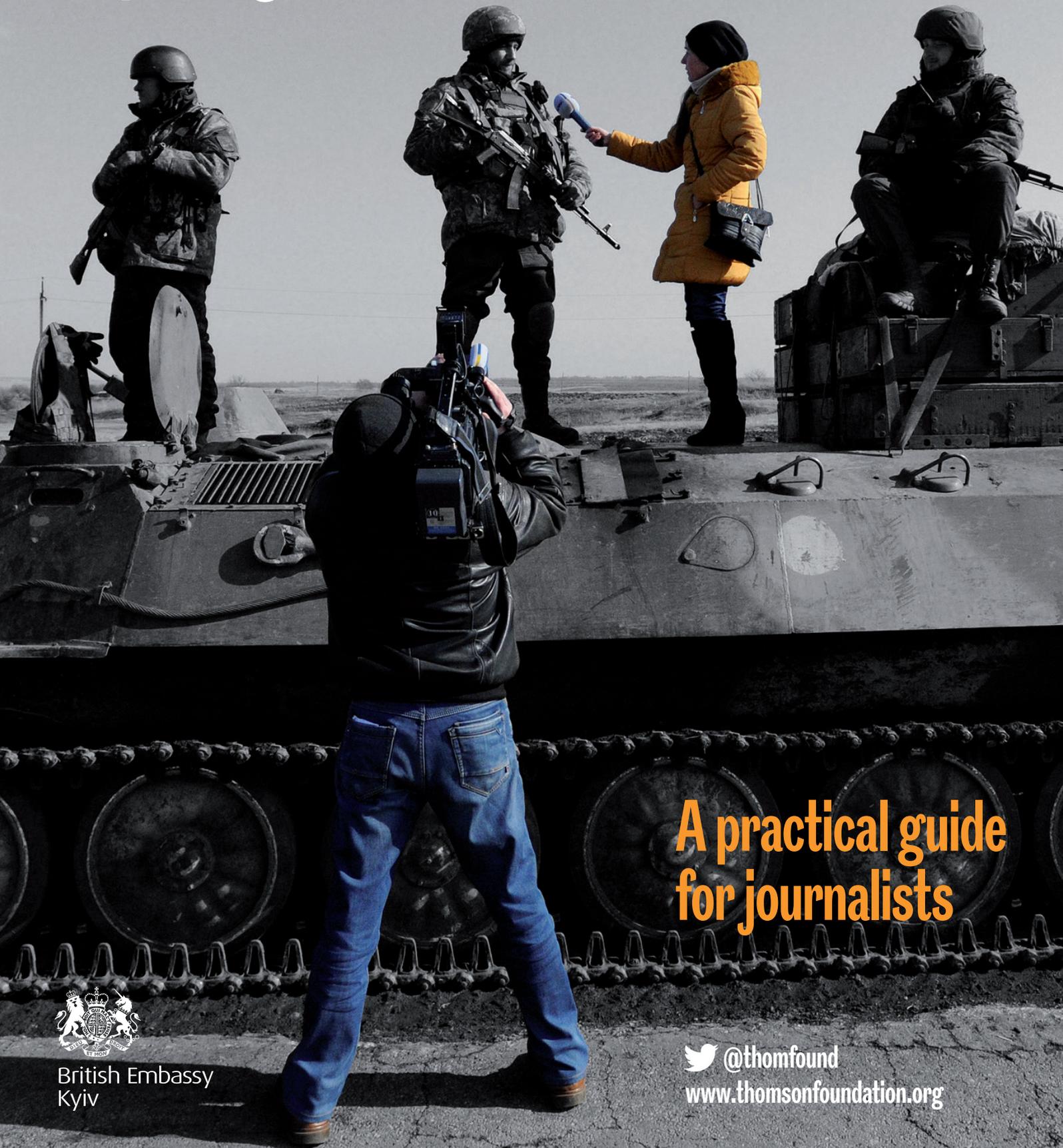


Ukraine

Reporting conflict



A practical guide
for journalists



British Embassy
Kyiv

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Ukraine

Reporting conflict in Ukraine: a practical guide for journalists

Introduction from Nigel Baker, Thomson Foundation

The current conflict in the east of Ukraine bears many similarities to events in other parts of the world and throughout history. The journalist's challenge to distinguish fact from fiction and achieve balance in reporting is never easy. A violent confrontation like the one in Donbass makes the job immeasurably harder. However, journalists face the huge but vital challenge of trying as best as they can to make sense of what is happening and giving a voice to those affected.

