



COUNCIL OF MEDIA ETHICS
OF MACEDONIA

GUIDELINES ON REPORTING FROM ARMED CONFLICT/ WAR ZONES

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Guidelines on reporting from armed conflict/war zones

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JOURNALISTS REPORTING FROM ARMED CONFLICT/WAR ZONES

Reporting from armed conflict/war zones is the biggest challenge for media workers, and at the same time the most complicated and difficult task. In addition to the fact that military activities in their essence carry a certain risk with respect to safe working conditions and the risk of losing their lives, media workers are exposed to a number of other dangers on the ground. When a country is in a state of war, the regulations on what is allowed and how a foreign citizen should behave in that country on the ground are constantly changing.

Media workers who do not know or do not follow the changes in these regulations risk being arrested/detained by national authorities. Journalists and videographers in the field, not only need to be aware of the dangers that threaten their lives and freedom of movement, but they also need to be aware that through their reporting or publishing of various types of content (videos) they might cause harm with deadly consequences.



Barricade in front of the Lukianivska Metro Station in Kyiv, Ukraine

WHAT MEDIA WORKERS SHOULD KNOW BEFORE LEAVING FOR ARMED CONFLICT/WAR ZONES

Before starting the preparations, media workers should get acquainted with the geopolitics of the country, as well as with the political trends and the history of the conflict of the warring parties. In addition, there should be a minimum of training in military reporting.

1. Preparation begins with a call to the embassy of the warring state.

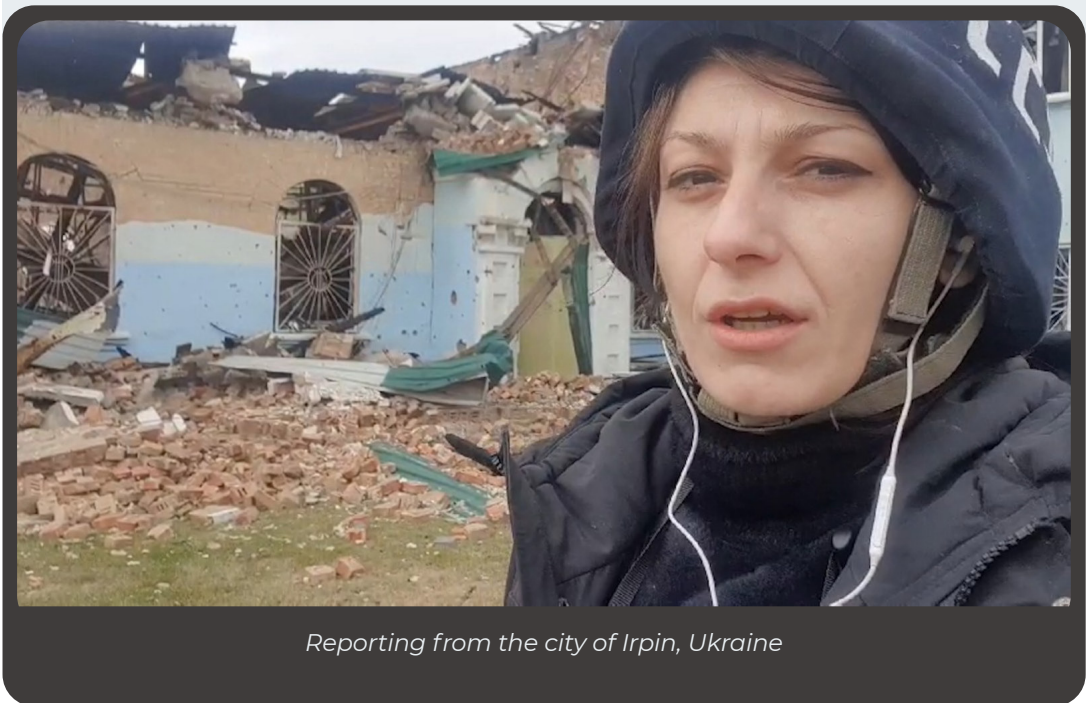
The embassy is the primary source of information on current regulations in their country. Normally, during wartime, all foreign national reporters present on that territory must be accredited by the armed forces or the responsible ministry. The presence of any and media worker who does not have field accreditation can be considered as intelligence activity by law enforcement agencies. For example, with respect to the war in Ukraine, which started on 24 February 2022, the Law signed by President Volodymyr Zelensky provides for up to 8 years in prison for not having this accreditation. This accreditation is issued by the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and in order to obtain it, a reporter had to provide an international press card, a letter from the editor-in-chief of the editorial office sending them to the field, a copy of their passport and a photograph.

