

A photograph of a photographer in the foreground, wearing a cap and a vest, holding a camera up to take a picture. The background shows a busy refugee camp with many people, some pushing a cart, and a tent labeled 'Medical Point' in Arabic and English. The ground is muddy and littered with debris.

**A Practical, Ethical and  
Safety Guide to  
Disaster Journalism**





# A Practical, Ethical and Safety Guide to Disaster Journalism



**RTÜK**



Social  
Innovation  
Agency



Universidade de Vigo





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**A PRACTICAL, ETHICAL AND SAFETY GUIDE TO DISASTER JOURNALISM**

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**Contact**

Kızılırmak Mahallesi, Mevlana Bulvarı, No: 144

06520 Çankaya, Ankara, Türkiye

**T** +90 312 590 20 00 | [webinfo@iletisim.gov.tr](mailto:webinfo@iletisim.gov.tr)

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**CHAPTER 1**

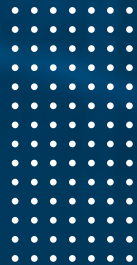
**A PRACTICAL  
GUIDE TO DISASTER  
JOURNALISM**





# 1.1.

## What is Disaster Journalism?





## 1.1. What is Disaster Journalism?

### Introduction

We live in a changing world where, thanks to modern information technologies, events and situations become closer and more tangible for millions of people. Disasters and emergencies are factors that always compel humanity to react acutely and promptly: to seek ways to ensure safety, to empathize, to provide support to those affected, and to create opportunities for eliminating consequences and preventing them. This is especially true for situations involving natural disasters, such as fires or floods – in such cases, information about the disaster’s spread is disseminated and tracked almost in real-time, with views and reactions reaching millions.

Disaster journalism is a distinct, specific branch of traditional journalism that aims to inform society not only about immediate threats but also about how to avoid them, how to provide support, or how to mitigate their consequences. Perhaps it’s worth saying that disaster journalism today is a tool that allows for the unification of millions of people, the coordination of their efforts, and the demonstration that we live in times when indifference and support can save thousands of lives, when timely and objective information unites and enables us to avert misfortune. In this lies the truly high humanistic pathos of disaster journalism, and in this also lies the immense responsibility of the journalist. Alongside covering emergencies, the journalist must help prevent panic and direct social efforts towards truly important things and actions, show the real needs for support, and shape ideas and meanings for interaction to eliminate the consequences of disasters.

Of course, saying that the journalist’s role in this is the most responsible and important isn’t entirely accurate, as various structures - from special services to international organizations and volunteers - are involved in eliminating consequences and combating misfortune. However, the journalist’s role is significant and noticeable. Without this work – objective and timely coverage of events, reflection of the situation over a long period, stimulation of social discussion, fostering empathy, and facilitating the satisfaction of the needs of those affected – overcoming the consequences of disasters and emergencies would be much more difficult, and for many people, these consequences would be much more severe and catastrophic.

## **Why Is It Important to Cover Disasters?**

Covering disasters involves fulfilling the fundamental, basic function of journalism in a democratic society: providing complete, objective, and timely information about changes in the surrounding world. Disasters are a factor that directly impacts people's lives, significantly limiting their basic needs according to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy, and shaping a different, distinct way of life from the usual - often, one of survival. Furthermore, in a broader context, disasters generate and highlight social processes, either consolidating or, conversely, dividing society. They create conditions for the real, practical implementation of various humanitarian measures and initiatives.

Disaster coverage focuses not only on the technical or technological component of demonstrating the essence of what happened and the scale of the calamity. Equally important is highlighting how society consolidates, how the government and international structures act to eliminate the consequences of disasters. In covering the aftermath of disasters or efforts to mitigate them, journalists consistently emphasize to society the idea that social progress, the development of democratic institutions, and civilization allow people not to be left alone with misfortune. This affirms the value of human life, caring, and readiness to help.

Journalism plays a key role in shaping public opinion and sentiment. During disasters, this factor becomes crucial for eliminating consequences and supporting those affected. Fear, panic, empathy, and compassion are the most complex emotions and the most responsible areas of a journalist's work. It is thanks to this work that society can transform these emotions into effective aid, into confidence in overcoming consequences, confidence in support and caring, and confidence in the future. A separate, important factor in the need for full and objective disaster coverage is the formulation of disaster prevention measures and the reporting of these processes. Such effects are particularly evident during natural disasters and calamities, when countries, and often the international community, make maximum efforts to limit and localize natural disasters, such as in massive fires or floods. The promptness of journalists and the completeness of information coverage become additional factors influencing the effectiveness of actions by authorities, special services, and volunteers.

Journalism is not the sole and decisive means and regulator of processes in combating emergencies and natural disasters. For this purpose, there are special services and systems at national and international levels. At the same time, it is precisely thanks to journalists, and publications in traditional or social media, that the process of eliminating disaster consequences becomes an important component of social reality. It is thanks to journalists that the efforts of thousands upon thousands of people are consolidated, which helps alleviate the situation and provide necessary support, even after catastrophic situations.

Within the framework of the Erasmus+ project “Disaster Journalism,” a survey was conducted to assess the skill level and readiness of practicing journalists to work in disaster zones. A significant 95.6% of surveyed journalists indicated that part of the training process should be dedicated to materials that help them understand how to act in various types of disasters. This indicator demonstrates a pressing need for specialized courses in disaster journalism for effective media education. We believe this course is useful not only for specialists focusing on this issue but also for all graduates of universities and institutes training media professionals, as the high probability of working in disaster situations during a graduate’s professional career, unfortunately, is not decreasing.

It’s difficult to overestimate the need for reliable and prompt information during emergencies. However, it’s equally difficult to overstate the journalist’s responsibility for the consequences of their own publications. Therefore, the work of media professionals requires not only professionalism in preparing materials but also a systematic and consistent adherence to standards and ethical codes, as well as constant attention to the results and reactions their material will evoke in society, and the consequences a publication might cause after its dissemination by international media.

### **Ethical Aspects of Disaster Journalism**

Disaster journalism necessitates a systematic and thorough discussion of ethics, and this conversation should be the result of dedicated research. In this handbook, we will outline the most important directions and aspects that define the ethical components of a journalist’s activities when covering disasters. First and foremost, it is crucial to adhere to journalistic ethical codes and the principles of a journalist’s work in a news format, as reporting on disasters and emergencies is largely concentrated within the genre palette of

news. Notes and reports, features, comments, and interviews—this is the body of texts that most fully and promptly reflect the situation at the scene and the participation of various institutions in mitigating the consequences of the event.

In light of this, the key parameters of a journalist's ethics become the requirements of news journalism standards. Accuracy and timeliness, reliability and completeness of event coverage are the aspects that demand a journalist's particular attention. For many media professionals, the question arises: what is more important: to be the first to report on a disaster or to provide verified information from official sources, even if not first among colleagues? To present only partially confirmed facts, or to find and publish full information about the event? An ethical approach dictates adherence to standards, attention to the quality of emergency coverage, but the nature of the disaster also matters.

Research into the needs of journalists in disaster zones, conducted during the implementation of the Erasmus+ project "Disaster Journalism," proves that the most important knowledge required by practicing journalists, among others, is knowledge of media ethics and safety peculiarities of the work, primarily the experience of media professionals covering various types of emergencies. In third place are cases of effective work in disaster zones, which are also a result of experience, hence training in ethics and safety is extremely important.

During emergencies, emotional tension in society intensifies, with negative emotions predominating. These emotions, in any case, affect the experience of the calamity, can cause panic, and lead to a worsening of disaster consequences. In their professional activities, journalists must consider this factor, understand that reliable and prompt information can contribute to easing emotional tension in society, and prioritize how to ensure safety from disaster for thousands of people. That is why the degree of a journalist's responsibility for adhering to activity standards is high. News journalism has a complex, regulated set of restrictions regarding information presentation; adherence to these requirements will help create truly necessary and useful messages.

It is also important to talk about the functions of journalism in society, which, in the event of a disaster, acquire a distinct expressiveness, so significant that they manifest as a model of a media professional's ethical responsibility to society. Take, for example,

the service function – a journalist should provide useful information, practical help for daily life (Blum) – in a disaster situation, people need information about possible ways to rescue themselves, places where help can be obtained, evacuation, and necessary means for survival. Such information will never be superfluous, as basic needs change and there is a necessity to preserve life and health first and foremost. Providing such information from unverified sources, no matter how prompt it may seem, means exposing people to additional danger.

On the positive side, we can state that in the digital age, verifying information and confirming many facts from official sources does not require much time or extraordinary effort, provided, of course, that the journalist has experience, knowledge, and information regarding the state's organization of disaster consequence mitigation (relevant services, headquarters, spokespersons and official channels, contacts of experts and representatives of these structures, areas of responsibility of different services, volunteer initiatives, and non-governmental organizations involved in the disaster zone, etc.).

Among the ethical principles of a journalist's work during disasters, humanity and respect for people's personal lives should also be included. It's crucial to remember that any photo and video materials must be created with consideration for the right to privacy, and with limitations concerning minors, particularly regarding consent for publication and avoiding shocking materials that could identify an individual without their or their relatives' consent for publication. International media holdings have strict requirements for such content; for example, the BBC has a separate procedure (BBC Editorial Guidelines 2025, 2025) that allows for consultation and approval of all questions regarding the publication of photo or video materials where doubts exist.

Humanity as a principle of journalistic activity implies attention to the general context of materials. During natural or social disasters and technogenic emergencies, co-participation, empathy, and support are important. This applies not only to the country where the calamity occurred but also to the international community. Therefore, a journalist must be prepared to show not only sensational footage but also the scale of the event, its prerequisites, and to competently forecast and demonstrate possible consequences, citing official or verified sources. For instance, this could include the number of people requiring help or evacuation, immediate

needs for food or medicine, or other crucial circumstances. It is no less important to inform about which essential needs have already been met, so that aid is directed towards truly necessary areas. We can illustrate this point with an example: in the summer of 2024, a hospital in Kyiv, Okhmatdyt, was damaged by a missile, and many people arrived at that location to provide assistance and clear debris. At that time, the air temperature was quite high, and there was a need for drinking water for volunteers. After this information was published in local Telegram channels, water delivery was promptly arranged through the initiative of many individuals and businesses who reacted instantly to the need. After some time, messages in the same communication channels indicated that there was already enough water and the most that might be needed in this situation was to take a little water for personal needs if a person was going to help clear debris.

In 2018, UK media outlets, including the BBC and The Guardian, faced a very sensitive ethical challenge when reporting on a case involving the victims of the thalidomide scandal. This was a public health crisis in the 1950s and 60s where thousands of babies were born with severe birth defects after their mothers took the drug thalidomide during pregnancy. Over 60 years later, many of these victims were facing new health challenges.

The core ethical dilemma for journalists was how to report on the victims' health deterioration and their legal battle for a new compensation scheme without sensationalizing their suffering or compromising their dignity. This required a delicate balance between public interest and respect for personal privacy.

Instead of using shocking images or overly emotional language, journalists focused on the victims' lifelong resilience. They published in-depth articles that explained the complexities of their legal fight and their struggle for recognition.

Journalists took great care to obtain informed consent from the victims and their families. They conducted interviews with a high degree of empathy, allowing the victims to share their stories in their own words. The BBC, for example, produced documentaries and articles that gave a voice to the victims, highlighting their strength and advocacy.

Reporters carefully protected the identities of those who did not wish to be fully identified, using first names or initials

when necessary. They prioritized the subjects' well-being over a journalistic "scoop."

This approach showed that it is possible to report on a deeply tragic and sensitive story while upholding the highest standards of journalistic ethics. The media's coverage brought renewed public attention to the thalidomide victims' plight, leading to increased support and a positive resolution of their legal claims. It serves as a powerful example of how journalism can be a force for good in raising awareness about long-term social injustices, even decades after the initial event.

In conclusion, we note that the ethics of disaster journalism is a special section of journalistic ethics that requires separate coverage and assimilation during the training of media professionals. Unfortunately, no one can guarantee that a future journalist will not have to work in a disaster situation. In general, we must remember that the basic ethical principle of a journalist's activity, similar to that of doctors, is: "Do no harm!" During disasters, this has a significant addition: "Do no harm and help!"

### **The Role of Journalists in Crisis Situations**

Journalists play a pivotal role in the event of disasters or emergencies. The stability and development of the modern world depend significantly on information exchanges and flows, the spread of access systems to various information sources, the increasing speed of data transfer, and the growing opportunities for instant information exchange, including photo and video content. These are the hallmarks of our time that drive social processes and shape people's habits of organizing their daily lives. Just a few decades ago, the social landscape of life was so different that we cannot fully imagine it unless we belong to older generations. In contrast, today, the saturation of the information stream compels us to dedicate a considerable amount of time to news and reports in traditional, and more often, social media.

