

Reduced Security for Journalists and Less Reporting from the Frontline

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Abstract

According to both UNESCO and NGOs working to protect the safety of journalists, the security situation for reporters and media workers in conflict zones has deteriorated greatly during the past decade. The present authors have undertaken a combined method of survey and in-depth interviews with one hundred journalists and editors in the field of war and conflict reporting in seven countries to discover whether, and how, they perceive the recent increase in threats and attacks against journalists at work in conflict zones. The study aims in particular to focus on the consequences such environmental security constraints have for the journalistic output in general, and sets out to map in detail editors' and journalists' security routines prior to fieldwork and the aftereffects suffered from attacks.

Keywords: war and conflict reporting, journalist safety, impunity, aftereffects

Introduction

Since 1992 and until today, the Committee to Protect Journalists has registered 1149 journalist killings with a confirmed motive. Sixty-six per cent of these cases were classified as 'murder', meaning "the targeted killing of a journalist ... in direct relation to the journalist's work" (CPJ 2015). Simultaneously, Reporters Without Borders' (RSF) press freedom index for 2015 declares that press freedom is on the decline worldwide and points out the targeting and manipulation of media workers as the main cause of this deterioration (RSF 2015).

Defence of freedom of speech must be seen in connection with the issue of journalists' safety in the field. Both in our own research (see Høiby and Ottosen 2015) and in that of others (e.g. Berger 2013), it is evident that there is a close link between lack of security and self-censorship. Moreover, the increasing problem of impunity has an impact on freedom of expression on a global scale. According to the International Freedom of Expression Exchange

(IFEX), perpetrators of crimes against journalists go unpunished in nine out of ten cases (Høiby and Ottosen 2015). Thus, UNESCO's work for "mapping of freedom of expression" is treated in connection with the protection of journalist safety and addressing the continuing issue of impunity for perpetrators.

Despite UN Resolution 1738 from 2006, there is a sense among many vulnerable reporters that the UN has failed. Many perceive that the work of journalists in conflict zones has become even more dangerous over the past years. Recent research has shown that editors and journalists worldwide feel the five past years have taken a new direction regarding security and their working conditions in the field (Høiby and Ottosen 2015). Year 2012 showed the highest figure for journalists killed on the job to date: 121 media workers were killed by targeted attacks, bomb attacks and crossfire incidents (IFJ 2012).

But who will protect journalists in conflict zones when they are obviously often the selected targets? Perhaps the Nordic countries could contribute more to putting the threat against journalists in conflict areas on the international political agenda? Horsley (2013) argues that the Nordic countries should be more active in trying to implement mechanisms in their foreign policy to force partners to take journalist safety more seriously. The EU, the Council of Europe and OSCE have shown willingness to push forward greater respect for the protection of journalists, but as we are all witnessing daily, we have a long way to go (Ottosen 2014).

The present authors have investigated how journalists and editors experience the pressure of threats and dangers in the field, how the situation affects them and what response strategies they have developed to continue their work. Here we will share the experiences of one hundred journalists and editors in seven countries, all of them working in the field of conflict reporting.

Methodology

The method comprised semi-structured interviews with 100 informants: 27 editors and 73 journalists working in the field of war and/or conflict reporting. Although we conducted the interviews with Norwegian journalists and editors ourselves, we contracted seven local collaborative partners to carry out the interviews and analyses in Nepal, the Philippines, Uganda, Nigeria, Tunisia, and Nicaragua.

The researchers conducted the interviews in personal meetings, for the most part, and filled out the survey forms together with the informants. They used a multiple choice survey containing 30 questions, most of which required a single response, some multiple responses and three or four questions were open-ended. Survey forms for editors and journalists addressed the same topics, but we made some adjustments to adapt to the different nature of their respective work and working conditions.

The definition of conflict reporting chosen for the present study was outlined on the first page of the survey form as *reporting on armed or violent social conflict*. It further clarified that “we aim to include answers related to *both armed conflict and organized crime*”. For safety reasons, the identities of respondents have been protected and kept confidential.

About the informants:

Media platforms represented by the 100 informants, journalists as well as editors, were as follows: News – print and Internet (39); television/video (21); radio (18); several platforms (15); photo (3); digital (1); other (3). The total number of editors and journalists responding was 100.

All of the 27 editors were leaders of media outlets or sections covering war and conflict and many had years of experience covering war and conflict themselves. They categorized themselves as editor-in-chief (10); editorial leader of a section or department (15); administrative leader (1), and other (1).

Of the 73 journalists, only 14 are freelancers or journalists employed on temporary contracts, while the rest are staff reporters with full-time employment. The survey form also registered years of experience and number of times covering conflict. Regarding experience as a conflict reporter, 27 of the journalists had more than fifteen years, 40 had five to fifteen years, and 6 fewer than five years. As to the number of times covering conflict, and to the extent that is measurable in numbers, about half of them (32) reported having covered conflict more than twenty times, while 4 reported not having covered conflict at all, despite the fact that the study set out to specifically reach informants with such experience.