2. The key stage in the preparation is the provision of logistical support from the field.

Before the journalist leaves for the war zone, it is necessary to have an information network, i.e. to establish contact with several local residents who are well informed or who have contacts with various civil society associations. At least one local contact should be the contact for the “worst case scenario”. That should be the person who can provide shelter, in case the media worker, for some reason, loses his/her residence and also alert the domestic and international associations in case of a bigger problem. The other contacts serve to obtain basic information that may be of existential importance, such as which is the safest city or location; whether and where there is water, food, electricity, internet and safe underground bunkers; what kind of transport works and what are the safest and cheapest ways to move through cities or war zones; is there a shortage of fuel; whether the banks have blockages on payment cards and in what currency the cash payments take place, etc. The media worker must know all this information, as well as all the direct changes to the afore-stated, prior to their departure.

3. In the process of preparation before leaving for the field, the media worker/editorial office must also take care of their protective equipment.

Bulletproof vest and helmet are mandatory equipment. Without them, the accreditation is not valid, i.e. the military personnel do not allow the media workers to move on the ground. As a rule, the editorial office or the journalists' associations should procure protective equipment with appropriate "PRESS" markings. Media workers should get comfortable and warm clothes in neutral colours. It is forbidden to wear tactical equipment, as well as military colours or patterns, because the lives of media workers will be endangered if they look like militants. On the other hand, more striking colours, which can easily turn the media worker into an attack target, should be avoided. A sleeping bag and a first aid kit are among the mandatory things that must be part of the equipment in a war zone. Apart from this, you should also take with you the things that are essential for survival for at least a certain period of time (food, water, batteries, and lights). The editorial office must keep in mind that prices in war-torn areas vary and can change significantly depending on the security of cities, and that certain field services are paid exclusively in cash. Therefore, the editorial office should provide sufficient resources to the media worker, but also make contingency plans for extraction, in case the media worker remains "stuck". Also, at least one person in the newsroom must know, at any and all times, the whereabouts of the media worker.



Reporting from the city of Irpin, Ukraine

HOW SHOULD MEDIA WORKERS BEHAVE IN WAR ZONES

Once the media worker arrives in the field, (s)he should spend the first few days getting familiar and informed about their operations and the communication. In modern warfare, states pay particular attention to communication channels, so each country determines through which channels communication and information sharing takes place. In particular, in Ukraine text messages and direct calls are not used at all, communication is conducted exclusively through two networks: Telegram and WhatsApp.

Every country at war, but also every city inside the country, has a different kind of organization concerning the presence of the media. In some cities there are media centers where press conferences are held by official authorities. In the cities where fierce fighting is taking place, there are no such centers, and due to the great life-threatening danger, the media representatives must act in a better and more organized way on the ground, i.e. go out only for agreed recordings and return immediately to the shelters. Reporting from the line of fire is the most dangerous field work and every media worker must strictly follow the directions or signals of the military.

A media worker should never put the story before his/her personal safety. Those who do the opposite, in search of news, become news themselves. It is not advisable to go to the line of fire, but if you are going nevertheless, you must know the following:

- ▶ the first rule is **“take the story/photo and get out”**, every second is more life threatening;
- ▶ **media workers must be remotely recognizable as press** and must always carry identification with them;
- ▶ **media workers must be mentally prepared for the military environment**, the first rule for survival is to remain calm;
- ▶ **white handkerchief must be worn** in case the media worker becomes a visible target of an attack;
- ▶ **there is a difference between the work of the journalists, videographers, and photographers**, also depending on the task, sometimes there is no need for all three to go out in a location that is considered a target.