News content forms a significant part of our lives and, to some extent, determines its quality. In the event of crisis situations, people who find themselves directly in problematic locations primarily seek information that will help them understand the situation, grasp the scale of the problem, find ways to safely exit the crisis, or prepare for its consequences. The same, but in a slightly different vein, can be said about information consumers who are outside the disaster zone:

potential threats of the critical situation spreading, needs for aid and support, possible options for eliminating consequences, the closer prospect of social life in disaster-affected locations, the involvement of structures and organizations, volunteers, and the international community in mitigating consequences – all of this becomes the subject of attention for millions of people worldwide.

During a crisis situation, a journalist performs (or can perform) several important tasks that, in combination, define their functions in crisis situations. First and foremost, we should highlight the journalist's role as a source of information. This role requires adherence to standards and a high level of competence, and such competence must be sufficient to obtain relevant comments and account for the complexity of the situation. For example, in a technogenic disaster, it will be practically impossible for a journalist to understand the threats and the scale of the event if they cannot grasp the risk factors this disaster carries, the means of securing safety, and the possible ways to overcome the crisis situation precisely in view of the nature of the disaster. The journalist's role as a source of information can hardly be overstated, which is why we once again emphasize the responsibility and absolute adherence to the rules for preparing journalistic materials.

The next extremely important role of a journalist during crisis situations is the study of social sentiments and expectations of the population affected by the disaster. Special attention should be paid to the vital needs that influence survival and safety in these situations. Reports on these aspects are always aimed at direct assistance and support. It's important for the journalist not only to show the experiences and fears of people who have suffered losses or damage during the disaster but also to draw attention to centers of confidence and effectiveness, the degree and strength of support, ways to resolve situations, and satisfy urgent needs. These topics become a crucial factor in consolidating efforts during the elimination of catastrophic consequences and determine the most important directions of aid. Typical examples of such reports could be information about the need for specific blood types in aid centers, the need for medicine or food, evacuation routes, and the efforts of volunteers and official structures providing such assistance.

Reporting on the elimination of consequences is another important component of the journalist's role in crisis situations. For many people who have left their homes and usual way of life,

this information is extremely relevant, so media professionals must strictly adhere to the position of official sources and cover the situation objectively. This is because, as a result of their publications, people may plan their return and must clearly understand the conditions and possibilities of life in disaster areas after the factors that make residing in these territories impossible are eliminated. This point is especially important during social and military conflicts, where the general assessment of the situation includes not only the level of provision of basic needs but also other security dimensions – from a comprehensive analysis of conflict development trends to the existence of additional factors that may be important, such as landmines or the ability to obtain food.

Any publication about disasters, the development of events in a location, or the elimination of consequences leaves no one indifferent – not only those affected but also broad social circles both within the country and beyond its borders. The moral support of the population and the formation of scenarios for situation development are additional factors of a journalist's activity that affirm humanism and define possibilities for many content consumers. We note that studying the situation and providing detailed coverage of disasters or their consequences increases the value of publications, their significance for the audience. The possible directions of the situation's development, as seen by the journalist – if they are sufficiently competent to provide such information and are perceived as a reliable data source – can affect the activation of social processes and thus require serious attention to the text of the messages.

Creating the image of a disaster for the residents of a country/region and for the global community is also crucial. In the modern world, most events and phenomena, including disasters, are perceived and remembered precisely in the way they are presented by the media. Visual materials and comments, eyewitness testimonies, and accounts from victims – all of this becomes part of the image of an emergency, how it will be remembered and recalled over a significant period. Therefore, the journalist's role is to create relevant yet vivid content that will reflect the full complexity of the situation and provide an objective understanding of the essence and scale of the calamity. crucial task

Despite a journalist's aspirations, and even beyond their wishes, the most vivid frames and photos will be disseminated in global media, and as a result, will influence the understanding of the

situation. Thus, a media professional's work at the scene of a disaster must consider this aspect, as the key messages in the materials will shape the image of the disaster for a long time. They will be supplemented or clarified by other colleagues or even the journalist themselves, and over time, it is quite possible that materials about the restoration of that location after the elimination of disaster consequences will also be filmed. Here, we can give an example: on October 10, 2022, as a result of a missile strike near the buildings of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, both the buildings themselves and a road interchange were damaged. Materials about the university's resumption of work and the participation of philanthropists in eliminating the consequences became the subject of publications by several journalists, and the fact of the university's restoration became additional evidence of resilience for many people in Ukraine. Interestingly, in this situation, the road interchange was restored promptly (in the central district of Kyiv), overnight, despite the scale of the destruction, which was reflected in Ukrainian media. At the same time, a narrative appeared in Russian public channels that Ukrainians could eliminate the consequences of a missile hit in a few days, while Russians are unable to repair roads without any hits. This information spread in Ukrainian social media, adding even more positive content and moral confidence in resilience, which did not negate the tragic nature of the situation.

A journalist's role in a crisis is not just to report on the consequences, but also to coordinate social efforts in the process of disaster relief, and to inform the public about potential escalations and countermeasures. An excellent example of this approach is a piece by Bartosz Chochołowski (Wroclaw.pl), written during the 2024 flood in Poland.

In his publication, the author not only clearly identifies specific ways to counter the disaster but also effectively uses social context. He activates readers' memories of the 1997 flood and provides information on the safety of animals at the zoo, a concern for which city residents also needed information.

The structure of the material is particularly noteworthy. The author used a question-and-answer format, which helped to briefly and fully reflect the overall situation and to address various aspects of the problem within a single text. This conciseness is especially important during times of social anxiety, as it helps people make decisions and take action.

Source: Bartosz Chochołowski. Flood threat in Wrocław: questions and answers (Zagrożenie powodziowe we Wrocławiu: pytania i odpowiedzi)// <https://www.wroclaw.pl/dla-mieszkanca/zagrozenie-powodziowe-we-wroclawiu-w-pytaniach-i-odpowiedziach> (16.09.2024).



The examples and sources provided are not exhaustive. Later in this guide, we will examine other situations and authors, including some of the most popular publications about disasters and their aftermath. However, it's important to emphasize that the role of journalists in crisis situations cannot be overstated. Social consolidation and the public's organized response to or prevention of the consequences of emergencies depend in no small part on the work of media professionals.

All the above-mentioned components of the journalist's significant role in crisis situations stem from the function of journalism to objectively reflect social reality and to facilitate social transformations that support humanistic values. Publications by journalists from disaster zones cannot do without content that evokes emotions; they often become sensational and are widely disseminated – therefore, the responsibility for the accuracy and objectivity of information, for adhering to ethical prescriptions and norms, is extremely high.

Media platforms and social networks became key to disseminating vital information, such as safe routes, aid collection points, and contact details for rescuers. This helped coordinate volunteer efforts and direct resources to where they were most needed.

The coverage of human stories and the tragedies that unfolded contributed to the rapid mobilization of international humanitarian aid. For example, organizations like the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) raised significant funds to help those affected.

During the 2021 floods in Germany, Belgium, and Luxembourg, the media also demonstrated its importance. Although many people were caught off guard, the media actively shared information about weather warnings. They helped people assess risks and make decisions about evacuation.

Even after the active phase of the floods ended, the media continued to report on the damage to infrastructure (like roads, bridges, and power grids). This helped volunteers and emergency services better navigate the situation and plan recovery efforts.

The reports on these floods not only informed the public about the immediate situation but also brought the issue of climate change to the forefront. This drew attention to the need for better early warning systems and adaptation to future disasters, which has a long-term positive effect.

These examples underscore that the role of journalists in crisis situations goes far beyond simple reporting. They become key coordinators of public efforts, mobilizers of aid, and crucial elements of social accountability.

### **Tools of Disaster Journalism (Technologies and Methods Used)**

Disaster journalism is an integral part of traditional journalism, and therefore the methods and tools of a journalist's activity must adhere to the general principles of media operations. However, they must also explicitly account for the specific characteristics that define the boundaries of objectivity and ethics in this field.

We can highlight the following key aspects in disaster coverage, which constitute the basic methodology for a journalist's professional activity:

*The preparation for disaster coverage* consists of several elements, the importance of which is hard to overstate.

1. Information about the type of disaster and necessary knowledge. Depending on the nature of the emergency, the journalist must have a deep understanding of its causes and identify potential threats – this determines the completeness and objectivity of their conclusions. For example, if a major fire is involved, it is crucial to update knowledge about the locality, the potential for fire spread

(including meteorological phenomena and forecasts), and the nature of industrial or technical infrastructure in the fire's propagation area, as these can create additional dangerous factors. It would also be beneficial to analyze the possibilities for consequence mitigation: who can participate in eliminating or limiting the effects of the natural disaster, which structures will be or are already involved, and the quantity and type of equipment or other resources that can be utilized.

2. Activities of state headquarters or other structures involved in disaster consequence mitigation. The journalist must clearly know which sources can provide accreditation and official information, coordinate consequence mitigation activities, and regulate the rules and restrictions of informational activities for a specific situation. It is worth noting that such restrictions may not concern freedom of expression as much as they are aimed at preventing additional losses or casualties among the population and those engaged in emergency response.
3. Psychological readiness. During a disaster, journalists typically receive a significant amount of information about the affected, directly communicate with eyewitnesses or victims, and therefore require resilience and readiness for such communication. Furthermore, the nature of the reports will depend on the journalist, so they must also understand that their materials can support the moral strength of the audience, or conversely, create a context of unavoidable consequences, pessimism, and despair.
4. Professional readiness. Journalists must ensure they are prepared to work in difficult conditions with disruptions to technical communication parameters, limited access to power sources for equipment, lack of food or water, medication, or other means of mitigating disaster consequences. They must be ready for this. It is also advisable to prepare a vest or helmet with "PRESS" clearly marked and to study the regulations for working in an emergency zone. Regarding equipment and its setup, we emphasize that a journalist may have to work during nighttime hours, so they need to ensure the quality of photo and video materials is sufficient for publication

in the media. Last but not least, it will be useful to review the rules and requirements for disseminating information about disaster victims to avoid interfering with their personal lives and to stay within the bounds of professional ethics.

5. Journalist's personal safety. The world, of course, deserves to see the most sensational footage, the most horrific consequences, and to have the opportunity to support the victims. However, journalists must understand the level of danger and the factors threatening their life or health, and structure their work in a way that allows them to avoid these factors as effectively as possible.

Direct work at the scene involves not only photo and video documentation but also a broader context of informing, which requires additional knowledge and work with sources. It is important to be able to obtain information from consequence mitigation headquarters; this will help to learn about the spread or reduction of disaster factors, gain access to official information sources for comments, use verified statistical data, and respond to truly significant situations and events in the disaster location. Alongside this, journalists should pay attention to the testimonies of those affected, and to working with volunteers and other organizations involved in consequence mitigation.

It is also crucial to monitor the level of safety for people in the emergency zone: whether evacuation is being carried out, whether there are points providing medical and psychological assistance, whether food is organized for the victim, where drinking water can be obtained, what the dynamics of the safety level is in the disaster zone and neighboring locations (regions), who and to what extent is providing assistance, and who is studying the disaster as it unfolds, providing sociological, technical, and technological information regarding threatening factors and ways to avoid their effects.

Covering Consequence Mitigation and Recovery Prospects as another a stage of work is calmer but requires the assessment of a considerable number of sources and initiatives, an analytical approach to reflecting the situation, and objective data. A crucial task for the journalist is to illustrate the consistency between the statements of various structures and organizations regarding consequence mitigation results and the actual state of actions in the

emergency location. The journalist's attention should be focused on the factors of basic needs for ensuring people's lives, the level of safety and coordination of recovery measures, and the comments and perspectives of local residents who remained or returned to the disaster location after the most threatening consequences were eliminated.

At the scene, the prospects of various structures' activities in consequence mitigation also become apparent, for example, in comparing specific actions and the expectations of the local population. These issues usually attract considerable attention and require media coverage, which helps coordinate recovery efforts after a disaster.

A separate aspect is the comparison of objects or localities during a disaster and during the process of consequence elimination. Here, the journalist can use their own materials from the scene or other materials with proper attribution. Such a demonstration, especially if the changes are palpable, leads to an increased level of optimism and support.

During post-disaster recovery, acute problems may arise locally that lack institutional solutions. These are often narrow and very specific but no less painful. For example, the urgent material needs of a large family affected by the disaster that for some reason did not receive or received insufficient support, the absence of drinking water in a specific location, the inability for local residents to warm themselves when the weather changes, the lack of electricity, and consequently, the absence of communication and internet, etc.

### **Case Studies**

The materials provided below offer information about tragic events in Türkiye and Japan. Earthquakes that claimed lives, devastated settlements, and drastically altered daily life for extended periods dominated the headlines of both local and global media. Journalists covering these events accurately conveyed the full tragedy of the situation and thoroughly depicted the image of the disaster and the nation grappling with its aftermath in each instance. However, even a cursory analysis of these reports reveals certain differences in approach and presentation that reflect unique aspects of culture, mentality, and societal attitudes toward disaster and its consequences.

