



A GUIDE FOR  
**PROFESSIONAL  
JOURNALISM IN  
CONFLICT ZONES**

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First and foremost we would like to acknowledge the passionate engagement of the participants in the project, Israelis and Palestinians alike, who shared their experiences with honesty, and dedicated scarce time resources to learning new possibilities. Most of the examples and quotations in this guide stem from their readiness to take risks and their openness to new horizons.

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Our hope is that journalists, particularly in conflict zones around the world, will find it useful.

# INTRODUCTION

Mass communication has heralded a new era where the presence of the media pervades public life as never before. Reading articles online in the morning, checking cell-phone updates whilst waiting in queues, viewing twitters and watching television in the evening – we are constantly updated on events taking place around the world.

We at Search for Common Ground<sup>1</sup> believe that journalism as a profession has the capacity to influence the public and leave its mark on society – and on history. A story may not only reflect what is happening on the ground it can also engender a wide range of feelings and views among the public which might then react in a variety of ways. In other words, journalists are in a position to make a difference. As a result of this belief Search for Common Ground has been working with journalists operating in conflict zones – from Burundi to Lebanon- for nearly thirty years in order to influence attitudes on the ground towards a more constructive approach to dealing with discord<sup>2</sup>.

This manual is an output of a two year project, funded by USAID, involving Israeli and Palestinian senior and mid-level journalists in Israeli and the Occupied Palestinian Territory.<sup>3</sup> Our goal is to share the learnings from the participating journalists, and the project as a whole, in the hope that it

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1 Search for Common Ground is an international not- for- profit organization working in the field of Conflict Transformation with 37 offices in 25 countries including Jerusalem.

2 For more information on programmes please see: [www.sfcg.org](http://www.sfcg.org)

3 USAID funded Conflict, Management and Mitigation (CMM) project administered and run by Search for Common Ground's Jerusalem office entitled *Promoting Common Ground Print and Broadcast Journalism in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza*; 2009-2011



will benefit others in the region and around the world who are grappling with the crucial job of reporting news, particularly in times of conflict. Whilst our journalists came from broadcast (T.V. and radio) and print media we believe that journalists involved with new media, including the blogosphere, grapple with similar issues. In addition, whilst every conflict has its own unique conditions, questions raised about the role of journalists and their reporting are universal and have broad implication.

We do not have definitive answers to the many questions we pose in this manual but we hope that they will spur on your own thinking as journalists and encourage you to reflect further on your professional roles. The manual has therefore been created as a “time –out” for journalists and students of journalism - to reflect on your role as investigators and deliverers of information to society. Journalists deal with extraordinary levels of pressure in their daily lives, racing from deadline to deadline and ever-mindful of the competition for a “scoop”. As a result, they have little time and opportunity to examine their role as journalists and what it means to themselves and those around them.

But time for self-reflection is absolutely essential if a person is to grow in his or her profession. This manual is designed to create space for journalists to do exactly that, with room for readers to write down their own feelings and thoughts to the issues raised in these pages in order to encourage the free flow of reaction and response to the ideas discussed.

Both budding journalists and long-term professionals in the field are invited to take a “pause” so to speak; to reflect on their work, their time in the field, and their professionalism. In short, we are asking journalists to answer for them-

## INTRODUCTION

selves the question: How can I, using my unique skills and abilities, be the most professional journalist I can possibly be?

## CHAPTER 1:

# THE NEWS, THE MEDIA AND THE PUBLIC



The amount of attention paid to an event is not necessarily a result of the importance of that event itself. After all, significant events take place across the world on a daily basis. Generally, the media only report on a small number of the stories that are potentially of interest to the public realm, with a critical impact on these events themselves, as well as on those not reported. Descartes might well say today “I am in the news therefore I am”.

Arguably, even when a specific event is reported, its import may differ according to the source and style of the report and the outlet of delivery to the public. Two different newspapers or television channels, for example, can bestow

different significance to the same event.

- Can you, as journalists, think of examples of when this has happened? Please write down your examples here:

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Various elements impact the media and the work of journalists within this frame. The two most important are economics – the need to reach high ratings – and politics, those of the media outlet itself and the political landscape of which it is a part. This is complicated even further in societies that have experienced entrenched conflict with an adversary in what is often seen as an existential, win-lose struggle. In these situations, the enemy “Other” is often presented in specific ways. Moreover, there is a dynamic in both local and international news outlets to spotlight conflict stories in any given society or country believing that ‘if it bleeds it leads’, with the result that people, both near and far, often receive a skewed picture of what is happening on the ground.

Using the Israeli-Palestinian example, the media of both nations, more often than not, focus on the violent confrontations between the two peoples. They provide little information about the daily lives of the other side whilst

emphasizing the responsibility for political, military or socio-economic crises on the 'enemy' population. Choosing a certain narrative or framing often results in only specific stories reaching the headlines. These are more likely to highlight their own people as victims and lay the blame for the violence on the other side. In times of high-level conflict these patterns often become even more rigid.

- Are you, as journalists, aware of situations like these?
- Have you sometimes found that you yourselves can be caught up in the emotions of your own society in times of crisis?
- What happens in times of war or heightened hostilities?
- Are your main sources of information the military or the political leaders from your own side?
- Do you sometimes find that after the event, your opinions might change as a result of new information or reduced tension?
- Can you think of a time when the media reported an outbreak of hostilities one way and changed its perspective following the event? Can you think of a personal example?

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Given the prevalent paradigms of conflict reporting and the focus on negating the 'Other', the media tends to ignore those stories that offer a different reality. In the Middle East region, there are many stories of goodwill between Israelis and Palestinians that demonstrate positive interactions and human relations. These stories can be just as dramatic and exciting as those that focus on the negative— for example of the story of Palestinian Authority firefighters that came to assist Israelis battling the flames raging in the Carmel forests in 2010.