▶ **media workers entering the line of fire are required to have a minimum knowledge of weapons** in order to make a personal security assessment. For example, in the case of sequential bombing there may be a pattern, which means you should leave the site immediately if any subsequent sound louder than the previous one is heard. If media workers find themselves under artillery fire, the best shelter is a basement or the ground/first floor of the nearest building. The safest place is under the stairs, and the most unsafe place is near the windows. In case the media workers find themselves in the open, (although the initial instinct may be to run away), it is still considered safer to lie on the ground and remain motionless while there is a possibility of a new explosion nearby.

Media workers should not be transported by military transport as they are likely to be targeted. In case of moving in a convoy, they should avoid being in the first and last vehicle. In the event of an attack on the convoy, movement along its route should be avoided and the media worker should get off the road. However, mines are often placed along the highway and that is why it is necessary for media workers to have minimal knowledge of what an area with planted landmines looks like.

It is important to know that moving on the ground in a warring state, not only in the line of fire, but around the country, is practically impossible without hiring the so-called “fixers” or “intermediaries” who know safe routes of movement, can translate/interpret, assist in finding contacts and stories, and assist in the cultural understanding with the local population.

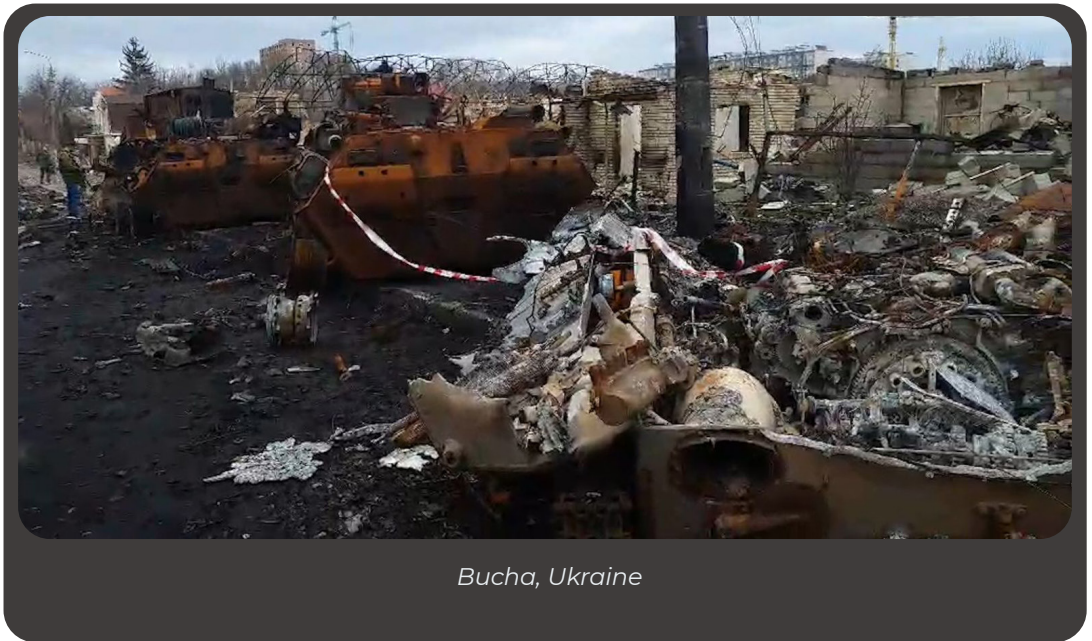
Media workers should never put the story before their personal safety

Media representatives on the ground must take into account the sensitivity of the situation when interviewing refugees or people stranded in occupied cities. The people the journalist will meet in the field can have many reasons for not wanting to talk. They could be traumatized victims, overworked officials, local citizens who may be upset from previous meetings with journalists, a potential whistle-blower who fears endangering his or her safety and career, and people who do not want to talk to reporters because they simply have something to hide. That is why it is necessary for the journalist in the field to assess the person they want to interview, in order to choose an appropriate approach to gain their trust.