The BBC article “Turkey earthquake: Satellite pictures show scale of destruction” reports on the aftermath of the 2023 earthquake in Türkiye, using before-and-after satellite images to illustrate the immense scale of the destruction. The article focuses on the city of Antakya (Hatay province) and the town of Islahiye, highlighting the catastrophic damage to buildings, public infrastructure, and homes. The visual evidence from space is a sobering reminder of the power of the quake and the enormous task facing reconstruction. The article reports the large number of collapsed buildings and the humanitarian crisis, with hundreds of thousands of people made homeless. The way the authors presented this touchy subject was a standout example of using data and visuals to report first.

1. **Focus on Visual Evidence:** The article primarily communicates the scale of the disaster by using satellite imagery. This method enables the public to view what is truly a horrifying disaster on an objective and global scale while avoiding using gruesome images of human suffering. It’s an effective, and presumably ethically unobjectionable, way to illustrate the physical aftermath of the episode.
2. **Concentrate on the Physical and Logistical Impact:** Rather than get bogged down in specifics about the individual tragedies, writers Ken Ellingwood and Garrett Therolf take us through a discussion of the physical and logistical aftermath of that quake. They are studying the impact on entire neighborhoods, roads and cities. By so doing, the attention is moved from simply emotional trauma to a consideration of the nuts and bolts of rescue, assistance, and reconstruction.
3. **Expert Comment:** The article has been expert reviewed by professionals such as Dr. Vianney Le Pail of the French space agency CNES, who give scientific insight into the satellite data itself. This provides the story with legitimacy and authenticity.
4. **Balance of Reportage and Human Reader:** The article is clearly data-anchored and applies itself to the visual, but doesn’t ignore the humanity behind those figures. It gives brief but searing depictions of the deadly toll - in thousands dead and homeless. With this method, the audience gets a sense of how bad things are, which is less

confusing and intense than straight up descriptions of gore.

**CONCLUSION** In summary, the BBC's coverage of the earthquake was a testament to responsible and effective journalism - using technology and data to interpret loss on a massive scale in an ethical and informative way.

Article Link: <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-64540696>



The article “How to assist quake victims in Turkey, Syria” by Ivan Pereira (ABC News) is an example of how the text instructs readers in general on the best ways to provide aid after the 2023 earthquake. The story underscores the continuing, current humanitarian crisis with thousands of casualties and refugees, and describes steps several charitable organizations were taking in response. It specifically calls out a number of major players — UNICEF, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Doctors Without Borders among them — explaining exactly how they’ve responded to peak conditions there, plus with links if you want to donate. The way it is being covered by the authors is unique, not as a regular news report on the incident but rather as actionable information to circumvent and help victims.

1. **Humanitarian Aid Focus:** The objective is to educate readers about how they can assist. The article goes beyond coverage of the death and damage to provide an organized list of agencies engaged in relief work.
2. **Direct Quotes:** Strong quotes are used in the piece from people from the aid organisations, Angela Kearney of UNICEF and Xavier Castellanos of the IFRC. These quotes offer a direct, empathetic voice from the ground that convey the panic, grueling conditions and individual challenges experienced by victims and relief workers. This also gives that feeling of immediacy, reality.
3. **Detailed Description of Assistance:** Author provides a short and distinctive description of content. It cites, for instance, UNICEF providing emergency water and reuniting families, and the Red Crescent establishing crisis centers and distributing materials. This level of specificity enables readers to have a sense of what their donations would be earmarked for.

4. The specific vulnerabilities it makes reference to: The article makes distinctions between Türkiye’s and Syria’s situations, noting that in Syria they have been compounded by a decade of war. This backdrop, as described by the International Rescue Committee, includes how much more important humanitarian needs even are in the that region, which had already suffered catastrophic infrastructure damage. This story is a pure expression of solutions journalism - not just telling readers about a problem, but asking what citizens themselves can do to help solve it. Article Link: Pereira, I. (2023, February 7). How to help earthquake victims in Turkey, Syria. Article



Link: <https://abcnews.go.com/US/earthquake-victims-turkey-syria/story?id=96948818>

The CNN article, “‘Battle against time’ to find quake survivors as Japan lifts tsunami warnings and death toll rises,” reports on the immediate aftermath of the 7.5 magnitude earthquake that struck Japan’s Noto Peninsula on January 1, 2024. The text describes the widespread devastation, including collapsed buildings, fires, and landslides. It focuses on the urgent rescue efforts, the challenges faced by emergency services, and the rising death toll. The article also mentions the lifting of tsunami warnings and details the difficulties of accessing the affected areas due to damaged roads.

### **Specifics of the Earthquake Coverage**

The authors’ approach to covering this natural disaster is a clear example of real-time crisis reporting, with a focus on human impact, official response, and logistical challenges.

1. **Emphasis on the Human Toll and Urgency:** The article uses phrases like “‘Battle against time’” and “rescuers raced to save residents trapped in the rubble” to convey the critical nature of the situation. It cites concrete numbers, reporting that at least 57 people have been killed, and 15 people were confirmed dead in the city of Wajima. This focus on the human impact makes the disaster immediate and personal for the reader.
2. **Highlighting Logistical and Infrastructure Challenges:** A significant part of the reporting is dedicated to the

difficulties of providing aid. The article points out that a “destroyed road had cut access” to the northern part of the peninsula, and that 500 people were stranded at Noto Airport. It also mentions that 45,700 households in Ishikawa remained without power, and doctors were unable to travel to work due to damaged roads. This attention to detail highlights the complex, multi-faceted nature of disaster response.

3. **Use of Official and Expert Commentary:** The authors incorporate direct quotes from Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who emphasizes the urgency of the rescue efforts, and from seismologist Susan Hough, who warns of the continued threat of aftershocks. This provides the reader with authoritative information and context.
4. **Comparison to Previous Disasters:** The article places the current earthquake in historical context by comparing it to the 2011 9.0 magnitude quake. It notes that while the current damage is “far from the levels of destruction wrought by 2011’s” quake, it remains a significant and serious event. This comparison helps readers understand the scale of the current disaster without diminishing its severity.

The CNN article serves as a strong example of how media professionals cover an ongoing crisis, combining critical statistics, official statements, and human stories to provide a comprehensive and impactful report.

Article Link: <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/01/02/asia/japan-earthquake-tsunami-warnings-tuesday-intl-hnk>



The CBS News article, “Strong earthquake hits southwestern Japan, triggering temporary tsunami alerts,” reports on a magnitude 6.6 earthquake that struck southwestern Japan. The piece focuses on the immediate aftermath, including the temporary tsunami advisory issued by Japan’s Meteorological Agency (JMA), which was later lifted. The article highlights the minimal damage reported, a single minor injury, and the temporary disruption to train services. It also mentions that no problems were detected at nearby nuclear plants. The report provides a larger context by referencing Japan’s location on the “Ring of Fire” and past, more catastrophic earthquakes, such as the 1946 Nankai Trough quake and the devastating 2011 event.

The journalistic approach in this article is a prime example of responsible, fact-based reporting during a potential crisis, prioritizing public safety and verified information over sensationalism.

1. **Prioritizing Official Information:** The article consistently references official sources, such as the JMA, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), and NHK TV. This demonstrates a commitment to providing accurate, verified information to the public, especially crucial during a rapidly developing situation. The article also notes the JMA's own revision of the earthquake's magnitude, showing the transparency of both the agency and the news outlet.
2. **Focus on Precaution and Safety:** The reporting emphasizes the precautionary measures taken, such as the temporary evacuation orders and the JMA's social media message urging people to stay away from coastal areas. This serves a clear public service function, reinforcing safety protocols for a population accustomed to earthquakes.
3. **Contextualizing the Event:** The article effectively places the 2025 quake within the broader context of Japan's seismic history. By mentioning past, more destructive earthquakes like the 2011 Fukushima disaster and the 1946 Nankai Trough quake, it helps readers understand the potential risks without causing unnecessary alarm. This contextualization also subtly explains why authorities and the public react with such caution.
4. **Calm and Unsensational Tone:** Unlike reporting on a major disaster, the article's tone remains calm and objective. It reports that "there were no immediate reports of damage" and that electric power was still working. This measured approach avoids creating panic and instead provides a reassuring, grounded perspective, which is a key ethical consideration in disaster journalism.

The report serves as an educational tool for the public on how to react to seismic events while also demonstrating the critical role of media in disseminating official, life-saving information.

Article Link: CBS/AP. (2025, January 13). Strong earthquake hits southwestern Japan, triggering temporary tsunami alerts. CBS News. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/japan-earthquake-tsunami-advisory-jan-13-2025/>



Please analyze the provided materials and formulate the image of the disaster separately for each country. Try to predict why a more open descriptive model is used in covering the disaster in Türkiye, where specific individuals are featured, the efforts of organizations and services are highlighted, and a long-term response model, including the post-disaster recovery period, is established. In contrast, reports on the disaster in Japan and its consequences exhibit a more closed model, presenting general information about the number of affected and the destruction, summarizing technical data on the intensity and frequency of tremors, and mentioning additional dangerous factors like tsunamis.

Formulate your own conclusions about the necessity of preparing materials based on this experience. Predict the reaction to such materials, considering the mentality of the affected populations and the involvement of international support and aid. Characterize the role of journalists in covering these events, perhaps as an algorithm or a descriptive account. Assess the effectiveness of their work from the perspective of someone tracking the situation, and draw conclusions regarding your own approaches to publications about crisis situations based on this experience.

Special attention should be paid to the scale of a catastrophe, particularly for emergencies that have or could develop into global consequences. Events like pandemics (including COVID-19, MERS, and SARS), forest fires, or nuclear and chemical attacks - which carry multi-component threats that can spread far beyond the immediate disaster zone - require a high degree of speed and objectivity in their

reporting. This is especially true for the predictions and conclusions of experts, scientists, specialists, and representatives from local and regional disaster response teams.

Global catastrophes are unique because, in addition to the direct damage and consequences, they can trigger other outcomes, such as social disasters, and impact the development of entire multi-country regions. Social conflicts, including military actions, also fall into this category. Beyond their direct effects, they can cause migration waves of varying intensity, alter economic and social paradigms, and create a range of acute, localized problems.

The role of journalism in covering these global-scale catastrophes takes on special significance and, consequently, raises the demands on professional competence and skill. Without a deep understanding of the unique features and requirements for covering such disasters - and without specialized training and knowledge of the profession as outlined in this handbook - a journalist may be ineffective. Their professional errors could carry a high price for millions of people.

### **Recommendations**

Here are some key recommendations regarding the information presented above:

- Disaster journalism is a unique branch of traditional journalism that demands specialized knowledge and skills from journalists, as well as psychological readiness and resilience. It requires the ability to perform their work under the pressure of numerous complex and difficult factors, ranging from empathy and compassion for victims to maintaining their own safety in a disaster zone. Therefore, journalists must be adequately prepared, and if they intend to specialize in disaster issues, they should be well-versed in the geography and typology of disasters, the effects of damaging factors for various disaster types, the legislation regulating the situation in disaster zones in specific countries, and other equally important specifics.

- Ethics within the system of disaster journalism is one of the most crucial components of activity, alongside journalist safety. This knowledge requires constant updating and renewal, studying precedents, and avoiding situations that could pose additional threats to the victims.
- Operating in an emergency location demands a journalist's technical and technological readiness, ensuring autonomy for a considerable period, and the ability to prepare material under exceptional conditions. This characteristic places high demands on a journalist's equipment and technological competencies.

In any complex situation, journalists must remember that they are a source of information for thousands of people within the emergency zone and an even greater number beyond it. Therefore, not only facts and testimonies are important, but also the assessment of the situation, particularly the key needs of the affected, the assessment of dangerous factors, the style and presentation of the material, and the use of reliable sources and verified experts in their own materials.



# 1.2.

## Preparing for Disaster Coverage





PRESS

PRESS

## 1.2. Preparing for Disaster Coverage

### Introduction

This chapter aims to prepare journalists for covering emergencies. It will include recommendations that we, the authors of this handbook, deem essential. At the outset of this discussion, an important caveat is necessary: disaster journalism is a distinct and specialized type of professional activity. Therefore, specializing in this area requires meticulous and systematic work to study the specifics of your country's regions, the history of emergencies and their potential recurrence, and the means that help mitigate the consequences of potential threats – from local community actions to nationw–ide safety measures.

No less important are professional training and focus, technical and technological competencies, and psychological and physical resilience. Being in a disaster zone is itself a challenging period of life, and the ability to work effectively there demands additional effort.

We also draw attention to the necessity of studying the legal aspects of a journalist's activity in a disaster zone, particularly those defined by national legislation. Up-to-date knowledge about the country's emergency response structure is crucial, especially which agencies should be the first to respond to various types of crisis situations, their official communication channels, spokespersons, and other information vital for objective disaster coverage.

### Developing an Action Plan

It's important to note that the ideal scenario for developing an action plan is to work on it long before an emergency arises, not at the moment it occurs. It's likely advisable to consider two types of plans: a strategic plan, which broadly outlines possible situations, and a tactical plan, which is a response model for an emergency. The tactical plan should have variations depending on the type of disaster or crisis that has occurred, as each type dictates its own specific response and direct actions.