This short booklet aims to provide some pointers and practical advice on how to stay safe while getting closer to the heart of what is going on. It is not an exhaustive guide to reporting conflict but a short introduction to some of the challenges reporters face in a bitterly divided area. Expect to meet some hostility, particularly from civilians caught in the middle of the conflict, and look out for obvious examples of bias, misinformation or blatant propaganda.



About the author
Mark Webster's 30-year career in journalism began in newspapers, including the *Evening Standard* and the *Financial Times*. He moved into broadcast media in 1983, joining ITN News where his roles included political correspondent and economics and business editor. He has lectured extensively on presentation, media and crisis communications



What's more, in a situation which has utterly divided opinion and led to a war of words through the media, it will be hard for journalists to report information seen as critical of their own side. Reporting conflict is never a straightforward task and often a journalist will have only partial information because of the physical difficulties and dangers involved. However, the basic journalistic instinct to question whatever they are told and look for evidence to support or devalue what is being said must remain the touchstone. ►



“Reporting conflict is never a straightforward task. However, the basic journalistic instinct to question whatever they are told and look for evidence to support or devalue what is being said must remain the touchstone” **Nigel Baker, chief executive, Thomson Foundation**

When it comes to the plight of Internally Displaced People (IDPs), journalists are up against additional challenges and constraints. The actual number of IDPs in Ukraine is unclear but figures ranging from 600,000 up to one million have been given by different bodies. What is clear, is that Ukraine is experiencing a humanitarian crisis on a scale not seen since the Second World War. Reporting on IDPs is a highly sensitive issue which demands great skill and compassion from journalists. How the issue is reported will undoubtedly affect public opinion about huge numbers of Ukrainians who are finding it impossible to return to their homes.



Sometimes, journalists also have to accept that they cannot achieve proper balance in a single article or broadcast item. If you have been given special access to an area, or spent time with a particular military or civilian group, journalists must still question what they are being told but they will find it difficult to reflect opposing points of view. That is why editors and newsroom staff have a duty to achieve balance across their output especially where an individual item has been more selective in the picture it has painted.

Finally, in times of national crisis the pressure on journalists from outside the media increases dramatically. There are always those ready to criticise what they don't like in the way events are reported and those who will always conclude that if they are criticised it means the outlet or publication must be hostile. If you are not their friend you must be their enemy. While clearly the reality is far more complex, it can make a critical approach to reporting uncomfortable for the individual journalist or media outlet. ●

Reporting on Internally Displaced People (IDPs) is a highly sensitive issue which demands great skill and compassion from journalists

Nigel Baker, CEO
Thomson Foundation

Before you start

Prepare: Consider basic questions about the nature and reality of what is happening and discuss the big issues with fellow journalists before you go



Before you start

Reporting on a conflict in your own country which has already cost more than 5,000 lives and affected millions of Ukrainians is probably the biggest challenge you will ever face. The best way to prepare is to consider some basic questions about the nature and reality of what is happening. Discuss the big issues with fellow journalists and organisations which are involved before you go anywhere near the conflict. Don't forget that once you are there, there will be no time for reflection, there will be too much going on.

Ask yourself the following:

- What are the underlying causes of the conflict?
- Do you really have a thorough understanding of how it all started and how it has developed since the beginning?

Never forget there are many sides to any conflict and matters get more complex as events move on. Try not to settle for the simple “good guys versus bad guys” or “them and us”. ▶

Journalists interview members of the Ukrainian Army as they withdraw in Soledar, eastern Ukraine, on February 27, 2015



Remember...

There are many sides to any conflict and matters get more complex as events move on. Try not to settle for “good guys versus bad guys” or “them and us”

- Is there a clear consensus about the root causes or are there widely conflicting views?
- Is there any common ground between Kiev and Moscow?
- What effect is it having on different groups of people?
- How is it perceived by those who have had to flee and may now be homeless, by those who have loved ones fighting in the conflict and by those who are a long way from the fighting but who feel very emotionally involved in what is happening?
- Where are you getting your information or “hard facts”? Who are the sources you trust and how can you check that what they are saying is true? Are there other organisations you can contact or websites you can access for additional information?