- What effect do you think reporting negative stories about the 'Other' has on the public?
- When you investigate and/or read positive stories of cooperation between peoples in conflict, what effect does it have on you?

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- **Recognize the importance of how the media as a whole frame and portray an issue and how framing influences both your reporting and how the public understands the conflict.**

- **Be aware of your responsibility as a journalist and recognize the power that your reports may have to influence individuals and governments.**

- **See yourself as a conduit that provides information to the public and recognize that you have a great deal of responsibility in what information is presented to the public and in how the public receives it.<sup>4</sup>**

## THE PUBLIC

Ultimately, whatever we write or prepare for broadcast as journalists, is intended for reader and viewer consumption. Some publications do try to cater to a certain sector of society while other outlets, though widely available, are often seen to be more affiliated with one section of society than another.

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<sup>4</sup> These bullet points were compiled jointly by Palestinian and Israeli senior media advisors and Search for Common Ground staff for the enhancement of *Professional Journalism in Conflict Situations*, during the project, *Promoting Common Ground Print and Broadcast Journalism in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza*. The full text can be found at the end of Chapter 3.

- Do you believe you write for a specific public or do you write for society at large?

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Even when investigating a story or reporting on a certain event, journalists are often overtaken by the necessities of daily life – the constant deadline, the computer whose battery needs charging, the editor on the phone. As a result, thoughts of the public may not be uppermost in journalists’ minds.

- Which of your articles do you think the public most enjoys reading?

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Whilst taking into account the aphorism 'there is no accounting for taste' it is clear that the content of some journalism seems to have more mass appeal than others. For example in recent years we have seen a rise in publications that focus on celebrity gossip. Do you think there is a difference between what interests the public and what is in the public interest?

- How would you define the public interest?
- What is your role as a journalist in relation to the public interest?

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## THE JOURNALIST

Journalism is a unique career path, both for the opportunities it affords and the hardships it entails. Yet before we are career professionals, we are human beings, impacted by nurture and nature; dual forces which exert their own unique pressures. We are all products of our family - our relationship with our parents, the way we compete with and protect our siblings. Yet as important as the role of our family is in creating our identities, they are also strongly influenced by the society, religion, nation, and socio-economic

status into which we are born. Inevitably, we look at the world through subjective spectacles. And much like the physical spectacles many of us wear, our internal ones need to be checked every once in a while.

Moving on, our next chapter focuses on self-awareness as an integral component of professional journalism.

## CHAPTER TWO:

# THE JOURNALIST AND HIS WORK



## I, THE JOURNALIST

Who are journalists? Dedicated, professional journalists are curious, enquiring people, passionate about providing information that enables the public to understand that information - often in a new light. Investigative journalists are many a time in the forefront of exposing scandals and shining a light on corruption and injustice. First and foremost, however, journalists are human beings and, like all of us, are products of their environment.

Although journalism is a unique profession, it is much like other career paths in that motivating factors for choosing the profession influence the way people see and do their jobs. A person that embarks upon a teaching career

out of an inability to decide on other options, for example, will perform differently from a teacher who is motivated by a love of reaching out and contributing to the optimal growth of children.

People become journalists for a wide variety of reasons. In our media project we held discussions with Israeli and Palestinian journalists about their motivations for embarking upon such a career. These ranged from “wanting to change the world” to a more concrete, “I started in sports journalism because I loved sport”. Many of the journalists began their careers partly as a result of political events, such as the Israeli journalist who revealed “I began working as a journalist during the Intifada; during the time of suicide bombings”. A Palestinian journalist, after much deliberation, realized that although he was initially ambivalent about journalism as a profession, he embraced his career path following an afternoon where he experienced a particularly long wait and interrogation at a checkpoint.

- How did you reach your choice to be a journalist?
- In what ways do you think different motivations affect journalistic styles?
- How do you think the political motivations for the career choices of the two journalists quoted above might affect how they report the same event?

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## BUT I JUST REPORT THE NEWS, DON'T I????

We all hold assumptions as human beings. These are formed as a result of our experiences which in turn are based on our family context, age, socio-economic background, religion, education nationality and environment. The way we see daily life and how we define 'what is reality' is filtered through these lenses. It is well nigh impossible not to let our personal assumptions trickle down into our professional work.

In the Israeli and Palestinian context, there is often a tendency to include stereotypical assumptions in the reporting frame.

One example where stereotypical assumptions dramatically changed was in the media reportage on the deaths of the Abuelaish daughters whose home was bombed by the Israeli army during the 2009 Israeli invasion of Gaza<sup>1</sup>. News of these deaths broke live on air, when their distraught father Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish, a physician with a home in Gaza and who, for most of his life, treated patients in both Palestinian and Israeli hospitals, phoned his friend, Israeli Channel 10 news reporter, Shlomi Eldar, as he was sitting in the studio during the eight o'clock prime time evening news programme. This most probably was the first time that a substantial number of the Israeli public saw human tragedy in the face of an innocent Palestinian as well as empathy given to him by his Israeli friend. Israelis suddenly realized that not all Gazans were guilty. This had a profound effect on Israeli attitudes towards the bombing of Gaza with many Israelis doubling their efforts to bring about a cease fire.

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1 For more information, see, *I Shall Not Hate* by Izzeldin Abuelaish 2011, published by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, London

It is possible to view an event in diverse ways because of the infinite experiences of our lives. A journalist who has personally experienced an assault and now has to cover a crime scene is likely to look at and report it differently from a journalist who has not undergone a similar experience. Similarly, journalists who have been soldiers, have experienced a suicide bombing, have had a family member killed, lived through an Intifada or suffered hardships at checkpoints, are likely to react differently when writing a story about these issues than those who have not. Of these journalists, some will have more whilst others will have less, personal awareness of how their experiences might affect their output.