For both plans, it will be beneficial to have important items such as your media identification (a "PRESS" label or labels that can be affixed to your clothing and backpack), as well as equipment aimed at your personal safety and ability to work (a first aid kit, water, high-calorie food, and mobile equipment for filming).

### *Developing a Strategic Plan*

This stage of the strategic plan is essential for understanding potential challenges and preparing for them. First and foremost, this applies to natural disasters and calamities in areas with unstable natural conditions. This type of disaster includes earthquakes, floods, avalanches, seasonal activity of natural factors like locust migration or other insects, and fires, including those of natural origin. The journalist should not only gather information about the type and characteristics of past natural disasters but also study the actions of the region's or country's administration, safety measures, and the functional parameters of relevant national structures' activities, including contact details for press services or communication departments of such structures.

After emergencies, the information space of the affected country or region contains a significant amount of analysis and forecasts, reports on prevention measures, and assessments of the effectiveness of services in mitigating consequences. All of this should be studied and summarized in a user-friendly format. Here, it is appropriate to discuss the creation of a list of experts for the strategic plan who can be involved in covering emergencies. Such experts include not only representatives of relevant services but also scientists, monitoring services, public activists, experienced journalists, and so on.

Particular attention at this stage should be paid to studying the technological or industrial characteristics of the region - industries with hazardous substances, nuclear energy, mechanisms for controlling safety quality in such industries, and their vulnerability to external factors, such as fires. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the necessity of considering the potential for epidemiological threats to spread, especially in densely populated areas.

Disasters of a social, including military, nature require a slightly different approach, as such conflict situations have latent and overt periods of development. Therefore, readiness for such situations involves studying the vectors of social tension in the region or locality, taking into account reports from analysts and experts on increased troop numbers (as in the situation with Ukraine in 2022), or escalating tension due to clashes and conflicts between political opponents, representatives of national minorities, etc.

### *Studying the Disaster Counteraction Structure*

This element of the strategic plan directs our interest to the system of disaster prevention and counteraction adopted in a particular country or defined by agreements between several states. Journalists should primarily focus on relevant structures, and we would advise approaching this based on the typology of disasters. The specifics of such planning involve establishing the operational trajectories of communication departments of relevant services, forming a list of spokespersons and potential experts from among the leadership or public representatives of individual departments. Here, it is also important not to forget about medical structures, as, unfortunately, emergencies rarely occur without casualties. It would be beneficial to add information about volunteer organizations and initiatives in the country to this section of the plan, as they are always involved in consequence mitigation and also have spokespersons and experts who can serve as sources of information. Last but not least, journalists should inquire about international organizations and funds that provide support during disasters.

### *Studying Legislation on Media Activity in Emergency Situations*

Any potential emergency situations always trigger certain action protocols for such crises. These protocols are formalized at the level of regulatory acts and are mandatory for the country's services and institutions. In complex cases, a state of emergency or martial law may be declared, and such a state can cover a specific part of the country or extend to the entire territory. The introduction of such states creates a separate legal regime in the territory and introduces additional restrictions and procedures, including for media activities. It is strategically important to understand and know not only about these restrictions but also about the right and possibilities of acquiring official status (accreditation) for covering the event. As a rule, the editorial office can help with this, but after a disaster, a journalist's knowledge and competence, the availability of necessary contacts, and confirmed experience (e.g., a certificate from tactical medicine training) can become factors of success that work in your favor.

### *Data Generalization*

Data generalization is not the last, but an important element of the strategic plan. We recommend preparing a memo and other

materials with detailed data, preferably not only in electronic format, so that they can be used in conditions of communication or power outages. If a journalist is heading to a disaster location, then certain things, such as a detailed map of the area and contacts of local activists and official services, will certainly not be superfluous. It is thanks to such contacts that one can quickly verify the accuracy of information, determine the scale of events, and learn about probable threats.

### *Developing a Tactical Plan*

Planning Your Trip to the Disaster zone. A memo can be incredibly helpful in this situation, detailing essential items like:

- Necessary documents, including permits.
- Protection and safety gear, such as “PRESS” identification markers that can be attached to your clothing and backpack.
- A minimal but sufficient supply of medicine, water, and high-calorie food.
- Equipment and gear.
- Information about the region and its specific characteristics.

### **Gathering Information on Different Types of Emergencies**

First, it is important to describe the information field that emerges as a result of an emergency or disaster. Direct participants in events publish a massive amount of material and information on social media and networks, which serve as evidence of the disaster. In fact, these reports always precede official materials and hold undeniable value for both the chronology of events and the activation of relevant services. However, this body of information does not always accurately and fully reflect the scale of the event and its potential consequences, meaning that the use of such information absolutely requires verification. The demands for information verification become especially critical during social and military conflicts, where immediate information can be a result of fear and anxiety, and rumors, unverified forecasts, and sometimes even specially prepared disinformation are spread, influencing public sentiment and reactions.

Such information cannot be entirely dismissed, but it should also not be trusted one hundred percent. Prejudices and fears primarily lead to distortions of the event's scale and significance, and not just towards an increase in consequences, as eyewitnesses may only be able to testify to a small segment of the event accessible to them.

When planning their work, journalists must consider the specificity or type of emergency and monitor changes that are threatening or dangerous specifically for that type of disaster.

In situations of natural disasters, the following factors are important: the scale of the event, the possible spread of the disaster to neighboring locations, and the speed of such spread. Here, journalists should use not only the testimonies of official sources or eyewitnesses but also data from independent research and technological data - possibly information from satellites or other open sources that supplements the main report. Objects located in the natural disaster zone that could create additional dangerous factors, such as a gas station in a fire zone, require special attention. Knowledge of such objects or situations will allow for timely and effective work in the natural disaster zone and a full reflection of the efforts of people combating its consequences. As an example, we can cite the situation with floods in Poland in 2024, when numerous publications emerged about the strengthening of embankments, which helped attract many volunteers for this activity.

Technogenic disasters, accompanied or potentially accompanied by the release of hazardous substances or biological material threatening epidemics, require a special approach to journalist safety, as well as a sufficient level of knowledge about the nature of threats and the possibilities for mitigating their consequences.

Disasters resulting from fires also have their peculiarities; they can be of natural or technogenic origin, or considered as a separate dangerous factor in other disasters. Fires threaten the release of toxic substances, the rapid spread of these substances, and a significant reduction in air quality, which is a problem for many people. During fires, it is advisable to rely on official air quality monitoring data that indicate objective values, and to use the advice of experts and specialists regarding symptoms and alleviating conditions during smoke exposure. Overall, journalists should plan to cooperate with, or at least obtain information from, medical professionals, and strictly

adhere to recommendations and guidelines when preparing materials. As an example, we can cite the situation of the Russian-Ukrainian war, when, due to the spread of forecasts about the possibility of tactical nuclear weapons use and related comments in social media, iodine preparations virtually disappeared from pharmacies. This necessitated an information campaign regarding the impermissibility of using these drugs for prevention or «just in case.»

Disasters of a social or military nature involve a somewhat different model of data collection. It is important to understand and track key threats, the types and specifics of weapon use, and the possibilities of protection against them (for example, a ballistic missile covers a distance in minutes that a cruise missile takes dozens of minutes to travel, thus the chances of getting to a shelter differ, and the relevance of reports on the nature of the threat increases). Journalists must also have a detailed understanding of the social profiles of conflict participants, their motivations, and guidelines to gather material sufficient for objective event coverage.

This brief overview of recommendations for information gathering is not exhaustive. Journalists in an emergency zone develop their own models and priorities for obtaining information. We note that these models must absolutely consider the type of disaster, official sources, and objective data regarding its progression. They should involve experts who possess a sufficient level of competence and represent various directions of disaster consequence mitigation (from administrative efforts to ensure evacuation to providing medical or psychological assistance).

### **Collaboration with Other Services (rescue workers, government agencies, medical and volunteer organizations)**

A disaster compels hundreds or even thousands of people to focus on providing aid and support. Their activities are coordinated by specially established headquarters, and covering these activities is a crucial component of a journalist's work. Below, we provide a brief list of services or structures whose activities are important to cover for comprehensive reporting. As a rule, these systems include spokespersons or communication departments that prepare press releases or reports with verified information. Although social media provides information much faster, it's important to verify and cross-reference data with official sources before publication, or at least indicate the absence of comments or conclusions from such sources regarding situations discussed online.

**Emergency Response Structures (rescuers, firefighters, etc.).** Emergency Response Structures (rescuers, firefighters, etc.). Throughout this section, we will avoid specific names of agencies and units, as they can vary in each country. At the same time, the functions and roles of these structures remain similar, so we allow for certain generalizations in this handbook. Collaboration with emergency response structures focuses on obtaining primary and generalized information, determining the scale of the disaster, threats, and ways to avoid them in a specific situation. Information from these structures is thoroughly verified before release, often includes references to professional experts and scientific or other sources, and garners a high level of public trust.

**Police and other Internal Security Structures.** Professionals in these fields are often among the first to encounter danger and coordinate on-site activities for consequence mitigation or evacuation. Representatives of these structures generally do not require confirmation of their authority for actions in emergencies and enjoy public trust; their recommendations and orders are taken as given. The only caveat regarding these services is in social conflicts, where the role of such structures may not align with the social situation, or their representatives might be on both sides of the conflict. Here, journalists must weigh the current social role of these services and strive for impartiality when covering events.

**Military.** The deployment of military units or subdivisions into an emergency zone for any purpose indicates that authorities cannot cope with the situation through other, usual means. As a rule, the military does not have separate tools for communicating with the population; their activities are subordinated to disaster consequence mitigation headquarters. The situation is somewhat different in conflict zones, where military units perform tasks related to defending the country. Here, they can act as subjects of information activity; their structure includes press officer positions, and it is through them that communication is built and a journalist's work is organized (interviewing soldiers directly in the unit, filming or reporting from the front line, obtaining information about the course of hostilities in certain sectors of the front or in specific locations).

**Medical Services.** Medics working at a disaster site may not always be able to share information or have a generalized understanding of the situation. For such information, it is better to contact the communication departments of medical institutions

or ministries, which can see the entire picture of the disaster. At the same time, directly at the disaster site, a journalist can obtain information about typical injuries, means of counteracting or alleviating symptoms, the need for medical supplies or protective equipment, and general information about the condition of the injured, especially if they were subjects of previous reports. In this situation, detailed diagnoses should not be expected, but information about whether there is an ongoing threat to life or health can be hoped for.

Utility and other services that manage buildings and engineering networks. As a rule, these services do a lot to ensure that a disaster is not compounded by additional danger factors, as alongside its immediate consequences, there are often accidents involving electrical or gas networks, water supply and drainage, and the destruction or damage of buildings.

**Volunteer Organizations.** These structures are not part of the state body system but actively participate in disaster consequence mitigation. They often serve as a hub for involving local (and not only local) residents in combating consequences or creating preventive measures against natural phenomena.

### **Ensuring Journalist Safety**

Prioritizing your safety is a critical step in a journalist's preparation for disaster coverage. A survey conducted as part of the Erasmus+ project "Disaster Journalism" revealed that only 17.6% of journalists prioritize their own safety in an emergency zone. Yet, 80.9% of surveyed practicing journalists emphasized the necessity of acquiring first aid knowledge and skills when preparing to work in a disaster zone.

Above, we outlined specific points within the structure of strategic and tactical planning. Here, we will focus on the organizational and safety dimensions of various types of disasters.

A journalist cannot disregard rules of conduct in a disaster zone; at the very least, accreditation indicates that such conduct is expected. Rules and regulations developed for disaster responders clearly regulate many factors, depending on the nature of the threat. Several typical general rules to consider include aspects such as: duration of stay at the scene; rules for movement and marking of vehicles, clothing, and equipment; conduct during work, specifically

avoiding dangerous factors and substances; medical prophylaxis (if needed) and equipment (first aid kit contents); use of protective gear in designated locations; and escort or constant communication with the coordinating headquarters. This far from exhaustive list shows that the rules for being at the scene constitute a complex but vital system, whose purpose is to preserve the life and health of the journalist.

Among the general factors, it's also important to consider the journalist's health status, as certain damaging factors can significantly impact the ability to perform active duties. Therefore, deployment to an emergency site is only possible when such limitations are absent. The same applies to the ability to stay autonomously at the scene for an extended period, in a situation lacking comfort and with limited basic human needs (food, water, rest). To this, we should add the high level of emotional tension often observed during the coverage of emergencies.

During natural disasters, journalists should take care not only of their own safety but also of the preservation of their equipment, without which materials cannot be published (protection from water, temperature, lightning strikes, etc.). It's also advisable to have medical supplies and a minimal survival kit (water, food) for acute situations. No less important is having means to inform rescuers about problems if the situation becomes extremely critical. During technogenic disasters, additional care must be taken to protect against the main damaging factors, and it is important to follow medical recommendations and consistently monitor one's condition.