How is it perceived by those who have had to flee and may now be homeless, by those who have loved ones fighting in the conflict and by those who are a long way from the fighting but who feel very emotionally involved in what is happening?

- What is the impact of social media on reporting the conflict and to what extent can it be relied upon? Are you fully up to speed with the inherent dangers of online content which often cannot be verified or checked and which could have come from someone or some group with a particular bias?
- Are your stories stoking the flames of the conflict or enabling a wider understanding of what is happening on the ground? In any conflict, rumours, scaremongering and urban myths can quickly become accepted fact. Are you certain you have not been sucked in to accepting some of the myths as truth?

This may all sound either blindingly obvious or too theoretical to the working journalist. Certainly, when you are in the field there will be no time for philosophising. Nonetheless, there is a danger with all conflicts that even the best journalists can get a little lazy when it comes to questioning what they are told.

The trouble is that in a conflict that can have real and damaging consequences. If we report there have been “massacres” or “atrocities” against civilians the story will not end there. There are far too many examples where one side justifies its own unacceptable behaviour by accusing its opponents of similar activities. It’s usually the civilians in the middle who suffer. ●

In any conflict, rumours, scaremongering and urban myths can quickly become accepted fact. Are you certain you have not been sucked in to accepting some of the myths as truth?



Story ideas

The challenge is to find new ways of covering the ongoing problems and how to find a fresh approach which will inform and educate the wider public



Writing a Day in the Life of an IDP or an aid worker can bring fresh perspectives

In the initial rush, when hundreds of thousands of people fled the fighting, there was a huge appetite in the Ukrainian media for stories on the plight of those IDPs. The human tragedy unfolding was covered comprehensively and the narrative was simply how did people survive during the fighting and how had they fared since leaving the conflict zone? As the situation has continued it has become harder to find new angles to cover and the appetite for those stories has diminished.

The challenge is to find new ways of covering the ongoing problems and how to find a fresh approach which will inform and educate the wider public.

Talking to Ukrainian journalists a number of ideas have surfaced. For instance, returning to re-interview a family a month or more after the first interview to find out how their lives have changed. Writing a Day in the Life of an IDP or an aid worker can bring fresh perspectives. Use your contacts with journalists in other parts of the Ukraine to get a bigger picture of the situation to find out what is different in your area or if you share the same problems.

There are still many issues that need coverage in a balanced and thoughtful way. ●



The bigger picture

Your reporting will have an influence on how the wider public views IDPs. That means trying to ensure that you have as many pieces of the puzzle as possible

There are still many issues that need coverage in a balanced, thoughtful way

- What are the authorities doing to help IDPs? Are they doing enough?
- How are they interacting with charities and international agencies?
- Have IDPs found work or started their own business?
- Have their children integrated in the education system?
- Are benefits being paid and if so how much?
- What effect has their presence had on rental costs for property?
- Have they been able to integrate with the local community?
- What is being done by local people to help?
- Are they running out of money to feed and clothe themselves?
- Are they still hopeful of returning home?



- Do they have fresh information about what is happening at home?
- What is being done for the most vulnerable, particularly children, the elderly, the sick and injured?
- How are those returning from fighting in the conflict zone coping?
- Are they suffering mental health issues (PTSD) and is any help available?
- What additional help is required and what is the international community doing to assist?