- Think of an example where an event has been reported by different journalists in different ways. Can you imagine how their personal experiences might have affected the way they reported the event?
- In what different ways do you think your own experiences may influence your work?

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Beyond personal experiences, for journalists that work in conflict zones, their communal and national identities are also relevant. We are an integral part of a wider grouping as are our families and friends. And as part of that group – be it community and/or nation we and our loved ones are affected by the events happening around us. As a result, when hostilities break out, journalists can become swept up in the nationalistic feelings of a society as a whole.

Examples from our project clearly reflected these patterns. As one Israeli journalist reported “I was very happy when ‘We Con the World’ (a video mocking the Turkish activists on the Mavi Marmara flotilla against the blockade of Gaza in 2010) was sent around. I enjoyed writing about it’. Meanwhile, a Palestinian journalist who reported on a prisoner release admitted, ‘Like most Palestinians, I identified with the prisoners. The whole story made me angry’. Another Israeli journalist related, “in times of war I am an Israeli first” whilst a Palestinian journalist insisted “of course I am going to present our national cause to the world”.

- Consider whether you sometimes find yourself becoming emotionally invested in a story you report?
- In what particular issues have you noticed your own emotional reactions?
- In what ways have you noticed your being happy, sad, frustrated, or any other emotion about a subject, affect your style of reporting?

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Even during “quieter” periods when conflict is not raging, the way we write continues to be affected by our identities.

A Palestinian participant mentioned that “I always report the views of the Palestinian Authority. I don’t include the statements of other parties – I think they are less important” Another Israeli journalist argued, ‘I present the views of the Israeli government and I include a statement from the Palestinian Authority. My readers can then decide for themselves.”

- What messages do you think have been conveyed in each of these examples?
- Reflecting on your own work, how do you think it conveys messages?

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• **Understand your own views and biases.**

• **Be aware that in addition to being a journalist, you are also a human being, and, before you report during a time of conflict, take a careful look at your emotions.<sup>2</sup>**

2 These bullet points and all that follow in this chapter were compiled jointly by Palestinian and Israeli senior media advisors and Search for Common Ground staff for the enhancement of *Professional Journalism in Conflict Situations*, during the project, *Promoting Common Ground Print and Broadcast Journalism in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza*. The full text can be found at the end of Chapter 3.



## FIRST THERE WAS ME – THEN THERE WERE OTHERS

Often, it is only as we become more aware of ourselves and our surroundings that we develop an awareness of the complexity of others. On an individual level, as we become more aware of the various influences that shape us such as our relationship with our parents, families, friends and communities, we are more able to see such patterns in the way other people interact with their environments. Without an in-depth understanding of the motivations and viewpoints of the other person, we often build assumptions that may not be accurate. Journalists know that the most professional way to discover information is to be curious, investigate, ask, listen, and observe before deducing. This works when turning the process inwards and finding out about our own motivations, thoughts and emotions. It also works well when trying to discover the motivations of others. At the same time it reduces the risk of stereotyping and making assumptions that are not based on thorough investigative reporting.

Can you think of an example when you've made an assumption about someone else in your reporting that was later proved incorrect? Examine what led you to the assumption and what you might have done differently if preparing the report now.

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Incorrect assumptions about others also happen when reporting takes place within societies. A Palestinian journalist participant mentioned an incident in his town whereby a man was accused and presumed guilty of harassing a child in an incident that made headlines. It was only following a thorough investigation that the man was found to be innocent of the charge.

This phenomenon replicates itself on an international basis. In situations where there are physical obstacles preventing two conflicting sides from meeting, as is the case between Israelis and Palestinians, assumptions are even more likely. Kept apart by checkpoints, fences and walls, Israelis and Palestinians hardly enter each others' territories – and lives. Few know each others' languages which adds to the ignorance and results in a tendency to assume a certain image and homogeneity in each others' societies and cultures which does not exist in reality.

In a meeting between our Israeli and Palestinian journalists in February 2011 we discussed recent political events, including the U.S. veto in the U.N. Security Council condemning Israeli settlement building. One Palestinian journalist was stunned to learn that there were sections of Israeli society that had disagreed with the U.S. use of the veto and believed it to be harmful to Israel's security in the long term. As this journalist exclaimed "sometimes we forget that there is diversity within each of our societies".

When we start breaking down our assumptions we are more open to acquiring a better understanding of "the Other" and the values and presuppositions that guide their actions. The journalist mentioned above would have learnt of the range of opinions held by Israelis and adapted her views accordingly had she made an effort to follow the news in

Israeli media outlets. Often, all it takes to break down assumptions is a pro-active stance in investigating them - in other words making use of the basic tools of journalism.

- Can you think of an example when you've made an assumption about a society or country as a whole in your reporting?
- Examine what led you to the assumption and what you might have done differently if preparing the report now?

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Among the most effective ways to check that our assumptions are based on a comprehensive analysis of the situation is to create contacts with those about whom we are reporting. Such contacts would allow for varied perspectives on a specific event. The most valuable and enriching way to do this is to physically meet people from the other side when possible. Seeing and hearing the range and diversity of human life on the other side of a divide enables us to greater understand complexities and diverse views in a society.

Part of our two year journalism project involved bringing Israeli and Palestinian journalists together on "field visits" to each other's side in order to deepen their understanding of the intricacies of each society. On one field visit, the journalists visited the Israeli Channel 10 Television Studios in

Tel-Aviv. Palestinian journalists noticed a large photograph of (former Palestinian President) Yasser Arafat hanging on one of the walls. The picture caused much confusion, with Palestinian journalists exclaiming, “This would be like having a photo of (former Israeli Prime Minister) Ariel Sharon hanging in our headquarters. This is unimaginable!!!” One Palestinian journalist assumed it was out of a desire to mock the former Palestinian President. Yet the Israeli journalists explained that for them, President Arafat was a symbol of the Palestinian nation and, as the newsroom in which his photo hanged covered the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it seemed to them completely appropriate.