In situations of military or social conflicts, journalists must clearly identify their profession to protect themselves from the consequences of confrontation. On the other hand, if one side of the conflict violates the rules of warfare or has other motives, the "PRESS" designation can pose additional threats; the number of journalists who die in conflicts is a sad confirmation of this fact. Also, one cannot neglect protective equipment - a helmet, body armor - and accompaniment by a responsible officer or representative of a military unit's communication department. As a rule, media presence and coverage of conflict information are important for all participants, so journalists receive appropriate support. When working in military conflict situations, it is crucial to ensure data security and delete all unnecessary information from the phone and laptop you plan to use on site. Any data, even likes on social media,

can become an additional reason for restrictions and biases from the conflict parties (Institute of Mass Information, 2016, p. 137).

Finally, we must emphasize the need for reliable transportation that can help save lives or evacuate from an affected zone during a technogenic

### **Disaster Response Plans (How Journalists Can Develop a Response Plan in Disaster Situations)**

Disaster response procedures are stipulated by law and define the actions of various structures and services in crisis situations. These plans are systemic and aimed at reducing consequences or avoiding them in the most effective way possible. However, every emergency creates challenges and threats that extend far beyond developed plans, and mitigating disaster consequences may not always be optimally effective due to the human factor or the emergence of new, unforeseen threats. Journalists can significantly influence the optimization of such measures, and at various stages of a crisis situation.

First and foremost, it is important to focus on local information and its objective assessment for those locations or regions prone to disasters. Such information can be disseminated through social networks, local media resources, or even official reports from local government branches. This typically refers to situations that could lead to a disaster - excessive rainfall, rising river levels, the threat of dry grass or peat fires - all of which are precedents indicating the possibility of an emergency. As a rule, such situations are at least monitored locally, or authorities implement measures to prevent the situation from worsening.

Close attention to escalating social or military conflicts or the creation of conditions for military conflict also serves as a factor in preventing disasters or can mitigate their consequences, warn the population, and focus attention on potential threats. For disaster journalism, responding to events that have already occurred is more common, and this introduction merely highlights a journalist's capabilities in forecasting event development and focusing social attention.

During disasters, official information reveals key indicators: the scale of the event, actual losses and casualties, possible consequences, and the development of the situation. Simultaneously, among people who witnessed or suffered from the disaster,

illustrative content is disseminated, specific needs and fears are highlighted, and social attitudes are formed, including towards the authorities who must take measures to eliminate consequences. The work of rescuers, medics, and volunteers operating in the disaster zone also becomes an object of journalistic attention. Their actions, sometimes even heroic, rarely make it into official reports. Therefore, media publications not only reveal the heroism of these individuals to the public but also help create positive social contexts to reduce the level of despair, anxiety, and fear, as it is always good to hope for the support of professionals who are in their place.

The last point to discuss in this section of the handbook is attention to details that need to be disseminated as examples, warnings, confirmations, and so on. The dissemination of official information by spokespersons and representatives of consequence mitigation headquarters leads to an intensification of the information flow, increasing comments and publications. The development of the situation, the increase or decrease of a threat - also lead to an increased intensity of the information flow. At the same time, people or circumstances that are no less important for understanding the situation than official information often remain outside public attention. This category can also include stories of eyewitnesses or affected individuals whose stories have been told and whose fate interests the public.

### **Case Studies**

You are presented with two models of news coverage about fires that garnered a high number of reactions and views, thus deemed effective by the audience. The materials on fires in America are based on interactive maps and generalizations of experience derived from evident analytics. A significant portion of these materials emphasizes the connection between the causes of disasters and political or social processes. In contrast, informational materials on fires in Spain have a somewhat different character; the information is primarily focused on the chronology of events and threats, with a considerable part of the content pertaining to the causes and specific characteristics of the emergency.

In this section, we discuss preparation for disaster coverage. The materials from the USA show a higher degree of analytical depth, implying a more complex model of preparation for event coverage or directing journalists' attention to cause-and-effect relationships as the basis for the disaster coverage model. The materials from Europe

align with a response model, where the event dictates the specifics of coverage, and cause-and-effect relationships serve as an illustrative component that enhances the publication's impact.

Based on a comparison of approaches by journalists from different parts of the world, construct a model for preparing for disaster coverage that would involve knowledge of the region and potential threats, an analysis of previous emergencies of that type, and less emphasis on socio-political contexts. Pay attention to how evident the collaboration between journalists and disaster relief services or other participating organizations is in these news reports. Separately, consider the reasons for the appearance of politicians in American news and the articulation of their positions to illustrate the situation. Why do you think such a model is not relevant for publications by European journalists? Conclude on how the socio-political landscape influences media work and determines the systematic approach to covering emergencies.

### ***Fires in the USA***

The NBC News article, “The dangerous combination fueling the L.A. fires: Exceptional dryness and strong winds,” reports on the primary causes behind the dangerous wildfires in the Los Angeles area. The article identifies a “triple whammy” of conditions: prolonged drought, an exceptionally dry winter, and powerful Santa Ana winds. It details the widespread destruction, including 16 deaths and over 12,000 structures destroyed, and mentions the specific neighborhoods affected. Most importantly, the article connects these specific fires to the larger issue of climate change, arguing that such destructive blazes will become more frequent as global warming alters rainfall patterns and intensifies drought. The report includes commentary from experts to support its claims.

This material is highly effective for covering the wildfires for several reasons:

1. Explaining the “Why” behind the “What”: The article moves beyond simply stating that fires are happening. It serves a crucial educational function by explaining the scientific and meteorological factors that led to the disaster. By breaking down the “dangerous combination” of dry conditions and strong winds, it gives readers a deeper understanding of the event. This is a key aspect of explanatory journalism.

2. **Connecting the Local Event to a Global Issue:** The piece successfully links the immediate, local disaster (the L.A. wildfires) to the global, long-term issue of climate change. This connection is vital for public awareness, as it helps people see the tangible, real-world consequences of climate change, making the abstract concept of global warming more concrete and urgent.
3. **Use of Expert Commentary:** The inclusion of quotes from wildfire specialist Max Moritz and climate scientist Daniel Swain adds credibility and scientific authority to the reporting. Their expertise validates the article's central argument and helps the public trust the information.
4. **Balance of Data and Human Element:** The report provides a concise summary of the human and material toll - 16 deaths and over 12,000 destroyed structures - without being overly graphic. This respectful approach maintains the seriousness of the event while focusing on the broader, systemic issues at play. The image of a resident trying to protect his property also effectively conveys the personal struggle against the natural forces.
5. **Forward-Looking Perspective:** By concluding with the warning that such fires will “continue to threaten people’s lives and livelihoods,” the article provides a forward-looking perspective. It suggests that this is not an isolated incident but part of a new reality, which is a powerful call to action for policy makers and the public.

In summary, this article is a strong example of journalism that is both informative and socially responsible. It educates the public, contextualizes a crisis, and highlights the urgent need to address the root causes of the disaster.

Link to the material: <https://www.nbcnews.com/weather/wildfires/what-fueled-la-fires-dry-conditions-wind-rcna186801>



The BBC News article, “What’s the latest on Los Angeles wildfires and how did they start?” by James FitzGerald, provides a comprehensive overview of the ongoing and devastating Los Angeles wildfires. It reports that at least 25 people have died and over 12,000 structures have been destroyed. The article details the status of the two main blazes, the Palisades and Eaton fires, noting

that they are partially contained but face renewed risk from strong Santa Ana winds. The piece also delves into the causes, ruling out lightning but highlighting the combination of extreme drought, dry vegetation, and strong winds. It explores the political debate surrounding the city’s preparedness and concludes by connecting the fires to the broader, long-term impact of climate change.

This material is extremely effective and serves as a model for comprehensive crisis reporting.

1. **Multi-Faceted Coverage:** The article doesn’t just focus on one aspect of the disaster. It covers a wide range of crucial topics:
  - **The Latest Updates:** Providing concrete numbers on deaths, destroyed structures, and containment percentages.
  - **Scientific Causes:** Explaining the role of Santa Ana winds, drought, and dried-out vegetation.
  - **Human Impact:** Mentioning the victims and even celebrities who lost their homes, which makes the scale of destruction more relatable.
  - **Political Response:** Highlighting the “political row” over preparedness, the role of the Governor and Mayor, and budget cuts. This holds officials accountable and adds a critical, investigative layer to the reporting.
  - **Broader Context:** Crucially, it links the fires to climate change, quoting experts and government research to show that these are not isolated events but part of a larger trend.
2. **Use of Visuals and Sections:** The article is well-structured with clear headings and a video segment, making the complex information digestible and easy to navigate for the reader. The use of sub-headings like “What are the Santa Ana winds?” and “What caused the fires?” allows the reader to quickly find answers to their specific questions.
3. **Educational Value:** The material goes beyond mere reporting by educating the public on technical terms like “containment” and explaining the “whiplash” effect of climate change. This empowers the reader with a deeper understanding of the event and its long-term implications.

In summary, this article is a prime example of high-quality journalism during a disaster. It is factual, contextual, and serves a vital public service role by not only informing but also educating and holding power to account.

Link to the material: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/clyxypryrnko>



### *Fires in Spain*

The Euronews article, “The era of ‘mega forest fires’ has begun in Spain. Is climate change to blame?,” reports on the wildfires that broke out in Spain’s Valencia region in March 2023, an unseasonably early start to the fire season. The article notes that over 1,500 people were evacuated and more than 4,000 hectares of land were burned. It investigates the suspected cause of the fire (a spark from a machine) but primarily focuses on the exacerbating factors: a prolonged drought, an unusually dry winter, and high temperatures. The piece directly links these conditions to climate change and includes expert commentary to argue that “mega forest fires” are becoming the new norm in Spain. It also discusses the broader ecological impacts of these fires and suggests potential strategies for reducing their risk in the future.

This material is highly effective and is an excellent example of in-depth, solutions-oriented journalism.

1. **Connecting the Local Event to a Global Trend:** The article excels at moving beyond a single event to a larger, more critical issue. It uses the Spanish wildfire as a case study to explore the broader phenomenon of climate change-fueled disasters. This approach provides a powerful, tangible example of an abstract concept, making the threat of climate change feel more real and immediate to the audience.
2. **Educational and Explanatory Focus:** The piece does an excellent job of explaining the scientific reasons behind the fires, such as the low humidity and dry topsoil. It also educates the reader on the role of greenhouse gases, the consequences of a warming climate (like increased evaporation and longer fire seasons), and the ecological damage caused by fires. This is a crucial public service.

3. **Incorporating Diverse Expert Voices:** The article includes commentary from a range of credible sources, including Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, weather agencies (AEMET), wildfire expert Pablo Martín Pinto, and a forest ranger. This gives the report depth and multiple perspectives, reinforcing its credibility and comprehensive nature.
4. **Actionable and Forward-Looking:** Unlike articles that only report on a disaster, this one concludes with a focus on solutions. It presents expert-backed strategies for reducing wildfire risk, such as better forest management, the creation of “patchwork landscapes,” and increased resources for firefighters. This approach not only informs but also empowers the audience and policy makers with potential actions, which is a hallmark of responsible journalism.

In summary, the Euronews article is a successful piece of journalism because it is factual, educational, and contextual. It uses a specific event to shed light on a global crisis, provides scientific explanations, and offers a path forward, demonstrating that journalism can be a powerful force for change.



Link to the material: <https://www.euronews.com/green/2023/03/27/the-era-of-mega-forest-fires-has-begun-in-spain-is-climate-change-to-blame>

The DW article, “Spain: Thousands left without power as Catalonia fire rages,” reports on a significant forest fire in Spain’s northeastern Catalonia region. The fire, which had already consumed over 435 hectares, led to the evacuation of nearly 140 people from several villages and a campsite. It also caused temporary train service cuts, road closures, and a power outage affecting an estimated 4,000 people. The article notes that strong winds were fanning the flames and preventing water-bombing planes from taking off, while the rugged terrain was complicating firefighting efforts. The piece also links the fire to the broader issues of climate change, drought, and a record number of wildfires in Spain.

This material is very effective for its clear, concise, and comprehensive reporting on an ongoing crisis.

1. **Focus on Immediate Impact and Logistics:** The article excels at providing real-time, actionable information. It reports on the number of people evacuated, the scope of the power outage, and the specific closures of roads and train lines. This focus on immediate logistical details is crucial for a public dealing with an unfolding emergency. It also highlights the challenges faced by firefighters, such as strong winds and difficult terrain, which provides a realistic view of the rescue operation.
2. **Contextualization:** The article successfully places the fire in a broader context. It mentions that wildfires are on the rise in Spain and references data from the European Forest Fire Information System (EFFIS) about the record number of blazes in previous years. It also connects the fire directly to climate change and the region's severe drought, which elevates the report from a single-event story to one with a systemic and pressing message.
3. **Human and Technical Elements:** The reporting balances the human element (evacuations) with technical details (number of firefighting units, hectares burned, wind speeds) without getting bogged down in jargon. It also uses a map and a relevant image to help readers visualize the affected area and the on-the-ground situation.
4. **Public Service Orientation:** The article's mention of the "drought emergency" and the associated water restrictions in Catalonia adds a vital public service dimension. It informs the public not only about the fire itself but also about the underlying conditions and the policy responses to the crisis.