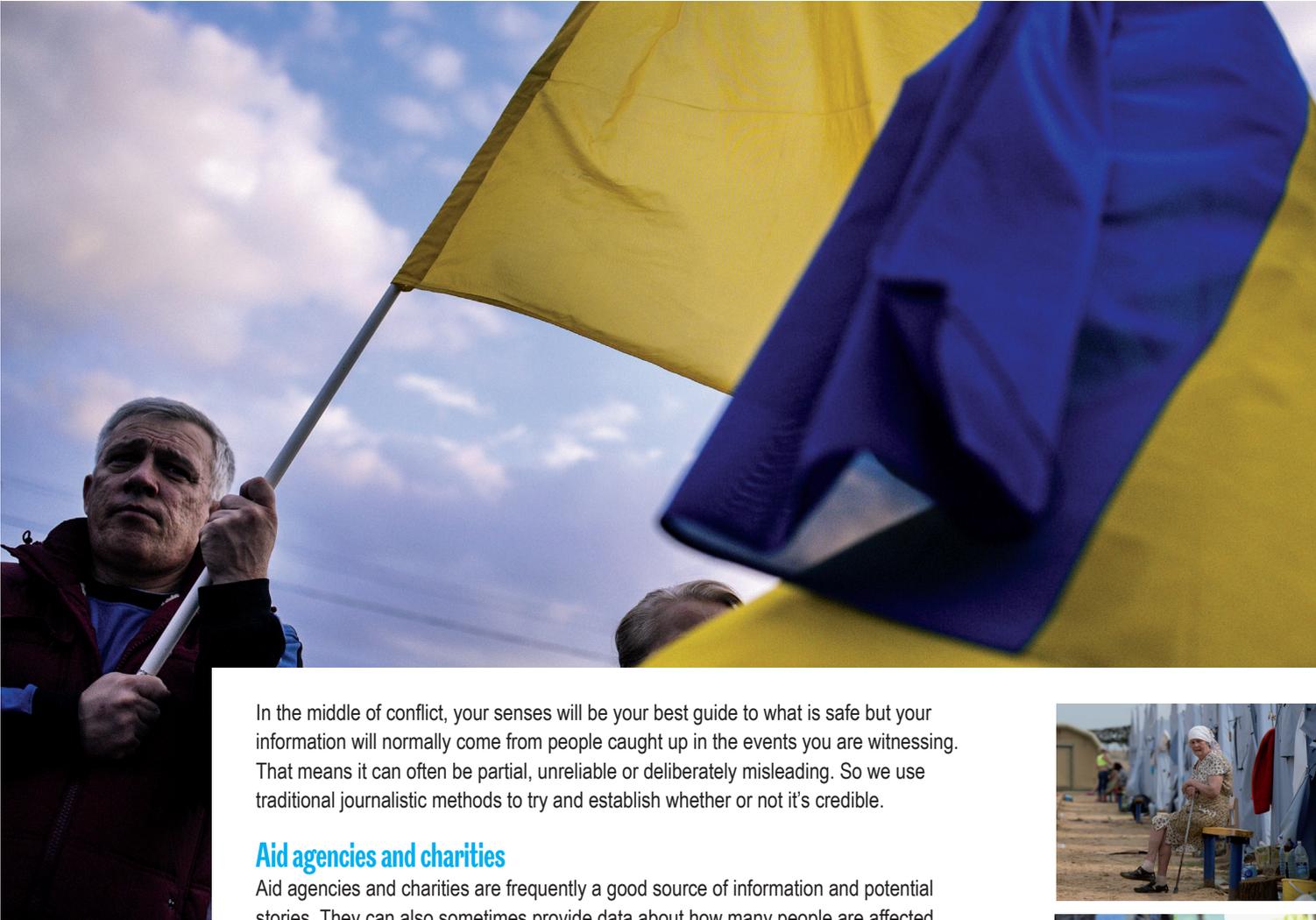
What is being done for the most vulnerable, particularly children, the elderly, the sick and injured?

As you will already understand, all of these are highly sensitive issues and will require great care when researching and writing about them. Your reporting is likely to have a big influence on how the wider public views the presence of IDPs on their soil. That means a lot of hard work trying to ensure that you have as many pieces of the puzzle as possible and reflect the bigger picture. ●



Gathering information

Your information will normally come from people caught up in the events you are witnessing. That means it can often be partial, unreliable or misleading



In the middle of conflict, your senses will be your best guide to what is safe but your information will normally come from people caught up in the events you are witnessing. That means it can often be partial, unreliable or deliberately misleading. So we use traditional journalistic methods to try and establish whether or not it's credible.

Aid agencies and charities

Aid agencies and charities are frequently a good source of information and potential stories. They can also sometimes provide data about how many people are affected when there is very little hard evidence available. Don't be offended if they are occasionally a little brusque with journalists – they have a great deal to do and the media won't be their first priority. (See list of sources at the end of this booklet).

Social media

Although, as has already been said, information derived from social media has to be treated circumspectly, it is nonetheless an essential tool of today's journalism and can give you access to stories and images which would otherwise be very hard to reach. To use social media most effectively you will have to organise the chaos that is out there.

Start by using Twitter client TweetDeck (<http://www.tweetdeck.com>) and then organise the information into columns by creating Twitter lists and search items. It is now common in developing news stories that those tweeting want to be heard so will use hashtags in the hope they will be picked up by anyone using a hashtag search.

