For example, if you are writing a story about difficult living conditions in Kabul and you interview a street seller, you should not just describe him as “Abdullah, a resident of Kabul”, but “Abdullah Karimi, 43, who lives in Microrayon and sells CDs in the bazaar to support his wife and 10 children”. This allows the reader to come a better judgement about what Abdullah has to say. It is also more interesting!

Similarly, if you were reporting a story about a bomb attack and were describing the scene by quoting a policeman, “Pierre Dupont, a police officer who was on the scene shortly after the attack, said . . .” is much better than “a policeman said . . .”

## Contextual Detail

Always consider whether your audience needs context to understand who or what someone is. The amount of context required will vary depending on the audience but some context is nearly always essential.

For example, for a Serbian audience, you do not need to describe who Zoran Djindjic was and can simply write “Zoran Djindjic, the late prime minister”. But if you are writing for an international audience, you might need to add more detail like “Zoran Djindjic, the Serbian prime minister who was assassinated in March 2003”.

Places also may need context: not just “the Badakhshan province of Tajikistan”, but “Badakhshan, a high-altitude, remote province part of Tajikistan on the south-eastern border with Afghanistan and China”.

Consider whether detail could be added which is relevant to the story. If, for example, the Helmand province of Afghanistan is mentioned in a story about production of opium, it is relevant that the province is the country’s biggest producer of the drug. So instead of saying simply “Government troops entered

*If you are in doubt about the right level of detail, provide more rather than less*

Helmand to destroy crops of poppies”, you might write “Government forces entered Helmand, the largest opium producing area in the country, to destroy poppy crops”.

As a reporter, if you are in doubt about the right level of detail, provide more rather than less. That gives the editor the choice of whether to include all the detail you report or not. If you omit details about the scene, or people you have interviewed, he or she cannot include it later.

### Colour and Voices

Do not forget to use all of your senses when conveying a story to your readers. The classic rule of fiction writing - that it is better to show an event than to re-tell it - holds true for journalism, too. This means providing colour, human voices and other details that will bring the scene to life.

The best journalist can find the short telling detail which can bring a scene alive: the noise on the street, the smell in the air, a bead of sweat pouring down the cheek of a soldier standing at attention. As a reporter, push yourself to get the telling quote which will sum up the story in the words of a local participant.

Quotations, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 7, provide more than information; they give the reader a strong sense of location and people’s feelings, and make your story more immediate.

Feature articles, particularly in U.S. newspapers, will often begin with a small scene from the ground to give a human dimension to a larger issue. Again, this is called the “delayed drop”.

A story about the slow delivery of humanitarian aid, for example, may begin with a brief description of the day-to-day struggle for survival in a refugee camp, which illustrates the broader issue. Bringing the story to life in this way can transform what could be a dry political or bureaucratic article into an urgent, human report, engaging the reader’s own human interest.

## EXERCISES

To recap what has been learned in this chapter:

- Detail is essential to help a reader understand why a story is in fact “news” or to help answer the “So What?” test.
- Do not overload stories with acronyms but do use them if an organisation with a long complicated name needs to be mentioned often lower down.
- Contextual detail is important but varies according to the needs of different readers. Each case needs to be assessed on its own merits.
- Colour can bring a story to life but needs to be used carefully and with skill.

Discuss with colleagues the following example and possible ways of constructing the story:

You are a reporter working in Sudan where civil unrest means that humanitarian aid is failing to get through to the starving population. The situation in relief camps is dire and you have just returned from one camp with your own disturbing

eyewitness assessment of the crisis. On your return to the capital, as you are considering how to write your story, an official from the Red Cross calls and offers you an advance copy of a previously unpublished report into the situation. The report voices strong criticism about how aid is being distributed and offers concrete proposals for improvement. You are now in the possession of first-hand knowledge of conditions in the camp and an exclusive report.

- How would you construct your news story?
- What would be the balance between description of conditions and “hard news” of the report?
- One version of your story will be for an African publication. Another version has been commissioned for the U.S. market. What would be the difference in level of detail between the two?

### ADDITIONAL READING & REFERENCES

Tip sheets on writing and editing from the Poynter Institute's online site:

[www.poynter.org/content/content\\_view.asp?id=31907&sid=2](http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=31907&sid=2)

*On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*,  
by William Zinsser (HarperCollins)

## Chapter 7

# Quotations

QUOTATIONS ARE LIKE SEASONING on food: they spice up the flavour and add the feeling of being there. But there are also dangers. Too many quotes, and your story can become a jumble of indistinguishable voices.

There are two kinds of quotations: direct and indirect.

### Direct Quotation

The right direct quotations will convey a view point directly and strongly, and with more impact than an indirect quotation.

*“Mr Smith, why did you kill so many people? Why did you rape our daughters and sisters?” Barbara Brown, one of the delegates, demanded, according to several independent witnesses. “Enough is enough.”*

Quite clearly, the direct quotation above is much more powerful than the indirect version below:

*Barbara Brown asked Mr Smith why he had killed so many people and raped so many women, several independent witnesses said.*



*Quotations spice up the flavour and add the feeling of being there*

*The primary rule is that direct quotations must not be changed in any way*

The advantage of indirect quotations is that they are usually shorter, and can be compressed to make the point you want more efficiently. Where the direct quotation is long-winded, an indirect quotation allows it to be summarised. So unless there is a dramatic or other point to be made, indirect - sometimes called reported speech - may be better.

The primary rule is that direct quotations must not be changed in any way. What appears within quotation marks must be precisely what the speaker said. When you use a direct quotation, you are telling the reader that these are the exact words spoken.

To change those words is to invent. If you have not taken a precise note of what somebody said at the time, or you have not recorded it properly, you cannot use a direct quote. To violate this rule is a breach of good practice and ethics, and is very likely to undermine your ability to get interviews with the same or other sources in the future.

Direct quotes should be used to carry information that is dramatic or unusual, not mundane or ordinary. Do not use long direct quotations from officials simply because they are senior

or because it might please them. Where an extended quotation needs to be cited, an efficient method is to combine direct and indirect quotation, by summarising main points and then directly quoting the key words or sentence to provide impact. Be careful not to use direct quotes out of context where their meaning is changed.

### Indirect Quotation

The purpose of indirect quotation or reported speech is to compress a lot of information into a small space. Unlike direct quotes, the reporter is free to rearrange the words a speaker has said in order to present them in a different order, or to emphasise one particular thing over another. This is often important to present a more logical, cleaner and sharper structure than that used by the speaker. But this method should be used only in the interest of being clear and concise, and the meaning conveyed must not be changed or distorted.

Compare the actual direct quotation from a speech below with a far more concise presentation of the same information in an indirect quotation following.

**Direct quotation** – Mohammadi said: “Many of our experts have experience in business abroad. Fifteen per cent of the 300 million dollars is allocated to a fund which provides a minority stake in businesses which will be set up related to the roads - running petrol stations, repairing equipment and so on. In addition, the donors guarantee that projects which win funding from the Technology Sub-Committee will have first access to other funds available for investment in the private sector. Mithalistani experts who come back to work on the project as managers will automatically be eligible to apply for these funds. We want to use the project so that hundreds of Mithali experts come back with their families, work on the roads project itself for six months to a year and then set up businesses. We have officially approved 37 projects and of these I think maybe half a dozen are already in business.”

**Indirect quotation** – Mohammadi said that an investment fund holding \$45 million allocated to the programme had already approved 37 joint ventures with Mithalistani nationals for businesses related to road programmes, such as petrol stations and repair shops. Of these, six were already up and running.

The shorter, indirect version is sharper and clearer than the long, convoluted and boring direct version. The indirect quotation uses only 43 words. The direct one uses over three times as many. Excessive use of long, direct quotations also gives the impression that the journalist is not truly independent or professional and may be trying to impress or gain favour with the speaker. It may also give your editor the impression that you are just filling space or can't be bothered to find out what the real story is.

*Only the exact words spoken by a source should appear within quotation marks*

### Checking & Editing Quotations

When editing quotations to make them fit, do not change the sense or distort the meaning. Where a quote cannot be easily made to fit without changing the meaning, put it in reported, indirect speech. Only the exact words spoken by a source should appear within quotation marks.

When in doubt, check back with the source. Fact-checking a quotation can be problematic, as reading back a full quote may tempt the source to fiddle with or deny his earlier comments, leaving the journalist in a difficult position. The best approach

*Comparing notes  
with your colleagues  
can be risky: remember you  
are responsible for your  
own reporting*

is to explain that you have an editorial policy not to read back quotations verbatim, but rather to fact-check the substance of the remarks. In any event, the source should appreciate the care you are taking to get it right.

After a press conference, it is not uncommon to see a group of journalists comparing their notes, asking each other, “What exactly did he say?” This can be a risky business. Through such lazy pack reporting habits, an error by one reporter can be replicated and multiplied through many other media. But journalists often help each other out in this way and it can be useful to identify one or two very trusted colleagues with whom you may compare notes. Still, be careful, and remember you are responsible for your own reporting! Of course taping a press conference (see later in this chapter) can avoid many of these problems.

If the words themselves may not be changed, direct quotations can be shortened through the use of ellipses, square brackets and other interruptions.

Three points indicates that some words have been cut from within a sentence, as in: “The judgment is not proportional to

the crimes it is based on,” the prosecutor declared. “The accused . . . deserves no less than 20 years’ imprisonment.” Note that the points should be typed with a single space between each (avoid Microsoft Word’s automatic ellipsis feature).

Four points indicates that one or more sentences have been cut, as in: “Two of the greatest challenges facing us today are the reconstruction of Iraq and the reconstruction of Afghanistan. . . But much work remains to be done,” Secretary of State Colin Powell acknowledged to the Congressional committee. Note that with four points, the first serves as a full stop, with spacing accordingly.

Square brackets are used to indicate an editorial insertion, which should only be for the purpose of clarification, as in: “Despite his appalling human rights record, the West has continued to support [Mithalistan President Shepi] Maartens,” said Moscow-based analyst Alexei Baryshnikov.

The use of *(sic)* informs the reader that an awkward phrasing or ungrammatical sentence was in the spoken or written language and is not a typographical or editor’s error.

Alternatively, to avoid ellipses, breaks may be inserted as follows: “The accused,” said the prosecutor, “deserves no less than 20 years’ imprisonment.” This method, however, should only be used when necessary to maintain the flow, and must not distort or misrepresent quoted material.

### Recording & Note-taking

The intimacy of a private conversation can be disturbed by the use of a mini-disc or tape-recorder but they can be invaluable for covering press conferences.

In the same vein, the process of taking notes can distract the journalist from the interview itself or can give the interviewee pause. There is nothing like a sudden flurry of note taking to make a source feel concerned that they have begun to say too much. Yet accuracy, especially in presenting direct quotations, demands careful recording of conversations.

Journalists deal with this dilemma in many ways. An effective approach is to learn shorthand. This is an invaluable life-long tool, and even minimal proficiency will provide great benefits. Two very effective English-language shorthand systems are

called Teeline and Pitman. Self-teaching handbooks can be purchased over the Internet and a web search will also turn up various distance-learning courses.

A simplified version, derivative of shorthand, is to write omitting vowels. This will speed up your writing, while leaving you still able to make out the sense of your notes.

Whatever system you use, it is important to review your notebook soon after the interview, to jog your memory and enable you to recover any lost - or illegible - notes.

But in all cases where your source will allow, it makes best sense to use a recording device. Remind them that this is solely to ensure a faithful and full reporting of their remarks. Accuracy is in both your interests.

Even while recording, many journalists will also take notes, or at least jot down the most important quotations. Double-checking your recording equipment, microphone, batteries, tapes and discs beforehand is essential, but foul-ups do occur. There is little to match the horror of conducting a brilliant interview, only to find out afterwards that the tape recorder didn't work.

*Review your notebook soon after the interview to jog your memory and enable you to recover any lost - or illegible - notes*

It is common to meet sources in coffee shops or other public places. But this may limit their comfort in talking, especially if you want to take notes or record. Be especially careful if conducting an interview in a restaurant or café: the clinking of glassware and other background noise can drown out their voices, so be sure to put the microphone or recorder as close to them as possible.

With important interviews, it is invaluable to transcribe the entire recording. The process is labour-intensive. But the full context for the discussion, and extended quotations, are often stronger than you may have realised in the first instance. Transcripts are also easier to maintain and review from your archives for later use than a daunting and poorly labelled stack of old tapes.

Make sure you date your transcripts and notebooks and then store them. If there is a problem with a story or, in a worst case scenario, a legal challenge, you will need recourse to your original notes. Many western media organisations advise that notebooks be kept for a period of three years.

## EXERCISES

Discuss the following examples with your colleagues and the dilemmas that sometimes arise over sourcing:

1. You have conducted a lengthy on the record interview with a development agency executive who has made several forthright remarks, accusing his local management of taking bribes and corruption. You have written a hard-hitting story, based on the best quotes, but before the article goes to publication the executive calls you in a state of high anxiety. He is certain, he says, that the interview will cost him his job and, he fears, it could even endanger his life. He would like to work with you to tone down the quotes.
  - Who would you discuss the situation with?
  - What are the pros and cons of agreeing to his request?
2. You have conducted an exclusive on the record interview with the prime minister of your country. In it, he has criticised in no uncertain terms the policies of several of his ministers, accusing them of being disloyal to the

government and endangering the country's economy. Shortly after you return to the office, his press secretary rings and says the prime minister has had second thoughts and the interview is now off the record. He lets it be known, unofficially, that the prime minister is worried that a story will bring down his coalition government.

- How do you react to the press secretary's request?
- Who would you discuss the situation with?
- What are the pros and cons of agreeing to his request?

### ADDITIONAL READING & REFERENCES

Poynter Institute's Online site on whether to "clean up" quotes:  
[www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=1&aid=2912](http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=1&aid=2912)

*The Washington Post* policy on quotes:

[www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=45&aid=61190](http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=45&aid=61190)

To tape or not to tape:

[www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=52&aid=15200](http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=52&aid=15200)

## Chapter 8

# News Judgement and Story Types

TRYING TO DEFINE just what exactly is “news” is difficult. But knowing how to identify a story to research is perhaps a journalist’s most vital skill. This chapter examines issues of news judgement and examines the different story types commonly used.

Most journalists would agree with the cliché that “Dog bites man” is not news, but “Man bites dog” is. Why? Simply because the first happens all the time and the second is an unusual, not to say bizarre, occurrence.

But there are also more down to earth ways of looking at what makes a story. New, in its simplest terms, is something that has happened. It can be an event or a trend, something that occurred suddenly, or something on-going. Someone won something, or lost. Conflict erupted, or was resolved. Something was built, or destroyed. Someone failed, or they succeeded.

A good story has a beginning, a middle and an end. It responds to the six questions set out in Chapter 3: who, what, when, where, why and how? Remember to think of the reader, and what would make him or her want to read your article: Did something happen? Is it new? Is it interesting?



*Knowing how to identify a story to research is perhaps a journalist’s most vital skill*

*Knowing the news intimately is the best way to tell whether your story idea is new*

### Story vs. Issue

One of the biggest difficulties, especially for young journalists, is distinguishing between a story and an issue. A story may be about an issue. But an issue is in itself not a story.

In discussing story ideas, many reporters say that they are concerned about a subject in their community and want to write about it. This is very positive, but not enough. Poverty, education, security - these are subjects.

A journalist has to dig deeper to find an event, a development, perhaps a trend to be able to construct a narrative in which something distinct occurs.

### Following the Peg

The other essential component of story selection is keeping up with the news. Knowing the news intimately is the best way to tell whether your story idea is new.

There is little point in trying to write a story about something which has already been widely covered in the media. A short news piece, or a feature article, should be fresh and should break

new ground. That means something new has happened. It may also mean you have a fresh angle, or a new source, to add to the information which has already been published.

The “news peg” is a problematic concept which refers to what is of news interest or is the subject of particular debate at the moment. Just as your editor will not want an article on something the newspaper has already covered, he or she will also tend to be uninterested in subjects which are totally out of the news.

The balance is never entirely clear and different editors will view the question of the peg differently. Some journalists resent the whole concept of the peg as a very limiting, pack-like approach to media. They argue that it is up to individual media organisations to determine what is news, not to follow events blindly. But when a big story breaks, the power of the peg is undeniable.

Following the peg means targeting stories that relate to the key events and issues of the moment. It could mean a story directly about a major news issue - say, the assassination of a prime minister. Or it could mean an off-angle piece that contributes to

*When a big story breaks,  
the power of the peg is  
undeniable*

*Read your own newspaper,  
your rival newspaper, and  
newspapers with views you  
strongly oppose*

the subject - say, about the prevalence of violence and gun-culture in the society. Often an article can be adjusted to relate to the peg through editing of the lead. But be aware that pieces may also often be spiked if the news peg shifts too radically.

In any event, you must be aware of the main news at all times. This underscores the single most important task of a journalist, namely, to be an avid news consumer. Read everything you can. Read your own newspaper, your rival newspaper, and newspapers with views you strongly oppose. Try to read newspapers from other countries, and surf the web. Build a usual set of media you try to follow and make a regular habit of reviewing them. Amid that, follow the electronic media, especially the key morning and main evening news bulletins.