In conclusion, the DW article is a strong example of responsible journalism that provides a mix of immediate, practical information and broader, contextual analysis. It informs the public about what is happening, why it is happening, and what it means for the future.

Article link: <https://p.dw.com/p/4UoTZ>



## Recommendations

Preparing for emergency coverage is a complex process that includes gathering information, collecting contacts, studying legislation, and understanding the specifics of a journalist's work directly in the affected location. Above, we've described the main approaches and possible scenarios, although it's certainly impossible to account for everything. Finally, here are a few tips on how not to turn news into a disaster.

For effective and professional work, a journalist's mindset and psychological resilience are significant. It's crucial to remember the key principle already mentioned: not only to do no harm but also to help. To achieve this, it is necessary to pay close attention to details and understand the importance of public news for victims, rescuers, medics, and representatives of various services involved at the emergency site. Their contribution will not be fully recognized until the media reports on it.

Don't forget about plans, especially paying attention to those aspects that don't fit into the official reports but reflect the essence of the event and consistently demonstrate people's readiness to support and help, not abandoning efforts to rescue and mitigate the consequences of disasters. During every emergency, the situation improves thanks to specific individuals: not only those directly clearing debris or providing medical aid, but also those who coordinate activities, organize evacuations, or ensure drinking water. All these people are doing a common good, and it's essential to be empathetic to their efforts. Material for publication can be found everywhere, and it's solely up to the journalist how we remember this story - as a story of support and overcoming problems, or as a story of despair and defeat.

During disasters and emergencies, you will encounter a lot of information and data on social media and local public pages. Remember that any information in these channels is published by specific individuals who can become part of your material – providing testimony or comments, confirming official data, or telling their survival story. At the same time, much information from such sources cannot be considered sufficiently objective, as their authors are in a difficult emotional state, prone to anxiety and worry, and may exaggerate or, conversely, downplay the significance of events. Also, when publishing information, such authors aim to help specific

people – their closest neighbors and surroundings, to protect them from threats, even by stirring up emotions or fears.

The desire to be the first to tell the world about what they've seen is also present among social media authors. Therefore, one must approach information in local public pages with caution, distinguishing between objective and emotional information: for example, the time the tragedy began, recorded by a local resident's phone camera, is objective information, while their impressions of the possible consequences of the event require verification. Particular attention should be paid to information about the number of injured and dead; at least, such information can easily be clarified with medical services that provide assistance or monitor the situation.

The final piece of advice in this section is the recommendation to duplicate critically important tools and materials whenever possible. In disaster situations, equipment may fail, or due to stress and emotions, something might break - from a torn camera strap to an accidentally shattered lens. It would be even more frustrating if filmed material disappears due to the loss of a physical information carrier for any reason, and you also didn't take care of a copy. 86.2% of surveyed journalists ranked communication tools first among what they take to an emergency zone, 57.6% ranked first aid kits, and only 36.4% ranked protective equipment. Caring for safety means giving a million-strong audience a chance to see your material, learn about the situation, and perhaps contribute to supporting those affected. Therefore, neglecting safety is extremely imprudent and unprofessional.



# 1.3.

## Covering Disasters On Site



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**JOURNALISM  
IS NOT A CRIME**



## 1.3. Covering Disasters On Site

### Introduction

A journalist at a disaster scene can be overwhelmed by the situation, react emotionally, and not immediately engage with the process. Professional skills and readiness are the components of success that this chapter will address. We'll outline questions such as: How do you avoid getting lost and start working? What should you pay attention to and what steps should you take? How do you gather and prepare material while remembering important topics? We are far from offering a universal algorithm; rather, we will discuss general patterns that will certainly be useful.

A survey conducted as part of the Erasmus+ project “Disaster Journalism” showed that the most important requirements for journalistic materials are the ability to reliably convey facts, and the ability to avoid manipulation and adhere to principles of humanity. In third place among the results was adherence to ethical principles, especially when working with affected individuals. These conclusions from experts and practicing journalists underscore the importance of a media professional's training.

Disaster coverage attracts the attention of many journalists. If you miss a moment, it's quite likely it will be covered in your colleagues' material, but it will be no less regrettable, especially if these moments are important and significant, and attention to them was anticipated by your general action plan at the disaster site. Therefore, an internal review of your actions and comparison of results with a pre-arranged plan or a simple list of ideas is a good self-control tool that will certainly be useful. However, many precautions and work specifics are determined by experience, so you should never neglect the recommendations of more experienced colleagues, both from your own editorial office and those you meet at the scene. It's also wise to use the advice of people who are more knowledgeable about the security situation and sufficiently aware of how to avoid dangerous factors. The materials you gather, the facts you record, the comments and interviews you film—are undoubtedly important for creating an informational image of the situation, but only if they are transmitted to the editorial office and published. Therefore, don't forget to take care of safety and the technical means necessary for your work.

A few more warnings to help ensure your readiness for work: scan and upload all important documents to cloud services,

including your ID, press card, and accreditation, so that in case of loss or any critical situations, you can confirm your status. If necessary, consider getting a translator or using modern AI-powered devices with offline translation capabilities. The accuracy of such a device can be sufficient for understanding the situation and aiding communication with the local population.

### **First Steps at the Scene**

According to the Institute of Mass Information in Ukraine, situations often arise where journalists are denied access to emergency sites (Safarov, 2019), even though the country's legislation provides for free access. Such situations can be anticipated, so it is always advisable to secure accreditation and have documents that confirm your ability to work in the specific required location. The first steps for a journalist at the scene should involve working with the disaster consequence mitigation headquarters, as such cooperation is necessary and important for the journalist themselves (legalizing their presence, access to official information) and for the structures dealing with the disaster's aftermath (the ability to disseminate necessary information, an additional source of information from specific locations, confirmation of reports with visual materials, etc.).

Consequence mitigation headquarters are not only responsible for upholding journalists' rights to information but also, to some extent, bear responsibility for their work, especially in conflict zones. Whenever possible, it is advisable to establish productive cooperation, exchange information and contacts, and update the needs of the victims in all possible cases.

Sarah Knight, in her handbook on Data Verification, identifies three key roles a journalist can play when preparing materials at a disaster site: "providing people with the information they need to respond to the event... disseminating critically important information honestly, without sympathy or prejudice." The researcher defines the third role as creating a filter for information from social networks and local public pages, which is quite extensive but requires verification and clarification, a duty of the journalist or editorial office (Knight, 2016).

Following the author, it should be emphasized that the first role - providing useful information - must be clearly coordinated with the information from consequence mitigation headquarters

or specific services responsible for the situation in the emergency location: police, firefighters, rescuers, etc. Since such information determines ways to prevent dangerous factors, it must strictly align with official statements, be provided promptly, and cite the sources of recommendations.

The first steps at the scene should also include the journalist's work in clarifying the general situation, identifying key threats, selecting contacts of eyewitnesses and experts, creating a list of locations that may be interesting or important, and developing logistics. It will be useful to learn about the informational activities of disaster mitigation headquarters, such as press briefings or statement releases, the possibility of obtaining comments on the situation, and creating other content based on official data. During a disaster, the dissemination of such information is regular, so it's worth inquiring about the schedule and providing contacts for receiving official press releases if the editorial office has not already arranged this before your arrival at the scene.

### **Fact Gathering and Interviews**

The process of gathering data for publications involves understanding the structure of organizations and services, their responsibilities for specific areas, as well as paying attention to recommended sources and expert assessments. First and foremost, you should obtain official information, if not already provided before the trip, and track the development of events through official communication channels and spokesperson statements. The involvement of experts must also be regulated and take into account their level of access to information, their experience, and their current role in the situation. For example, scientists' assessments of the consequences or potential consequences of a technogenic disaster may contain various scenarios that may not fully reflect the situation, so it's advisable to use several sources if possible.

Official data are periodically updated, contain information important to the public, and are aimed at managing the crisis. Therefore, such data cannot be disregarded even when they do not fully correspond to eyewitness accounts. In such situations, it's important to cite information sources and verify testimonies and assessments, as mentioned above. Separately, it's worth discussing official expert assessments - during a disaster, it's not always possible to objectively study the situation, so probable scenarios and perspectives may be highlighted in expert comments.

Local experts and eyewitnesses produce a significant amount of information, typically in the most accessible media format - i.e., disseminated on social networks and local public pages. Journalists must consider the specifics of how such information is spread, the emotional states of event participants, and therefore verify data and follow other data verification procedures. “When attempting to evaluate information - regardless of whether it’s an image, a tweet, a video, or another type of content - it’s necessary to verify the source and the content itself,” assert Craig Silverman and Rina Subaki in their data verification handbook chapter (Silverman & Subak, 2016). Additionally, it’s advisable to use modern data verification tools based on technologies for evaluating the technical parameters of photo and video materials, including metadata.

Special attention should be paid to materials from local residents in the case of social or military disasters. Do not forget about potential disinformation or bias from any side of the conflict, or the use of information as an element of hybrid warfare, a means of creating desired social effects (panic, fear, anxiety, etc.). The dissemination of such information significantly worsens the situation, as media are trusted more than social networks, and the scale of audience reach matters.

However, do not entirely disregard information from local resources. Very often, individual topics and messages, photos, and video materials may repeat with minor changes (angle, lighting, time of capture, etc.). This can provide additional opportunities for data verification by comparing similar materials and establishing the course of real events. Searching for information in local sources is inherently documentary work and requires an analytical approach characteristic of journalistic investigations.

When collecting material, it’s important to stick to your pre-formed plan and remember to include facts from those event participants who often remain off-camera, such as medics or volunteers. It’s appropriate to differentiate facts by areas and topics that can provide insight into disaster consequence mitigation in different areas of responsibility: human health and evacuation, ensuring basic needs and volunteer activities, additional dangerous factors and threat warnings. Statistics and statistical data are another important direction for fact selection. As a rule, such information is disseminated by official sources, contains important information, and provides opportunities for objective information representation. Statistical data can also be collected by volunteer organizations and

centers, medical services, and local authorities. When publishing materials, it's important to clearly state the source, period, and volume of the factual basis on which the statistics were formed, as well as possible research errors stipulated by its methodology and indicated during publication.

Interviews and comments play a special role in a journalist's work at the scene. Not all filmed materials may be published, but the general rule states that the more such materials a journalist has in accordance with the content of the editorial assignment, the more fully they can fulfill that assignment. The circle of interviewees includes representatives of official structures, experts, spokespersons, eyewitnesses, local experts and activists, and affected individuals. The content of the questions and the specifics of the final material depend on how competent and informed the expert is, and how their comment or interview can be incorporated into the overall structure of the journalistic material.

At this stage of activity, we must emphasize the peculiarities of working with vulnerable population groups. The most vulnerable group, requiring unspoken adherence to ethics, is children and adolescents. The authors of the handbook "Journalist and (Un) Safety" state: "The interests and safety of children and adolescents must take precedence over any editorial requirements" (Institute of Mass Information, 2016, p. 168). A child can appear on camera only with the consent of the child, parents, or guardians. It is best to obtain such permission in writing. If such consent cannot be obtained, and the situation requires intervention (for example, it is necessary to quickly find the child's relatives, for which the media's potential is recommended to be used) - it is advisable to coordinate such possibilities with the editorial office and the relevant services of the disaster consequence mitigation headquarters.

Individuals affected by a disaster often have a special psychological state, so working with them requires a certain sensitivity; you should not force people to relive difficult moments if they are not ready to talk about it. Furthermore, it is necessary to verify and cross-check information. For instance, children and adolescents may fantasize (Institute of Mass Information, 2016, p. 169), add "facts" that did not actually occur, or whose interpretation may significantly differ in other sources, or assess the situation from an unexpected angle precisely due to the plasticity of their psyche and developmental characteristics (Institute of Mass Information, 2016, p. 168).

## **Trauma Journalism and Interviewing in Crisis**

The field of “Trauma Journalism” is currently a rapidly developing area of training, presented through numerous special courses, workshops, webinars, guidelines, and handbooks. It is highly advisable for any journalist working in an emergency zone to complete such a course to build specialized skills.

A key principle of interviewing victims is to avoid forcing them to relive negative emotions, especially if not much time has passed since the disaster. For instance, a medical professional treating a victim can provide a more objective account of injuries and an overall picture of the situation, whereas a victim might not only heighten the emotional reality but also be forced to re-experience trauma.

Additionally, the nature of the interview will depend on factors like the victim’s age, cultural traditions or religious affiliation, and social status. It is equally important for a journalist to have at least basic psychological and communication skills to be able to recognize nervous distress or a decline in a person’s psycho-physiological state and either change the subject or end the interview.

