

# Violence and getting the story: Journalists at work

*Like all professions, journalism has its fair share of hazards in the office: bullying, psychological stress, loneliness, intense competition from within the organization and from outside, sexual harassment and repetitive stress injury (RSI). Outside the office, where much of their work is done, journalists face even greater hazards.*

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Lee Woodyear  
Journalist

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Stress and repetitive strain injury (RSI) are common in media offices because of the rhythm of the work. Journalists regularly tap at a keyboard while talking on the phone or editing a tape. Deadlines get tighter, stress sets in, muscles tense and tendons inflame. Journalists are also prone to work bizarre hours, and they must spend a lot of time waiting while their deadline draws nearer. Meaning that when it is time for action, it has to be fast.

Journalism is a lonely business. It is also a very competitive business. You are competing not only with other media companies, but also often with people in your own company who want to take over your beat, or prove that they could do it better. Most of the time it is your instincts, knowledge, connections and intelligence that guide a story. Decisions have to be made quickly and, of course, your credibility is on the line each time you are published.

The “more, faster, better for less money” motto of the corporate world is the same in journalism. Journalists are often sent out into the field with laptop, paper, pencil, camera, video recorder and a tape recorder. This is especially true of freelancers. These journalists do not have a fixed income, so when they get themselves into a certain position, covering a riot, or a war or a fashion show, they want to exploit all of its aspects as a news event. Not only is that equipment heavy, but you also need

to be thinking of three different mediums during your reporting, not to mention the deadlines.

## Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment in all of its ugly guises exists in media companies around the world. It can be exacerbated in visual media, where decisions about your career depend on how “sexy” you look on television. This is true for men and women.

The position of women in a society is also a barrier to their professional success. Many women relate the same story. They are asked to meet a source in a restaurant or bar. The source insinuates that he would be willing to trade information for sexual favours. The journalist becomes more worried about how she will get home safely than about what information she may gather. “Women are already considered second-class citizens in many countries, and when you are a professional you have twice the fight; first to be respected as a human being, then to be respected as a professional”, explained Bettina Peters, the Director of Programmes at the European Journalism Centre. Peters has conducted training seminars throughout Africa for the past 10 years. She has also run a series of gender seminars addressing these issues.

Many trade unions, professional associations and media companies have strict

codes of conduct concerning sexual harassment inside a company. In many cases, management upholds these codes. If not, media workers can file grievances against their employer for not providing a harassment-free environment. Unions can follow up on these grievances, but it is impossible to apply standards to people you are interviewing. It is a tricky issue that will continue to hinder media professionals in all parts of the world.

## Revealing the truth

Yet the most dangerous aspect of journalism, and indeed the very nature of the profession, is uncovering and publishing information that someone, or some group or even a majority of a population, does not want to have published.

According to statistics gathered by the Belgian-based International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), the international trade union secretariat for journalists and other media workers, over the last 12 years almost 1,200 journalists and media workers have died because of their professional duties. These journalists fall into various categories. The largest number is those who are targeted because someone does not like what they are doing.

In June 2002, the Brazilian TV Globo journalist Tim Lopes was abducted, tortured and murdered. He was investigating drug gangs and the sexual exploitation of minors in the *favelas* (shantytowns) of Rio de Janeiro. Ram Chander Chatterpatti, the editor of a local northern Indian newspaper, was gunned down in front of his home in April 2002. He was working on a story about corruption in a local religious sect. In September 2001, Martin O'Hagan, who was working for the Dublin-based *Sunday World*, was also shot outside his home in Lurgan, Northern Ireland. A militant Protestant splinter group claimed responsibility for his death. O'Hagan was investigating links between Loyalist groups and security forces in the area. He was the first journalist to die while covering this decades-old conflict.

Daniel Pearl, an American correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal*, was abducted in January 2002 while on his way to meet a source in Pakistan. He was investigating terrorist groups, their links and affiliations, in Pakistan. He was tortured and assassinated. Had he uncovered specific information that chagrined one group or another, or was he assassinated because he was from the United States? The bottom line is that he died while trying to inform his readers about a very important topic.

## Terrorism, accidents and war

Terrorism, the new Cold War of the twenty-first century, greatly ups the ante and further endangers journalists. Now correspondents, when travelling abroad, can conceivably be shot because of their nationality even before they ask any questions. A number of extremist groups have announced that killing any "Westerner" is good. And if you are a journalist from an Arabic media company, you could be denied access to some countries and some media events, as has recently happened to the Al Jazeera journalist trying to cover the United States stock market.

Though the killing of journalists from developed countries receives more attention from more media outlets, it is local journalists who are really on the frontline. The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists estimates, from their statistics over the past ten years, that for every single visiting journalist who dies in a country, three local journalists perish.

Cases abound all over the globe. In areas where there is widespread social disorder and organized crime, like in Colombia and Russia, assassinations are more frequent. From 1990 to 2002, 104 journalists died on duty in Colombia and 85 were killed while working in the Russian Federation. Many of these deaths were premeditated.

Another example of this can be seen in Nepal. Few journalists have been assassinated in that country, but last year, following the intensified uprising of the Maoist

insurgents, three journalists were killed. According to the Nepalese Federation of Journalists and other sources, two were tortured and killed by Maoists or their sympathizers and one by government agents who were attempting to extract information from the journalist concerning his ties with Maoists. A typical Catch-22 – you go to the “enemy” to gather information, and then you are associated with the “enemy”. More than 150 Nepalese journalists have been arrested, many detained and beaten, since 2001.

