

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.



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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”.

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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.

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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
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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.

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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.

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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

“On Assignment – a Guide to Reporting in Dangerous Situations”:

cpj.org/Briefings/2003/safety/journo_safe_guide.pdf

International Press Institute: www.freemedia.at/index1.html

Reporters sans Frontieres: www.rsf.org/

International News Safety Institute:

www.newssafety.com/insihome/index01.html

Crimes of War Project:

www.crimesofwar.org/thebook/book.html

Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma:

www.dartcenter.org/index.html

And Dart Europe: www.dartcenter.org/europe/

The Rory Peck Trust: rorypecktrust.org/

The Kurt Schork Memorial Fund: www.ksmfund.org/

A number of organisations offer safety training, including:

- AKE - www.akegroup.com
- Centurion - www.centurion-riskservices.co.uk
- Pilgrims - 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.