International organisations

The key international organisations monitoring the conflict and the situation of IDPs are the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). Links to their websites can be found at the end of this guide. ►



Ukrainian soldiers play football on the road leading to the embattled town of Debaltseve on February 15, 2015 outside Artemivsk, Ukraine, during a ceasefire



The military has a long history of mistrust where the media is concerned. The introduction of media liaison officers in the armed forces has gone some way to bridging the gap but the suspicion still remains...

Military

If a soldier tells you something bear in mind that they may not have permission to give information to the media and can get themselves into serious trouble if you use it without double checking. Try to get to someone senior or, if it's possible, get your newsroom to check on your behalf. Always just ask yourself – does this seem plausible? Does it seem likely? Is there any other evidence to back it up?

The military has a long history of mistrust where the media is concerned. The introduction of media liaison officers in the armed forces has gone some way to bridging the gap but the suspicion still remains. Also, as with aid agencies and charities, dealing with the media may be low on their priority list. It's not personal. ►



Always check details

Gentle questioning can establish how many other people might have been involved, what actually happened and how others responded



Civilians

Never forget that most of the civilians you encounter have gone through the most profound personal turmoil. They may have lost relatives and friends, seen appalling violence and left their homes and possessions. Therefore they will be confused and vulnerable so journalists have to be particularly careful when listening to their stories and deciding how credible they are.

Always check details wherever possible to establish where they have come from, what they saw and where they saw it. Gentle questioning can establish how many other people might have been involved, what actually happened and how others responded. Sometimes they will carry photographs or documents which you can take a copy of. Sometimes, a friend or neighbour can add clarification or additional details.

Also remember to be careful when identifying individuals. If they are IDPs they may still have family living in the conflict zone, and critical statements might invite retribution if the source of the quote or story is easily recognisable. It's perfectly legitimate to use first names only or in some circumstances to change the names altogether. However, it is good journalistic practice to point that out at the end of an article.

For broadcast media, it may be necessary to obscure the face. There are a number of techniques for doing this including pixelating, interviewing against a strong back light so the individual is in profile and using the interview over a series of shots of hands and other features. Broadcasters may also have to disguise the voice in certain circumstances. ●

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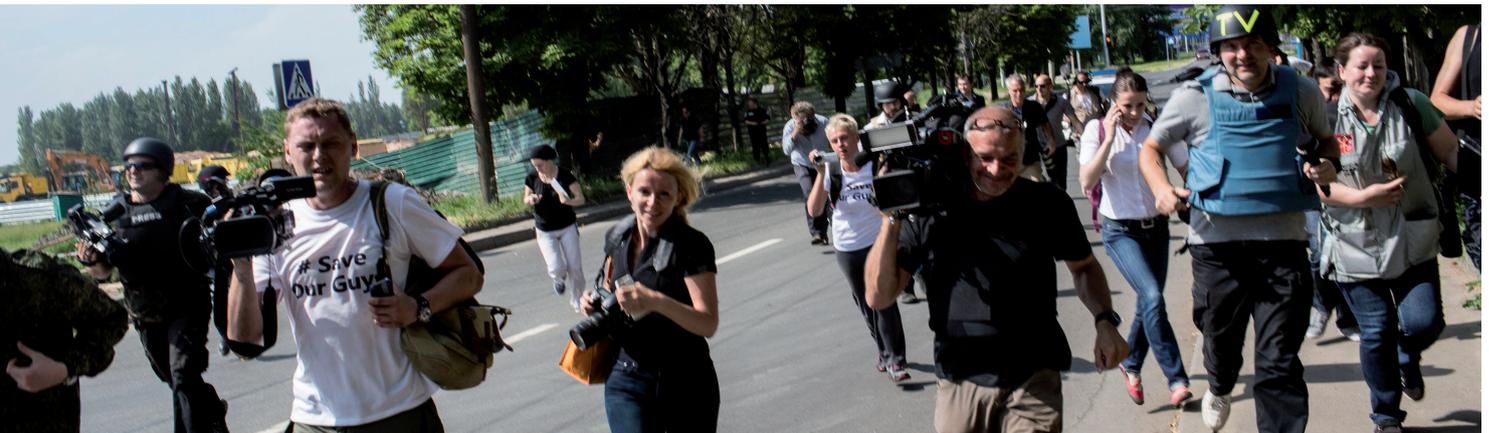


What we say and how we say it

A constant challenge for reporters is getting the right vocabulary. Words like 'terrorist' or 'massacre' have to be carefully considered before they are used

Reporters carry great responsibilities but few are more onerous than trying to achieve some sort of balance in a conflict zone. Always question whether words like insurgent or rebel are really conveying the right meaning.