When talking to refugees or victims, one must have an understanding of their situation. The approach should be humane, unobtrusive, with respect and attention, and at the same time, the questions that are asked should be direct, and the answers sought need to relate to chronological events, in order to avoid confusion among the people being interviewed at the moment. Usually, in war zones, the questions should be friendly and the

journalist should show understanding for the interlocutor. When it comes to interviewing officials, journalists should bear in mind that some of them may try to slip misinformation or disinformation. It is therefore important to be well prepared for such interviews. If the journalist notices inconsistencies in the statement and tries to come up with clear answers, (s)he should ask questions that contain facts, not opinions. The journalist must not rush to any conclusions. Some interviews require further fact-checking before they are published.

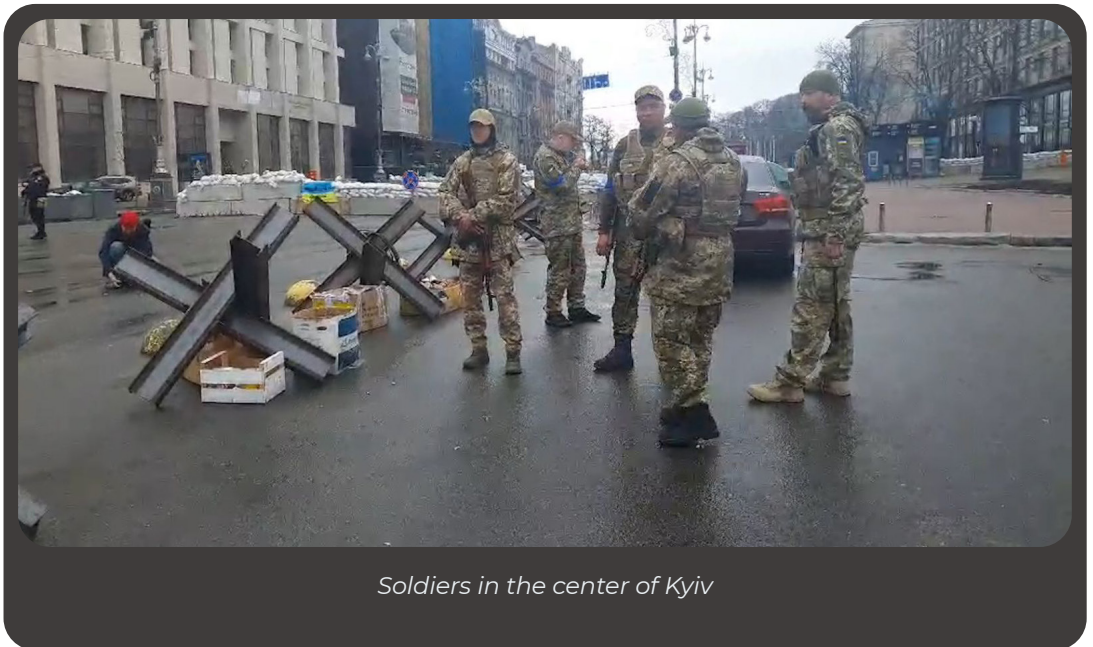
As a rule, during wartime, the country is ruled by Marshall Law, which means that all substances that affect the psycho-emotional and physical condition are strictly forbidden. War zone media workers, and especially professional war reporters, who go from one war zone to another and take risks, often resort to vices to relieve stress. This is important to emphasize for two reasons: the first is that in times of great danger media workers need a clear mind to be able to reason and assess danger well and they need to be able to rely on their own reflexes. The second reason is the legal restriction, the non-observance of which can take the media worker behind bars. In addition, we must bear in mind that in some countries, especially in the east, alcohol is banned for cultural and religious reasons. Consequently, media workers must be mentally prepared for any and all shortages, from cigarettes and alcohol to food. According to the Marshall Law, each city has a different duration of curfew. Usually, the accreditation itself should emphasize whether the media worker is allowed or not to be out of the curfew, but despite this, there are differences in practice from city to city, so it is important to be well informed about the rules in each individual city.



SELECTION AND VERIFICATION OF FIELD INFORMATION

Information is one of the key factors in a war. Thanks to the Internet, today information (photos and videos) is published live and this is the first challenge for journalists.