### Horses for Courses

How do you know what sort of story people are interested in? The answer is that different people are interested in different stories, according to their background, profession, or where they live.

The first rule then is to consider your audience. Is it a story they are interested in? That they should know about? For example, an international audience will not be interested in an ordinary car crash, which killed two people on a local road, unless they are foreigners or someone internationally known. But a local audience will be.

Similarly, stories may interest an international audience because they are unusual for them, even if a local audience takes them for granted. For example, whale hunting in the Faroe Islands; a likely tourist resort; an interesting archaeological feature or a colourful local festival.

The car crash might even produce a follow-up feature if it points up how bad the roads are, how maintenance has failed and that the latest accident has raised attention to the need for more work on the roads or other safety measures. Potential features exist all around and that is what makes them worth looking for. A good journalist uses eyes, ears and lots of acquired knowledge to get features.

## Story Types

Many news organisations divide stories into four main types, a practice which is also followed by IWPR. In selecting your story you should therefore know what kind of story you intend to write:

- **News** – A report about an event or a trend. It should be punchy, balanced and relatively short.
- **Feature** – An extended narrative allowing more in-depth reporting into an event, a trend, a place or a personality (sometimes known as a “profile”).
- **Analysis** – An analysis of a news event or a trend, often quoting a range of protagonists and experts; analysis may suggest a viewpoint but should present a diversity of opinions with a moderate and balanced tone.
- **Comment** – A partisan viewpoint, presenting a personal perspective and often a strong argument, including recommendations for addressing a problem.

It is imperative in selecting your story that you are also clear with yourself, and explicit with your editor, about which type of story

you intend to write. Most stories for IWPR will be news and features, with regular analysis. Comment is occasional and often limited to known experts or journalists with established bylines.

In order to uphold principles of impartiality, it is essential to distinguish among different types of stories, and in particular to keep news and comment separate.

*News is something that happens: a plane crashes, a politician is killed, war breaks out*

## News Stories

News stories can be divided into two different kinds: spot or breaking news or set-piece news. Sometimes the latter category is called “diary” material because a news organisation knows when something is scheduled to take place and has it down in the diary to cover.

1. Spot news – Spot news is what most people understand as news in its hardest form. It is something that just happens: a plane crashes, a gunman assassinates a politician, a severe storm destroys homes, war breaks out, an earthquake rocks a region, a volcano erupts and so on. The 24-hour news channels call it “breaking news” and run a banner across the bottom of the screen to draw viewers’ attention.

2. Set-piece news – Set-piece news is usually predictable (as above, it can often be in the office diary). It revolves around scheduled events planned in advance: the president of a country delivering a key speech for example, or a company announcing its financial results for the past year. Anniversaries are also sometimes viewed as a good reason to write articles, for example about a historic event, assessing 10 years of independence or a decade after a tragedy.

It can be wise to prepare background for a story in advance. But remember that the unexpected often happens: breaking news can interrupt set-piece news - the president is shot while speaking or is jeered or falls over; or the speaker diverges from prepared remarks. So the journalist must be ready for this. Reporters have ended up in trouble by writing set-piece news in advance without checking what actually happened, only to find out - sometimes from the competition - that things turned out very differently. This is false reporting, and a good reporter must watch for sudden events.

## Features

1. Investigative Features – Sometimes the news is the story itself. This is because, while nothing in particular has happened, and no event has taken place, investigative research in the article reveals information that changes our understanding of events which have already taken place, or are under way.

After a major conflict, journalists produce books and extended articles based on inside information from the participants: politicians, diplomats, generals. The war is long over, but these reports explain the course of events in a way we did not understand previously.

In other examples, an investigative feature may reveal conditions in a workplace, problems facing a minority community, a growing environmental crisis or perhaps positive advances being made in the educational system. The drama in these stories is the on-going cumulative effect, and in digging out the information, the journalist makes it into news.

*Remember that people  
are always of interest  
to other people*

2. Colour Features & Human Interest – These can be the most fun and certainly provide the journalist with a lot of creative writing opportunities. Such features do not need to be “hard news”. They could be entertaining as well as informative, for example a story about a political leader, about travel or food. Sport and entertainment are other popular themes. These are often called “human interest” stories. After all, a good publication should not be all heavy and serious. The key to writing features is first of all good ideas and good research. The material must be carefully selected before writing, and then assembled in an intriguing or attractive way. There needs to be a logical structure and a striking conclusion.

When writing features, you can often start with a specific subject, trend or issue to illustrate more general ones.

For instance, when writing about how people have left villages for the towns, find a specific village and some of its people and use their stories to illustrate the problems and successes. Remember that people are always of interest to other people.

If you want to write a story about a project, try to write it through the eyes of the people affected. Try to humanise issues.

You can fill out the picture with statistics and broad information later but they will be boring unless you can show what they mean to people.

### Analysis

A news analysis has to take the reader beyond the normal “spot” news story and would typically go into more detail and explanation than is possible when you are under pressure to write a hard, breaking news story which is still developing. Here, you could be under a lot of pressure, both to gather facts and stay on top of a rapidly moving event (if for instance the death toll in a bombing is steadily rising). Such breaking news stories must have context so that the reader can understand why they are important (again, the “So what?” test). But they cannot be cluttered with analysis which will only get in the way of the important first facts.

When the dust has settled, and the spot story has been fully covered, it might be time to stand back on the situation and write a separate analysis. The danger is that the “analysis” will be little more than the news story dressed up with a few longer

paragraphs and more context. A true analysis needs to seek opinion, for example from politicians, military commanders, aid workers or diplomats, setting out their views on what happened, why it happened and, crucially, what an event means for the present and the future. Try and cast an analysis forward.

### Comment

News organisations often run comment pieces but take special care to ensure that such articles are clearly labelled as such. This ensures that a reader is aware that what he or she is reading is not straight, impartial and factual news reporting but is, in fact, someone's opinion on what has happened or, often, what they think should happen.

Comment can be written by journalists or by outsiders - experts, diplomats or politicians. In the case of journalists, some newspapers with large staffs can afford to enforce a Chinese Wall principle, ensuring that the mainstream news reporting staff is separate from the comment team.

Many western news organisations would also seek to ensure that comment is balanced over a period of time. If, for example,

during a country's elections, a politician from one party writes a commentary in a newspaper, the other main parties will also be given a similar amount of column inches in the run-up to polling. Some broadcasters have very specific rules ensuring that they give equal airtime to major political parties.

It is important to realise that allowing someone to write a comment piece is also not a licence to print libel (for which the publication - and not just the author - could end up being brought before court), wild allegations or racial slurs. It is the responsibility of senior editorial management to ensure that a commentary does not breach the normal boundaries of good journalism.

*Allowing someone to write a comment piece is not a licence to print libel, wild allegations or racial slurs*

## EXERCISES

Read the following statements and identify where the news is and what the reporter needs to do to develop them. What type of story would you write?

1. Lots of children are dying during childbirth, because there are no medical facilities for their mothers. This is especially the case outside the capital and the major cities.
2. The government has sent soldiers to guard the major trade routes to catch smugglers bringing goods across the border without paying customs duties.
3. The education ministry has raised 10 million dollars through an appeal for contributions from the public.
4. Many former refugees who have returned to the country this year are finding life difficult.
5. Some refugees who returned to the capital this year have protested outside the municipality because of their crowded living conditions.

## ADDITIONAL READING & REFERENCES

Research and training links for journalists, in partnership with  
*Columbia Journalism Review*:

**[www.powerreporting.com](http://www.powerreporting.com)**

For guidance on computer assisted reporting:

**[www.nicar.org](http://www.nicar.org)**

## Chapter 9

# House Styles



*The aim of style is to avoid inconsistency or confusion that may hinder the reader or listener*

HOUSE STYLES ARE THE LANGUAGE and grammar conventions set by any newspaper, web site, publication or broadcaster for use in all reports and by all writers to ensure internal consistency.

Since the point of any publication is to convey clearly as much information with the least effort, a uniform style is one tool to achieve that. The aim is not to homogenise tone - clearly every author has his or her style of writing - but rather to avoid inconsistency, awkwardness or confusion that may hinder the reader or listener. The audience can expect information always to be presented in the same consistent way, and the publication “speaks with one voice”, helping its credibility.

Sometimes this style and tone is part of the identity of a publication and is carefully cultivated. In Britain, for instance, the tabloid newspapers employ very short headlines and sentence structures. *The Economist* also has a very distinctive tone that is consistent throughout all its different sections, irrespective of content.

A firm set of rules also saves time, helping authors submit copy

which is closer to the requirements of the editors and providing editors ready answers for frequent spelling, grammar and other questions.

If using a language which has different dialects or spelling, the newspaper will decide which one is to be used, and will stick to it. Proper names are often transliterated into other alphabets with varying spelling, and again choices have to be made to maintain consistency and clarity.

Sometimes these decisions involve political discussions - the Serbian-language spelling Kosovo or the Albanian-language spelling Kosova? The editor has to make a choice both to ensure consistency and to forestall such debates getting in the way of the deadline.

Because of all these reasons, nearly all printed publications, agencies and broadcasters have clearly defined house styles.

Typically, editors first refer to their own in-house style guide for a ruling; this is then supplemented by reference to a broader, generic guide (for example both The Associated Press and *The Economist* have well known and widely used guides); finally, if needed, reference is made to an agreed dictionary.

### Examples of Style

A simple example of the need for an agreed style is dates. Most countries use a solar calendar. But Muslims, Orthodox Christians and Jews use different calendars based on different periods in their history.

Muslims using their traditional lunar calendar will have a different year date than the internationally used western calendar. Which one will your audience feel more comfortable with? Which is the most appropriate for your publication? When is there a case for providing both?

While the western calendar states the year as 2003, the Muslim religious calendar would use 1421/22 AH (after the Hejirah).

The West generally uses BC and AD (Before Christ and Anno Domini, or *In the Year of the Lord*) as base marks. Western historians seeking to be neutral when using a western calendar might use BCE (before the current era) and CE (current era). This avoids the use of a Christian symbol.

What calendar does your publication use? If quoting someone using one calendar different from the one the publication normally uses, it might have to be either converted or explained.

Foreign words may also require specific style rules, especially where they may have a special use or may be new, perhaps scientific, vocabulary. Should they be translated or used in the original with or without explanation? These are the sort of things decided by house styles.

Another complication comes when an English language publication has to distribute its material both in the United Kingdom and the United States. “English English” and “American English” spellings and journalistic style are very different and some organisations end up having to rewrite copy into two versions to make it acceptable to each audience.

Some media organisations steer clear of words or phrases which can be particularly problematic. Reuters news agency avoids using words such as “promise” or “threaten” when paraphrasing what someone has said. Both carry different meanings - one positive and one negative - that indicate a particular attitude to what was said. Reuters style aims to ensure that its stories are viewed as being objective and impartial.

Reuters also avoids the use of the words “terrorist” and “terrorism”, a policy also adopted by IWPR. The terms are

*The words ‘terrorist’ and ‘terrorism’ are imprecise and emotive and can usually be substituted for more accurate and descriptive phrases*

imprecise and emotive and can usually be substituted by more accurate and descriptive phrases. Some people find this style rule quite controversial and also somewhat hard to maintain given the prevalent usage of the terms. IWPR seeks to avoid using these terms unless in direct quotations.

Style also covers punctuation. Two publications may have different styles, for example, on the use of single (') or double (") quotation marks. English and American publications differ in the placement of punctuation at the end of a quotation, with the UK generally leaving punctuation outside quotation marks, while U.S. editors tend to place punctuation within quotation marks.

*The Economist* always uses an honorific like Mr or Ms to describe people it is writing about. Some publications never use such titles, or only when the name is first used.

Some publications always use italic font for the name of publications. Others put the name in quotes. Others do neither.

Much of this is a matter of choice. But once made, the publication and its staff must always use the same style for the sake of consistency.

## EXERCISE

Discuss some style issues with your colleagues:

1. Does your publication have a house style?
2. Can you think of examples of usage at your publication that need to be regulated by a consistent house style? Are there inconsistencies?
3. When writing in English, do you use English or U.S. spellings of words such as labour/labor, homogenise/homogenize etc?
4. Think of some examples of inflammatory words which are not consistent with an impartial and objective style of news reporting.
5. Take three publications and see if you can identify differences in their house styles.

## ADDITIONAL READING & REFERENCES

For further information in IWPR's house style, see:

**[www.iwpr.net/index.pl?development/resources/training\\_styleguide.html](http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?development/resources/training_styleguide.html)**

An good dictionary is essential. *The Cambridge Dictionary of International English* is available online:

**[dictionary.cambridge.org](http://dictionary.cambridge.org)**

For the U.S. media market, the Associated Press stylebook is often the benchmark:

**[www.ap.org/pages/order.html](http://www.ap.org/pages/order.html)**

*The Economist* style guide:

**[www.economist.com/research/StyleGuide/index.cfm](http://www.economist.com/research/StyleGuide/index.cfm)**

Amazon.com sells digital versions of *The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage*, conveniently laid out in dictionary format.

One of the most widely regarded general texts on English writing style is *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk, Jr., and E.B. White. The updated version, with White's additions and introduction, is well worth obtaining. The original version, by Strunk alone, is available at: **[www.bartleby.com/141](http://www.bartleby.com/141)**

## Chapter 10

# Introduction to Libel

THE ESSENTIAL RIGHT TO FREEDOM of speech is balanced by a requirement of journalists to use that right responsibly - and by the risk that subjects of media reports may have recourse to legal action if they believe they have been subjected to a libel.

Laws covering defamation vary hugely from country to country and it is imperative to have a good understanding of libel and privacy laws within your own country.

Repressive regimes may deploy libel laws to silence their critics, arguing that a report has defamed them, regardless of its accuracy. In the absence of an independent judiciary, such cases have resulted in extended jail terms for local journalists.

England, which has some of the world's most strenuous libel laws, protects people's right to their "good name" and provides wide leeway in defining defamation. But it balances this right with a number of defences available to journalists, although the burden of proof lies with them essentially to prove their innocence. Cases of criminal libel are very rare, though the financial penalties from verdicts in civil cases can be ruinous.

Libel law in the United States sets a very high burden of proof on any potential claimant, especially a public figure (the law is



*The essential right to freedom of speech is balanced by a requirement of journalists to use that right responsibly*

*The best safeguard against  
a libel action is good  
journalistic practice*

different for private individuals). A public personality bringing a libel suit in the United States has the burden of proving that a reporter not only published false information but also did so recklessly and maliciously without attempting to determine whether it was true. In essence, there has to be intent.

### The Best Safeguard: Sound Journalism

Journalists must have a healthy respect for laws of libel and privacy because they uphold the right to an individual's "good name" and the right of private citizens to conduct their private lives without intrusion.

That said, there is a balance to be struck. Journalists should not allow concern about the law to prevent them from doing their work conscientiously for the public good. The best safeguard against a libel action is good journalistic practice: thorough, accurate and balanced reporting, careful and sceptical editing, and fair-minded presentation.

Because laws and the way they are implemented vary so widely, journalists must always be sensitive to good practice in their own country and in major countries where they may be disseminating stories.

In practical terms, this means that if reports are being distributed in English, journalists must be aware of the libel laws in England and in the United States. The tough English law sometimes acts as a “lowest common denominator” and will be discussed at length in this chapter.

### Forum Shopping

Increasingly libel cases are being heard by courts outside what might normally be thought of as their natural jurisdiction. Print publications are sued in courts in countries not where they are published and not even where the journalist is working, but in countries where they are sold or distributed. With the expansion of the Internet, there are even more of these “extra-territorial” cases, and it could be that your article in IWPR is the subject of a libel action in several nations’ courts.

This is known as “forum shopping”, where a plaintiff seeks to bring an action in a country where he or she believes the chances of winning a libel case are greatest.

One recent example of this, and perhaps a key case in the extra-territorial jurisdiction issue worldwide, is the case of *Dow Jones & Company Inc v Gutnick in Australia*. On December 10, 2002, the

*If you publish online, you will be seen in dozens of countries, and could be sued in any one of them*

High Court of Australia ruled that publisher Dow Jones could be sued in the Australian state of Victoria for an article posted on Barron's Online, a US-based website owned by Dow Jones. Despite submissions to the court in support of Dow Jones from the likes of Reuters and Amazon.com, among others, the court ruled that, regardless of the location of the hosting server, the alleged defamation of the plaintiff, Joseph Gutnick, took place in Victoria.

Apparently, it took place everywhere else, as well. The judge's ruling read: "For myself I would see no immediate reason why, if a person has been defamed in more than one jurisdiction, he or she, if so advised might not litigate the case in each of those jurisdictions."

This ruling in the case could open the floodgates to a large amount of litigation in Australia and in other countries.

Internet libel, in fact, is no different from normal libel. If you libel someone, and the court can prove at least one person has seen it in a specific country, then you might face a libel action in that country. If you publish online, you will be seen in dozens of countries, and could be sued in any one of them..

Media organisations thus face the daunting prospect of having to understand libel law in several different countries. IWPR is monitoring closely the changing environment of multi-national and international libel cases and will advise editors and contributors of any important new developments.

