

Chapter to UNDP on safety

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“Be alive to tell the story”.

“Safety first - no story is worth dying for”.

There are many proverbs about journalists’ safety.

Another is “Be safe. And if you can’t be safe, be careful” – a paraphrase of the old moral double-standard: “Be good. And if you can’t be good, be careful.”

It should be needless to say that Safety Rule Number 1 is good journalism; true and justified revelations, verified and confirmed by two or three independent sources.

One thing is sure: Bad journalism is more dangerous than investigative journalism. More killings of journalists have to do with unprofessional reporting than with investigative reporting. In some of the most dangerous countries, only few reporters are killed after thorough investigations, while far more are killed as news reporters or columnists after having insulted particular persons or accused them of corruption or other malpractice without having enough evidence – if any at all.

Any reporter and any editor can significantly mitigate the risk by accurate, balanced and fair reporting and by giving the accused the right to reply before publication.

Even so, it can be dangerous to reveal malpractice of powerful sources. Investigative reporters and editors share the responsibility to develop the safety strategies and secure communication strategies relevant to their investigation in the country they report in.

The text is written for investigative reporters. But every line falls back on the editor’s responsibility. The ultimate responsibility for the staff’s safety lies with the editor. And every investigative reporter has to take responsibility for own safety.

Safety is about being aware, being alert and being careful. You can prepare yourself and plan to mitigate the risk.

Safety is not only about you, but also your sources – and others who may become victims of a culprit’s reaction to your story.

This chapter provides some tips useful for most investigative reporters and editors. They are compiled from numerous safety manuals and investigative trainings.

Equally important is it to learn from other colleagues who have experienced the dangers, the threats and the attacks.

Exchange experience with colleagues to the extent that you sense, what they sensed, feel what they felt and see yourself take action as they took action.

Safety tips make you aware. Fear makes you careful.

BEFORE YOU GET STARTED

1 Assess the sources and the targets of your investigation

Assess who may be hurt by your story – and who may in return hurt you or others?

When you investigate systemic errors, powerful sources’ malpractice or even controversial information, it is crucial to make a risk assessment of your investigation.

However, it is neither systems nor information that will intimidate you, hurt you or even kill you. It is people. People who represent a system, people who are organized, some more than others, and people who believe they have an interest in suppressing the information you want to reveal.

To begin with, try to forecast the effect and the consequences of your possible revelations. What are the wrongdoings, you are investigating? How deep, does it go? Who is responsible, directly and indirectly?

Every threat is different. It depends on your possible revelations, on the sources and on the context and time.

Nevertheless there are systematic ways to forecast the possible dangers.

Make a stakeholder analysis of who may get hurt by your revelation – and to what extent? Who will gain and who will lose, if the problem is exposed in public? Who will gain and who will lose by status quo?

And who will gain and who will lose, if the problem is solved? And what do they lose – also in terms of lost opportunities?

Also assess: Who may, rightly or wrongly, feel threatened by your investigation?

Research how the hostile sources see you. What is their attitude to journalists in general and to your media company in particular?

In fragile democracies and conflict zones investigative reporters are often seen as supporting different factions and are treated accordingly.

By exposing corruption or other malpractice on one side, the investigative journalist is often seen as a supporter for the other side.

Assess if you could be seen as ‘representing’ one side or another in a conflict – or even you could be seen as taking sides, because you have working relations with sources who are opponents or critical to the targets of your investigation.

2 Assess the reactions of the targets of your investigation

A part of your research plan should be a risk assessment: How do you get close enough to get the information? When does close become too close?

When you know the possible aggressors, the next step is to assess the extent of their possible hostility:

What may trigger a hostile action? What are their sensitive points?

Do they believe that they can stop the investigation by stopping you – in any way?

Who represents fatal dangers? Who kills? Who doesn't? How do they kill?

Research the possible aggressors' track-record and their modus operandi. Some kill, others don't. Ask the police, ask their opponents, ask other sources, as you would do in any investigation.