Another field visit entailed bringing Palestinian and Israeli journalists to the Old City of Jerusalem – a place at the forefront of conflicting claims concerning sovereignty between the two sides. Christians, Jews and Muslims tend to only visit the Holy Sites that hold religious meaning for them, and stay clear of the sacred places of other faiths. On this field visit the journalists toured a wide variety of historical and religious sites that are of significance to all the peoples in the region. Touring together, seeing the concrete reality of life in the Old City, and discussing their assumptions, Israeli and Palestinian participants themselves awoke to a new reality. As one Palestinian journalist said, after visiting the Western Wall, the holiest site for Jews and seeing people engrossed in prayer, “I now know how deep, how rooted the feeling about this place truly is”. Meanwhile, an Israeli journalist, when visiting a church, exclaimed “I didn’t even know half these places existed”.

On another occasion, when the Israeli journalists visited their Palestinian colleagues in Bethlehem, one journalist commented “I was surprised. I thought the place would

be more religious, but there were all types of people there, both religious and less religious, conservative and more liberal". Meanwhile another highly experienced Israeli journalist, who had spent much of his professional career reporting on Israeli settlements in the West Bank said, "I always thought that settlements naturally belonged there. I now realize there's another narrative." Do you reflect the diverse views of people in your reporting? If so, how?

- When writing about a conflict situation, how do you reflect the complexities of views and approach?

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At various times during our media project the gap in views and attitudes between the Israeli and Palestinian journalists was profound. During one discussion that took place on an overseas trip the Palestinian journalists were infuriated when Israeli journalists called a Palestinian friend who had come to visit, a 'terrorist'. The disagreement became very heated, with accusations flying across the room. The Palestinian journalists felt offended by the use of the word, while the Israelis felt it was justified. In arguing, the Palestinians focused on the painful cost of the occupation, the Israeli army and checkpoints to their lives, while the Israelis focused on the dire threats to Israel's security. Both sides referred to the death of loved ones in justifying their stance and both focused on the question of "who suffered the most", and "who was right". Emotions ran deep but it was from that profound place of common feelings and

needs that the dialogue was able to continue despite the opposing viewpoints. One participant expressed her deep desire when she said “I don’t want to be afraid anymore”. This resonated profoundly with both Israelis and Palestinians in the room.

For the Israelis, the Palestinian visitor was a man involved in an event that had threatened their national security with a violent act. For the Palestinian journalists that knew him, he was first and foremost a father to his children, a friend to them and a person who cared deeply about his people and nation. For them he was a freedom fighter. In these two very different viewpoints, there are also differing ‘truths’ depending on whom you ask.

- In what ways do you recognize and acknowledge that different people can hold different truths about the same issue?
- Do you allow space for different truths when you write?

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**• Dig deep to find out what the values and assumptions are that motivate each side. Use professional tools to get a full understanding of the needs and values of those involved in every story.**

## MY EFFECT AS A JOURNALIST

What effect do the media actually have? Does it really matter what you write?

Some media reports change the path of countries as a whole. One notable example is the 1969 report of a young U.S. journalist called Seymour Hirsch. His story unearthed the killing and rape of Vietnamese civilians by U.S. soldiers in Mai Lai. The story gained traction and within a week it appeared in all of the U.S.'s most important media outlets, sparking national outrage. As a result, anti-war sentiment moved from the fringes of U.S. society to its mainstream, strengthening protests against the war and eventually leading to U.S. military withdrawal from Vietnam and the end of the war. Meanwhile, Seymour Hirsch was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for his work. One of basic roles of a journalist is to be the link between an event and public awareness of that event. .

This relationship can also be reflected on a smaller scale. Sometimes we clearly see a public reaction to our work. In fact it has become highly popular to install a talkback section in many newspapers and outlets that is dedicated to publishing the reaction of readers to certain stories where, on a daily basis, the public expresses its support, surprise or outrage in relation to a certain piece.

- Have you experienced reactions to your stories?
- What are your reactions to the different types of reactions?
- Do they affect your style of reporting?

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But what happens when the news we write affects us directly? After all, as was mentioned before, journalists are citizens of a specific country and members of a certain society. As a result, they inevitably report on developments that also affect them – from dramatic pieces on decisions to go to war to a story about a teachers’ strike that concerns their child’s schooling.

- In what ways might you think about the way in which your reporting may actually affect you as part of the community about which you are reporting?
- Can you provide an example of when that might have happened in the past and how it may have been reflected in your writing?

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**• See yourself a conduit that links information to the public and recognize that you have a great deal of responsibility in what information is presented to the public and in how the public receives it.**



## THE COST OF JOURNALISM TO THE JOURNALIST – OR - HOW FAR DO YOU WANT TO GO???

The work of journalists in exposing stories and reporting the unpalatable often comes at a great cost to journalists themselves. Journalists are among the first victims in a war zone, with the Committee to Protect Journalists reporting that 79 journalists were killed in 2010<sup>3</sup>. Aside from the violence inflicted on journalists, they can also become targets of anger and frustration for the public.

Beyond this, the long hours and ever-present stress takes its own emotional toll. As one journalist noted during our discussions, “I sometimes get tired and angry from my job, and need to let off steam. I think this affects my relationship with my family”.

- Do you sometimes sense you are paying a mental, physical and/or emotional cost for being a journalist? If so, please describe.