For now, the advice on third-country libel suits is clear:

- Know the law in your own country.
- Know the law in England.
- Assume that any third country would be just as strict on libel as England.

### A Common Sense Approach

Before going into the specific details of various laws, it is important to have a common sense approach to the issues:

- Be attentive to complaints about accuracy and fairness, and be prompt in correcting errors. An angry reader treated fairly who sees that you are willing to fix mistakes might be less inclined to take further action. A swift correction can also be seen as mitigating evidence in a court.

- Never ignore a threat of legal action. Talk about it with a senior editor as soon as possible. Do not hope it will go away.
- Be sure that senior editors have a chance to check sensitive articles early before they are published. Decisions that might need legal advice - whether there might be some protection against a person likely to sue or whether a tough statement might be protected because of the circumstances - should not be made by a single sub-editor a few minutes before a publication deadline.
- Good journalism means sometimes taking a risk, but it must always be for a good, well thought out reason. Taking sound legal advice and considering issues of libel is often about risk assessment.

Some countries consider libel a criminal matter, which means the accused could go to jail. Others consider it a civil matter, but losing could incur heavy damages. Some plaintiffs will use both civil and criminal law.

In some countries, insults or even strong criticism against minister or public officials may be considered libellous or even criminal. In other countries criticism of public figures is given wide latitude in the interest of the public good and democracy. There is simply no universal agreement, so journalists must familiarise themselves with local law and practice.

*In some countries, insults or even strong criticism against government officials may be considered libellous, or even criminal*

The London-based organisation Article 19, which promotes freedom of expression for the media, has proposed that universal guidelines could be drawn up on the basis of international law, various national standards and generally accepted legal principles. This would “set out an appropriate balance between the human right to freedom of expression . . . and the need to protect individual reputations”.

### Some Broad Definitions

Until that happens, there are no universally recognised guidelines. But there are some common elements covering defamation and privacy that journalists should know.

*It is generally not a defence to report what somebody else said if it has not been independently checked*

First, what is a libel? A standard definition would be a false statement, published about someone, that damages that person's reputation or business, or holds the person up to ridicule or public hatred. Slander is the same except it is impermanent or spoken, not written. Note, however, that in England, radio and television broadcasts are treated as libel, not slander.

In many countries truth is a defence against libel. But you might have to be able to prove that a statement is true and could be held responsible if you cannot, or if you can be shown to have published without checking its accuracy, especially if it turns out to be false. You might know it to be true but you will have to prove it. In some countries - but not many - the person alleging libel may have to prove it is not true. And it is generally not a defence to report what somebody else said if it has not been independently checked for truth, no matter how reliable you thought the source.

Even a note given to a small number of people, or a summary of an article or broadcast used in a conference of editors planning publication, could be considered "published".

A libel in most countries is about a person or a small group of

identifiable people, generally not about a group of people - unless they are named - or an institution. This is often a question of fact and degree. But in some states, adverse comments about a head of state, a minister or a public official could bring legal proceedings and even jail. Conversely, such criticism may be considered fair in those countries which encourage debate in the public interest for the greater good of society.

A statement about a national, ethnic, religious or similar group might not be libellous, but it might fall under laws banning incitement to hatred or hate speech. Some states place a ban on criticising the heads of friendly nations or even the country itself.

Remember, it is possible that people can be identified in an article even if they are not specifically named. An official could be identified by title or position, by occupation or by address. If a group is so small its members are easy to identify individually - workers in a small office - they may all be able to sue.

In many countries, those suing may have to prove real damage to their reputation. In others, courts may presume damage and defenders may have to prove no damage was done. And the bigger the reputation or place in society, the bigger the damages.

*The alarm bells should start ringing when a report goes personal*

### Alarm Bells

The alarm bells should start ringing when a report goes personal - that is, if it includes accusations of professional dishonesty or incompetence, suggestions of immoral, criminal or improper behaviour, questioning a person's ancestry and allegations that somebody is mentally ill or suffers from the likes of a sexually transmitted disease.

A city official might be scorned in his community if he is convicted of drunken driving, or a restaurant owner might lose business if an inspector reports a violation of health rules. If true, accurate reports of them should not give rise to a libel action. But if these people have not been convicted in a court, how will you prove it true?

## English Libel Law

Organisations which distribute news in England, such as IWPR, must be familiar with the specifics of English libel law and its defences.

The classic definition of defamation in English law is “a statement that lowers the reputation of a person in the mind of a right-thinking person.” Who that might be is a difficult concept but it is generally taken to mean the average man in the street.

### **There are four main possible defences:**

1. *Truth*: This is the most obvious defence. But remember our mantra: the issue is not about what you believe to be true or even what you know to be true; the issue is what you can prove to be true.

Example: In 1993, the magazine *New Statesman* wrote a story about rumours that Prime Minister John Major was having an affair with a caterer. The rumours were ruled defamatory and the paper had no defences. Major settled the dispute out of court, but he could almost certainly have pursued his claim and probably put the magazine out of business.

*The classic definition of defamation is a ‘statement that lowers the reputation of a person in the mind of a right-thinking person’*

2. *Fair comment*: This defence applies to statements not of fact but of opinion. The statement must be obvious to readers that it is a comment or opinion. However, the underlying facts on which the comment is based must be true.

Example: In the 1980s, a BBC satire programme described the tabloid *News of the World* as having “All the nudes fit to print, and all the news printed to fit.” The newspaper’s editor, Derek Jameson, sued the BBC. The court accepted that the statement was defamatory but accepted the defence of “fair comment,” because the statement seemed justified by the lurid contents of the newspaper.

3. *Privilege*: Statements made in Parliament, or in English courts, may enjoy “privilege.” Likewise, a privilege to publish information that turns out to be false may be permissible in other situations, though this is a very complex area of law and is always a question of fact. In England, statements from Parliament enjoy absolute privilege: in other words, they can be recorded, and you cannot be sued. Statements in courts enjoy qualified privilege. Although you can report what is said in court, the report must be fair - there must be

coverage of any reply or counter accusation, even if in a subsequent issue, and the report must be contemporaneous, ie, it must be the first opportunity for your newspaper to cover the story.

Example: In 1980, police captured the Yorkshire Ripper, an infamous serial killer, by chance, when his car was stopped for a routine reason. When the police chief realised he was the man they had been searching for, he called a press conference and told the journalists “We’ve got him.” Many papers, including the *Darlington Evening Dispatch*, ran the story with those words as its headline. The Ripper was charged later that day. The papers claimed protection against contempt of court and libel arguing that the police press conference was qualified privilege. The courts agreed, but probably because so many papers had gone along with it. But it was close decision - they might in other circumstances have been sued for libel.

4. *Death*: Someone who is dead cannot be libelled. Basically, this is because there is no one to sue. But be careful that libel of the dead does not also implicate the living. Defaming a

*The dead cannot sue, but be careful that libel of the dead does not also implicate the living*

*Working for a limited company does not protect individuals from libel suits*

dead man may also defame individuals and institutions he was associated with.

It is equally important to be aware of what is not a defence under English law. These common excuses do not work:

- “But I don’t live in England...”

Different country: You can be sued for libel in any country in which your material appears. For example, Russian businessman Boris Berezovsky is suing a U.S. magazine for libel not in his native Russia, or even in the U.S., but in London. This is possible because the magazine sells a few copies in London.

- “But it wasn’t me; it was my publisher...”

Limited liability and individual responsibility: Working for a limited company does not protect individuals from libel suits. You can be sued for libel personally. Libel suits can be sent simultaneously against the newspaper, the reporter personally, and thirdly, against the distributor of the media, whether this is a newspaper deliverer, shop, or Internet provider. This is an odd exception to the laws of limited liability in England.

- “But the other paper reported it...”

Repeating a report already published: It is not a defence to repeat a libel. Jeffrey Archer, a former MP, won libel damages from the *Daily Star* in the late 1980s, after it ran a version of a story about his paying a prostitute, which was written in another paper. The first paper had contacted the prostitute, but the *Star* had not, and it had no defence. Remember: no matter how many other people may have written the story, do not write it unless you know you yourself can prove it.

- “But everybody knows that already...”

Rumour/hearsay: Saying that you are reporting a rumour or hearsay is not a defence against libel. If the court decides that the “man on the bus” might have a lower opinion of the subject as a result, you are not protected. It is also no defence to say “it is widely known that...” or “everyone believes that Mr A deals in drugs.” The test is: can you prove that he does it, not just that people think it?

*No matter how many  
others have written a story,  
do not write it unless you  
know you yourself can  
prove it*

*Reporting someone's denial is no defence if the court decides that the statement still lowers the person's reputation*

- “But that’s what he really said...”

Reporting comments that defame: One popular misapprehension goes like this. Man A says something bad about Man B. The paper reports the comments, on the basis that Man A really did say them. But this is no defence. The judge is not concerned with whether the comments are accurately reported, but rather, whether they defame the subject.

- “But he denied it openly...”

Denials: Reporting someone’s denial is no defence if the court decides that, in the mind of the right-thinking person, the statement nevertheless lowers reputation. Statements such as “The Palace denied that Charles fed his cat to his dog” are unacceptable.

- “But I wrote about his company, not about him...”

Unwitting link: Anything that could link your subject to specific individuals may be libellous. British courts are likely to allow a head teacher to claim defamation if his school is criticised - likewise company chiefs and police chiefs. Companies,

corporations and organisations also have reputations and can sue in their own right.

- “But I didn’t even use his name...”

Safety in numbers: Anonymity can get you into trouble. If you write a story saying a member of a football team had sex with an under-aged girl but do not name him, you will not get a single libel suit; you will get eleven libel suits.

- “But I obeyed the ethical code...”

Following the rules: Many journalist associations have ethical codes that say each story should be accurate, fair and balanced - it should carry both sides of the argument, and the journalist should not comment. These guidelines are all very well, but they still may not save you from a libel suit.

- “But it was an honest mistake . . .”

Ignorance: Claiming you did not know the law is no defence. Nor is it enough to say that you “did your best” to contact the subject for their side of the story. You have to have had firm grounds for believing the story to be true.

*Ignorance of the law  
is no defence*

- “But I used the word ‘alleged’...”

Blurring words: Using “alleged,” “reportedly” or similar words is no defence.

### Public Interest Defence

In some countries, public interest can be a defence. This is not what “interests the public”, but the higher argument that it is for the welfare and good of the public. This is a standard that some courts apply in many cases, such as alleged breaches of privacy or confidentiality and sometimes even security - depending on the individual country and how much public debate is encouraged. But it is not universal law and accuracy and fairness still applies. You need to know whether this defence applies in your country. There is no general public interest or public figure defence in England.

Again some countries recognise more latitude to opinion and comment, provided the facts are not distorted. A reviewer might say that a new play was a waste of time and money so long as no personalities were specifically attacked and where judgement was clearly a matter of opinion and not of fact.

Actors have been known to sue successfully, however, where their professionalism has been attacked. They have also lost - so it is a gamble for them and it may depend on the reputation of the reviewer.

Opinions may be strongly held and strongly stated as long as they are relevant and based on sound observations, not conjecture. And they should not try to present opinion as fact.

“The play is a waste of time because it says nothing new about our lives” is clearly an opinion; “the lead actor appeared to be drunk” is much riskier. Is it a fact? Can you prove it? Is it damaging to the actor’s reputation?

But there is another major factor other than what the law says - what is culturally acceptable in that society. One has to consider whether there is good reason to challenge this. And bear in mind that cultural issues may also influence the courts.

Highly exaggerated statements or satire may be protected if it is clear that it is meant to be a joke or poking fun. But cultural attitudes make a big difference here. What might be seen as fun in one society may be seen as insulting in another. Making fun of a prominent person or of an ethnic minority might be seen

*Opinions may be strongly held and strongly stated as long as they are relevant and based on sound observations, not conjecture*

*When someone's reputation is at stake, be careful with every detail, including headlines and photo captions*

as highly damaging. Once again, the journalist has to exercise proper care or be ready to take the consequences in the interest of something worthwhile, like bringing about some form of improvement.

### Reducing the Risk

Here are some suggestions on how to practise safe journalism:

- When someone's reputation is at stake, be careful with every word and every detail. A 2,000 word report might pass muster with every lawyer in the country, but it can still be undone by a single careless word in a headline or photo caption.
- Review your work carefully, especially if you or someone else has made significant changes, for implications that you did not intend. If a photo caption refers to "drug dealers," are you confident that everyone who can be identified in the photo is a drug dealer? Anyone in the picture, even a passer-by, could sue if they are not drug-dealers. Even if they are, can you prove it?

- The difference between “X happened” and “A said X happened” is crucial to safe reporting about accusations of crime or improper performance. If you report that the police have accused someone of a crime and your report is based on an official document, you may be safe - even if the accusation is later shown to be false and the person is absolved. You would have no protection if you simply reported as fact that the person had committed the crime before any conviction.
- Accounts of an event by victims or witnesses might be compelling, but unlike police or court documents, they are not usually protected by the privilege to report on official proceedings. When these accounts touch on the behaviour of identifiable people, treat them with caution, especially if they go beyond what you can confirm from other sources.
- Be especially careful with what neighbours, colleagues, friends or others say about the past lives of people who are suddenly in the spotlight. The source may be prejudiced about the person.

- Be sure that you understand the distinctions between different types of crimes - some charges are more serious than others. In some legal systems, homicide could mean murder, manslaughter or an accident of some kind. Do not take shortcuts just to be brief or dramatic. It could land you in trouble.
- Do not assume that a set of events represents a “plot” or a “scheme” if an innocent explanation is possible. Even if the facts are protected by privilege, a conclusion based on those facts might not be.
- In some countries, the law may not be as important as the local cultural attitude towards honour. People in some societies might injure or kill in defence of a reputation.
- People affected must always be given the chance to reply or defend themselves from accusations

### Privacy Laws

Privacy laws are another hazard for journalists. Some countries do not have them, others have very strong ones. Some do not protect people obviously in the public eye; some specifically protect such

people. Pop stars and footballers may have less protection than other people because they depend on the media for their popularity. But many laws still protect them in certain cases.

France, for instance, has a much stronger privacy law than the United Kingdom. Some laws say that while individuals are not protected, say, from paparazzi in a public place, they may be on private premises, especially their homes. You need to be aware that children often have special legal protection.

Even prominent people have a right to be left alone. Journalists usually have wide freedom to report about events that are in the public interest or in areas easily accessible to the public, even if some of the subjects of news stories and photos might be embarrassed. In many countries local journalists' associations or unions also have ethical codes of practice governing such things as privacy. Particular caution should be exercised in relation to using long lens or intrusive photographs.

Here are some tests to consider:

- Is an event or person truly of significant interest?
- Is it in public?

*Even prominent  
people have a right to  
be left alone*

*Good journalists avoid language which smacks of prejudice and try to be sensitive to people they are reporting on*

- Is it really “news”? Of course news about pop stars, footballers and the like may be entertainment news rather than so-called hard news. But of course it might also be scandalous - the question should be, Is it fair?
- Are you using someone’s name or picture for commercial gain without permission?
- Are you using someone’s name or picture in a manner that casts them in a false light - for example illustrating a story about street crime with a picture of a vagrant or using someone without their permission to illustrate something that is not specifically about them?

### Incitement to Hatred

Apart from issues of libel, good journalists also seek to avoid using language which smacks of prejudice and try to be sensitive to the people they are reporting on. This not a question of being politically correct, but rather of ensuring use of appropriate language and especially not using language that may incite hatred or violence. It is not about what the law may allow, though in some countries the law does penalise such language.

For instance, in the United Kingdom, there is a law against race discrimination. Ridiculing a disabled person may be against some laws. Following genocide in Rwanda, a United Nations tribunal sent some broadcasters and journalists to prison over the use of hate language that may have inspired some of the killings.

Every community has words that are clearly insulting to another. Good journalists should generally avoid using them to describe a particular person or group of people.

It is worth remembering that a story that is legally safe to publish, might still fall short of standards for fairness, relevance or taste.

“Can we publish this?” is a question for lawyers. “Should we publish this?” is a question for reporters and editors. Equally, a decision might be taken that it is in the “public interest” to publish something that might breach the law for the greater good of the public. That is a risk and decision that only a senior editor, publisher or owner should take. Responsible journalists draw such risks to their editor’s attention.

*A story that is legally safe  
may still fall short of  
standards of fairness,  
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## EXERCISES

To recap, in this section you have learned that:

- Laws on libel and other restrictions on freedom of speech vary widely from country to country and you must ensure you know what rules apply for where you work.
- There are some common elements of libel law - especially regarding publication, identification and defamation.
- Truth is the best defence against an accusation of libel. Make sure you know whether some form of privilege might apply or whether there could be a public interest defence.
- You should introduce essential safeguards into your own newsroom and into your own methods of reporting.
- You should retain your research materials as they may become relevant evidence.
- Laws, ethical and cultural rules and practice vary widely and you must know what applies in your country.