Special attention should be given to the ability to navigate contexts, transitioning during the interview from personal impressions to broader assessments, and from the past (in which the victims survived and found safety) to the future (in which they will overcome the consequences of the disaster). During the interview, both the journalist and the interviewee must remember that the material could be seen by millions of people worldwide. Such popularity could have both positive and negative consequences for the victim, offering help from caring individuals but also potentially causing social problems within their local community after the interview. When interviewing individuals who have experienced trauma, your approach should be grounded in empathy and a clear understanding of their psychological state. Here are some key techniques to keep in mind:

### **1. Establish a Safe and Controlled Environment**

- Choose the right location: Conduct the interview in a private, quiet space where the individual feels safe and won’t be interrupted. Avoid public or noisy areas that could add to their stress.

- Respect their time and space: Always ask for their consent to be interviewed and make it clear they can stop at any time. State the purpose of the interview clearly and concisely.

## **2. Adopt a Non-Intrusive, Empathetic Tone**

- Listen more than you speak: Give the individual time and space to talk. Avoid interrupting or filling silences. Your role is to be a listener, not a prompter.
- Use open-ended questions: Start with broad, non-specific questions to allow them to share what they feel comfortable with. Questions like, “Can you tell me what happened?” or “What do you remember from that day?” are better than, “How did you feel when you saw...?” which can be too direct.
- Avoid leading questions: Do not phrase questions in a way that suggests a specific answer or emotion. This can put words in their mouth and compromise the integrity of their testimony.

## **3. Navigate Emotional Content with Care**

- Move from general to specific: Start the interview with general facts (e.g., the time of the event, the location) before moving to more emotionally charged details. This helps the individual feel in control.
- Focus on observable facts, not just feelings: While feelings are important, eyewitness testimony is often most valuable when it focuses on objective details. Ask about what they saw, heard, or smelled. This can also help reduce the risk of re-traumatizing them by forcing them to dwell on emotional pain.
- Be aware of their emotional state: Pay close attention to verbal and non-verbal cues. If they show signs of distress - such as crying, trembling, or becoming visibly agitated - it may be time to change the topic or politely end the interview.

#### **4. Consider the Broader Context**

- **Manage expectations:** Remind the person that their story is valuable, but also be transparent about the potential reach of the media. This helps them understand the implications of sharing their story publicly.
- **Offer resources:** If appropriate, have information ready on local support services, such as counseling or aid organizations. This shows that you care about their well-being beyond the scope of the interview.

Interviewing people who have survived a disaster requires journalists to have a deep understanding of ethical standards and psychological sensitivity. The main goal is to obtain information without causing harm. In general, effective interviewing of victims is a balance between the professional duty to inform the public and the ethical duty to protect the source of information. This requires special skills that go beyond traditional journalism.

#### **Using Different Formats (Text, Photo, Video)**

Text, audio, video, and photos are the means by which we present information about a disaster. The editorial team can add visual design and apply additional effects, but the quality and completeness of the material are ensured by the journalist. We live in an era of convergent media, where professional qualifications must include the ability to prepare various materials, from a short note to a podcast, from a photo to a video report. A journalist must be ready for such work, both in terms of mastery of genre tools for depicting the event and technologically - meaning using various tools for a comprehensive representation of events across all platforms supported by the editorial office.

Text work has several peculiarities that require attention: accuracy and completeness of presentation, particularly the correct spelling of proper nouns, avoiding unclear abbreviations, and explaining technical or scientific terminology - these are the foremost requirements for a text. The style of presentation, especially for news reports, should not contain comments or evaluations from journalists, particularly concerning the demonstration of personal emotions, in order to create an impartial picture of events. Special attention should be paid to avoiding hate speech and using specific terminology correctly - for example, distinguishing between the

concepts of a refugee and an internally displaced person, and adhering to requirements for labeling parties in social or military conflicts.

When creating audio texts, the soundscape of the event is important, as are additional effects that may require commentary (the listener must understand what is happening). It's also worth remembering that additional elements create tension for the listener (e.g., sounds of sirens or explosions), so such sounds must be identified within the context of the event. For each type of message, especially audiovisual ones, it's important to consider the platform where the information will be disseminated, as different platforms have their own requirements for information presentation - from duration to style of presentation.

Photos created by the journalist or used to illustrate material should always have an authorship credit. In many situations, such photos can be sourced from photo banks or disseminated by official sources. Photo quality is important, and one should strive for a sufficient level of visual content and meaningfulness. However, journalists can also use photo and video materials from social networks and other local sources that may not always be of high quality but accurately depict the event. In such situations, the decision to publish the photo is also made by the editorial team.

Video documentation of a disaster is always appropriate. A journalist's presence at the scene in most situations is geared towards creating video content, especially in the digital era. Video should reflect the dynamics of events, demonstrate changes in situations, present event participants and victims, and again, be tailored for dissemination on the platforms supported by the editorial office. We note that in many situations, additional lighting may be needed. The experience of Ukrainian journalists who worked in the Anti-Terrorist Operation zone before the full-scale invasion confirms the need to carry a flashlight or even several to improve the quality of filmed material (Institute of Mass Information, 2016, p. 21). In military conflict zones, it is advisable to have a flashlight or red LED lights to maintain camouflage.

Today, we're seeing the active use of drones and other unmanned systems. These tools are often used when a specialist needs to gather information without risking their life - from filming a fire to covering military operations. The widespread use of unmanned

systems in warfare has already led to a rapid development of this field and the creation of various technological and infrastructural capabilities, to the point where some armies now have dedicated drone units.

The use of unmanned systems and the footage they capture have their own specific technical features. These include the equipment itself, material quality, camera angles, pacing of the footage, and data reliability. There are also specific considerations related to the operator's competence and the capabilities and proper use of the equipment. It's highly recommended that any journalist who plans to work in a disaster zone take a specialized course to become a drone operator. This would not only enable them to use drones themselves but also to understand the benefits, potential biases, and drawbacks when using drone footage captured by others.

### **Journalistic Capabilities and Advantages**

The use of drones provides journalists with unique advantages that significantly improve the quality of their reporting. Drones allow for shots that are impossible to capture from the ground. These can include large-scale panoramas of destroyed cities, views of overflowing rivers, or bird's-eye shots that help assess the scale of destruction. Journalist safety is the most important advantage. Drones allow for filming in dangerous zones, such as near fires, landslides, or in areas of active conflict, without putting the journalist at risk. UAVs can quickly reach hard-to-access locations, allowing journalists to get footage faster than with traditional methods.

At the same time, the use of drones in journalism, especially in disaster zones, raises a number of ethical and legal issues that are important to remember.

- **Privacy and Invasion of Space:** Aerial filming allows drones to capture places and events that are typically private. Journalists must weigh whether the public interest outweighs an individual's right to privacy, especially when filming victims, their homes, or personal tragedies.
- **Flight Regulations:** Depending on the country and location, there are strict rules for operating unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). These include restrictions on altitude, no-fly zones (e.g., near airports, government buildings, or military sites), and the need for permits.

Journalists are required to know and follow these rules to avoid legal consequences.

- **Safety:** Improper use of a drone can pose a threat to people on the ground, other aircraft, and rescue and search teams. A journalist must be aware that their drone should not interfere with the work of emergency services.

Despite their significant advantages, the use of drones in journalism has its challenges. Drones can be ineffective in extreme weather conditions, such as strong winds, rain, frost, or fog. This limits their use. Technical problems like a drained battery, loss of signal, or camera malfunction can lead to the loss of the drone or poor-quality footage. An improperly chosen angle or scale can create a misleading impression of the situation. A journalist must be honest and objective to avoid deceiving the audience.

Overall, drones are a powerful tool for modern disaster journalism, but their use requires not only technical skills but also a deep understanding of the ethical, legal, and professional aspects.

When covering a disaster, journalists may use materials from their colleagues or agencies, most often photo materials and press releases. It's important to remember copyright and related rights, indicating the source or applying another model for reserving these rights. The same advice applies to using information from local information resources on social media. Special attention should be paid to citation accuracy and avoiding situations where a quote is presented out of its original context. Such actions are evidence of violations of journalistic standards and professional ethics.

### **Live Broadcasts**

During disasters, national and regional television companies initiate and run special broadcasting procedures, often in a non-stop mode, as a telethon or other format that allows for round-the-clock informing about the course of events. A significant portion of the broadcast consists of live field reports, provided by on-site journalists. From these materials, millions of viewers gain an understanding of the disaster's scale and consequences, hence the demands on such materials are quite high.

Preparing for a live broadcast involves several mandatory steps, traditional for journalism. The first step is selecting an appropriate location that reflects the nature of the event. The next

step is time planning. For disaster situations, we have at least two caveats: the duration of the broadcast cannot be too long, and the journalist must possess the most current information, including official data disseminated by the regional disaster response headquarters. The subsequent step is planning the presentation. Experienced broadcasters know that a prepared and thoroughly rehearsed text may not work during a live broadcast, as viewers might get the impression of reading from a script. Therefore, it's better to have an understanding of the message's structure and sequence, key facts, and names, so that you can adjust what's being reported during the broadcast. The final step is checking equipment readiness and connection quality. Often, this final check is performed during the broadcast itself, when the studio clarifies signal reception - a common situation, especially given the emergency and potential broadcasting interruptions.

A journalist can invite experts or representatives of disaster consequence mitigation services to a live broadcast. Such inclusions also require preparation: the expert must understand what they will be talking about, be ready for questions, and possess the necessary information fully, or at least sufficiently. It's also important not to forget about angles and lighting, and ambient noise (intersound); all these factors create a combined effect and influence the perception of the emergency. The journalist must ensure their own safety and that of the operator, so it's necessary to carefully consider the location choice and adhere to safety norms during the live broadcast. This problem is particularly acute in combat zones or frontline areas, where there's a risk of being hit by weapons firing from concealed positions. Here, it is crucial to strictly follow the recommendations of press officers and other representatives of military command. Journalists must remember that in a military conflict zone, parts of the territory may be targeted or mined, monitored by snipers or drones, and today there can be many more types of weapons than even a few years ago, with FPV drones and other unmanned systems actively used alongside mortar fire. The "PRESS" inscription on equipment may not always save you, and in some situations, as the experience of the Russian-Ukrainian war proves, it can provoke additional fire.

The journalist's image on screen must align with the TV channel's style and adhere to internal broadcasting standards. During disasters, journalists cannot always control their emotions, and this applies to both the on-site journalist and the studio anchor. As a rule,

viewers are understanding of such situations, disregarding pauses or other shortcomings, such as a trembling voice or unclear speech. However, journalists must understand that their key task is to convey information regardless of their own state and emotions, to publish important facts, as the life or safety of many people may depend on it. If, during preparation for a live broadcast, it is not possible to achieve an unemotional delivery, it is still advisable to record the main facts and content so that the broadcast can be conducted fully and the most important information conveyed.

### **Collaboration with Other Journalists**

At a disaster scene, a team of journalists, representing various media structures, usually works together. In this paragraph, we'll outline some areas of cooperation that can enhance the effectiveness of your material. First and foremost, every journalist has their own experience working at disaster sites, so it's not worth limiting yourself to theory alone; it's always advisable to seek and listen to advice and recommendations. Similarly, it's likely that your colleagues have been at the scene longer and possess more information regarding local rules and circumstances, the activities of services, and the specifics of experts, thus they can significantly simplify your efforts in preparing material. Safety recommendations will also be important and should be utilized.

The UNESCO-supported Safety Guide for Journalists emphasizes that the AFP (Agence France-Presse) agency tries to ensure its journalists are accompanied by local colleagues or other journalists to always work as a team (UNESCO, 2017, p. 87) ensuring media professionals are not left alone. This approach is driven by various situations, especially in military and social conflict zones, which can lead to tragic consequences.

Journalists can also leverage their colleagues' strengths. For example, if a professional photojournalist is working at the scene, you can use their photos with proper attribution based on direct agreements or through the platform where the content is hosted. Many opportunities for collaboration arise during emergencies and disasters. Media professionals fulfill a common mission: providing information that will help many people preserve their lives and health, in addition to offering necessary support, assisting in meeting vital needs, and shaping an understanding of the situation and response possibilities.

Not all of your interviewees will speak on camera, show their faces, or provide identifiable data. In such situations, it's important to use material preparation methods that guarantee the interviewee's safety. This will help ensure the source's openness and trust.

### **Case Studies**

In 2023, Slovenia suffered from floods. Information agencies and media across Europe disseminated information about this crisis, providing quite objective assessments and conclusions about the consequences of the floods. Local media analyzed the needs for protection from this natural disaster, publishing information about the situation's impact on the economy and the need for investment in recovery and prevention against future threats of this type.