What was once considered a mission for intelligence can now be inadvertently done by ordinary civilians with a phone camera and internet access. In particular, in the war in Ukraine, the first information that arrives from the authorities at the moment when a detonation is heard is the request and the guidance not to publish the location information, photos and videos that show the place of the impact, until they become official. This government request applies to both civilians and journalists, and the reason, according to the Ukrainian authorities, is not to give information to the enemy. For the same reasons, it is strictly forbidden to publish information or visual representations of the army, army facilities and the movement of army equipment at any time



Soldiers in the center of Kyiv

During the period, of usually about an hour, until the authorities publish official information about the location and the number of victims, journalists, even if they know the exact location, should not announce it, but rather use geographical landmarks. For example: “Two detonations were heard in the western part of Kyiv”. Depending on the strategic interest of the target, the authorities decide whether and when to allow media workers access to the point of attack. Only after receiving official information can journalists publish accurate

details. However, at any and all times in a war zone, officials have the right to inspect the recorded material and delete it if they deem that the material may harm the army, i.e. provide information. Journalists need to listen well and articulate what is being said by the official authorities, because the fact that some information is an official position does not mean that it should not be verified. Apart from military targets, which are usually located outside the city, military activities usually take place in populated areas, which means that there are almost always witnesses.

According to the above-stated principle of sensitivity when talking to sources, they should be approached with a tone of confidentiality and journalists should always ask for their permission before pointing a camera at them. The journalist should use language and terminology that is not offensive. For example, if a question is asked with the term “Ukraine crisis”, the interlocutor will feel offended and will not give an answer, unlike the approach where the term “Ukraine war” would be used. The field reporter should refrain from abusive attitudes and terms, any kind of hate speech and labelling. It is necessary to have knowledge of the law, because in some countries the use of certain terminology cannot only be offensive, but also punishable by law.

The journalist should use language and terminology that is not offensive

In order for the information to fulfil the principles of accuracy, the reporter must stick to the facts, but also give them context, so that they are not misinterpreted, without drawing premature conclusions based on those facts. For example, authorities report that after an attack, a number of residents are taken to a hospital with respiratory problems. This is a factual situation that needs to be conveyed, contrary to many opinions, arising from this fact, that there was a chemical weapons attack. Not only should the journalist not draw such conclusions, but (s)he should also take the conclusions of the witnesses with caution.

The harm caused by the reckless and unethical reporting from a war zone can be creating panic among the local population and at the same time it might lead to a situation where the information can be used as a justification for further attacks. The selection of photos and videos should be made very carefully. Even if it is particularly important for the public interest to show what happened, there are still ethical rules that must be followed. For example, the faces of children should be blurred or if there is a naked, dead body in the frame, respect should be shown to the victim and it should be blurred. It is advisable not to post pictures that could provoke further sparks of violence.

The selection of photos and videos should be made very carefully

In the chaos of war, it is very important for the journalist not to fall into the trap of disinformation. There are people on the ground who, for various reasons, have their own agendas and try to promote them through

the media. That is why it is important for the journalist to try in several ways to check the information before publishing it, and thus to respect the golden rule in journalism that the information should be checked from at least two independent sources. There are also people from various humanitarian and civil society organizations on the ground, who can also be a source in a war zone. With every single source in a war zone, the journalist must clarify whether it is an official statement, in which the person wants to be shown and whether they agree to have their name, surname and title given. Quotes from an official can be used, but because of the danger of the consequences if their real name is published, they should be listed without their first and last name. However, it is desirable to indicate a more specific position of the source. For example, a “member of the 96th Brigade” instead of a “soldier”.

In the chaos of war, it is very important for the journalist not to fall into the disinformation trap of disinformation

Sources that give journalists unofficial information and their statements cannot be used, require from the journalist additional research and additional provision of another source, who will be able to confirm that information. In their reports, as a rule, journalists must tell their viewers or readers who is their source, i.e. what are their grounds for reporting. It is very important that media workers in the field are not carried away by the whirlwind of sensationalism and the competition for sensationalist headlines because such reporting can cause even more damage.

In war zones, journalists usually do not have access to both sides. In particular, the reporters from Ukraine do not have access to the other, i.e. the Russian side. That is why the correspondent’s good connection with the “home” editorial office is needed, which, in turn, should provide quality coverage to the other side.