Read the following examples and questions and discuss your answers with your colleagues:

1. During a campaign speech in your town, one legislator describes a rival as a “clown,” contends that he has taken repeated bribes from the building industry and calls him a “traitor to his party”.
  - Are any, all or none of these statements safe to use in your report? Should you refer your story to anyone else?
2. Work is to begin on a long awaited highway near your town. One evening, a man calls your office and says he has seen documents that prove the main contractor of the highway is using inferior material and defrauding the government. The caller refuses to give his name but says he works for the highways department.
  - If you do not print an article exposing this, he says he will take his story to a competing publication. He will call you back in half an hour for your answer.
  - What do you and your colleagues - and your boss - need to do immediately?
  - What will you say to the mystery caller when he calls back?

- Is there a possible strategy for getting the story or do you reject it out of hand?
  - How should the fact that a competitor might run the story influence you and your publication?
3. Several new restaurants appear in town. You hire a writer to review one of the most popular. Here are some sentences from his review:
- I wouldn't feed the kebabs to my cat.
  - I think the kebabs were left at room temperature too long.
  - The health department's file on this place is thicker than the kebabs.
  - Health department inspectors reported finding rat droppings in the kebabs.
  - My sources at the health department would not go near this place.
  - This is the worst restaurant in the universe.
  - Would you use any, all or none of these statements or modify them in any way? Why?

Remember the differences between facts and opinions, between protected and unprotected sources of information, between facts and exaggerations, between local law and culture.

### ADDITIONAL READING & REFERENCES

For an up-to-date overview of English law from a journalist's perspective: *McNae's Essential Law for Journalists*, by Tom Welsh and Walter Greenwood, published by Butterworths Law.

## Chapter 11

# Peace Reporting



*In a conflict, the media may be used to engender hopelessness, militarise society, and even provide direct instructions to kill*

MEDIA IS INEXTRICABLY BOUND UP IN WAR. When the first shot is fired, truth, it is often said, is the first casualty, as competing sides manipulate the media to mobilise populations, hide the grim realities of death and atrocity, and demonise their opponents.

Consider some of the ways the media is exploited in current conflicts:

- A guerrilla group stages a provocation, which they know will bring a violent government counterattack against villagers, and which can then be exploited through the international media to draw attention to their cause.
- A NATO official tells a press conference that his missiles have precision accuracy, obscuring the inevitable “collateral” deaths of the very civilians the intervention is supposed to be “liberating”.
- An extremist religious group detonates a bomb on a commuter train in the heart of a major western capital - for the precise purpose of spreading “terror” through the horrible images of mutilation and destruction that will be immediately flashed around the world.

When the fighting stops, partisans continue to fight their battles over the airwaves and in the newspapers, competing for advantage, justifying their campaign, and undermining moves towards peace and reconciliation that may cost them their ill-gotten profits and positions of power.

Even before the conflict begins, war-driven governments exploit state-controlled media to lay the foundations for violence, pumping out noxious hate speech, bogus history and mountains of lies. The national struggle (and inevitably the pre-eminent leader) is glorified, while fear and hatred of the “enemy” is fuelled. The media is used to engender hopelessness, militarise society, and even provide direct instructions in the means and strategies of killing.

These grim scenarios are played out inexorably, time and again, wherever conflict arises. Fierce professional and academic debate rages over the role western media has played during the many international military interventions. Over the past decade, the abuse of local media to drive genocide, especially in Rwanda and the Balkans, has drawn particular attention, demonstrating the media’s enormous potential for evil.

*If the media is so tied to war, can it also contribute to peace?*

But if the media is so tied to war, can it contribute to peace?

The question is a difficult and under-researched one, that is highly controversial among journalists. Traditional professional scepticism leads many in the media to oppose any concept of the media seeking to play any role at all. Discussions about “peace reporting” seem to many editors and reporters to push journalism across the line from being a neutral observer in society to emerging as a direct actor. Even if for good intentions, this “instrumentalisation” of the media is still seen as a dangerous violation of core professional principles. Propaganda for peace is still propaganda.

Yet journalism should be a responsible and concerned profession, and many reporters and editors, and several media-development organisations such as IWPR, have begun to think about the question, and formulate ways that media can maintain its core professional standards while also actively contributing to the resolution of conflict.

Various studies have broken down potential responses in different ways. A recent review by the government-funded think tank United States Institute for Peace refers to structural,

content-specific and aggressive media interventions. A report by the Canadian group Institute for Media Policy and Civil Society (IMPACS) outlines five types of intervention, from basic training through to peace programming, such as soap operas and other cultural outputs which promote positive messages. Even major mainstream media have experimented with new strategies to increase the input of “local voices” in the content of their stories and, through so-called public journalism, in setting news agendas.

The Institute for War & Peace Reporting was established to provide a platform for responsible local journalists in crisis areas who are so often locked out of local and international debate over conflict issues in their own countries.

IWPR groups its concept of peace reporting into three categories: strengthening individual skills, building institutional capacity and setting content agendas. It is the third category which forms the bulk of this chapter.

### Strengthening Skills

The heart and soul of good conflict reporting is solid

*IWPR was established to support responsible local journalists so often locked out of the debate*

journalism - fact-based, moderate in tone and balanced in choice of sources and subjects. In that sense, this entire handbook is about developing the core professional skills for operating sensitively and constructively in conflict areas.

Once in a conflict area, two overriding principles apply. First, do your homework, read a lot, speak to official and non-official sources and ordinary citizens, and know as much as you can about a region and its people (and if at all possible its languages) before you set pen to paper, begin to hammer the keys or stand before the camera.

Second, believe nothing you have not seen with your own eyes, and be especially sceptical of official statements. The daily press conference through which military leaders pronounce on their successes in the field and the atrocities of their opponent can never be trusted without first-hand witness. The best and bravest of correspondents are the ones who skip these regular charades and risk frontline reporting from the field.

### Building Capacity

Professional and creative journalism which can engender responsible and constructive debate cannot thrive without

strong institutions to sustain it. This includes: 1) vibrant media organisations free from political control, 2) responsible official and nonofficial bodies supporting media freedom, and 3) a vigorous civil society sector from which to draw ideas and information and through which to debate with the wider society.

Building this capacity involves reforming media legislation and regulatory and bodies, strengthening the professionalism of existing media institutions, and establishing sustainable media support institutions for training and lobbying, such as media training and monitoring institutes, free speech groups and journalist associations.

A range of international organisations specialise in various media capacity-building components, and there is an energetic international freedom of expression community. (See the reference notes to this chapter.) Some focus on reforming state broadcasters, others on building independent and community radio stations, still others on elaborating legal frameworks or establishing journalist unions.

The freedom of expression community is especially important to provide a global network to raise an immediate alert when reporters are attacked, and to provide financial and legal support

and increase political pressure, for example to secure an early release from unjust imprisonment. Media monitoring is sometimes criticised as a censorial or regulatory effort but in fact provides important base-line research to track performance and hold up a critical mirror to help a responsible media community do better.

IWPR capacity building has focused on establishing and reforming media organisations, assessing local needs and evaluating media projects, launching and strengthening media training, research and monitoring groups, and training local trainers to sustain long-term skills development on the ground.

### Setting Agendas

Beyond basic journalistic skills and ethics, there are many conflict-sensitive approaches that can be taken in choosing topics, developing a reporting strategy and structuring the presentation of voices within a story. The main thrust of these is to move beyond the locked-in pessimism and polarisation of much reporting on conflict. The goal is to search for alternative voices and what IWPR calls cross-community dialogue, to build bridges across confrontation lines, identify areas of agreement

rather than discord, and highlight positive, often nonofficial, developments on the ground.

An agenda-setting approach is not about propaganda. It does not mean supporting one side against another, or necessarily becoming a direct partisan in anti-war debates - indeed, an understanding of theories of just war is also important.

Rather it recognises that in reporting news the media also makes the news. The media creates a real-time record of history which has the power to determine not only the public's understanding of events and issues but also what it actually defines as news itself.

Journalism is faced with the conundrum of the nuclear physicist: you cannot measure an atom, because the very effort causes it to move and hence changes the atom's dimensions. Similarly, in reporting conflict, journalists have a responsibility to:

- Understand how much their involvement may influence events;
- Dig beneath the surface of entrenched warring positions;

*The media has the power to determine what the public actually defines as news itself*

*In a world of conflict, an agenda-setting approach seeks to provide a modicum of balance for the other side of the story*

- Question whether they are being exploited by media-savvy players in a conflict to promote one side's war aims.

For the mainstream of media coverage, war is sexy and peace is a bore. It is just this intoxication that Chris Hedges, an award-winning correspondent for *The New York Times*, had in mind when he entitled his cautionary memoir *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*.

In a world of conflict, the agenda-setting approach seeks to provide a modicum of balance for the other side of the story.

### Understanding Conflict

A financial journalist must know something about economics, and a legal correspondent should have a basic comprehension of the law. Similarly, in order to cover war, it is important to understand the nature of conflict. This means breaking out of the confines of day-to-day coverage and making an effort to comprehend what drives conflict, and what the resolution of conflict actually means.

Conflict analysis (or “peace studies”) suggests that conflict is natural and common but that it does not always spell violence.

A review of other peace processes reveals that conflicts can, in fact, be resolved peacefully, although rarely easily. Managing conflict is part of resolving it, and the process of working towards peace is itself critical to building the constituencies on the ground for a durable, long-term solution.

At the same time, beware of anyone who suggests that violent conflict is inevitable. Violent conflict happens for reasons, and is driven by people. Sometimes a leader or a government provokes conflict as a means of securing or maintaining control. A primary cause of conflict is scarce resources, where power and wealth are unevenly distributed and there is a long history of past grievances or antagonism. This indicates that violence between “historic enemies” is not inevitable but can be avoided by addressing an imbalance of resources, or a monopoly on political power, driving the underlying dispute.

*Beware of anyone who  
says that violent conflict  
is inevitable*

The following, drawn from a valuable recent report by the Canadian group IMPACS, is a classic example used to describe the possible outcomes of a conflict:

There is an orange on the branch of a tree. The tree is located in one garden, but the orange is hanging from a branch that reaches into the neighbouring garden. Each neighbour believes he should have the orange. Conflict study teaches that there are four possible outcomes:

OUTCOME	EXAMPLES
<p>One side wins</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) might makes right</li> <li>b) legal resolution</li> <li>c) chance</li> <li>d) compensation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) neighbours fight for the orange</li> <li>b) property law determines who gets the orange</li> <li>c) neighbours flip a coin over the orange</li> <li>d) one gets the orange, but pays the other 5p</li> </ul>
<p>Withdrawal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) walk away</li> <li>b) elimination</li> <li>c) delay</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) both parties turn their backs on the orange</li> <li>b) they destroy or give away the orange</li> <li>c) they put the orange in the freezer</li> </ul>
<p>Compromise</p> <p>dividing the resource</p>	<p>parties agree to cut the orange in half or squeeze it and share the juice</p>
<p>Transcendence</p> <p>innovative solutions</p>	<p>cut the seeds out of the orange, plant them and start a plantation – new business, new income, more resources</p>

A good example of conflict resolution is the peace process in Northern Ireland. For many, many years the conflict was framed as an irresolvable confrontation of “Catholics vs. Protestants”. Any moves towards self-control for the former (and ultimate linkage with the Irish Republic) was seen as a loss of control for the latter (and the British union itself), and a risk of their livelihood, culture and life. Meantime the violence continued.

The Good Friday Agreement that emerged in 1998 was a product of the Irish government distancing itself somewhat from the Republican movement and the British government distancing itself from hard-core Unionists. At the same time, moderate groups on each side were supported and legitimised, sparking the successful moves for peace. The process has run into consistent problems, but the underlying cycle of violence-revenge-further violence with no solution in sight has been broken.

When there are only two parties to a conflict, it can often escalate into a zero-sum game in which each side only sees the black or white possibility of victory or defeat. Any success for one side comes at the direct cost of the other. Conversely, when there are more players or stakeholders the chances of a peaceful

*A journalist covering conflict needs to understand the meaning of violence*

resolution increase. Outside mediation seeks to break down the causes of conflict and identify ways that both sides can reach a compromise, satisfying basic needs while avoiding the descent into violence, which is inevitably a defeat for both sides. Indeed, if war is often defined as the failure of politics, the mitigation of violence is its ultimate success.

### Types of Violence

The responsibility of a journalist covering conflict also involves understanding the meaning of violence.

Again, there is a large body of specialist research to draw on here. Some research divides violence into three types: direct violence (hitting, shooting, rape etc); cultural violence (hate speech, xenophobia, religious justifications for war etc); and structural violence (apartheid, colonialism, occupation etc).

There are both visible and invisible effects of violence. The journalist can observe most obviously the killed, wounded, raped, tortured and displaced. But beneath the surface can be hatred, xenophobia, desires for revenge and a whole range of emotions that can lead to further violence. Structural change - such as the

eradication of a language and a culture – may be harder to recognise and may occur over extended periods of time.

Certain forms of violence contravene international humanitarian law, even in times of war. The Crimes of War Project was founded to educate journalists about violations of the laws of war, to help journalists comprehend the scale of violence they may witness. As Roy Gutman, the Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter who initiated the project, has explained, seeing an army shell a church or other historic site which is sheltering civilians is bad enough; but understanding that such an attack represents a violation of the Geneva Conventions raises it to another level of importance - elevating what may seem a routine article into a breakthrough report on a major shift in the tactics and implications of the conflict. (See chapter 12)

*Simplistic use of ethnic or religious identifications can be highly provocative*

### Framing Conflict

Reporting in a crisis area begins with the fundamental question of how a conflict is framed. Short-hand references are inevitable in journalism. But simplistic use of ethnic or religious identifications, or open use of concepts of “us and them”, can be highly provocative. In war reporting, such abbreviated terminology, thoughtlessly used, can contribute to a sense of polarisation suggesting that conflict is inevitable.

In the Balkans in the mid-1990s, most reports referred to conflict between “Serbs”, “Croats” and “Muslims”. The majority of the soldiers on the various sides were indeed ethnically Serb or Croat, or religiously Muslim. But such phrasing, without any qualification, created a dangerously simplified picture, enforcing arguments that the dispute was based on “ancient ethnic animosities” among historic and irreconcilable enemies.

In fact, many Serbian and Croatian citizens strongly opposed the war, and their governments bent on prosecuting them. The “Muslim side” was, albeit to a decreasing degree, nevertheless ethnically mixed, with Croats and Serbs serving in the

internationally recognised government in the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo. Many people in the former Yugoslavia rejected ethnic identification altogether or had mixed parentage. Further complicating the picture, Muslims chose a new term by which to be identified, “Bosniak”, in an effort both to strengthen their own national identity under siege but also to undermine the sense of a religious motive to what they argued was essentially a war of territorial conquest.

The war on the ground was thus accompanied by a fierce debate over how it should be defined, and as the understanding of the definition shifted, so did the understanding of the possibility of finding solutions.

The goal of sensitive reporting is not to adopt one side over another. Many reporters have come to argue that, faced with genocide, journalists are bound to do precisely that. Others have suggested that journalists in fact have a duty to represent the unrepresented side - namely innocent civilians not associated with any warring group. This means framing stories in the context of real people - ie, not just leaders, experts or diplomats. This can often graphically demonstrate the damage done to all parties in violence.

Most important, however, is to strive to present the complexity of the situation, even within the constraints of limited space and inevitable journalistic short-hand. The aim is not to be used as a propaganda instrument for one side or the other. And, of course, it is clearly a more accurate reporting of the reality on the ground.

### Emotional Language

War is highly emotionally charged, and journalists are subject just like everyone to strong feelings. But the basics of responsible journalism demand that reporters absolutely avoid:

- Hate speech
- Dehumanising language
- Incitement to violence

Such language is seen in coverage of conflicts around the world and it is all too easy to slip into it when a journalist feels that his or her community is under threat. But calling for the extermination of the enemy, referring to opponents as subhuman, or directly rallying people to violence is well outside

the bounds of responsible journalism. Indeed, international war crimes courts have raised the question of whether media which directly contribute to the use of violence may be prosecuted for war crimes.

Even words in regular usage can be inflammatory. The common terms “terrorist” or “freedom fighter” are loaded with connotations. Phrases such as “armed fighters”, “insurgents”, “rebels” or “guerrillas” tend to be more descriptive and less emotional. Find neutral, non-pejorative terms that avoid taking sides.

Overly emotive images should also be used with extreme care. In television or news pictures, it is important not simply to go for the goriest pictures. Journalists need to have respect for the victims on all sides of a conflict and to understand the emotive power of such images and the further violence they could spark.

As a print outlet, the temptation is sometimes to follow the television news. But print has the ability to dig deeper and provide broader context, and need not descend into sensationalism or gratuitous coverage.

*Overly emotive images  
should be used with  
extreme care*

One rule here is to use special care when publishing images and reports about atrocities by the other side. A primary responsibility of a free press is to challenge its own government, and this applies even, or especially, in times of war.

Again, this is not to say that the media should become propagandists for peace. But by recognising their responsibility, journalists can help contribute to an environment of greater understanding and indirectly prevent tensions flaring even more.

### The Cynicism Trap

In the cold light of dawn, when international mediators fail to bring the parties to agreement and the competing spokesmen rush to the microphones to denounce the recalcitrance of their opponents, headlines habitually declare: “Peace Process on Verge of Collapse as Fighting Flares”.