Research previous threats and attacks on reporters in the region: Were the aggressor ever brought to court or even investigated properly – or were they somehow granted impunity?

First of all you have to understand the possible risks, before you can decide how to deal with it.

The targets of your investigation may react hostile to your sources – or to those they think can be the sources, presently or in future. It is your responsibility to protect your sources.

The reaction of the targets can also be irrational and cruel. They may attack other scapegoats than the obvious ones, they may sacrifice sitting ducks from their own ranks or they may even deviate the public attention by orchestrating attacks on minorities or other victims.

Such risk assessment allows you to prioritize the dangers you put yourself into – in terms of the clues you choose to follow, and eventually in terms of the revelations you choose to publish. It allows you to ask yourself: Is the story worth the risk?

3 Assess hostile action from the local community

Even ordinary people can be dangerous, if they take you for an “enemy”, for example if you are seen in company with “alien” NGOs, politicians, investors or other stakeholders presumes antagonistic to the local community.

In a conflict area or fragile society it can be dangerous event to represent a medium that the people think belongs to “the other side”. They may hold you accountable for the other side. So even journalistic virtues as “reporting the other side” and “reporting the bigger picture” may be dangerous, if the audience is strongly opposed.

Pre-research the community you want to research, before you move in.

Ask colleagues on the ground. Contact local journalists when travelling to an unfamiliar area. They have knowledge about both the target of your investigation and the local risks.

Who are the main local players, and what is their connection to the target of your investigation? Are you sufficiently updated on recent developments and present tensions in the area? Are there any ‘no-go’ areas?

Do any groups have a history of violence towards journalists or a history of atrocities to civilians?

What are their attitudes likely to be towards journalists in general and towards you and your media company in particular? Does your own ethnic or religious belonging put you at extra risk?

Of course any investigative journalist should know his or her legal rights – according to the constitution and the laws, even according to international humanitarian laws. But do they carry any weight in the area you do your investigation?

Research the rule of law in the area. Who is de facto in charge of security? What permissions do you need and from whom? Will these carry any weight once you are out on the road?

Again, ask yourself: Is the story worth the risk?

WHEN YOU DO YOUR RESEARCH

4 Asses the dangers for your sources

Safety is not only about you, it is also about your sources.

Sources can be put in danger even by being seen with you or being connected via mail or phone. They can be intimidated, they can lose their job, they can be attacked or worse.

You may even decide not to mail or call your sources at all, but arrange to meet them face to face with the help of fixers, in discrete ways that will never leave a record of your approach. You may also decide not to write the names of your sources anywhere, on paper or on your hard disc.

This applies to any whistle-blower, but again, it all depends on your risk assessment; the sensitivity of the possible revelations and the context. If your story is big, your precautions should be big, and you need to be prepared to communicate in a secure way.

5 Secure communication

Today there is no doubt that intelligence agencies can monitor your digital communication. The question is: Will they do it at any stage of your investigation?

A strategy for secure communication includes considerations of how to store your findings, how to communicate with sources, with whom to discuss your findings.

Many international media organizations have developed guides for secure communication that do not reflect local realities where journalists shares computers, get internet access at the local cyber café, where everyone knows everyone.

In some cases it is unsafe to discuss sensitive matters on the phone or e-mail with your editor. In some cases it would put you or your source in danger to have any contact via phone or e-mail.

In other cases it may be appropriate to communicate via Skype, chat or special and anonymous e-mail accounts, generic accounts such as Yahoo! or Hotmail, which are more difficult to trace.

There are other cases where you want to use special techniques like encryption or TOR. On the other hand, if a smart intelligence agency has got into your computer, no amount of encryption or TOR will save you.

Again, it is a matter of making a specific risk assessment and safety plan for every investigation, also on the level of digital communication.

6 Make a safety plan

Many investigative reporters are acting as lone wolves. But researching alone makes you an obvious target. The lone wolf is dangerous. You need a back-up from your editor and your editorial office, and you need to share the exposure to danger with colleagues.