It is understandable that any journalist wants to bring home the drama or horror of what they may have witnessed. That is when first-hand accounts can be at their most effective, whether the journalist is reporting what they have seen for themselves or they are passing on what they believe are reliable accounts of what has happened to someone else.



Interviewing techniques

Clearly, interviewing people in a conflict zone also has additional problems and pitfalls. If they are civilians they may be too traumatised to talk and may be actively hostile towards the media. It's usually not worth trying to persuade someone to tell you their story unless you have reason to believe they have witnessed something exceptional. Sometimes, an official or an aid worker might tip you off to a particularly illuminating story.

However, there are always some who want to share their experience with the media. Sometimes, they have a complaint or accusation about how they are or have been treated. This might be a genuine grievance or a perceived slight. Either way, if you have any means to check the veracity of a statement it's crucial to do so. Alternatively, ask other people if they have had the same experience to give it added credibility.

You will need to be patient and treat your interviewee gently. It's much more likely you will get the interview if you show some sympathy for what they have been through. Ask some general questions to help them to relax and trust you. It could be about their health or their families, any human point of contact which will build a better understanding.

When interviewing anyone who has been through a difficult time, it's vital to ask open-ended questions to avoid prejudicing the outcome of the interview. Questions such as: "Tell me about your journey here?" or "What did you experience before you left?" is more likely to elicit an honest reply than "Do you feel you've been abandoned by the government?" or "Who do you blame for what happened to you?"

Naturally, people might offer an opinion about whose fault they think it is but always treat such statements with caution. If a number of eye witnesses give the same story it may lend weight to the idea that it is true. However, people who have experienced some dreadful event can also pass on events they have heard from another individual. Just ask yourself if it sounds likely. It is not that people are deliberately lying to you, but they may well be confused. ▶

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Getting it right

It would be impossible for any journalist to get at the whole truth, but striving to verify, check and question is at the very heart of journalistic ethics

Visual evidence

There are often individuals out to make money from the misery of conflict and they will consider journalists fair game. If someone offers to help get a story in return for money just ask them some telling questions and then decide for yourself if the story is good enough to justify the outlay or whether you are being suckered by a con artist.

If you are offered pictures or photographs use a critical eye to make sure they are what they are purported to be. If it is video footage, does it look like the right time of year? Are there leaves on the trees or snow on the ground? Does the sound appear to be genuine or was it added later? Is the weaponry recognisable in which case who does it belong to?

On occasions, distressed people will also make dramatic accusations about massacres, torture or rape. It is always difficult to verify such stories though it would be worth talking to aid agencies and medical personnel to find out if they have heard similar stories. Just don't automatically assume the stories are true especially since reporting atrocities will have consequences.



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Getting it right

Applying these basic journalistic rules does not make you an uncaring or heartless person. All reporters have to remember that whatever they write or say may well have repercussions further down the line and could serve to stoke the conflict even if it later turns out to be distorted or untrue. It would be impossible for any individual journalist to get at the whole truth, but constantly striving to verify, check and question is at the very heart of journalistic ethics. ●



Staying safe

There is no shame in being afraid and no point in pushing your luck. Once you've got your story – get out



People outside the industry frequently ask war correspondents if they get afraid. The answer is, of course, yes. Journalists have to go into dangerous situations to report what is happening but no one is expected to be a hero. The most important thing a reporter can do is bear witness by making sure that once they have got their information they return safely and file their report. There is no shame in being afraid and no point in pushing your luck. Once you've got your story – get out.

Safety equipment

These days, there are good quality safety vests and helmets but they do not guarantee your protection. However, they will protect your vital organs if you are hit and give you a much better chance of survival. If you know you are going into a hazardous area make sure you put your gear on beforehand. You don't want to be in the middle of fighting trying to get into safety equipment. It may be uncomfortable but it's a small price to pay to protect yourself.

Stick with those you trust

It is a standard feature of many armed conflicts that reporters are invited to go with certain military groups (embedding) and they will have the protection of being with people they trust. This does offer access to areas which it would be very dangerous for journalists to get to otherwise. However, it inevitably compromises your neutrality particularly when you are with your compatriots. In these circumstances, reporters can only beware the risk of taking sides or being too uncritical.