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3 <http://www.cpj.org/killed/2010/>

Sometimes issues that arise during your role as a journalist also have an economic cost. Economic penalties can be officially legislated. Some countries hand out financial penalties for “harming” the country’s image or “undermining trust” in its institutions. Journalists in newspapers owned by governments or political parties can find themselves out in the cold if they write a less than positive account of that party’s actions. Defying the government can have a range of increasingly serious personal costs to the journalists – including the threat of prison and even death.

Even in an environment which is considered to have a free press, economic pressures often reign supreme, a prisoner to ratings. Some journalists complain that it would be difficult for them to write something their audience would not approve of as people may stop reading or viewing their stories and they would then be adversely affected.

- Are you aware of economic/rating/consensus/policy considerations affecting your reporting when carrying out your work?

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The relationship between journalists and their editors is very significant and can be particularly sensitive if they hold different viewpoints. One Palestinian journalist in our project reflected that “I have had to consistently argue with my editors about certain stories that I wanted to publish”. Israeli journalists spoke of disagreements with their editors about the use of terminology. One brought an example of differing views on how to describe the people on board the Mavi Marmara Flotilla attempting to break the Gaza blockade in 2010.

- Have you experienced differing viewpoints with your editor that has affected your reporting?
- Over what was the disagreement?
- How far did you push back?
- Did it have an effect on your relationship with your editor?

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It is up to each one of you to decide how far you are prepared to go in order to become the most professional you can be in our role as journalists. Sometimes you may need to take steps that will be outside your comfort zone.

**BEFORE WE GO FURTHER.....**

Being a professional journalist may have its costs and we have laid out some of them above. At the same time this is your chosen profession.

- What do you see are the benefits for you of being a journalist? List some of them below:
- How do you stay true to yourself and your profession as a journalist?

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## CHAPTER THREE:

# JOURNALISM IN TIMES OF CONFLICT

## CONCRETE STEPS TOWARDS PROFESSIONAL REPORTING



Prior to preparing a journalistic piece, it is worthwhile looking inwards and taking a “spot-check.”– Ask yourself the following questions – and reflect on the answers: How aware am I of my own thoughts, feelings and views on the event in question? Do I identify with a particular side? What assumptions might I hold about the event that need verifying? Answering these questions is the first step.

What else is needed to put professional journalism into practice?

## 1. Choosing a story

Editors and the public are always looking for a different angle, a fresh view, a new insight.

Reporting on conflict situations generally provides plenty of exciting news but how the information or opinion is imparted depends a great deal on the professional skills of the journalist.

In every conflict, the public can find daily reports on the 'enemy' by reporters that highlight a narrow, militarized, portrayal of a homogeneous adversary. But is that the whole picture?

When you prepare a story, how do you convey the range of daily life in the society of the other side? Do you tend to focus on its militarized nature?

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A couple of Israeli journalists from our project decided to write a story on Qalqilya, a town in the West Bank that has seen much violence and bloodshed. Yet they looked at it from a fresh angle, choosing to write about its zoo, and the enthusiastic response of Palestinian society to its expansion. Israelis reading this story were thus able to see another side of the Palestinian public than is usually portrayed; one that they could identify with as parents and children.

It is true that some stories choose us, such as an international political summit or an outbreak in hostilities. But even within these frameworks we can include an angle that broadens the brushstroke of the story to include relationships that are not only adversarial. One example could be highlighting behind the scenes cooperation between assistants of opposing parties to reach agreement. Another could be the highlighting of diverse voices in societies in conflict, not only focusing on those who blame the other side and support violence but also those who condemn it and recognize their role in aggravating it.

- How do you choose the angle of your story?

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## 2. Choosing how to present society

We are aware of the diversity in our own society because we know it so well. Yet we tend to view other societies as largely homogenous. This is partly the result of national narratives in conflict situations which encourage a zero-sum approach towards the opposing side which is viewed as inherently aggressive and intrinsically hostile.

- When you report on the reaction of the other side to an outbreak of hostilities, are you presupposing a specific response?
- Moreover, do you find yourself portraying that response as universal for the whole society?
- Do you allow for the same variety of voices that exist in your society to be heard from the other side?

In reality, people within every society may act and react in different ways depending on their background and environment, as was discussed previously.

- In your coverage of the news how do you go about interviewing and/or quoting a variety of perspectives?

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Covering all bases requires a solid understanding of the variety of positions on a conflict. This may be as simple as scouring a range of newspapers and websites from both sides or developing a local set of contacts that you can call upon to provide an understanding of the wider picture.

For example a piece can detail:

**Last night, Islamic Jihad launched 13 rockets from Gaza into Beer Sheba. The rockets caused widespread damage, with residents of Beer Sheba calling for retaliation against this threat from Hamas-controlled Gaza.**

OR

**Last night, Islamic Jihad launched 13 rockets from Gaza into Beer Sheba. The rockets caused widespread damage, with residents of Beer Sheba calling for retaliation against this threat from Hamas-controlled Gaza. Hamas, meanwhile, is divided on how to respond to this action from Islamic Jihad with the moderate wing of Hamas urging a clampdown of the group which it says is threatening their authority.**

Fact checking and background research should include instances even when various figures proclaim outright an adversarial position. We are usually aware of the divergence between word and deed in our own society, and often a statement by one of “our own” politicians may be scoffed at and dismissed as ‘rubbish’ However we tend to take the utterings of the other side’s political representatives with ut-

most seriousness. Providing a full picture contributes to a more multi-faceted and accurate view of the realities of the region and the conflict.

### 3. Choosing to allow space for others in your report

As we have explored in a previous chapter, being simultaneously both a journalist and a member of society affects your output, particularly in times of heightened conflict. If a journalist is writing about a union strike, she is likely to present the views and justifications of both union members and employers, as well as their different take on what constitutes “what really happened”. However, when reporting on a conflict, too many reporters, in identifying with their own national narrative, tend to ignore the alternative reality that is seen by the other side.