You can even expand your safety by cooperating with colleagues from other media. Cooperation with other media can take shape as a joint research project, as sharing information or as co-publishing.

The saying "You can stop a journalist, but you can't kill the story" is only true, if journalist shares the story with others. If the targets of the investigation know this, it will serve as a protection.

You can plan for a more safe research on a concrete level. Each editorial office should have formulated a standard operating procedure (a SOP) to follow during any investigation.

The back-up from your editor before a dangerous interview or field trip is a must. Staying in touch with your editor or colleagues means staying alive.

Share your research plan and schedules with a back-up team. At least one colleague should know your itinerary to be able to act quickly, if you don't report back as agreed or fail to return as expected.

Make a safety protocol on what will happen if you have not been in touch for a specified period of time. If you know the steps your colleagues will take, it helps you to make the right decisions if you are detained or hurt.

The protocol should include enough information for the office to follow your risk assessments and the steps of your research. Upon your return you should debrief and keep your colleagues and the protocol updated.

In particular if you research in a conflict area or hostile environment, it would be wise to have someone who can look out for you. If you are a team, pre-arrange contact points and times, if you happen to separate.

You should also have emergency numbers pre-set for speed-dialing on your mobile phone.

7 Be alert in the field

Be aware who you associate with during the research. Of course it is dangerous to take sides in an antagonistic environment. Of course accepting any kind of bribe is dangerous, as you will be seen as a tool by one who bribes you.

But even small favors, such as a lift, a meal or an introduction can label you as reporter for the both side or a spy for "enemy".

So you need to plan for independent research as far as possible. As they say in South Sudan: Don't sleep with the snake, even if you are careful.

You need to be aware of check-points and security forces of the government of factions or gangs. They may all see the media as a threat.

You need to decide how to signal your profession. Carrying a camera or a tape recorder may be dangerous as it may provoke security forces and well as people. Decide before you leave if you need to bring one.

The best is to be transparent about your research, but in some cases it is safer move around discretely or even research under-cover.

Showing your press card can in some cases help you. In other cases it is the press card that may put you in danger at a check-point.

Likewise, you also need to be aware of crowds. Try to predict if you at any time may find yourself in a hostile crowd.

In the field, be aware of when you are becoming the focus of a crowd, rather than just part of it. Prepare yourself to predict crowd movements and observe alternative ways out.

It should be needless to say, but dress properly, discretely and with clothes and shoes that make you free to move fast and freely.

On one hand you need to travel light on an assignment, on the other hand you need both your professional equipment and relevant means to deal with any foreseeable situation, be it water, medicine or a whistle to blow.

8 Watch your back

You can protect yourself and your family by watching for signs of surveillance. Some investigative reporters are often threatened, but it is important never to take the threats light.

Examine every threat with your editor, and take sufficient steps to deal with them: Report them to the police. If you know from where the threats are coming, let your editor explain the intimidator that it is not the individual reporter, but the entire editorial office that is doing this investigation.

It is documented that counter-surveillance can save lives. You need to know if someone is following your step, so you can take immediate precautions and get out of the heat, maybe even get the family out.

When relevant, you need to make routines for counter-surveillance. You can ask the editor or a colleague to help you to detect the surveillance, for instance by following your moves from a distance and watch for anyone doing the same.

If someone is following you, immediate precautions should be taken, which is determined by the situation and the possibilities, but they might include safe-houses, armed guards, and protection of the family.

You and your editor may even choose to stop the investigation, at least until the situation cools down.

9 Make a contingency plan

Have you been intimidated or threatened you need take a new look at risk and the bigger picture. Is the story worth the risk for you, your family and your sources?

You need the support of your editor and your family, but the decision to continue the investigation after being targeted is yours alone.

If you are at risk, you need to develop a contingency plan, in case the antagonist sources get hostile.

The plan should list possible crisis scenarios. Some you can't predict, but most you can.