Reduced security and fewer first-hand observations from conflict zones

One of the trends seen in the answers from both journalists and editors is that editorial managements have become more reluctant to send reporters to conflict zones (Høiby and Ottosen 2015). Moreover, if the decision is made to send them, they prefer having reporters there for a shorter time period and bringing them home as soon as they ‘have the story’. This may have an effect on journalism practice in conflict reporting, with more production of on-the-spot news and increased use of footage sent by wire and from second-hand sources.

Many of the journalists and editors interviewed said that one or two weeks at a time is the ideal length of time to spend in a conflict zone, but they gave slightly different reasons for this. While the journalists focused on planning

the assignment, having enough resources and taking safety precautions, the leaders added that they wished to protect the psychological wellbeing of their journalists and that spending more than two weeks in a tense area was likely to affect their mental strength and focus. They also emphasized that their employees needed adequate time to rest in between risky assignments. One Norwegian correspondent put it like this: “as long as you go quickly in and get out fast, and you have good contacts and a well-planned stay, the risk is considerably lower”.

Local and international freelancers are especially vulnerable to risks and dangers. As explained by an international freelancer based in the Middle East: “The local freelancers suffer the most; they take the highest risks, many are untrained and unequipped, they barely get paid, and they don’t even get the by-lines”. When they are young and/or inexperienced as well, this combination can constitute a death trap. Some informants told stories of local freelancers who started out as ‘fixers’ and ended up selling their stories to big international news houses. A few of them, after some time, got a contract for more permanent employment. While these cases are probably exceptions to the rule, the opportunities are there for those who are willing to take the risk – for as long as they manage to survive. The vulnerable situation for freelancers was summed up by one of the correspondents: “If you find yourself next to a freelancer [in the field], you know that you have gone too far”.

The survey incorporated a follow-up question to map additional issues that might affect decisions. The answers show that while security is the main editorial concern, economic aspects are also a part of editorial awareness. On the other hand, some editors said that although they were dealing with constantly tightening budgets, conflict coverage was not necessarily the most affected field of work. To take Norway as an example, despite the higher costs of production from the battlefield, two out of three Norwegian editorial leaders interviewed for the study said that international news is a priority. However, the recent targeting of journalists in the Ukraine conflict as well as Gaza, Syria and Iraq makes it difficult to access first-hand sources and observations.

The editors in several countries, across continents, also mentioned that the availability of pictures through the wires (e.g., AP, AFP, Reuters) makes it feasible to cover conflict without having to send one’s own journalists to the frontline. As stated by one of the editors, “... [With] the availability of wire services, it became more convenient for local media to get news, rather than engaging their own reporters to cover in conflict areas. We no longer cover wars like in Syria or Iraq”.

Another editor echoed this and gave the example of the danger of going to The Central African Republic. He said that coverage from such areas often relied on pictures and footage supplied by local or unknown photographers. The visuals are distributed by the wires and accompanied by a summary

of multiple online news sources (second-hand information). He added that they could not always determine whether the pictures or footage presented were genuine. According to the same source, the best way to behave ethically in such cases was to be explicit about these uncertainties in the published piece. Unfortunately, this kind of news production can easily create insecurity and, at worst, contribute to propaganda for countries at war (Nohrstedt and Ottosen 2014).

Issues related to finance and security also *interconnect* in many of the statements from the editors. Having the budget to cover safety gear, insurance and safe transport and accommodation is of concern to the editors. The following statement from an editor is an example of how these issues (often unintentionally) intertwine:

The desk has become more cautious. Many are willing to cover, but there are so many ifs and buts, particularly on the safety of reporters – their personal security. In fact, when you make a reporter cover something, it includes a lot of waivers.

Some of the informants pointed to the workload as another main challenge. The journalists may report for television, radio and the Internet in one day. One informant said that the workload had more than tripled in recent years. In particular, the interviews with television journalists revealed this; those who previously only reported for television now produced an additional piece for radio and yet another one for the web. The heavy workload had led to exhaustion and the pressure had become part of the daily routine. It may also pose a potential threat to security when standard routines are replaced with less well-planned shortcuts.

