

## 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?

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### 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.”

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### 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.

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## 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,

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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