The plan should also list the actions to be taken, by you, your family and your editor. Such preparation allows you and network to keep the head cold and act rationally in if risks come to close to reality.

A general experience is that it is absolutely critical to locate a disappeared colleague within the first days of the disappearance. The one who detain the journalist must know that other people know their action and demand your release.

10 Stay calm

Preparations can help you to stay calm if you get attacked or detained.

To some extent you can prepare yourself on how you will react if you are captured or illegally arrested. The main goal for you is survival.

It is possible that you may be held for quite a time, and you need to keep your head cold, face your captors and find ways to deal with them. You need to find ways to survive and maintain your dignity, despite the fact you are powerless and feel helpless.

Insist that you are a fellow human being, and that you deserve respect. Insist that your motives are professional, even though you disagree with those who keep you.

11 Be transparent and professional

Always talk to the accused before publishing. Keep your friends close and your enemies even closer.

Show the accused that you have the courage to face them. It is a matter of respect; if the culprits don't respect you, they are more likely to hurt you.

Respect connected to culture – and it is different in countries or groups, where losing face is a matter of concern, from others, where macho honour is at stake.

In this context it is also important that you stick to what you can back by firm evidence and confirmed information. Culprits have no respect for fishing, unnamed sources or secret documents.

When you accuse somebody of wrong-doings, stay out of the personal issues. Stay away from their family and the private domain, stay out of personality issues, don't comment their personal appearance.

Don't necessarily go after the most embarrassing revelation, because if the target of your investigation may be more offended by a personal attack than the actual revelation – and may act accordingly, as an irrationally prescribed by a code of honour rather than an analysis if interest.

BEFORE PUBLISHING

12 Make a safety check

First of all, your editorial office should give your story a thorough check of all facts and revelations before the story is published.

Secondly, give the story a legal screening. Preferably a lawyer is appointed to assist you and your editor to check for possible unjustified or unlawful accusations.

Thirdly you should give the story a safety check. Look out for anything in the story that gives the culprits compelling reason to kill you. It is better to omit details or otherwise change the story than to get killed.

To tell a good story, you want to create a character, with personal relations, through talking details and relevant anecdotes. On the other hand you also want to stay alive.

For a journalist and especially the editor it is a challenge to balance such safety considerations with catch personal details, which not only gives human interest to the story, but also sells the story to the audience.

Don't give the targets of your investigation room for speculations about your sources. Be as transparent with what you know and how you know it.

And never give them a compelling reason to go after a specific source. And make sure that there are no indications of other persons as sources that could harm the culprit. You don't want to create new targets for the bad guys.

13 Cooperate for impact and safety

You can kill the reporter, but you can't kill the story, the proverb goes.

This is only true, if more reporters work on the same story. You can protect yourself by sharing the byline with the editor and other colleagues.

In some cases, the investigative reporter may share the entire investigation with other media – not only for protection, but also for impact.

The investigative medium may also chose to co-publish the story with other non-competing media. For instance may a print medium co-publish with a broadcast medium. Or a national paper may co-publish with local media. Or a magazine co-publishes with news media.

Co-publishing gives an immediate protection and it may result in more impact of the story, which will provide even more protection.

Or the medium may want to co-publish the story with media in other countries to attract international attention.

14 Follow-up on other reporters' investigations

It is rare for competing media to share investigations or to co-publish. However, once the story breaks, the competing media should have the decency to follow up on each other's stories – with new angles, new revelations, as the competing news media they are.

The next worst response for an investigative reporter is silence from other media – no response.

If competing media silence their competitors' scoop, the result may be that the authorities will take no action and that the public will not be aware of the problem.

This is a dangerous situation for you, because now you are left alone in the dark – only to await the response from culprits or the authorities. In the silence of the other media, they may take action against the investigative reporter – and get away with it with impunity.

It should be an ethical rule for all investigative reporters and all media to follow-up on each other's investigations – to let any culprit source know that they never can kill the story by attacking the reporter.