Another category of death while on assignment is through accidents. The fact that journalists are conducting their business during riots, political rallies, search-and-rescue operations, natural disasters, sports matches and armed standoffs puts them in the vicinity of violence regularly. The pressures of the job also add to the frequency of accidents. When an event is taking place, if you are from the visual media, you need to get there before it is over. Once you get the story, you need to get it back to your office so it can be published.

Journalists have the further burden of standing out. Usually they are in designated areas and they have press badges and equipment. Even more worrying, and prevalent, is the fact that politicians small and large from all continents openly criticize “the media” or even specific journalists. In many cases this can lead to an uncomfortable moment, in other cases it can lead to a beating or worse.

At the beginning of 2003, a pro-government publication in the Ivory Coast printed the names of individuals that it considered to be sympathetic towards the rebels who are fighting to overthrow the Government. Amongst the names was that of Kloueu Gonzreu, a journalist working for the news service Agence Ivoirienne de Presse. Two weeks after his name appeared in that publication, he disappeared. His remains were found by the Red Cross in March 2003. Those investigating his murder believe that there is a direct link between the publication of his name, and the accusation that he was sympathetic to the rebel movement, and his murder.

Media companies can also have political affiliations, or can be accused of having such affiliations. Journalists associated with a specific company can also be targeted. It is better to have a generic press badge than to have one clearly identifying your employer. During the years of fighting in Northern Ireland, for example, not one journalist was killed until 2002. One of the reasons for this was that all journalists carried the same press cards and were therefore not identified with specific media companies, which could be considered sympathetic to one side or the other.

Covering demonstrations, rioting and looting is also dangerous. Television and photojournalists have the hardest job. They want to be as close as they can and if there is violence they can easily get caught in the middle. Demonstrators may target them because they do not want to be filmed doing something illegal, like smashing windows or throwing firebombs. They may believe that a journalist is actually part of the security forces, or is gathering evidence that will be given to the police. The police may not want their actions filmed either, and often claim that cameras incite people to behave more aggressively. In 2002 in Uganda, at a political rally that was banned by the Government, a journalism student sent to cover the event was killed instantly when a frightened policeman fired into the crowd. In Venezuela in April 2002, photojournalist Jorge Tortoza was shot and killed by a sniper. Four Palestinian journalists were killed in 2002 by Israeli security forces. Three of them were covering political demonstrations, and two appeared to have been targeted by the Israeli forces and were fired on by tanks.

And then there is war. Of the 1,192 deaths that the IFJ recorded from 1990 to 2002, 274, or almost one-quarter, were in war zones. By December 2003 this figure had risen to 303.

Civil wars are the most dangerous to cover. Close to 100 journalists have died while reporting on the wars in former Yugoslavia. In many cases, they were targeted. During the NATO attack on Serbian forces in 1999, the United States bombed the Serbian

national radio and television headquarters in Belgrade, killing 16 media workers. Press freedom organizations and the IFJ had been given assurances by NATO that Serbian TV would not be targeted. More devastating is the fact that the journalists in the building were not told beforehand that it would be bombed, though NATO claims that they had informed Serbian officials.

There is a direct correlation between access, information and death. The more access that journalists have to a war zone, the better informed we are about the conflict, and at the same time the greater the number of journalists who die. Sixty-four journalists died while covering the wars in Vietnam and Cambodia between 1954 and 1976. Eight journalists died covering the fighting in Afghanistan in 2001. During the first Gulf War, journalists were given very little access to the battlefield, and no journalists died during the liberation of Kuwait, but four died covering the ensuing civil wars in Iraq.

### Safety issues for media workers

Statistics like these do serve a purpose. In the past 12 years, literally hundreds of new organizations have been created to address safety issues for media workers. The IFJ and its member unions are working closely with media companies and governments to see to it that all journalists are trained and have access to equipment before being sent on a dangerous assignment. The IFJ published a comprehensive safety manual for journalists in March 2003, entitled *Live News: A Survival Guide for Journalists*. It is available through their website (<http://www.ifj.org>).

On 3 May 2003, the IFJ and the International Press Institute (IPI), a publishers' press freedom organization based in

Austria, launched the International News Safety Institute (INSI). This Institute already has the support of scores of large and small media companies and press freedom organizations. It is a bipartisan undertaking with both employers and employees taking part in its management and funding.

The primary goals of INSI are to set standards for safety training and safety equipment, to collate and distribute safety manuals and provide support for safety assistance programmes for journalists working in dangerous regions. It will also develop and promote affordable insurance for staff and freelance journalists, and it will promote health and safety agreements at all media outlets to ensure that journalists are given risk-awareness training and first aid courses. More information about INSI is available through the IFJ's website.

Yet much more needs to be done. The perpetrators of many of the murders and other human rights violations mentioned in this article have not been identified or have not been punished – or both. Many governments regularly intimidate journalists through threats, harassment, imprisonment and violence. Many media companies bring home their staff correspondents when a situation gets hot and use freelancers. Many journalists perpetuate the “macho” image of the fearless war correspondent, instead of admitting that coming under fire is not fun. If a journalist narrowly escapes with his or her life, they should analyse the situation and learn how they can avoid it in the future, not brag about it. Young and less experienced journalists can be influenced by bravado behaviour and make fatal mistakes when covering a conflict. These are all problems that must be addressed by governments, media companies and media workers together in order to improve the working conditions in this profession.