

Chapter 15

Reporting for IWPR



IWPR was established to support local journalists in areas of crisis and conflict

THE INSTITUTE FOR WAR & PEACE REPORTING was established to provide a platform for responsible journalists in crisis areas who are so often locked out of local and international debate over conflict and crisis issues in their own countries.

The goal of this work is to:

- Strengthen democracy and civil society;
- Build trust between communities;
- Inform international responses.

Our main programme areas are:

- Reporting and research;
- Training;
- Capacity-building.

Syndication, media appearances, conferences, seminars and other public events disseminate IWPR material widely, contributing to public dialogue and debate.

IWPR takes a practical approach. We believe the best way to learn journalism is to do it. Participating in a basic skills

workshop or working your way through a journalism handbook such as this one is only the start. The real learning begins when you pick up a reporter's notebook or sit down to write a story.

Many of the staff at IWPR are journalists, and we are drawing from our own experiences. We learned the craft from a good (and sometimes harsh) editor, a senior role model, or a supportive colleague who worked side-by-side with us as we developed our own skills.

The constant trial-and-error, the detailed comments, the constructive suggestions, even the jealousy of a rival who did the same story better - it can be frustrating and time consuming, but it is the best way to learn lasting lessons. This is the nurturing environment IWPR seeks to provide.

*The principles of
fact-based journalism
enable media to support
democracy in areas
emerging from crisis*

Working with International Media

For local journalists, the experience of working with IWPR may be very different from their home media. Intensive oversight, heavy reporting, re-reporting and fact checking, and extensive, detailed editing that to many feels intrusive - these concerns are sometimes raised by participating journalists. But the system at IWPR in fact draws on standard systems and habits of many international, and especially Anglo-American, media.

IWPR does not claim that this system of editing, and the basic international style of journalism, is necessarily superior to other approaches. As we said at the outset, different forms and habits apply in different parts of the world.

But the underlying principles of fact-based, responsible reporting - working from universally accepted principles as outlined at the beginning of this handbook - do offer benefits which can enable media to play a critical role in supporting democracy and building trust in areas emerging from (or at risk of) conflict and crisis.

The international style of reporting and editing is a predominant approach aiming to achieve these goals. The

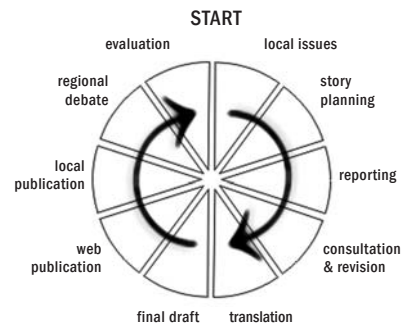
experience of working within this tradition provides invaluable lessons for any journalist, however they may wish to adopt them to their own circumstances and media environment.

The Reporting/Training Dynamic

IWPR breaks down the process of producing an article into basic components and seeks to support local journalists at each step along the way.

The first step is to identify local issues for coverage. This means comprehending the potential story's news value (see section 8), assessing reader/editorial interest, and clarifying if and how the story has already been covered within the media. This process should result in the production of a “commissioning brief”, a short memo drafted by the journalist and approved by the commissioning editor outlining the story, the approach, and some of the primary details and/or sources to be included, as well as a deadline and agreed length.

Step two is to plan the reporting. This means identifying sources and critical material, and charting a strategy for obtaining the information within deadline (see section 4). This process should



The Reporting/Training Dynamic

*Consultation and revision
is the labour-intensive
process of editing, line-by-
line, word-by-word*

include ensuring balance, fair comment and reliance on the two-source rule.

Step three is arguably the most important: reporting. The more you follow the lessons in this book, the smoother the process will go. But be prepared - IWPR editors, like editors for many international media, are likely to send you back with questions to do follow up reporting, fact-checking or further digging for sensitive information. This is time consuming, and it can seem frustrating to receive basic queries from editors who don't seem to understand the story. But what they are actually doing is trying to strengthen your sourcing or balance, clarify issues for the reader, and make your story stronger.

Consultation and revision is the labour-intensive process of editing, line-by-line, word-by-word. This can require considerable effort and communication. At IWPR, the process typically includes two stages - first editing is done by the commissioning editor (often the programme manager or in-country trainer, and sometimes working with you in a local language) who will look for factual accuracy and basic structure; following translation, a second edit is then usually undertaken in

English by the managing editor or assistant editors for style and general clarity. (They will also flag the story to the executive director and possibly solicitors if there are libel or other serious concerns.) This results in the final edit.

Again, the closer you can stick to the guidelines in this manual, the less editing you will receive. Pay particular attention to your commissioning brief and especially to length - if you are asked for 800 words and write 2,000, your story will be slashed, or spiked altogether. As above, it can be frustrating, but have patience: the job of the editor is to ensure the text is clear and accessible, to improve your story and increase your audience.