Yet a week, or a month, or two months later, another meeting is held, and a few more issues are agreed even if an overall settlement is still not reached.

Two years into a peace settlement, when the interim government is deadlocked and localised conflict erupts, again

the headlines confidently announce that the country is “sliding into new war”.

Yet again, after much haggling and unpleasantness, a new compromise is reached, a different faction leader is appointed acting prime minister and a localised peace deal is agreed.

Journalists covering conflict are constantly asked to predict the future, and as in the above examples, pessimistic assessments always win the biggest headlines. Indeed, journalists are professional cynics.

Obviously, there is no point in downplaying the gravity of any situation, nor in accepting at face value yet another “condemnation of the violence” by a United Nations Security Council unwilling to take stronger action, or a bland and meaningless “statement of principles” put forward by an ineffectual peace process which is indeed going nowhere. If you are on the ground and are convinced a massacre is imminent, by all means report it.

But a generally negative approach, often as not proved wrong as proved right, contributes to the pessimism that itself can fuel conflict. And it also misses key aspects of any successful

*Pessimistic assessments  
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a conflict always win the  
biggest headlines*

*It is always wise to avoid  
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trap of making dire  
predictions*

process of conflict resolution. A peace process by definition will be difficult and face many setbacks. But the process itself is meaningful, drawing parties together to establish a rapport, and often purposefully addressing minor issues first to build confidence before a global settlement addressing the core issues of the conflict can be reached.

A focus on the fragility of a “top down” peace accord often also distracts journalists from the more gradual, less exciting but ultimately essential “bottom up” successes achieved by the development community and civil society, as a bridge is re-opened, a community centre established, and slowly, family by family, refugees return. These developments, too, are part of the process, drawing support away from the warlords and increasing the constituency among the population for peace.

It is always wise to avoid being pulled into the cynic’s trap of making dire predictions. An agenda-setting approach highlights the deeper reality of a peace process and provides balancing perspectives of incremental, but sometimes no less important, successes on the ground.

## Responding to Crisis

A bomb goes off, a president is assassinated, an atrocity emerges – these are charged moments when it is critical to maintain professional standards.

Victims speak out with real anguish, political figures hurry to make condemnatory statements, and competing media rush off confident, sharply worded stories.

This is a time of great risk for a responsible journalist. The facts are unclear, responsibility is uncertain, and there is no way to comprehend the real meaning of the incident in such a chaotic environment.

With so many people expressing categorical views, it may be hard to resist the “obvious conclusion” - eg, that one ethnic group mounted a deliberate attack on another - even if no one has any facts to prove it.

Such irresponsible reporting can directly lead to further violence, as emotions are enflamed, and society is ripe for revenge actions.

*Even amid war, there are  
signs of civil society  
activity, of development,  
of hope*

In such circumstances, it is essential in your reporting to:

- Stick to known facts and make clear what cannot be confirmed;
- Tone down emotion and highlight those in society seeking to do the same;
- Speak to all sides and break through obvious stereotypes;
- Explore the complexity of the story, rather than easy conclusions;
- Maintain perspective on the incident, however tragic.

### Reporting the Peace

Even amid war, there are signs of civil society activity, of development, of hope. While it is the journalist's duty and natural instinct to report on the "factions" involved in a conflict, it is essential to look at the broader society. There is very rarely a 100 per cent pro-war bloc in a country, but reporting exclusively on the active conflict and those behind it only contributes to the impression of a totally militarised society.

Responsible journalism means reporting on parties and activities opposing the war, highlighting groups and individuals who contradict war-mongering stereotypes, featuring examples of cross-community collaboration and peace-building bridging the conflict divide.

Inevitably, extremists grab the headlines. Moderates are usually in the overwhelming majority on the ground but tend to receive less coverage. An article highlighting a call for violence may be more eye-catching than a feature on civil society groups working against it. But such reports also legitimise the radicals, and obscure alternative options.

Accurate reporting should aim to represent the relative weights of the various actors and their opinions, and seek an overall balance. Even while a global settlement may remain elusive, remember that the process of peace building is an important part of achieving a long-term resolution, and localised agreements, field development projects and indeed the reduction or absence of violence are all positive signs.

*Once the war ends, the international rat pack departs, contributing to the impression of a world in constant conflict*

Some experts in conflict studies believe that an aggressive approach to balanced reporting naturally assists peaceful resolution. This is simply a matter of a journalist doing his or her job properly since portraying more complexity and more sides of a conflict contributes to the understanding of prospects for a peaceful solution.

Notably, once war ends, the international rat pack departs, and coverage of a country which has been in crisis falls off. This contributes to the impression of a world at war in which conflict cannot be resolved. An agenda-setting approach returns to the region, to highlight reconstruction and development, not glossing over the inevitable setbacks and difficulties but also illustrating that the country has moved beyond violence.

## Editorial Selection & Deployment

Imagine you are the editor of a daily newspaper in the Middle East and are trying to find the front page lead and headline for Monday's edition. The weekend has brought a slew of major events:

- There were five suicide bombings in three days, killing nine Israeli citizens and wounding dozens of others;
- Israeli security forces sealed off many Palestinian towns, which means thousands of Palestinians could not get to their work;
- The Palestinian and Israeli prime ministers met, reaching no concrete agreement but committed to hold further talks in future.

Which is the top story? The usual rule is, "If it bleeds, it leads." The pressure to react to daily violence can be hard to resist when competing media are running their own banner headlines about the latest atrocities. But against a background of daily violence, a major effort at peace is arguably the bigger story. If you take into account the fact that the meeting between the

prime ministers is their first in years, the case for its importance becomes clearer still.

There are other issues of editorial selection and planning to consider, too. Covering a hard news story can be easier than covering a soft story. The first tends to write itself. So, too, journalists tend to concentrate on covering wars, fighting and famine but sometimes shy away from the later story - the reconstruction or life after the conflict. There are especially difficult choices here, especially as the reconstruction story may take more resources from a tight editorial budget.

Indeed, just how you deploy your reporting resources is crucial. The number of reporters available to cover a story is always limited, but part of being a responsible journalist is to realise that deployment is potentially a very subjective decision. So when deciding how to use reporting resources, it makes sense to make a special effort to expand on the number of angles for your coverage of a conflict, and make allowances for reporting the peace.

## Cross-Community Reporting

War is about division. People are divided, bridges are destroyed, countries are torn apart.

The information war is specifically intended to drive apart people who have lived side-by-side for ages. As communications links are severed, perspectives from the opposing capital are no longer reported, voices from across the confrontation line are silenced, and the frightening impression is created of the opponent as some subhuman “Other”.

A cross-community approach to conflict reporting seeks to bridge such divides. The strategy can involve complex reporting projects, assembling journalists from different ethnic, national and religious groups, and even across frontlines, to undertake in-depth reports and investigations together. An extensive article highlighting human rights violations on both sides can serve to underscore how each side is suffering, and feeling remorse. If it is produced by journalists from both communities it will serve to build confidence.

Dialogue projects can bring together individuals from across the conflict divide to debate issues, argue differences and locate

*The information war is specifically intended to drive apart people who have lived side-by-side for ages*

solutions. Special publications or documentaries can blend different viewpoints in an exchange or dialogue format. In the simplest form, cross-community reporting can simply mean taking the effort to syndicate reports between countries or regions in conflict, to break down the blockade of information, analysis and viewpoints from across the border.

Any cross-community project requires careful editorial handling, and often sensitive personal communications. Participants identified to participate in such projects are asked to take a positive approach, which includes using moderate language, avoiding emotionalism and stereotyping, and demonstrating sensitivity and respect for colleagues, and people as a whole, across the conflict line.

Where possible, cross-community projects benefit from personal meetings among the participants, to build confidence, air issues and identify common approaches. Media often seek to raise publicity for their output, and public meetings (safety and security concerns allowing) can be important mechanisms following production to bring participants and other civil society and even official representatives from different

communities together to discuss and debate the results - the media itself serving as a platform for civil society mediation.

IWPR's editorial strategy is based on a cross-community approach, seeking to draw participants and contributions from all sides, and all communities, in a conflict, providing opportunities for them to work together in an environment of mutual trust, and sharing perspectives by disseminating their reporting in all areas throughout the conflict region.

Such approaches can offer not only essential information but also fresh and often positive perspectives. They can also serve an important demonstration effect, building confidence that supposed enemies can still communicate together professionally and often find many points of agreement.

### Case Studies

A few examples from IWPR's recent experiences provide useful illustration of creative cross-community reporting strategies.

*Rioting in Macedonia.* The Republic of Macedonia, a former Yugoslav state, is a fragile country with a significant minority of ethnic Albanians.

*Reflecting typical conflict fever, the article was a tract, more than a report, and had not sourced anyone from the other side*

In 2001, rioting broke out in the town of Bitola, after the killing of Macedonian soldiers. A local Macedonian journalist, writing for IWPR, sought to justify the rampage in his report, utilising common stereotypes about Albanians and seeking to support the integrity and sovereignty of the Macedonian state.

This was a tract, more than a report. And he had not interviewed any of the shopkeepers, whose stories had been demolished and who were all Albanian.

A series of exchanges with an IWPR editor provided what was effectively on-the-job training, challenging the journalist to view the event from different prospective. As the Macedonian had no connections with Albanians, and was viewed with suspicion by the local community, the IWPR home office helped open doors for him locally, so that he would be received by Albanian sources.

On this basis of this fresh reporting, the journalist went back and drafted an entirely different, and far more professional, story. Much editorial and training time was required, but the challenge of continuing to work with the local reporter - rather than just spiking the article and moving on - paid off. The final article was finely balanced and calm in tone, and uniquely for a Macedonian

journalist was translated into Albanian and published by the Albanian press as well, a significant breakthrough that contributed to communication and confidence.

*Dialogue in the Caucasus.* Abkhazia is an unrecognised breakaway entity which was a full part of the Republic of Georgia until a bitter local war in the early 1990s. Since then, the border has been firmly closed, and official and nonofficial communications between Tbilisi and Sukhumi, the respective capitals, cut off. The lack of communication sustains misunderstanding and mistrust, and is a major obstacle to reaching a political settlement to the dispute.

Working with local journalists and civil society groups, in spring 2003, in partnership with an international conflict resolution group Conciliation Resources, IWPR established a new monthly newspaper, *Panorama*.

A unique collaboration across the conflict divide, the paper engages both Abkhaz and Georgians, with the mission to produce one newspaper, while being published in two languages, Georgian and Russian.

The project has been a breakthrough, especially in providing a framework to allow normal people to receive information from across the conflict border, and the publication, while a modest initiative, has become increasingly valued, especially in Abkhazia.

*War Crimes in Croatia.* Vukovar, a town in Croatia, was the scene of horrible atrocities at the early stages of the wars of Yugoslav secession, when Serbian paramilitary forces and the Yugoslav army undertook a series of brutal attacks.

On the 10th anniversary of these attacks, IWPR launched an extensive cross-community reporting project, bringing together Serbian and Croatian journalists to investigate those crimes and the long-term impact.

The project took extensive work, and some careful handling, to encourage the team to work together in good faith. But the results were well worth it.

Most notably, the team of journalists in Serbia were able to locate a number of Serbian soldiers who had taken part in those attacks. They spoke remarkably openly about what they had done, and expressed heart-felt regret about the events.

Due to its unique position, IWPR was able to secure publication for the breakthrough report in leading newspapers in both Croatia and Serbia. Serbian readers were able to read reports about their government's crimes, as written by Serbian journalists, while Croatian readers were able to hear for the first time about the remorse of common Serbian soldiers.

Both audiences saw that joint work by Serbians and Croatians, even on sensitive topics, was possible, contributing to confidence on both sides. A Serbian editor, who had been resistant to the project in the first place, even found himself being congratulated for his bravery in publishing such a bold investigation.

These are just some examples of the creative way in which a cross-community approach can produce journalism at the top level, while also making a direct contribution to bridge-building and conflict resolution.

*Cross-community reporting  
can produce top level  
journalism, while  
contributing to conflict  
resolution*

## Just War

Many wars are explained on the basis of preventing atrocity, righting a wrong or halting a worse outcome. Often these are justifications for public consumption obscuring more concrete reasons, such as to secure power or territory.

Yet western philosophical, religious and legal theories do allow for the concept of just war, where certain criteria have been met. These include:

- **Last resort** – all non-violent options must have been exhausted before the use of force can be justified.
- **Legitimate authority** – even just causes cannot be served by actions taken by individuals or groups who do not constitute an authority accepted by those within and outside the society as legitimate.
- **Redress** – a just war can only be fought to redress a wrong suffered, particularly in self-defence.
- **Success** – war is only justified if it has a reasonable chance of success; death and injury in the service of a hopeless cause are not morally justifiable.

- **Establishing peace** – the ultimate goal of war must be to re-establish peace, and the peace that is established must be preferable to that which would have prevailed had the war not been fought.
- **Proportionality** – the violence used must be proportional to the injury suffered, and legitimate authorities must only use the level of force requested to achieve the limited objective of redressing the injury suffered.
- **Discrimination** – weapons must discriminate between combatants and non-combatants, civilians are never permissible targets of war, and every effort must be taken to avoid killing civilians. Civilian deaths are justified only if they are the unavoidable result of a deliberate attack on a military target.

Clearly, these principles set a very high standard for justifying the use of violence, and a review of the theory provides a useful guide against which to judge the claims often made by governments who take their countries into war. The principles alone provide a strong foundation for an agenda-setting approach into the causes and consequences of conflict.

### Six Core Duties

Six core duties for responsible peace reporting:

1. Duty to understand conflict:
  - We have an obligation to study and understand conflict and conflict resolution generally before reporting on it.
  - We should understand how conflicts develop and how resolutions can emerge; we should know about the “rules of war” as well as something about peace studies and the evolution of resolutions.
  - This is the same with any specialised or “beat” reporting.
2. Duty to report fairly:
  - We have an obligation to report on the conflict fairly and in a balanced way.
  - We must make every effort to report the complexities and opinions of all factions and sub-factions in a conflict.
  - We should always make our own allegiances clear. As journalists, we must let the reader know where we stand if we are on any one side.

- Again, this is true of any type of reporting journalists do.
3. Duty to report background and causes of a conflict:
    - We should accurately represent both the legitimate and perceived grievances of all parties.
    - We must remember, and remind our readers, that even perceived grievances are important to perpetuating and resolving conflicts.
  4. Duty to present the human side:
    - We have an obligation to represent the trauma and the human stories of victims in a balanced, professional and non-exploitative manner.
    - This is an obligation we have not only to those people we are reporting on but also to our readers.
  5. Duty to report on peace efforts:
    - We should report on the efforts of those working on peace and reconciliation every bit as much as those who exacerbate a conflict.
    - We should actively seek out sources outside the primary

belligerents, especially those who break from simplistic, bipolar interpretation of events. This expands our understanding and our readers' understanding of the conflict.

- This does not mean taking sides or “propagandising for peace”; it simply means reporting on peace efforts as well as war efforts.
6. Duty to recognise our influence:
- We should always be aware that our reporting will affect the conflict and the lives of people in it.
  - We should be ever vigilant to avoid being used by one side or the other in their war efforts and to expose attempts at media manipulation.

## EXERCISES

The following exercise involves a fictional country. Review the background and specific events in each scenario. Then discuss your views and how you would handle the stories in question.

*Background:* The Abedarians and the Cedaroons live together in a small mountainous country. Tensions between the communities have increased recently, mostly due to increasingly limited resources like arable land and access to clean water. Unemployment is very high among young men in both communities, and violent clashes have occurred between individuals of the two groups in the streets of the capital.

**Scenario one:** At a large public rally in the capital, a Cedaroon leader says that all Abedarians are “vermin”.

- You are a journalist working for a national radio station. Do you report the speech? If so, how? Is there a difference between hate speech and incitement?

**Scenario two:** At a cabinet meeting, an Abedarian government minister calls Queen Cedar, the 14th-century ruler considered by Cedaroons the “mother of all Cedaroons”, a “whore”.

- Do you report that particular comment? Does it depend on how the comment was intended (as an insult, as a joke, etc.)? How would it fit in with the rest of your coverage of that cabinet meeting - would it form the lead of your story?

**Scenario three:** An Abedarian leader makes a public speech to a large crowd, calling on all Abedarians to “eliminate the Cedaroon problem once and for all”.

- What would be your radio station’s approach to this speech?

**Scenario four:** In a private interview with you, a Cedaroon leader hands you a list of ten ethnically Abedarian villages that he says should be “Cedarised” as soon as possible. “Actually,” he tells you, “this is only ‘re-Cedarisation’, because these villages have always been traditionally populated by Cedaroons.”

- As a journalist, how do you approach this interview? Do you report this list and the names of the villages on it?

## ADDITIONAL READING AND REFERENCES

IWPR's website contains many links to issues surrounding peace reporting. See [www.iwpr.net](http://www.iwpr.net); click through to training pages.

The Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society (IMPACS) is a Canadian group producing valuable thinking on the relationship between conflict and media, some of which has contributed to this chapter. See [www.impacs.org](http://www.impacs.org)

International Media Support undertakes assessments of media needs in areas of crisis and transition, and has published a recent report on conflict reporting. See: [www.i-m-s.dk](http://www.i-m-s.dk)

The United States Institute for Peace publishes regular reports on conflict issues, including the role of the media. See [www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org). A recent report, in association with the media development group Internews ([www.internews.org](http://www.internews.org)), reviews media interventions (search on “vulnerable societies”).

Article 19 is a London-based group specialising in legal frameworks for free media. [www.article19.org](http://www.article19.org). See in particular their important books on media and conflict in Rwanda and the Balkans.

The Committee to Protect Journalists is a leading press freedom group. [www.cpj.org](http://www.cpj.org). See also the International Freedom of Expression Exchange ([www.ifex.org](http://www.ifex.org)), which has membership groups around the world.

The International Federation of Journalists is an umbrella for journalists unions around the world, and helps build journalist associations. [www.ifj.org](http://www.ifj.org)

Index on Censorship is a venerable publication and also a busy website highlighting issues of censorship and free expression. [www.indexonline.org](http://www.indexonline.org)

The International Center for Journalists is a US-based organisation providing training and other international media development programmes. [www.icjf.org](http://www.icjf.org)

The International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) is an implementor of U.S. development programmes with a profile in media activities. [www.irex.org](http://www.irex.org)

Search for Common Ground is a conflict-resolution group engaged in many media and peace building projects around the world. [www.sfcg.org](http://www.sfcg.org)

Foundation Hironnelle undertakes media and peace-building projects. [www.hironnelle.org](http://www.hironnelle.org)

The Panos Institute undertakes a wide range of research, training and other journalism support programmes. [www.panos.org.uk](http://www.panos.org.uk)

International Crisis Group provides excellent regular analytical reports and recommendations on crisis issues around the world. [www.icg.org](http://www.icg.org). The Open Society Institute, the foundation of philanthropist George Soros, provides a wealth of information about transitional societies, much drawn from its extensive international programming. [www.soros.org](http://www.soros.org).

Human Rights Watch ([www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)) and Amnesty International ([www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)) are the leading international human rights groups, providing regular reports on violations in crisis areas around the world.

A large number of organisations seek to strengthen peace building in conflict areas around the world, and provide information and analysis on peace processes as well as on conflict resolution generally. These include International Alert ([www.international-alert.org](http://www.international-alert.org)), Conciliation Resources

([www.c-r.org](http://www.c-r.org)), the European Centre for Conflict Prevention and Transformation ([www.conflict-prevention.net](http://www.conflict-prevention.net)), the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo ([www.prio.no](http://www.prio.no)) and the Oxford Research Group ([www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk](http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk)).

Reporting the World promotes debate over media coverage and conflict, largely focusing on the responsibility of the international media. [www.reportingtheworld.org](http://www.reportingtheworld.org)

For the abuse of media in the extreme, see *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families: Stories from Rwanda*, by Philip Gourevitch (Picador). Mark Thompson's *Forging War: The Media in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Article 19), and his *Forging Peace: Intervention, Human Rights, and the Management of Media Space*, co-authored with Monroe Price (Indiana University Press), provide important in-depth studies.

Please note that there are countless excellent groups doing media, media development and crisis and human rights oriented reporting, and this is a highly selective list just to get you started. In particular, this list does not include the hundreds of local human rights groups which demonstrate such bravery, or the vigorous local media institutes on the frontlines. The single best resource is your own initiative, plus [www.google.com](http://www.google.com).

## Chapter 12

# Human Rights and Journalism

MEDIA IS AN ESSENTIAL CHECK on power, and as such it is an essential pillar of human rights protection. Yet the media also depend on human rights in order to operate effectively.

By virtue of their profession, journalists are often witnesses to human rights abuses. They have an ethical obligation to report on such abuses, whether it is the unlawful detention or mistreatment of prisoners, deportations, illegal executions or massacres. The spotlight of the media is a primary mechanism for mobilising the political will to obtain redress.

Because they are often the first to bear witness to and report serious human rights abuses, it is frequently their work that provokes legal authorities to investigate. In recent years, prosecutors have cited press reports as evidence in their efforts to try war crimes suspects from Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. With the establishment of the International Criminal Court in The Hague, the importance of human rights reporting will continue to grow.

At the same time, journalists, especially those reporting in conflict areas, depend themselves on human rights protection. Journalists are not singled out for special treatment under



*The spotlight of the media is a primary mechanism for mobilising the political will to obtain redress*

*Journalists are often imprisoned or harassed by parties to a conflict*

humanitarian law. However, human rights conventions accord all civilians certain protections. In theory, parties to a conflict should allow journalists to work freely in conflict zones and refrain from harassing or detaining them.

In reality, however, this is often not the case. Journalists are often imprisoned or harassed by parties to a conflict. But when this occurs, news organisations, governments and human rights organisations can apply pressure under these rights to seek a journalist's release or protection.

### Human Rights Agreements

Human rights have evolved as a concept over many years in many cultures. In the sixth century BC, the Chinese warrior Sun Tzu suggested putting limits on the way that wars were conducted. In 1215, King John of England was forced to sign the Magna Carta granting his subjects the right to own and inherit property and established principles of due process and equality before the law.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, several European philosophers proposed the concept of “natural rights”, rights

belonging to a person by nature and because he was a human being, not by virtue of his citizenship in a particular country or membership in a particular religious or ethnic group.

At the same time, the founder of the Red Cross, Henri Dunant, began expressing concern for the plight of the sick and wounded in war time and worked to establish the first Geneva Convention, which was signed in 1864. In the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth, these rights progressed further as political and religious groups worked to end slavery, serfdom, and exploitative labour practices.

These values - what we now call human rights - were enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, just after the Second World War. In its preamble, the charter stated that the UN aimed to “reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small.” It entered into force in October 1945.

The international human rights movement grew quickly in the second half of the 20th century. In 1946, the Nazi military and political leadership were put on trial in Nuremberg for the

crimes they committed against civilians and a new legal concept was born: crimes against humanity. These proceedings would lead to the expansion of the Geneva Conventions in 1949 to protect civilians during wartime, specifically outlawing attacks on civilians and civilian property.

In 1948, the United Nations established the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, enshrining respect for basic human rights as a necessary condition of any country seeking to be part of a modern international community. Article 19 of the declaration specifically addresses press freedom by guaranteeing the freedom of opinion and expression, including the right to “seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”.

The Cold War slowed down the development of international human rights institutions, although it was human rights conventions that helped open up the Soviet Union. Out of this effort, leading independent international organisations committed to human rights were established.

Following the UN’s lead, other organisations established their own human rights agreements. For example, in 1990, the Islamic

Conference Organisation declared, “Human beings are born free and no-one has a right to enslave, humiliate, oppress or exploit them and there can be no subjugation but to Allah the Almighty.”

In 1993, the United Nations created the office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to monitor and enforce human rights worldwide. It also established war crimes tribunals to prosecute crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. Subsequently, the UN has aided Cambodia, East Timor and Sierra Leone in their efforts to establish tribunals to try war crimes suspects.

In July 2002, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court entered into force, establishing a permanent court to try those accused of serious crimes such as crimes against humanity and genocide.

### Reporting on Human Rights

Reporting on human rights requires the same adherence to high standards as reporting on any other subject. But because of the great sensitivity, journalists need to be especially careful and sensitive to the possible dangers and pitfalls.

*Journalists must be ready to report any human rights violations by any group*

In most conflicts, any side may commit violations and journalists may simply only have access to a violation against one group. Although journalists must take care to distinguish between a policy of human rights violations with and an isolated act, journalists must be ready to report any human rights violations by any group.

The underlying principle of human rights is universality: everyone is entitled to protection of life and freedom from abuse, regardless of ethnic origin, religion or gender.

Those who have sought to challenge the legitimacy of international courts, such as the UN tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, have questioned its “balance”, although the court has prosecuted individuals from all parties to the conflict

Reporting violations means getting the maximum amount of evidence possible without disturbing any evidence at the scene. Ask everything several times and check all the answers. Take video or sound recordings, if possible, but do not remove anything such as identity papers, photographs, or other material from the scene. Verify facts as much as possible through the use of multiple sources - human rights groups will often interview

dozens and dozens of people before releasing an in-depth report.

Often, human rights abuses become a banner that one party will raise against opponents, government or any other dominant power in a region. As such, journalists must avoid being identified with any particular group involved. Take precautions not to be used by one party or another and make sure that your reports are based on sound evidence.

Journalists must be cautious in blindly accepting allegations about human rights abuses because they are often part of the propaganda battle. During the Kosovo war, several seasoned journalists from prominent news organisations erroneously reported massacres that did not happen because they were misled by their sources. When the fighting ended, they discovered that several of the people they reported killed were still alive.

On the other hand, journalists must not be too quick to dismiss allegations of atrocities. In the late 1970s, when Cambodians began fleeing across the border into Thailand with stories about the Khmer Rouge's atrocities, journalists were reluctant to take their accounts at face value because they were so horrific. It

*Allegations about human rights abuses are often part of the propaganda battle*

took several years to verify that such reports were true.

Journalists need to be aware of the sensitivities in seeking information in such a charged atmosphere. Both outsiders who are unfamiliar with the history and politics of different ethnic and national groups, as well as reporters who are members of one of the groups, may be deliberately used to spread false information.

Also, always remember that while the reporter might be able to leave a region (and fly back to a base in another country), many of the people interviewed cannot and this has an impact on how willing they are to talk or to what extra danger they may be exposed. Journalists must take all possible precautions not to jeopardize the safety of their sources, translators, drivers and fixers.

## Interviewing Victims and Witnesses

*Try to interview people separately.* Group pressure can easily influence and exaggerate a story.

*Clearly identify yourself as a journalist.* Say exactly who you are working for and why. Do not raise unrealistic expectations with those interviewed. Does the person think you can help them in a practical way? Make sure the interviewee understands you are not with a human rights organisation.

*Explain why it is important to report incidents.* The goal is to expose abuse to the world but the victims may be afraid of this. You should respect their wishes and look for alternatives. Agree at the outset with anyone interviewed whether you can use their name, or if they need to be anonymous for their own safety.

*Confirm basic details.* Get the full name, occupation and age of the person being interviewed, even if they are not to be used in the story, as a means of establishing credibility. Where can they be contacted later if necessary? Assume this may be the only chance you have to meet this person, and the only opportunity to get his or her personal details.

*Confirm supporting details.* Get clear descriptions of places, names of those present, their positions, ranks if appropriate, as well as any recognisable uniforms or insignia of alleged perpetrators. What weapons were seen or used?

*Ask repeatedly about timing and the sequence of events.* Most human rights violations take place in chaotic conditions. Remember victims and many others involved may become very confused about the order of events. Those interviewed should be asked sensitively to repeat their story to expose inconsistencies. Do not be afraid to say: “I know this is difficult for you, but could you describe the whole incident again?”

*Compare the stories of different witnesses.* While looking for inconsistencies, also be aware that if everyone is telling exactly the same story, it may indicate that it has been concocted for the media. You can avoid falling for this by gleaning as much detail as possible and looking for holes witnesses’ stories.

*Appreciate the degree of stress for victims.* Take breaks if possible, and don’t be afraid to be human. Offer your interviewee a tissue or something to drink (or smoke). Remember such interviews can be very traumatic.

## Interviewing the Accused

Where possible, seek to interview the people accused of human rights violations. This depends on the risk. But the story will be stronger with comment from all involved.

Be open and honest with those accused. Never pretend you are asking about something else – this is unethical and dangerous if found out. Explain that it is an attempt to establish the truth.

Make sure that you have researched the situation in great detail, and build up your questions carefully. Wild or unsupported accusations will result in a shouting match (or get you in serious trouble) but will not advance your search for information.

The underlying basis of the criminal justice system is innocent until proven guilty. Remember to undertake your journalism with a cautious and precise mind, sceptical both of the justifications of the accused and of the claims of the accusers.

*Remember the foundation  
of the criminal justice  
system: innocent until  
proven guilty*

## EXERCISES

Being a good journalist means being aware of what is going on in your own country and on the international stage.

Discuss with your colleagues the two following questions:

1. What human rights trials are going on internationally at present?
2. Are there human rights issues in your own society that should be reported?

Try to write the outline for an article on each, taking account of various viewpoints. For question two, whom would you like to interview and how you would prepare for these interviews?

## ADDITIONAL READING & REFERENCES

This chapter provides an overview of a topic of critical importance, and further reading is highly recommended.

*A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*, Samantha Power (HarperCollins).

*Crimes of War - What the Public Should Know*, by Roy Gutman and

David Rieff (W.W. Norton). The book spawned an organisation with further resources: [www.crimesofwar.org](http://www.crimesofwar.org)

The International Committee of the Red Cross includes the text of major treaties on its website: [www.icrc.org](http://www.icrc.org)

The United Nations also has details of major treaties, courts and tribunals on its site: [www.un.org/law](http://www.un.org/law). See also the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights: [www.ohchr.org/english](http://www.ohchr.org/english)

Human Rights Watch ([www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)) and Amnesty International ([www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)) are the leading international human rights groups, providing a wealth of reports and alerts.

The International Criminal Court is a new multilateral institution set up to prosecute war crimes internationally. [www.icc-cpi.int](http://www.icc-cpi.int).

Columbia University School of Journalism has a human rights reporting course with the curriculum and a useful bibliography available online. [www.humanrightsreporting.com](http://www.humanrightsreporting.com)

The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma offers ideas and resources for sensitive reporting on victims of trauma and crimes. See [www.dartcenter.org](http://www.dartcenter.org)

## Chapter 13

# Economic Journalism



*Public debate on economic issues helps focus attention on the real problems and possible solutions*

PUT IN ITS SIMPLEST TERMS, ECONOMICS is the study of what affects peoples' livelihoods.

Elections are won and lost on economics. Remember the legendary phrase from Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign, "It's the economy, stupid". Often a country's national, local and international well-being and stability hinges on how it fares in the global market place.

Countries of under-development, disturbance, disaster or conflict need good, clear stories on economic issues because public understanding and debate helps focus on the real problems and possible solutions. Critically, at a time when legal and regulatory frameworks may be weak, the spotlight of the media can be essential in combatting corruption.

This requires journalists to make a special effort to understand economic policies and economic performance to be able to explain them clearly to others. Just as it is essential to learn about conflict if you are going to be covering a war, a reporter cannot write properly about economics without having a basic grounding in the subject.

## What Is Needed?

Economic journalism actually needs the same skills as any other reporting - plus three special ones:

1. Knowing how to work with numbers
2. Knowing how to work with economic concepts
3. Contacts in the business and financial world

Like all good reporters who go on to specialise in a subject, you need to be ready to do a lot of background reading and not to be afraid to ask questions about what you do not understand. Specialists, whether they be central bankers or development economists, appreciate being asked to explain difficult questions, provided it is apparent that the questioner has made an effort to get up to speed in the subject.

*Often, one good number  
can be the heart of an  
entire story*

### Working with Numbers

This section does not attempt to teach you how to compute the Consumer Price Index or report on the velocity of M3 money supply. Rather, it tries to set out some general guidelines on how to work with economic numbers.

Often, one good number can be the heart of an entire story. For example, “Research reveals only 7 per cent of money given by donor countries to support education here has ended up in the country.” “Or, “House prices have increased over 50 per cent in the capital in the past year, a new survey shows.”

But “per cent” means little in real terms without actual numbers. In the above example, “7 per cent” of what - a million or 100 million? It makes a big difference! It is essential to give the context to allow readers to understand the significance of percentage rises or falls.

Keep it simple. Be precise if it is important but remember that figures can be rounded in a general article to prevent readers becoming bogged down in too much detail. Show the source of the information clearly and early to reinforce credibility and make it simple to understand.

For example, “wheat imports totalled nearly 180,000 tonnes last year, official figures show” not “wheat imports totalled 177,823 tonnes last year”. Again, it is important to put this figure in context. What were imports the year before, more or less? What was the government’s target for imports? Were there crop failures which meant more had to be imported than expected? Or were crops so good that imports could be cut back, saving the country foreign exchange? These are all questions that take the economic story one step further than the simple figures.

Know your systems of measurement and stick to the same units of measurement throughout a story. This may mean converting numbers and quantities from one measurement system into another. For example, you may need US dollars and local currency equivalents. Do not confuse with too many conversions, only those necessary for clarity.

“Even a simple imported painkiller like Paracetamol can cost as much as 180 lira (three US dollars), while the average worker might earn only 1,500 lira (25 dollars) a month.”

Compare like with like. If you are writing a story about inflation, try to relate all current prices to the same point in the past, for

*Know your systems of measurement and stick to the same units throughout a story*

*Always give a source for numbers, especially where they may be open to doubt*

example, one month or one year ago (which gives you a “year-on-year” increase or what is usually considered the rate of inflation).

Always give a source for numbers, especially where they may be open to doubt. For example, “the government says it has already taken on more than 5,000 workers.” If 5,000 workers are laid off at a plant, what does that mean in terms of the total workforce?

A good rule about using economic statistics is that if you have doubts about the figures, or do not understand what they really mean, do not use them.