If journalists are aware that as members of a society they are affected, even influenced, by their national narrative as professionals it is all the more important that they allow space for the narrative of the other in their reporting.

Unlike news reports where the journalist does not insert his/her own opinion, editorials that do offer a specific opinion can still allow space for the narrative of the other in order to provide a fuller picture. Take a look at the following examples of an opinion on a prospective unarmed demonstration in the West Bank and note the differences:

**In a move that is sure to heat matters further, Palestinian Authority President, Mahmoud Abbas encouraged demonstrators to march non-violently towards Israeli settlements, calling for “collected action against the Occupation”.**

## OR

**In a move that is sure to heat matters further, Palestinian Authority President, Mahmoud Abbas encouraged demonstrators to march non-violently towards Israeli settlements, calling for 'collected action against the Occupation'. The Palestinian Authority believes that negotiations with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government will not yield results and that such a step will create pressure on the Israeli government to agree to the independence the Palestinian Authority seeks.**

Introducing the narrative of the opposing side does not mean that you are betraying the legitimacy of your own national narrative. Rather, it means that you are able to observe the various truths that exist and convey this complicated picture of daily life and historical events – the essence of a journalist's role. As one Palestinian journalist noted during our project after a joint Israeli/Palestinian trip overseas, "Before this trip I never would have written the other side's viewpoint. Now I understand that it is part of my job and my responsibility as a journalist to do so."

An Israeli journalist, after listening to his Palestinian colleagues, mentioned "I guess from now on I will try and include Palestinian aspirations when reporting what their politicians say, so that people can understand actions and words in context".

## 4. Human beings first and foremost?

A sports journalist reporting a wrestling match where both parties are injured will detail each side's suffering and the lasting effect of their injuries. A report on a high profile divorce will, regardless of the reasons for the dissolution of the marriage, acknowledge the painful effect on both parties.

Yet as a result of the intense emotions released during times of hostilities and the national tendency to view the conflict in "winner takes all" terms, journalists tend to focus only on the suffering and the victims in their own society. This exacerbates the sense of victimhood each side feels and encourages the feeling that the other side is totally to blame for the pain and suffering.

Acknowledging that your national adversary can and does suffer is an integral part of humanizing the "Other". In entrenched conflicts, a dynamic emphasizing the unique "right" of one society over another is often evident, enabling and legitimizing military operations and the use of violence. The opposing side is portrayed, not as individuals with their own loves and losses, emotions and pains, but as nameless, faceless enemies. The anticipated corollary of this is that the Israeli and Palestinian media rarely mention the names of those Palestinians and Israelis from the 'enemy side' who have died as a result of the conflict.

As one Israeli journalist mentioned during our discussions "One of the ways forward in the conflict is giving all the victims a name, giving them respect, and making them human. I would like to see newspapers do that more often. We can push our editors to do that." A Palestinian journalist talking about a horrific murder of a Jewish family in the set-

tlement of Itamar, said “In the past, I would have said that a family of settlers had been killed. I think from now on I will call them “the Fogel family”.

The importance of seeing people as human beings and not just adversaries extends beyond those who have died or been injured – however difficult that might be in conflict situations. A man is not just an Israeli soldier. He also has a name and a family who cares for him. No Palestinian is only an ‘extremist’. He is also the son of someone who loves him.

## 5. Choosing your Terminology

In journalism, we tend to rely upon stock phrases or terms in order to convey our message. This is even more prevalent when the pressure to file a story is high. To ensure that you are not giving your public a mistakenly homogenous view of the societies embroiled in the conflict, it is important to carefully choose the terms you use. Similarly, emotionally loaded terms that provoke a bloodthirsty view of an entire society, or are intended to arouse hatred or anger are likely to only exacerbate the conflict.

Here’s how one Israeli journalist described her dilemma: “I was covering the tenth anniversary of the bombing at the Dolphinarium (a Tel-Aviv nightclub that suffered a suicide attack in July 2001) and I wasn’t sure how to refer to the person who had carried out the attack. Do I call him simply ‘Palestinian’? Do I say ‘terrorist’? In the end I settled for ‘suicide bomber’. I felt if I merely referred to him as ‘Palestinian’ it would seem as though I was trying to tar all Palestinians with the same brush”.

A Palestinian journalist followed up by stating “I know

some people think of Gilad Shalit as simply an Israeli occupying soldier who is a prisoner, much like Israel holds our people prisoner. But I think of him as a young man called Gilad Shalit who happens to be serving in the Israeli army”.

Below are some terms often used by journalists that encourage generalizations about a society or nation as a whole and deliver an erroneous image of inherent aggression. Although examples may be specific to the Arab/Israeli conflict, similar problems in terminology are evident in other conflicts around the world

- The use of ‘Israelis’ or ‘Palestinians’ in blanket terms. E.g. ‘Israelis believe that they have a religious right to the land between the ‘River Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea’. Instead, ensure to attribute claims or beliefs to specific groupings, e.g. ‘the settler group Gush Emunim believes that Israelis have a religious obligation to settle the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea’.
- Referring to the country or society in question instead of its leadership. E.g. ‘Israel is focused on building settlements in East Jerusalem. Instead, pinpoint the relevant actors ‘The current Israeli government is focused on building settlements in East Jerusalem’.
- The use of terms such as ‘aggression’ instead of defining the action. E.g. ‘Palestinian aggression has threatened Israeli civilians’. Instead, describe the specific action such as ‘Rocket launching by Islamic Jihad has threatened Israeli civilians’.
- The use of ‘Nazi’ or ‘Islamofascist’ to describe an entire society.