This is the time when you need to stress the importance of accuracy and impartiality. You will also have to abide by a mutually agreed code of conduct while you are in the conflict zone and under their protection. That would preclude you from revealing certain key facts which might have some military value like the exact location or strength of the unit you are with, which direction they are heading or how they are armed. ►

These days, there are good quality safety vests and helmets but they do not guarantee your protection. However, they will protect your vital organs if you are hit and give you a much better chance of survival



Working together

Although journalists are instinctively competitive, working together can give everyone a better, more accurate story as well as contributing to your safety



Be aware

It is always safer if you go as part of a team. Not only can you back each other up in times of crisis but you can pool your knowledge before taking a decision. Try to make sure that everyone in the group is happy with the decisions you are taking. If someone is afraid it doesn't make them wrong. Naturally, if you're with a television crew you're automatically part of a team so try to make sure you don't get separated.

Although journalists are instinctively competitive, working together and pooling information can give everyone a better, more accurate story as well as contributing to your safety. If you are going to work alone or move away from the group try to ensure they have contact details or a location for you and don't assume mobiles will work. Phone masts tend to be an early casualty of conflict. If you don't have a satellite phone you may find yourself completely out of touch.

Use your senses

Use all of your senses when it comes to evaluating whether or not a situation is hazardous. You probably won't be able to spot a sniper but look for areas that have sustained damage. In some conflicts, artillery will shell an area then wait some time for emergency services to arrive then shell the same co-ordinates again. ►

Phone masts tend to be an early casualty of conflict. If you don't have a satellite phone you may find yourself completely out of touch



Use your senses

If you are in the middle of the action, your senses will be on ultra-high alert. Just don't relax when it gets quieter



Buildings or walls can offer you some protection but don't assume you are safe. Try to identify where different military units are and as you get more experienced you will be able to differentiate between the weapons they are using. If you are in the middle of the action, your senses will be on ultra-high alert. Just don't relax when it gets quieter.

First Aid

It is highly desirable for every member of a team to have some grasp of First Aid. Everyone should have some bandages in their equipment which can be used to apply pressure to a wound. Equally, journalists should have a basic grasp of CPR (resuscitation) if they are going into a conflict as early intervention could save a life.

For all that, the challenge is to get a wounded colleague to professional help as quickly as possible. Just remember to try and assess the situation as calmly as possible before moving anywhere as a rush decision could end up with additional casualties. Remember DRABC – Danger, Response, Airways, Breathing, Circulation is the First Aiders guide.

A useful resource on safety tips and other information on conflict zones is the International News Safety Institute: <http://www.newssafety.org/home/>

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Further reading

The OSCE and UNHCR jointly produces a protection checklist for work with Internally Displaced Persons and includes some useful background information



- The OSCE and the UNHCR jointly produces a protection checklist for work with Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs); while the document largely addresses international or aid organisations it does include some useful background information on IDPs, available in English and Russian.
<http://www.osce.org/cpc/111464>
- A website dedicated to reporting conflict, the focus is on conflict resolution techniques but the site includes some tips and advice for journalists, in English.
<http://www.beyondintractability.org/userguide/journalists>
- Media Diversity Institute – handbook on conflict sensitive reporting focuses more on the theory of conflict sensitive reporting but does provide some examples for reporters, available in English, French, Arabic.
<http://tinyurl.com/ConflictSensitiveReporting>
- BBC editorial guidelines on war reporting, tips on language, available in English.
<http://tinyurl.com/BBCEditorialGuidelines>
- This document gives some background to conflict sensitive reporting and proposes a course outline for journalism trainers, available in English and Arabic.
<http://tinyurl.com/UNESCOconflictreporting>
- The journalism tipsheets published by the International Center for Journalists in 2005 gives a useful overview and key advice on story development, research and editing.
<http://www.icfj.org/resources/journalism-tipsheets-0>



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Additional information

International organisations

- International Office for Migration Ukraine Mission
<http://www.iom.org.ua/>

- Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
<http://www.osce.org/Ukraine>

- United Nations High Commission for Refugees
<http://unhcr.org.ua/en/2011-08-26-06-58-56/news-archive/1231-internally-displaced-people>

- For the most current IDP data
<http://www.humanitarianresponse.info/operations/ukraine>
<http://reliefweb.int/maps?country=241#content>