Explaining what we do not know can often help the audience as much as what we do know. For example: “Nobody knows exactly how much opium the country will produce this year. The UN estimates between 40,000 and 60,000 tonnes.”

One “hard” actual number can be worth ten projected numbers. Companies, NGOs and governments are always producing numbers in forecasts and projections - for jobs, profits and donations in the future - all of which may be exaggerated or over-ambitious. Often this is part of their promotion, their spin or even outright propaganda. So be careful to differentiate between forecasts and official published statistics.

## Working with Economic Concepts

In political journalism, it can be difficult to find the objective truth: there are many shades of grey between black and white. In economics, on the other hand, you can usually be right or wrong as far as the numbers go. (Of course, the interpretation of what those numbers mean can be subject to as much spin as politics and often ends up being politics!)

So it is important to realise that terms like inflation or Gross Domestic Product have precise, not vague, meanings. They are often based on indices which have clearly defined components and are calculated in a precise way.

You therefore need to master the basic concepts of economics and the individual terms so that you don't make mistakes when you use them. Here are two examples designed to highlight the importance of understanding the concept behind the bare figures.

Consider each of the following statements and decide whether they are likely to be true or false:

- Inflation is falling because the central bank is printing more money

(Wrong: printing more money is likely to cause higher inflation)

- Wages have fallen and so more people are employed

(This can be correct, because if labour is cheaper, then more people may get work)

- The real story is sometimes hidden in numbers

Sometimes a better or “harder” news story is lurking behind the headline numbers – or at least behind the way in which the numbers are presented by governments or companies trying to influence public opinion. The journalist’s skill is in learning how to spot the hidden story in these figures.

Look at the example below and write a one paragraph news story (effectively your lead paragraph) from the information:

*The Ministry of Finance in Mithalistan has just announced that it expects*

*to collect 25 million US dollars in taxes from tobacco this year. The ministry says there are five million smokers in Mithalistan and on average each one smokes 20 cigarettes a day. The tax on a single packet of 20 cigarettes is 2,000 riyals (worth five US cents - there are 40,000 riyals to the dollar). The ministry says it is very pleased revenues from tobacco have risen by 25 per cent from last year's 20 million dollars.*

It is often only by understanding the underlying concepts that you can fight through the figures to arrive at the real story.

## Contacts

Like any type of reporting, economic reporting depends crucially on whom you know - your contacts book.

In an industrial country, it is important to make contact with official bodies (the Finance Ministry, central bank, statistics office etc), industry (the top companies listed on a stock exchange) and economists who can help you understand economic news and can comment authoritatively and independently on it.

In a developing country, the mix of contacts is likely to be somewhat different. The Finance Ministry and central bank

will remain important for basic information. But you will also need to tap into development agencies working in the country - the World Bank, its private sector financing arm, the International Finance Corporation and a host of other NGOs or charitable organisation which may be responsible for running projects funded by western governments. An organisation like the World Bank will often have staff on the ground in a country but equally it will be important to make contacts with those responsible for overseeing policy back in the head office, in this case most probably in Washington, D.C. The UN Development Programme produces an important annual human development report.

Trade, finance and agriculture also tend to assume higher importance in a developing country. If a country depends on exports of, say, wheat for foreign exchange, you need to forge strong contacts with the relevant officials in the ministry of agriculture. Sometimes you will need to be able to talk to the minister for an official comment; at other times it will be good to go deeper into the ministry to someone who could give you early indications of crop forecasts (something a minister might not want to do).

## Development Issues

Development is a very important part of many countries' economies. Whole textbooks and university courses have been devoted to the study of development economics and topics such as "sustainable development".

In the early stages, especially when a country is in turmoil following war or a natural disaster, development may involve three stages:

1. Urgent humanitarian assistance
2. Reconstruction
3. Development

## Humanitarian Assistance

In a country at war, emergency aid is often the only kind of economy there is apart from trading in drugs, sex and weapons. International organisations fly in food and temporary shelter for tens of thousands of people made homeless by the fighting. There is no time or peace to think of anything else.

*In a country at war,  
emergency aid may be the  
only economy there is,  
besides drugs, sex and  
weapons*

This is where contacts come in. Make sure you get to know the heads of the main relief organisations working in a country. Equally, it will be worthwhile trying to forge links back to key staff in their headquarters when it comes to issues of policy.

When writing about relief efforts on the ground, try to concentrate on some of the main issues and basic questions.

This is all part of the aid story:

- How much relief is coming in each day and where?
- Is it the right kind of relief? Is it what the government has requested, or is it something else. If so, is there a dispute with the government?
- Is the relief getting through to the people who need it, or is it being wasted or siphoned off because of corruption? How often has relief been funnelled through to troops fighting a civil war?
- What about security? Are the aid workers safe on the ground or is the operation jeopardised by fighting? Are aid workers being targeted? Are they debating whether to pull out of the country?

## Reconstruction

Reconstruction is the stage a country reaches after a conflict is over. Key infrastructure such as roads, power, sewage, water, irrigation and agriculture need to be rebuilt.

Sometimes this will be funded by the “IFIs” or international financial institutions such as the World Bank. In other cases, international aid consortiums may be convened.

Aid programmes will often have many different strands, ranging from construction projects and basic de-mining, to health and education programmes. Often, there is a programme to foster an independent media, reflecting the powerful view that this is an important condition for democracy.

Another key element of reconstruction is formation of key institutions of state. In some cases, this will include setting up assemblies, law courts and sometimes even a new constitution. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, western-style free market economics were introduced into the former Soviet bloc nations. But some early attempts failed to deliver on high expectations because the basic institutional framework had not been put in

*Failure to put legal frameworks in place often allows corruption to flourish*

place to support the free market economic model - eg, a bankruptcy law. Failure to put such legal frameworks in place has often allowed corruption to flourish in a new, free-for-all environment.

### Development

Development is the stage beyond reconstruction, when a country can really begin to produce economic growth.

In the development stage, business begins to flourish and health and education services advance. The banking system is more developed, credit becomes more readily available, and matching resources to needs becomes easier. At this stage of a country's development, institutions such as the World Bank begin to take more of a back seat in an economy and the role of private finance and foreign investment grows. Financial markets are more developed and institutions to support them - such as a stock exchange - become more established.

At the same time, a nation's legal framework is becoming clearer and the currency is usually more stable. All of this helps provide confidence to investors and supports inward investment.

When writing about this stage of development, it is important to know whether foreign investors will be able to repatriate their earnings (such as profits from a joint venture or dividends from a stock investment) and whether a currency will remain stable. There is little point, from a foreign investment point of view, if huge profits can be earned in a country but the currency is "soft" and cannot be translated into a so-called hard currency such as the dollar, yen or euro.

Currency developments become increasingly important at this stage of development. A weak currency means a country will find that imports to build up its industry or agriculture are expensive. Equally, a lack of foreign confidence in economic management may lead to a run on hard currency reserves or pressure to devalue.

*Media promotes  
transparency, and  
transparency combats  
corruption*

## Corruption

Over the past decade, much research has been done into the ways in which the media can fight corruption, and the conclusion is clear: Media promotes transparency, and transparency combats corruption.

The World Bank is perhaps the foremost expert on the issue of corruption in developing countries, and it has assisted more than 50 countries with in-depth anti-corruption programmes and governance reforms.

But the bank soon discovered that it is critical to look at what it calls the "voice" through which citizens provide feed-back to governments: the media, NGOs and civil society groups.

In a report on the subject, the Bank concluded, "The role of the media is critical in promoting good governance and controlling corruption. It not only raises public awareness about corruption, its causes, consequences and possible remedies but also investigates and reports incidences of corruption. The effectiveness of the media, in turn, depends on access to information and freedom of expression, as well as a professional and ethical cadre of investigative journalists."

Others have come to similar conclusions. When the independent group Transparency International matched its Index on Corruption with the Press Freedom World Wide Index, it found an absolute correlation: the stronger and more independent the media in a country, the less corruption there will be.

Media can provide tangible benefits - an exposé on an influence-peddling minister that results in his sacking - and more general, intangible ones, including a vigorous public debate and heightened sense of accountability among politicians.

Journalists covering corruption begin with the core principles of in-depth, fact-based reporting, but the scale of difficulty and the risks are higher. Double-sourcing, coaxing out sensitive information and note-taking from interviews, and especially paying careful attention to libel laws are all absolutely essential. Indeed, long after war stops, many journalists have been personally targeted by local profiteers at risk of exposure by an active media. Even in stable Western countries, journalists investigating corruption have been killed.

*Journalists covering corruption begin with the core principles of fact-based reporting, but the difficulty and risks are higher*

### ADDITIONAL READING & REFERENCES

Glossary of terms:

**[moneycentral.msn.com/investor/Glossary/glossary.asp](http://moneycentral.msn.com/investor/Glossary/glossary.asp)**

Reuters Financial Glossary, published by Reuters

*The Financial Times Guide to Using the Financial Pages*, published by  
Financial Times Prentice Hall

IMF, World Economic Outlook:

**[www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2000/01/index.htm](http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2000/01/index.htm)**

OECD home page: **[www.oecd.org/home](http://www.oecd.org/home)**

World Bank: **[www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org)**

UN Development Programme: **[www.undp.org](http://www.undp.org)**

Transparency International: **[www.transparency.org](http://www.transparency.org)**

## Chapter 14

# Journalism Safety

DURING THE PAST DECADE, 346 journalists have been killed doing their job, 37 of them in 2003. The conflict in Iraq has seen the toll of death and injury continue to mount at an alarming rate.

The statistics, compiled by the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists, make for grim reading. Ten journalists, most of them foreign correspondents, died in the 21 days between the start of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein. (Other journalist groups cite even higher figures.)

But it is all too easy to forget that almost twice as many again were killed during 2003 in other parts of the world, often far away from the battlefield. Some were murdered because of their coverage of corruption; others were killed because their reporting got too close to the shady world of paramilitaries; and others were simply the targets of robbers.

It therefore an understatement to say that a journalist's work is dangerous, especially in modern day conflict zones. The truth of the matter is that you can never remove the element of risk. But there are some simple principles and guidelines you can follow to help reduce the level of that risk.



*Ten journalists died in the 21 days between the start of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein*

*Never put the story  
above personal safety*

- **Be prepared** – in terms of professional training, first aid and safety equipment;
- **Be informed** – know the territory you are travelling in, as well as your companions or fixers. Do your homework thoroughly first;
- **Be calm** – ensure that you are in a good physical and mental condition;
- **Prioritise your life** – never put the story above personal safety: no story is worth a human life; more crudely, a dead journalist can't file.

Many international media organisations have now made training for war correspondents compulsory. This has focused mainly on courses on physical safety - understanding conflict zones, equipment and basic things to look out for, as well as a review of basic emergency medical treatment. Increasingly organisations are also considering how to train - and provide counselling for journalists if necessary - on issues of stress and trauma.

Journalists working for smaller organisations or freelancers often do not have this opportunity to be trained. But fortunately

scholarships are increasingly being made available to help finance them to attend these courses. Some of the organisations involved in helping foster the safety of journalists, and those working in the field of stress and trauma, are listed at the end of this chapter.

What follows is not designed as a substitute for full and proper training. It does, however, cover many of the bases and sets out some essential “dos” and “don’ts”.

### Basic Rules

A key rule is not to follow anyone else thoughtlessly into battle, whether another journalist or soldiers fighting on the frontline. Always make your own decisions by assessing what could go wrong and by considering what you should guard against.

Ask yourself, “How to get a story without becoming a story?” Always question whether the story is worth taking a risk for.

It is easy to be caught up in the adrenalin of a conflict, whether a demonstration on the streets or a battle. Never be affected by what other people think about you. It is your life, so make your own decisions. Do not be ashamed of fear – it is a good sign of a need for caution.

*Do not follow anyone else  
thoughtlessly into battle,  
whether another journalist  
or soldiers on the frontline*

*Do not be ashamed of fear: it is a good sign of a need for caution*

Suppose a group of soldiers are moving up to the frontline and invite you to go with them. Do not think about whether to accept or reject the invitation in terms of what they might think about you. What are the risks? Are they worth it for the story or pictures? Does it really matter if you do not go?

Always consider ways to minimise any risk in covering a story. Try not to get excited or you will not think clearly.

It is not a question of personal courage. Your job is different from that of soldiers. Their job is to fight, and maybe to die. Yours is to stay alive and report what you see to the world. Journalists occasionally have to put themselves at risk, but the question, once again, is whether there is any story that justifies losing your life.

## Getting Close to the Action

Always consider whether moving into danger will help the story. Often it will not. For those shooting video or still pictures, the decision is less easy but the principles are the same - do the pictures justify the risk?

The job of a journalist is to find out what is going on, capture the overall picture, and have the report published. Experienced soldiers know that those in the front line of a battle almost never know what is really happening except what is immediately in front or behind them. There is too much movement and noise. Invariably, they are witnessing only one of many snapshots of the wider conflict.

In fact, more might be found out about the situation some distance back, at a command post for instance.

The large international news organisations have the luxury of being able to piece together many different viewpoints - from the battlefield, from headquarters in the field and from politicians back home - pulling together all the varied pieces of the jigsaw puzzle. Not every organisation can afford to do that so you have to ask yourself where the best story is to be had.

*Always carry a  
journalist ID; never  
carry a weapon*

Also, remember that the job of a reporter is different from that of a photographer. A photographer or cameraperson has to have some images to capture the essence of the conflict. Either way, a good motto is: “Get the pictures or story and then get out.”

You do not need to show your bravery to anyone. It is more courageous to take your own independent decision than simply to go along with the pack.

### Target Awareness

Always carry a journalist ID with you. Never carry a weapon with you. If you are captured by soldiers, why should they believe that you are neutral if you are carrying a weapon? It is also against international conventions on the protection of civilians.

Generally identify yourself as a journalist, otherwise you may be mistaken for a spy. It is usually better not to get through a checkpoint at all than to get through on false pretences. But there might be cases where you might need to break this rule, if there are good journalistic reasons. Local knowledge and checking with experienced colleagues will help you make that decision.

Always be wary of empty roads. Why are they empty? Develop an awareness of your surroundings and what might be a target for the other side. Wear clothes so that even from a distance you do not look like a combatant. But sometimes clothes that are too bright might also mark you out as an easy target, especially if snipers are around or if demonstrators are not happy at seeing people from the media.

In general, avoid khaki or any other colour that may make you look like a soldier or militia member. Near a spot from where combatants are firing, assume that they may draw return fire.

A camera from a distance, especially held near the face, can look like a grenade launcher or a sniper's weapon from the front. If you feel under threat, take the camera off your shoulder and show it side on, so that the opposing side can see what it is.

*Avoid khaki or any other clothing that may make you look like a soldier or militia member*

*Avoid depending on soldiers for your transport: their vehicles are a military target*

### Minimise Your Time at the Front

If you have to go, always have a specific goal - to conduct an interview with soldiers or those caught on the frontline, for example, or to get an idea of the conflict zone. Remember that frontlines are not always clear - do not get caught in no-man's land. Plan the trip beforehand, and make sure you can leave when you want to. Do not go to the frontline just to hang around, for the experience.

Make sure that you have a safe vehicle, that you know how it works and that it has enough fuel to get you back. Avoid depending on soldiers for your transport because their vehicles are a military target. Ensure you have thought of the best means of escape or evacuation if you need to leave in a hurry.

Make sure others know about your travel plan, giving precise details and checking in regularly, so that somebody will realise quickly if you have not kept to your plan, including coming back as expected. It may be safer to travel with other journalists and in convoys with other media vehicles. Listen to those with experience and avoid anyone you think takes too many risks.

## Weapons Recognition

In a war zone, try to think of things from a soldier's point of view. Analysing how dangerous the current situation is will be helped by knowing a few simple things about weapons and the technical aspects of modern fighting.

### 1. Heavy Weapons

Protective clothing helps, but heavy weapons are always dangerous. Distinguish whether heavy weapons fire is artillery or mortar. Artillery – field guns firing shells – has a low flat trajectory which means you can take cover from it behind the lee of a hill. Mortars have a shorter range but their high trajectory means you cannot hide in the same way.

Try to work out whether the incoming fire is direct – has a line of sight – or is indirect, using a spotter. If it is indirect, readjustment to specific targets will be slower. Without sophisticated guidance systems, accuracy is only to within 100 metres – which means anyone 50 metres away from the intended target could still take a direct hit.

*When travelling in a convoy of vehicles, try not to go in the first or last one*

Figure out the pattern of successive incoming rounds. A shot may have landed far away because it is a ranging shot. If the next one is closer, you should be moving away before the third one hits the target.

The impact of heavy weapons rounds varies considerably over different terrain. It achieves maximum impact on hard, flat ground. The best place to be when a round lands is flat on the ground, because the impact will create a hole which drives the shrapnel upwards. If you are out on a flat plain, away from cover when a round has just landed, the best place to be when the next round comes in, is directly in the shell hole of the first. Your instinct will be to run, but actually you are much better off lying flat in an artillery strike area than running.

In a building, it is safer under staircases or the beams. Keep away from glass windows. It is better to knock the glass out to avoid splinters.