- The use of the word 'entity' as opposed to referring to the country or people by name.
- The use of 'genocide', 'genocidal' and 'ethnic cleansing' to refer to an action when this does not adhere to the legal definition of the term. Instead, one can note the number of victims of the action and elaborate on why the action has taken place. E.g. 'The memory of the Jenin genocide killed in 2003 lives on' can instead be replaced with 'The memory of the 54 Palestinians killed in Jenin in 2003 in the attack by the Israeli army continues to anger most Palestinians'.
- The use of 'moderate' when referring to a liberal/open point of view of a given religious person. The assumption is that there is something innately 'extreme' in full Muslim or Jewish observance. E.g. "Moderate Muslims in the West Bank don't want a Palestinian state governed by Shari'ya law" or "Moderate Jews support civil marriage in Israel". The word 'moderate' can be replaced with 'mainstream', which acknowledges the prevalence of a majority view amongst specific religious adherents in a given society but not the intensity with which they practice their religion.
- Be aware that an action can be named in different ways and your choice impacts your audience e.g. the event in Gaza in December 2009 is variously called 'Gaza War', 'Gaza Invasion', 'Gaza Massacre', 'Gaza Incursion', 'Gaza Crisis'
- Be aware that different terms are used for the same place or object by different journalists and they too impact the public e.g. separation fence/ wall/ apartheid wall; colonies/ settlements; Judea and Samaria/West Bank and Gaza/Occupied Palestinian Territory/ Palestine/Palestinian Territories.

Below is a document that was compiled jointly by Palestinian and Israeli senior media advisors and Search for Common Ground staff for the enhancement of **Professional Journalism in Conflict Zones**, during our project. Its bullet point form was created to provide a concise, practical guide for journalists as they go about their daily work.

## PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM<sup>1</sup>

Below is a set of practices and principles that are associated with professional journalism.

1. Be aware of your responsibility as a journalist and recognize the power that your reports may have to influence individuals, governments, and whole countries;
2. See yourself a conduit that links information to the public and recognize that you have a great deal of responsibility in what information is presented to the public and in how the public receives it;
3. Realize that you have choices to make when you are reporting, as to the events you portray, the people that you interview, the questions that you ask, and the words that you use;
4. Recognize that by asking different questions, you will get different answers (for example, by asking people where they agree, you will receive very different replies than by focusing only on where they disagree);

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as a *Common Ground Approach to Journalism*



5. Be as fair as possible in making your choices in order to reflect the broadest possible set of views and alternatives;
6. Be well-informed about issues and people and be balanced in finding out their interests beyond their stated positions;
7. Report on about what is in the public interest, not only what interests the public;
8. Eliminate as much as possible use of prejudicial language and stereotypical views, even in quotes and citations from documents (in other words, just because an interviewee says something outrageous does not necessarily mean you must report it);
9. Understand your own views and biases, with the aim of empathizing without propagandizing;
10. Be aware that in addition to being a journalist, you are also a human being, and, before you report during a time of conflict, take a careful look at your emotions.
11. Recognize the importance of how the media as a whole frame and portray an issue and how framing influences both your reporting and how the public understands the conflict;
12. Seek out incisive thinkers with diverse opinions who are solution-oriented and not inflammatory;
13. Shift focus from unproductive, adversarial *blaming* to broad-based exploration of possible solutions;
14. Dig deep to find out what the values and assumptions are that motivate each side;

15. Looks for ways to build bridges and find constructive solutions.
16. Feature positive role models;
17. Seek out people of conflicting views and present multiple sides of issues;
18. Be willing to give *voice* to the *voiceless*;
19. Seek out constructive ways to move the story forward by providing accurate information, reducing misperceptions and stereotypes, and countering rumors;
20. Be creative and be willing to think *outside the box*.

### **Possible negative impacts of the media on conflict**

21. Promotion of *us vs. them* mentality
22. Focus on violence and its physical effects - not on efforts for peace
23. Zero-sum, win-lose approach to conflict
24. Celebration of the *stronger* or the *winner*
25. Dehumanization of the *other*
26. Reactive approach – waiting for violence to erupt, while largely ignoring pre-conflict signs
27. Propaganda-oriented – exposing *lies* of the *other*
28. One-sided focus on suffering
29. Use of language to demonize the *other*
30. Victory-oriented
31. Emphasis on disagreement

32. Focus on positions, not interests
33. Focus on elites and ignorance of other voices
34. Use of language that serves only the dominant group
35. Promotion of questionable assumptions

So having explored practical tools for becoming a more professional journalist, what's next?

# CONCLUSION

Now more than ever, journalism is an unprecedented platform for reaching the public. The stories the media convey can arouse a wide range of emotions, from hope to fear, from frustration in a political process to faith in that same process. Once your piece is out in the public realm, it creates its own dynamic and can exert a great deal of influence. As a result the words you, as a journalist, convey to the public have power.

It is up to you to choose how to put that power to use.

To be the most professional journalist you can possibly be, the first step is to use your skills of perception and investigation and look within. Self-awareness, in relation to the influences that affect your own output, is critical to your professionalism. Those crucial journalistic skills of observation, examination and deduction can only function to their maximum capacities once you have reflected on how your environment shapes and affects your own emotions and attitudes.

Among the questions worth checking are:

- **What experiences have shaped me as a journalist?**
- **What assumptions do I hold about any given conflict and how do they affect my output?**
- **What messages am I conveying through my work and are they the messages I want to convey?**

Such self-awareness will also hone your professional skills as you apply these types of questions to others in your work, and reflect on the nuances of diverse reactions in any given situation.

As journalists you enjoy a wide range of natural talents. We have suggested, in this guide to professional journalism in conflict situations, that they can be enhanced by:

- **Double checking your assumptions**
- **Understanding that different actors possess different narratives and different ‘truths’**
- **Ensuring you draw a picture of a complex society with a wide range of actors and perspectives**
- **Attributing actions and views to specific actors, not to the society at large**
- **Scrutinizing the terminology you use and checking whether it might create a misleading picture**

The impact of using these skills can be palpable. If you choose to take them on, you can create new conversations with your public. You can offer new perspectives to those trapped in the same old win-lose narratives of conflict reporting. You can open ‘closed’ eyes. Your work can become synonymous with ‘fresh’, and “innovative”.