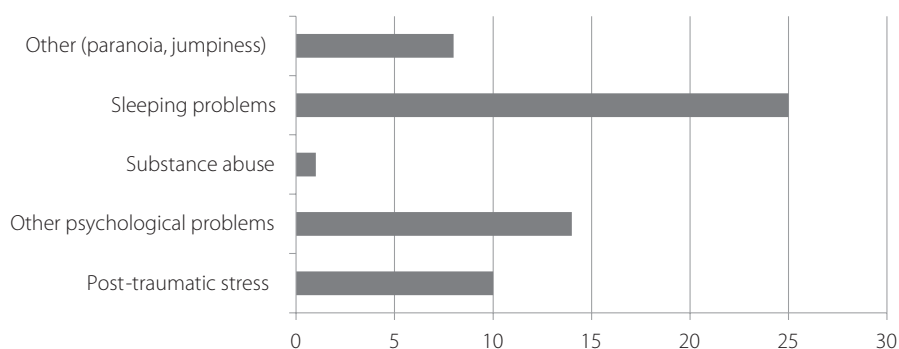
Aftereffects

As many as 33 of the 73 journalists interviewed for the study answered that they had experienced or were experiencing the aftereffects of work-related incidents. An equal number (33) answered, on the other hand, that they were not, and had not experienced such effects. The remaining seven did not know whether they had experienced aftereffects or not. There is uncertainty related to these findings, as the informants who had not undergone professional treatment to identify such issues may have found it more difficult to label the reactions they experienced. Several of the informants reported being overly 'aware', 'on guard' or 'alert' in situations where other people act recklessly. This is a reaction common in hypervigilance, a condition found in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Sleeping problems were frequent among the journalists, although in most cases not immediately reported as an aftereffect of working in conflict areas. Some informants first answered 'no' when asked whether they were experi-

encing or had experienced aftereffects, but nevertheless marked one or two of the options on the list of aftereffects when the options were presented to them. This again indicates that it was difficult for them to recognize and label the issues that they might have been dealing with. The graph below illustrates the types of reactions the journalists reported experiencing. The horizontal axis shows the number of journalists who reported each value. Answers are overlapping; many have responded “several” and some of those answering “none” still indicate that they were bothered by emotional reactions that contradict their initial answer.

Figure 1. Types of reactions among journalists (number)



Although many journalists stated that they preferred to deal with traumatic experiences in the company of colleagues, and ‘over drinks’, only one reported using substance abuse – in this case alcohol – to deal with trauma. Many journalists said that receiving death threats was something they were used to – although they were more affected when their families were threatened, especially if they had to take longer periods of time away from their spouse and/or children.

Security routines and measures

To map the safety measures, i.e., the equipment and training provided to the journalists, the survey contained a question with a checklist on which a number of alternatives were given. The informants were asked to mark all of the applicable alternatives. The option ‘none’ was not given. Still, 30 out of the 100 informants (30 per cent) added ‘none’ to the survey form as their only answer. In general, the results show that such measures are scarce, and the answers given by journalists are for the most part consistent with those of the editors.

The majority of the informants had not received first aid training or training for working in conflict zones. Nigeria, Tunisia and Nicaragua rated significantly lower on this issue than the other countries did, and Uganda and Nepal slightly lower. Of all the journalists interviewed from Uganda, Tunisia, Nigeria, Nepal and Nicaragua – in total 54 journalist informants – only five had received practical training (a security course) and only five were covered by insurance. Altogether, 44 of these journalists had neither – and none had both.

The journalists’ and editors’ own reporting of security training and access to equipment is shown in the next graph. The horizontal axis gives the number of informants reporting each value, out of the total of 100 informants.

Figure 2. Journalists’ and editors’ own reporting of security training and access to equipment (number)



Norway and the Philippines come out as the two countries with the best routines for preparation and security in this survey. It is worth noting, however, the potential methodological impact of the fact that the Filipino and Norwegian journalists report longer work experience in their work than did the informants from the other countries in the survey. Given their experience in the field, they are more likely to be attached to international media houses with larger budgets and more advanced security routines than are the other informants. Those with more experience are often the ones best trained and equipped in relation to safety.

Conclusions

Based on the experience of the one hundred journalists and editors we consulted, it is evident that the past five years have changed their working envi-

ronment significantly and for the worse in relation to security. The immediate result of this is reluctance to produce and publish information from conflict zones or to pursue high-risk assignments in regions affected by political tension. Self-censorship is common among journalists and editors who are particularly vulnerable in their local setting. Reduced security also implies a substantial increase in administration costs for coverage from wars and conflicts worldwide. Altogether, the present findings point towards a threatened press freedom that leads to degraded quality, and perhaps quantity, of information from contemporary wars and conflicts, and their impacts on civil society both at the local and the international level.

Many journalists are suffering from the aftereffects of experiences from work, and the means for safeguarding their mental and physical wellbeing are deficient. Some express a feeling that their vulnerability is being neglected, and hesitate about demanding support from the management because they feel pressured to 'be suitable' for handling the job. The long-lasting status and subsequent competition within war and conflict reporting still engender a climate in which exposure to physical and psychological reactions is discouraged.

Essential training and protective gear are generally scarce, and it may be that the field of war and conflict journalism is gradually becoming less attractive due to the potentially high costs – economically and personally – of pursuing the risky assignments. In other words, it remains to be seen how this may affect recruitment to this branch of the profession in the future. As for the coverage, a trend towards increased use of second-hand information through wires is evident. Sometimes, this information is difficult to interpret and provided by unknown sources. In the end, such a degradation in the quality of information provided to society should be of considerable concern to all of us.

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