Publication makes the effort worth it: it's what all journalists strive for, and your commissioning editor at IWPR will also agree a modest fee, payable upon publication via IWPR's international website and email publications. (Please note that payments may take up to one-month; speak to your local IWPR colleagues if you have any questions.) This electronic dissemination reaches a widespread international audience, including diplomats, journalists, academics and analysts working on your issues. It is a core means by which IWPR works to

provide an essential platform so that local journalists can impact international debate over their own countries.

Journalism, however, is also local, and IWPR's primary goal is to strengthen media locally. IWPR builds relationships with local and regional publications, so that your reporting can be disseminated at home, where it matters most. Your story will therefore also be produced in a local language version for publication in the local press. (IWPR is also developing selected local broadcast output as well as local-language IWPR websites or “satellite publications” in some areas.) This can be a complex process either of re-translating the English-language final edit or of “blending” any late changes in the English version into the final local language version of your article.

IWPR is also increasing its international syndication. This facility offers participating local journalists the chance to be published in important national and regional newspapers, especially in North America and Europe - again, building an international platform for local voices. To avoid misunderstanding, it is important to note that syndication fees are rarely paid to IWPR, and when they are IWPR pays one-half

the amount to the original author, retaining the balance to defray syndication costs.

A strong civil society is about vibrant debate, and IWPR works to feed your reporting into discussion and dialogue about key issues for peace, democracy and development locally. This may include a regional conference, media appearances, or a seminar at the IWPR offices with local officials, human rights and other NGO representatives and, of course, journalists and editors.

Evaluation seals lessons learned, clears up any mistakes or misunderstandings (from time to time on IWPR's side as well), and assesses the results of the publication. This assessment may come in an editor's note or a conversation with your trainer or commissioning editor. IWPR's distance-learning accounts via the IWPR Academy provide participating journalists with a secure online facility to review editing versions, receive feedback, and track overall development. (Evaluation should be two-way, so if you want to flag thoughts and assessment of IWPR and the training and editing process, please do.)

*A strong civil society is
about vibrant debate, and
your reporting feeds into
that public dialogue*

The key to writing for IWPR is to observe the guidelines for balanced, fact-based reporting

Tips for Working with IWPR

As outlined, this is a heavily involved editorial process. Sometimes it can go very quickly and easily; sometimes it can be very involved and trying. The more you do it, the easier it will seem, which is precisely the goal.

The key for writing for IWPR is to observe the guidelines in this manual for balanced and concise writing and well-sourced fact-based reporting. If your story matches the commissioning brief, includes a sharp lead and observes the core reporting and other journalistic principles, you should have few problems.

As part of that, remember to write for a wide audience, beyond your town, country or region. Make basic facts clear, identify individuals and parties on first reference, communicate in a way that will extend interest in your story, rather than just preach to the converted. Demonstrate fairness and respect, and observe a moderate, balanced tone. Editors spend a lot of time trying to clarify and smooth out stories in this way, but the story will be better and sharper if you incorporate this instinct by yourself.

The process may take patience, but understand that your story is not the only one editors are working on. They are processing

material as fast as they can. So the cleaner you can present it, obviously the less work they will have to do.

Finally, not every story works out. An experienced journalist understands that stories do get “spiked” (not used) from time to time. It is certainly not pleasant, but it is part of the profession. Sometimes it is because the story was not well done. But often it is because other stories came up, or because the news peg changed so the story is out of date.

If a story is not used, you may ask your commissioning editor if a “kill fee” is payable. This will be a partial payment and is generally applicable if the story is withheld because of editorial or news decisions, not because the story is of poor quality or because it has been delivered late.

But either way, learn the lesson and then shake it off. You are writing journalism, not poetry, and tomorrow is always another day - and another story.

IWPR resources exist to help local journalists at the frontlines of crisis

Resources

IWPR's training programmes include field workshops and seminars, extensive on-the-job style training via collaborative reporting projects, and extensive online training modules and printed material such as this book, as well as the online IWPR Academy distance-learning system (see www.iwpr.net).

The website provides links to a wide range of other specialist and training websites, covering everything from basic skills to environment and war crimes reporting. There is a wide bibliography of specialist and basic training guides, and many of these are listed online.

Basic and specialist training workshops are led by local and international trainers according to needs, so we welcome feedback and ideas from our local participants and partners. We will also be producing further editions of this manual, and look forward to incorporating insights from participants in our programmes to make it more useful.

IWPR capacity building projects work to strengthen local media and media institutions - whether a training or free-speech group or a local newspaper or news agency. For further information about IWPR's overall programme, or how you may work with us in your area, also see the IWPR website.