Creating change is often difficult and choosing a new path in this competitive world has its risks, as pushing boundaries inevitably does. Yet no one ever said journalism is an easy career. Did you choose it because you thought it was?

## CONCLUSION

Ultimately, it is up to you to decide whether you're ready to take that first step forward. You are the instrument that embodies the change. And what a change it can be.

# APPENDIX

## ABOUT SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND<sup>1</sup>

Founded in 1982, Search for Common Ground's mission is to transform the way the world deals with conflict - away from adversarial approaches and towards cooperative solutions. We are an international non-governmental organization whose media initiatives impact the lives of millions of people and whose multi-faceted approach finds culturally appropriate means to strengthen societies' capacity to deal with conflicts constructively: to understand the differences and act on the commonalities. Today, we have 400 staff in 26 countries and 39 offices in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and the United States. Currently we are producing *THE TEAM*, our global flagship TV and radio series, in 17 countries.

## JERUSALEM OFFICE<sup>2</sup>

Since 1991, Search for Common Ground has been working to foster cooperative solutions to long-standing conflicts in the Middle East. Our Jerusalem office, set up in 2000, conducts multi-track activities to promote positive relationships amongst Palestinians, Israelis and Arabs in the region. Directed jointly by an Israeli and a Palestinian, with a local staff, the Jerusalem Office's vision is one of people living together in generosity of spirit in a peaceful Middle East.

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1 See [www.sfcg.org](http://www.sfcg.org)

2 See <http://www.sfcg.org/programmes/jerusalem/index.html>

**Activities focus on:**

- Developing an independent, professional media capable of addressing critical issues in a constructive manner.
- Creating a cross-national, cross-sector Palestinian-Israeli Leadership Network
- Building regional cooperation in the fields of health and interfaith dialogue.

**MEDIA PROJECTS:**

• **Palestinian TV Productions:**

In partnership with the Ma'an TV and radio network, we are broadcasting on satellite the first non-affiliated one-hour local newscast six days a week—by Palestinians, for Palestinians—with live locations from Gaza, Nablus, Ramallah and Bethlehem. We have also co-produced several TV programmes with Ma'an and the Ramallah-based Wattan TV and have supported Wattan in the development of its news webcast.

• **Football Drama Series *The Team***

SFCG's Jerusalem office is co-producing TV drama series called *The Team* in the Palestinian Territory, with Ma'an Productions, and in Israel together with Alma Films. Using a soccer (football) theme, *The Team's* metaphor offers a simple message – if you cooperate together you will score goals.

• **Shape of the Future**

*Shape of the Future* is a T.V. docu-drama set in a peaceful future that looks back on the lives of two businessmen—a Palestinian and an Israeli—as they struggle



to forge a cross-border business relationship. The film is grounded in the idea that the people in the region need to see that peace is possible and worth striving for. The film is a co-production with Lama Films and is due to be broadcast simultaneously on both Israeli and Palestinian TV.

- **Common Ground Journalism**

The Common Ground Journalism project, on which this manual is based, was a two-year programme for Israeli and Palestinian senior and mid-career media professionals from a variety of major local media outlets. The project's major goals were to promote "common ground" professional journalism and enrich the participants in a process of empowerment, skill development, interaction, networking and dialogue.

- **Common Ground News Service - CGNews<sup>3</sup>**

CGNews weekly op-ed articles offer constructive perspectives on key issues affecting Muslim-Western relations with the CGNews' Jerusalem editor commissioning articles specifically about the Arab-Israeli conflict. Articles, written by authors from over 45 countries, have been republished over 30,000 times to date. Articles distributed by the news service have appeared in more than 3,000 media outlets around the world.

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<sup>3</sup> See [www.commongroundnews.org](http://www.commongroundnews.org)

## ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN LEADERSHIP NETWORK:

The Israeli-Palestinian Leadership Network is a multi-year initiative to build a broad-based, cross-sector network of Palestinian and Israeli leaders in the Middle East that can effect positive change in the region. Working in close partnership with the Outward Bound Center for Peacebuilding (OBCP), activities include outdoor wilderness expeditions, retreats, local meetings, and individual coaching. They focus on strengthening **leadership and conflict resolution skills and building deep personal relationships amongst strategically positioned emerging leaders across key sectors.**

## REGIONAL COOPERATION:

- **Middle East Consortium on Infectious Disease Surveillance (MECIDS)**

Since 2003, we have facilitated regional cooperation against the threat posed by biological attacks and natural disease outbreaks. In partnership with the Nuclear Threat Initiative's (NTI) Global Health and Security Initiative, we formed the Middle East Consortium on Infectious Disease Surveillance (MECIDS), through which the Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian Ministries of Health are building capacity and sharing data about disease outbreaks. MECIDS focuses on the continuous upgrading of surveillance methods in order to prevent and control the occurrence and transmission of food-borne and other diseases amongst these three communities.

- **Interfaith Projects**

Partnering with three NGOs - the Oslo Centre for Peace, One World in Dialogue and Religions for Peace - we have developed a ground breaking *Universal Code on Holy Sites* that maps out a detailed code of conduct in relation to sacred places worldwide. The Code has been endorsed by world religious leaders and institutions representing over 10 faiths and a pilot project is presently underway in Bosnia Herzegovina. The intention is for the Code to be legally adapted and adopted by a United Nations body.

In addition we share information and work closely with the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land, comprising the major Christian, Jewish and Muslim institutions in the region, whose secretariat rents space in the Jerusalem office.