When travelling in a convoy of vehicles, try not to go in the first or last one. The classic tactic of artillery or airplanes is to try to knock out the first and last vehicles and trap all the others. Once

out of the vehicle, run away from the road if you can, rather than down it, where you are a natural target for strafing or snipers. But watch for mines in roadside areas.

## 2. Small Arms

In the Second World War, about a million rounds of small-arms fire (from rifles and machine-guns) were fired for every person killed. So in the middle of a conflict, the chances of survival are statistically reasonably good. Most fire goes high.

Trained soldiers are generally better shots, while untrained soldiers may spray indiscriminately. The armies of western countries estimate that a trained soldier is generally accurate up to 100 metres. Other armies or militia may be less accurate.

One major light weapon used in many conflicts around the world is the Kalashnikov (the AK-47 and later models), popular because it is robust, easy to learn to use, and has a reasonable range. But it is deemed to be a “close quarter battle weapon”, and is not accurate at longer range. Be aware, however, that should a bullet strike a target even at 1,000 metres, it can still cause considerable damage.

The Kalashnikov has its safety-catch lever on the right hand side, which – as most people are right handed – means you can normally see what position it is in. Up means the safety catch is on and the gun will not fire. The first down position is for fully automatic fire, the final down position is for single shot operation. Always err on the side of caution.

### 3. Landmines

Mines planted by any side are nearly always a hazard, especially as they are often not marked in conflict zones. But always look out for signs and use common sense thinking on where they are likely to be. Spots in sealed roads are generally easy to see. Elsewhere, especially in fields, it is not easy. Certainly never touch or pick up anything in such a zone.

Mined areas are always likely near defensive or abandoned positions. A field lying fallow by a cultivated area may indicate mines, but anti-personnel traps may be sown even in cultivated areas.

There are two kinds of landmines: anti-personnel and anti-tank. Anti-tank ones are usually big and designed only to detonate on a heavier impact. They are often protected by the smaller anti-

personnel mines that can be triggered by any pressure.

Remember that most mines have not been designed to disintegrate, so that they may remain “live” and in place for many years after a conflict has ended.

### First Aid

This subject needs a special handbook its own right but it is impossible to stress enough how important it is to learn first aid, since it substantially increases everyone’s chances of surviving a serious incident or accident.

During a war, many more people die of disease and wounds than in actual combat. After serious accidents or injury, the first five minutes often decide whether someone will live or die. A two-day first aid course can teach how to deal with major blood loss, wounds, broken bones, burns and other eventualities. It means you can help yourself and others, too.

*After serious accidents or injury, the first five minutes often decide whether someone will live or die*

*The culture of journalism seems particularly prone to abusing substances*

### Substance Abuse

In a handbook about journalism, it is worth raising a caution about substance abuse, especially in conflict areas. Journalists often smoke, and especially in the West, drink. Many, in fact, drink a great deal, and some take drugs.

Any job involves professional pressures, and how people deal with that is up to them. But for some, the culture of journalism seems particularly prone to abusing substances, to the extent that it effects their livelihoods, and even their lives.

Professional war correspondents - that unique breed that travels from conflict area to conflict area around the world - face extreme risks and the often daily trauma of seeing death before their eyes. A number of them have had particular problems with alcohol and drug addiction.

A war zone is a rush, and awash with hard-living and ready access, for a price, to anything you please. Especially in those circumstances, it is important to keep your energy, your health and your judgement. Away from the front, memories and traumas can return, which cause some to seek escape. But doing so through the bottle is not the best way.

Needless to say, remember that journalism is also about learning about and respecting other societies, which includes taking into account where religion and culture forbid alcohol.

### Riots and Demonstrations

Remember, all stories carry a risk. Many people are wary, even hostile to reporters and news teams, either because they have something to hide or perhaps do not like the organisations that the journalists work for. So it pays always to think about the risk before covering any story.

This is especially true when covering riots or demonstrations. Mobs are unpredictable and while they may sometimes want the publicity, they can quickly turn nasty, putting news teams at risk. Similarly, security forces often do not want witnesses to what they are doing or are simply unable to distinguish demonstrators from journalists. It is essential that reporters think carefully about where to position themselves.

It is always best to try to get above a crowd where possible. Never get between demonstrators and the security forces. That is like being in no-man's land in a war where you can unwittingly

*Plan escape routes in advance so you can get away quickly with the story*

become a target of either side. Is tear gas likely? If it is, then prepare for it.

Plan escape routes in advance so you can get away quickly with the story. Think whether you need to take special precautions with equipment; sometimes it is better to hide it. If it comes to a choice between your equipment and your life, abandon the equipment!

Leave vehicles well away from the scene so they do not get damaged and can provide a quick way out. It is often a good idea to try to use inconspicuous vehicles. Similarly, as in conflict zones, think about clothing so that you do not stand out as a target.

The secret of all risk assessment is to think ahead about all possibilities, and use common sense. Know where your colleagues are and be ready to look after them, too.

**The golden rule is: if in doubt, get out.**

## EXERCISES

Choose a country you are covering and discuss with colleagues likely scenarios where you need to take precautions. Try to answer the following questions:

- What clothing should you wear? Do you need gas masks or other safety equipment?
- How would you protect your equipment?
- What sort of vehicles should you travel in?
- What do you need to know about the vehicle and how would you check it?
- Where are you going to stay and how safe is it?
- Do you know how to get out in an emergency?
- Are you trained in first aid and do you have a first aid kit in your supplies? What should it include?

### ADDITIONAL READING & REFERENCES

Committee to Protect Journalists: [www.cpj.org](http://www.cpj.org)

“On Assignment – a Guide to Reporting in Dangerous Situations”:

[cpj.org/Briefings/2003/safety/journo\\_safe\\_guide.pdf](http://cpj.org/Briefings/2003/safety/journo_safe_guide.pdf)

International Press Institute: [www.freemedia.at/index1.html](http://www.freemedia.at/index1.html)

Reporters sans Frontieres: [www.rsf.org/](http://www.rsf.org/)

International News Safety Institute:

[www.newssafety.com/insihome/index01.html](http://www.newssafety.com/insihome/index01.html)

Crimes of War Project:

[www.crimesofwar.org/thebook/book.html](http://www.crimesofwar.org/thebook/book.html)

Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma:

[www.dartcenter.org/index.html](http://www.dartcenter.org/index.html)

And Dart Europe: [www.dartcenter.org/europe/](http://www.dartcenter.org/europe/)

The Rory Peck Trust: [rorypecktrust.org/](http://rorypecktrust.org/)

The Kurt Schork Memorial Fund: [www.ksmfund.org/](http://www.ksmfund.org/)

A number of organisations offer safety training, including:

- AKE - [www.akegroup.com](http://www.akegroup.com)
- Centurion - [www.centurion-riskservices.co.uk](http://www.centurion-riskservices.co.uk)
- Pilgrims - [www.pilgrimgroup.co.uk/index.html](http://www.pilgrimgroup.co.uk/index.html)

Several memoirs by war correspondents highlight the risks and pressures of frontline reporting, including:

*The Bang-Bang Club: Snapshots from a Hidden War*, by Greg Marinovich and Joao Silva (Basic Books)

*My War Gone By, I Miss It So*, by Anthony Loyd (Penguin)

*Charlie Johnson in the Flames*, by Michael Ignatieff (Grove Press), is a novel about a war correspondent in Kosovo.

## Chapter 15

# Reporting for IWPR



*IWPR was established to support local journalists in areas of crisis and conflict*

THE INSTITUTE FOR WAR & PEACE REPORTING was established to provide a platform for responsible journalists in crisis areas who are so often locked out of local and international debate over conflict and crisis issues in their own countries.

### **The goal of this work is to to:**

- Strengthen democracy and civil society;
- Build trust between communities;
- Inform international responses.

### **Our main programme areas are:**

- Reporting and research;
- Training;
- Capacity-building.

Syndication, media appearances, conferences, seminars and other public events disseminate IWPR material widely, contributing to public dialogue and debate.

IWPR takes a practical approach. We believe the best way to learn journalism is to do it. Participating in a basic skills

workshop or working your way through a journalism handbook such as this one is only the start. The real learning begins when you pick up a reporter's notebook or sit down to write a story.

Many of the staff at IWPR are journalists, and we are drawing from our own experiences. We learned the craft from a good (and sometimes harsh) editor, a senior role model, or a supportive colleague who worked side-by-side with us as we developed our own skills.

The constant trial-and-error, the detailed comments, the constructive suggestions, even the jealousy of a rival who did the same story better - it can be frustrating and time consuming, but it is the best way to learn lasting lessons. This is the nurturing environment IWPR seeks to provide.

*The principles of  
fact-based journalism  
enable media to support  
democracy in areas  
emerging from crisis*

### Working with International Media

For local journalists, the experience of working with IWPR may be very different from their home media. Intensive oversight, heavy reporting, re-reporting and fact checking, and extensive, detailed editing that to many feels intrusive - these concerns are sometimes raised by participating journalists. But the system at IWPR in fact draws on standard systems and habits of many international, and especially Anglo-American, media.

IWPR does not claim that this system of editing, and the basic international style of journalism, is necessarily superior to other approaches. As we said at the outset, different forms and habits apply in different parts of the world.

But the underlying principles of fact-based, responsible reporting - working from universally accepted principles as outlined at the beginning of this handbook - do offer benefits which can enable media to play a critical role in supporting democracy and building trust in areas emerging from (or at risk of) conflict and crisis.

The international style of reporting and editing is a predominant approach aiming to achieve these goals. The

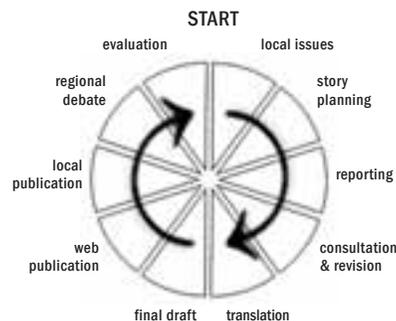
experience of working within this tradition provides invaluable lessons for any journalist, however they may wish to adopt them to their own circumstances and media environment.

### The Reporting/Training Dynamic

IWPR breaks down the process of producing an article into basic components and seeks to support local journalists at each step along the way.

The first step is to identify local issues for coverage. This means comprehending the potential story's news value (see section 8), assessing reader/editorial interest, and clarifying if and how the story has already been covered within the media. This process should result in the production of a “commissioning brief”, a short memo drafted by the journalist and approved by the commissioning editor outlining the story, the approach, and some of the primary details and/or sources to be included, as well as a deadline and agreed length.

Step two is to plan the reporting. This means identifying sources and critical material, and charting a strategy for obtaining the information within deadline (see section 4). This process should



The Reporting/Training Dynamic

*Consultation and revision  
is the labour-intensive  
process of editing, line-by-  
line, word-by-word*

include ensuring balance, fair comment and reliance on the two-source rule.

Step three is arguably the most important: reporting. The more you follow the lessons in this book, the smoother the process will go. But be prepared - IWPR editors, like editors for many international media, are likely to send you back with questions to do follow up reporting, fact-checking or further digging for sensitive information. This is time consuming, and it can seem frustrating to receive basic queries from editors who don't seem to understand the story. But what they are actually doing is trying to strengthen your sourcing or balance, clarify issues for the reader, and make your story stronger.

Consultation and revision is the labour-intensive process of editing, line-by-line, word-by-word. This can require considerable effort and communication. At IWPR, the process typically includes two stages - first editing is done by the commissioning editor (often the programme manager or in-country trainer, and sometimes working with you in a local language) who will look for factual accuracy and basic structure; following translation, a second edit is then usually undertaken in

English by the managing editor or assistant editors for style and general clarity. (They will also flag the story to the executive director and possibly solicitors if there are libel or other serious concerns.) This results in the final edit.

Again, the closer you can stick to the guidelines in this manual, the less editing you will receive. Pay particular attention to your commissioning brief and especially to length - if you are asked for 800 words and write 2,000, your story will be slashed, or spiked altogether. As above, it can be frustrating, but have patience: the job of the editor is to ensure the text is clear and accessible, to improve your story and increase your audience.

Publication makes the effort worth it: it's what all journalists strive for, and your commissioning editor at IWPR will also agree a modest fee, payable upon publication via IWPR's international website and email publications. (Please note that payments may take up to one-month; speak to your local IWPR colleagues if you have any questions.) This electronic dissemination reaches a widespread international audience, including diplomats, journalists, academics and analysts working on your issues. It is a core means by which IWPR works to

provide an essential platform so that local journalists can impact international debate over their own countries.

Journalism, however, is also local, and IWPR's primary goal is to strengthen media locally. IWPR builds relationships with local and regional publications, so that your reporting can be disseminated at home, where it matters most. Your story will therefore also be produced in a local language version for publication in the local press. (IWPR is also developing selected local broadcast output as well as local-language IWPR websites or “satellite publications” in some areas.) This can be a complex process either of re-translating the English-language final edit or of “blending” any late changes in the English version into the final local language version of your article.

IWPR is also increasing its international syndication. This facility offers participating local journalists the chance to be published in important national and regional newspapers, especially in North America and Europe - again, building an international platform for local voices. To avoid misunderstanding, it is important to note that syndication fees are rarely paid to IWPR, and when they are IWPR pays one-half

the amount to the original author, retaining the balance to defray syndication costs.

A strong civil society is about vibrant debate, and IWPR works to feed your reporting into discussion and dialogue about key issues for peace, democracy and development locally. This may include a regional conference, media appearances, or a seminar at the IWPR offices with local officials, human rights and other NGO representatives and, of course, journalists and editors.

Evaluation seals lessons learned, clears up any mistakes or misunderstandings (from time to time on IWPR's side as well), and assesses the results of the publication. This assessment may come in an editor's note or a conversation with your trainer or commissioning editor. IWPR's distance-learning accounts via the IWPR Academy provide participating journalists with a secure online facility to review editing versions, receive feedback, and track overall development. (Evaluation should be two-way, so if you want to flag thoughts and assessment of IWPR and the training and editing process, please do.)

*A strong civil society is about vibrant debate, and your reporting feeds into that public dialogue*

*The key to writing for IWPR is to observe the guidelines for balanced, fact-based reporting*

### Tips for Working with IWPR

As outlined, this is a heavily involved editorial process. Sometimes it can go very quickly and easily; sometimes it can be very involved and trying. The more you do it, the easier it will seem, which is precisely the goal.

The key for writing for IWPR is to observe the guidelines in this manual for balanced and concise writing and well-sourced fact-based reporting. If your story matches the commissioning brief, includes a sharp lead and observes the core reporting and other journalistic principles, you should have few problems.

As part of that, remember to write for a wide audience, beyond your town, country or region. Make basic facts clear, identify individuals and parties on first reference, communicate in a way that will extend interest in your story, rather than just preach to the converted. Demonstrate fairness and respect, and observe a moderate, balanced tone. Editors spend a lot of time trying to clarify and smooth out stories in this way, but the story will be better and sharper if you incorporate this instinct by yourself.

The process may take patience, but understand that your story is not the only one editors are working on. They are processing

material as fast as they can. So the cleaner you can present it, obviously the less work they will have to do.

Finally, not every story works out. An experienced journalist understands that stories do get “spiked” (not used) from time to time. It is certainly not pleasant, but it is part of the profession. Sometimes it is because the story was not well done. But often it is because other stories came up, or because the news peg changed so the story is out of date.

If a story is not used, you may ask your commissioning editor if a “kill fee” is payable. This will be a partial payment and is generally applicable if the story is withheld because of editorial or news decisions, not because the story is of poor quality or because it has been delivered late.

But either way, learn the lesson and then shake it off. You are writing journalism, not poetry, and tomorrow is always another day - and another story.

*IWPR resources exist to help local journalists at the frontlines of crisis*

## Resources

IWPR's training programmes include field workshops and seminars, extensive on-the-job style training via collaborative reporting projects, and extensive online training modules and printed material such as this book, as well as the online IWPR Academy distance-learning system (see [www.iwpr.net](http://www.iwpr.net)).

The website provides links to a wide range of other specialist and training websites, covering everything from basic skills to environment and war crimes reporting. There is a wide bibliography of specialist and basic training guides, and many of these are listed online.

Basic and specialist training workshops are led by local and international trainers according to needs, so we welcome feedback and ideas from our local participants and partners. We will also be producing further editions of this manual, and look forward to incorporating insights from participants in our programmes to make it more useful.

IWPR capacity building projects work to strengthen local media and media institutions - whether a training or free-speech group or a local newspaper or news agency. For further information about IWPR's overall programme, or how you may work with us in your area, also see the IWPR website.

***reporting for change:  
a handbook for local  
journalists in crisis areas***



Reporters at the frontlines are at risk as never before. But with many countries moving towards democracy, the role of local journalists has never been more important.

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The handbook draws on the extensive field training experience of the Institute for War & Peace Reporting, a non-profit organisation supporting local media in conflict areas worldwide.

IWPR programmes include reporting, training and strengthening the capacity of local media institutions. IWPR electronic publications provide in-depth reporting from local voices at the frontline of crisis and change in Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Africa. For further information, and online subscriptions, see: [www.iwpr.net](http://www.iwpr.net)

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