Taking into account all the challenges of military reporting, which we have processed so far, we should be aware by now that the journalist should process her/his information well and that the race is not about who has the fastest, but who has the highest quality publication. In modern warfare, a good military reporter is one who conveys the news correctly, not quickly. Reporting should use a calming and non-offensive rhetoric, which will encourage reconciliation, not incite impatience or military action. Any transmission of news from a war zone can save or take human lives.



HUMAN RIGHTS REPORTING

In times of war and humanitarian crisis, the issue of human rights is often overlooked. The journalist must distinguish between the policy of human rights violations and isolated cases. Allegations of human rights abuses are often part of the propaganda battle. Such accusations can be used by one side for further military or political activities. Therefore, journalists must be especially careful with the terminology they use and their reports must be based on solid evidence. The human rights issue is so sensitive that even organizations that do research in this area interview dozens and dozens of people before reaching a conclusion and publishing a detailed report. Journalists must be prepared to report on human rights violations committed by any group



CONCLUSION

Depending on the war zone, the rules of conduct for media workers may change. Given the danger that exists in a conflict zone, media workers must be well prepared not only with knowledge of the conflict and current legislation, so as not to fall into any legal trouble, but they must also be mentally prepared for anything that may happen or anything that they may see in a war. First, media workers should expect everything when they go out on the field, from capture and contact with armed groups, to scenes of mass graves and bodies scattered in the streets. In dangerous situations on the ground, the journalist must not be overwhelmed by panic or excessive emotional, impulsive reactions. It often happens that some media workers, after returning from a war zone, have psychological consequences such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other psycho-emotional states. However, this usually happens to media workers who have not received proper training and do not know what to expect on the ground, i.e. they have a false idea of what war reporting looks like.

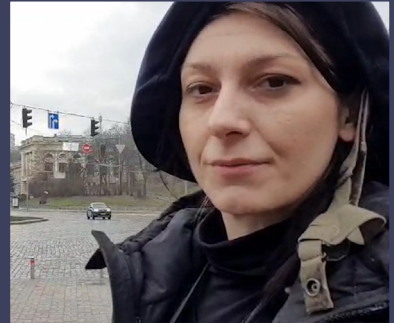
The practice of the international and European media is to train several different war zone reporting teams, which occasionally rotate or report from different war zones at the same time. All these military correspondents successfully complete their tasks from different military areas without any consequences for their mental health and physical safety. The media must keep in mind that sending an untrained media worker to war means exposing them to danger with fatal consequences. That's why correspondents who go to the field, first and foremost, need to be prepared and informed well, then they need to know how to act on the ground and where they should or should not be present at a particular moment.

The presence of media teams in war zones is important for the public interest, not only in terms of seeking or revealing the truth, but also in order to discourage any of the groups from committing crimes against civilians, because they will be made public. Unlike reporting in normal conditions, where the only challenge is the quality of information, reporting in wartime requires media workers to protect their lives and health at the same time. By their very nature, media workers are driven by curiosity, the search for the truth, the search for exclusivity, and taking the next step... However, they must know that in wartime the highest priority is their life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristina Atovska, born in Skopje, 1989, a graduated journalist at the Faculty of Law in Skopje in 2011, with a master's degree in Diplomacy and International Relations at the South East European University.

During her career, Atovska covered the most important political events, as well as the violent protests in Skopje, Belgrade and Athens.



Atovska also revealed several serious criminal activities after which the Public Prosecutor's Office opened investigative proceedings, such as stories of soliciting bribes for the adoption of children.

She showed special interest and knowledge in the preparation of a short documentary on the state of prisons in the country. Atovska is the author and director of a series of short documentaries related to COVID 19.

She is currently working on the show "Utrinski Brifing" ["Morning Briefing"] on the Internet television "Slobodna TV" and "Sloboden Pечат" and is the only Macedonian journalist reporting from the war zone in Ukraine.

*At the time of publication of these "Guidelines on Reporting from Armed Conflict/War Zones", Kristina Atovska is in Ukraine, for the second time. This text was prepared as part of her experience and lessons learned from reporting on the war in Ukraine.