The DW article, "Slovenia, Austria floods leave 3 dead," reports on the severe flooding and landslides that struck Slovenia and southern Austria after a month's worth of rain fell in just 24 hours. The disaster resulted in the deaths of three people. The report details the extensive damage, including submerged towns, impassable roads, and closed rail lines. It notes that several villages were cut off, thousands of households lost power, and rescuers struggled to reach affected areas. The article also provides a glimpse into the response efforts, with the army, firefighters, and civil protection teams working to rescue residents and clear debris. Finally, it mentions that the extreme weather is expected to spread to Croatia and Bosnia and that experts link these events to climate change.

This material is very effective for its clear, concise, and comprehensive coverage of an unfolding natural disaster.

- 1. Direct and Factual Reporting:** The article begins with the most critical information - the death toll and the cause of the disaster - and then provides key facts about the scope of the damage. By quantifying the rain ("a month's worth in 24 hours") and the number of affected households (16,000 power cuts), the report gives a tangible sense of the event's severity.
- 2. Focus on Logistics and Challenges:** The report details the logistical nightmare caused by the floods, such as closed highways, shuttered rail lines, and inaccessible villages. It highlights the challenges faced by emergency services, including the need for dinghies and the difficulty of communication. This focus on the "how" of the disaster

response provides valuable insight into the reality on the ground.

3. **Inclusion of Official Statements:** The use of quotes from officials like the Defense Minister and the civil protection chief adds authority and urgency to the report. Their statements confirm the seriousness of the situation and the scale of the rescue effort.
4. **Broader Contextualization:** Similar to other effective articles, this report connects the localized floods to the broader issue of climate change. It references expert opinions and mentions other recent extreme weather events in Europe, such as the heatwaves in Greece and Spain. This linkage helps readers understand that these are not isolated incidents but part of a larger, evolving pattern.

In summary, this article serves its purpose exceptionally well. It delivers critical, verified information about an emergency while also providing the necessary context to understand its causes and potential long-term implications.

More about the floods in Slovenia can be found via these link: <https://www.dw.com/en/slovenia-austria-floods-leave-3-dead/a-66443381>



The beginning of autumn 2024 again brought floods to Europe; Italy, Austria, Romania, Hungary, Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland were affected. In southwestern Poland, entire towns were evacuated and submerged.

The BBC News article, “Polish city urged to evacuate as floods batter central Europe,” reports on the severe flooding caused by Storm Boris, which has affected several countries in Central Europe, including Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania, Austria, and Hungary. The death toll had risen to at least 16 people. The report highlights the extreme measures taken, such as the evacuation of the Polish city of Nysa, where the mayor warned of a potentially devastating flood wave from a nearby lake. The article details the specific impacts on each country, including power cuts, closed roads and rail lines, and the deployment of armed forces. It also notes that while conditions are stabilizing in some areas, others are still bracing for rising water levels. The piece concludes by linking the record rainfall to a “perfect storm” of weather conditions exacerbated by climate change.

This material is very effective and serves as a strong example of responsible and comprehensive international crisis reporting.

1. **Pan-European Perspective:** The article successfully covers a regional disaster by providing specific details from multiple countries. It avoids focusing solely on one location, instead offering a broad, interconnected view of how a single storm system is affecting an entire region. This approach helps the audience understand the true scale of the event.
2. **Emphasis on Public Safety and Official Response:** The report is a model of public service journalism. It leads with a life-or-death evacuation order from a Polish mayor and includes details about government declarations of natural disaster, promises of financial aid (from Poland and Austria), and the deployment of emergency services and the military. This focus on official action and public safety makes the information actionable and relevant to those in the affected areas.
3. **Humanizing the Disaster:** The article includes powerful human elements, such as the mayor's plea to residents to "evacuate your belongings, yourselves, your loved ones," and the quote from a Romanian mayor describing a devastating impact on his community. The mention of rescued residents and their pets adds a relatable and empathetic touch.
4. **Scientific and Contextual Explanation:** The material moves beyond simple reporting to explain the meteorological causes of the floods. It mentions the "perfect storm" of cold Arctic air meeting warm Mediterranean air, a stalled weather pattern, and the role of climate change. The specific detail that "the atmosphere is able to hold about 7% more moisture" for every 1°C rise in global temperature provides a clear, science-backed reason for the record rainfall.

In conclusion, this BBC article is a highly effective piece of journalism. It is comprehensive, factual, and deeply human, while also serving a vital public service role by contextualizing the disaster and highlighting the systemic causes behind it.

Link to the material: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5yjjqyv84eo>



The Euronews article, “Poland declares state of natural disaster in areas affected by severe flooding,” reports on the official response to the devastating floods sweeping through Central Europe. The main focus is on the Polish government’s declaration of a state of natural disaster, which Prime Minister Donald Tusk announced to “facilitate evacuation and rescue operations, as well as expedite financial support for the victims.” The article notes that Poland has allocated one billion zlotys for aid and will seek additional EU funds. The report also provides updates on the situation in other affected countries, including the Czech Republic, Austria, and Romania, and highlights that Hungary is bracing for what its mayor predicts could be the “biggest flood of the decade” as water levels in the Danube rise.

This material is highly effective and is a great example of focused, official-response-oriented journalism during a crisis.

1. **Direct and Authoritative Reporting:** The article’s primary strength is its focus on the official government response. By leading with the Prime Minister’s announcement of a “state of natural disaster,” it immediately conveys the seriousness of the situation. This approach provides readers with a clear understanding of the top-level actions being taken to address the crisis.
2. **Focus on Public Service and Reassurance:** The article emphasizes the direct benefits of the declared state of disaster, such as faster evacuations and financial aid. Prime Minister Tusk’s assurance that “there will be no shortage of means” and the mention of allocated funds (one billion zlotys) are crucial for providing reassurance to the affected population.
3. **Regional Context:** The report effectively shows that this is a widespread, multi-country disaster. By providing brief updates from the Czech Republic, Romania, and Hungary, it demonstrates the scale of the event across Central Europe. The mention of specific impacts, like the flooding of the Oder River in Ostrava and the preparedness of 12,000 Hungarian troops, gives a clear picture of the situation in different areas.

4. **Concise and Clear:** The article is short and to the point. It avoids lengthy narratives and instead provides key facts and figures, making the information accessible and easy to digest for someone looking for a quick update on the situation.

In conclusion, this Euronews article is a very successful piece of journalism for its clear and concise reporting on the official government response to a regional disaster. It serves a crucial public service by explaining the significance of the “state of natural disaster” and reassuring the public that resources are being mobilized.



Link to the material: <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/09/17/poland-declares-state-of-natural-disaster-in-areas-of-flooding>

After the water levels normalized and society could assess the consequences of this disaster, publications emerged that called for orienting government programs and initiatives toward mitigating the effects of climate change and preserving public health through the normalization or amelioration of climate change impacts. Thus, the analytics and assessments after the 2024 floods took on a more global character compared to the situation in Slovenia.

These two disasters, occurring in a very close timeframe, raise two questions crucial for understanding disaster journalism:

1. Does it seem correct to you that publications about the floods in Slovenia largely did not touch upon the pan-European context and were more focused on the domestic audience, which led to the 2024 floods causing significant damage? Perhaps a powerful information campaign about the consequences of the disaster in Slovenia and possible ways to combat rising water levels and floods in Europe would have become an impetus for preventive measures and reduced risks?
2. Is it appropriate to raise the issue of the global context of flood control through climate preservation procedures, as happened after the 2024 floods, thereby creating a pan-European context for the situation instead of focusing on recovery and internal resources, as was emphasized in Slovenia in 2023?

## Recommendations

At the scene of a disaster, a journalist usually doesn't have enough time for extensive planning and systematization. You need to act quickly and produce content, cover the situation, and offer your microphone for the thoughts and perspectives of others - official representatives of disaster response headquarters, experts, and affected individuals. Therefore, thorough planning before the trip and readiness for various situations and difficulties are essential for effective work.

Your camera might fail at the most crucial moment; your memory card might fill up just when you capture a brilliant shot; filmed material might disappear when you remove the memory card to copy data to your laptop - these Murphy's Law-style warnings can indeed become reality if you're truly unlucky. But we recommend a different approach: anticipate such situations and protect yourself against them, leveraging the capabilities of modern equipment and technologies.

When preparing audiovisual content, remember that information not accompanied by visual or auditory cues of the event will have a lower level of audience trust. Such cues can include background scenes, consequences or signs of the disaster, the soundscape of the emergency, ambient noise, and visual images of experts, volunteers, or victims - all that creates a general impression of the event.

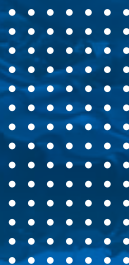
Remember that your information isn't the only one in the information space, but it's crucial for your audience. Therefore, especially during live broadcasts, strive for clarity and expressiveness from yourself, invited experts, and interviewees. Your colleagues in the studio maintain the social focus on this event, and your material must support the rhythm and style of presentation that helps the public grasp the scale and threats of the emergency.

Exchange contacts and information with your sources and colleagues. It's quite likely you'll have an opportunity to be the first to report a publication to some and meet others in a working situation. Openness and support are effective communication tools that will help you obtain truly valuable information. Also, remember that your professional skills and abilities can be needed and useful to those affected by the emergency. Very often, these needs center on attracting the attention of authorities or involve the need to find relatives or loved ones and information about them. This is equally important in overcoming disaster consequences and is a part of our profession.



# 1.4.

## Reporting on Disasters





## 1.4. Reporting on Disasters

### Introduction

Disaster reports are always unexpected, just like the events themselves. They provoke anxiety and an attempt to understand what happened, the scale of the event, whether there's an immediate threat, and what form it takes. We seek answers to all these questions in journalists' materials, follow news and social media reports, and build our own response models for the situation. The initial period of disaster reporting requires a clear emphasis on reference points and the scale of the disaster, to understand what our world will be like the next day or month.

A disaster raises the demands on journalistic materials. In this situation, any report is considered important or super-important, and the level of trust in materials increases, sometimes unjustifiably, especially when consuming information from social networks. After some time, once the scale of events and key threats are known, society seeks ways to provide aid and support to the victims, mitigate consequences and threats, and involve the international community. Then comes the time to reflect on the causes and consequences, develop methods and ways to avoid similar situations, and evaluate the activities of the people and services who worked at the disaster scene. Even later, materials and publications emerge that imprint the disaster in human memory as an event that society survived, as a historical acquisition with its heroism, victories, and losses, dedication to the cause, and empathy.

The work of journalists also receives appropriate evaluations, aiming to understand the activities that helped avoid panic and spread of unreliable data, benefits that media reports brought to the victims, and the professionalism of journalists. Therefore, it's worth discussing the requirements for key types of materials from which we learn about a disaster, their features, and the technologies for preparing news content in disaster situations.

### Structure of News Materials

News materials belong to the informational genres of journalism; they are the most operative and are the most regulated by professional standards and journalistic ethics. The key features of materials in these genres are the journalist's impartiality, avoidance of emotions and evaluations so that the audience can form their own

impression of the unfolding situation. News materials are focused on presenting facts, which may be accompanied by comments from relevant officials or experts. An important requirement of journalistic activity standards is the separation of facts from comments and evaluations, again driven by the need to provide objective and reliable information.

At the level of an individual material, the structure of disaster reports is no different from a typical news note or other informational material, and consists of the headline, the lead, images, the main body of the report, comments from official representatives or experts, and background information.

The headline is a crucial part of the message, based on which the reader decides whether to view the content and determines their level of interest in the event. For conveying information and facts about disasters, it's appropriate to use a headline-news style: a headline type that contains the main information about the event. In disaster or emergency situations, this approach is extremely important, as many sources publish reports on the same facts.

The requirements for a headline in the most general sense can be formulated as follows: it should not be too long (this indicator depends on the language, usually up to 10 words) and must contain only verified facts. Journalists should avoid emotions, even when reporting on sensational or extraordinary events. Localization, time, and place of the event are always relevant data in the report, and at a minimum, localization should be present in the headline, especially since it allows for immediate understanding of which events are being discussed. In the case of military conflicts, such information is even more important and may include the date, especially if threats recur regularly or several times over a certain period in the combat zone or shelling locations; then the reader can orient themselves in the situation more precisely.

Disaster reports are often accompanied by visual elements, photographs from the scene. Therefore, it's important to ensure a semantic connection can be established between the photo and the headline, to understand what events are depicted. A caption under the photo will not be superfluous, even if the location or public figure is well-known - information may be disseminated to audiences, primarily international, who may not be entirely familiar with this data.

The lead expands on the content of the headline, detailing it. This structural part of the message is placed immediately after the headline and indicates the main idea of the message. The volume of the lead is no more than 30-40 words, and in informational messages, it can be shorter. The peculiarity of lead perception is that in a text message, it is read after the headline, while in a video message (e.g., a report), it is voiced after the headline, in the first phrase.

The third element that captures the audience's attention is the image, and the sequence of these elements in the perception process can vary, with the image potentially attracting attention even before the news is consumed. The publication of images is governed by several requirements, the most important of which is crediting the source of the images. This is not only about ensuring copyright, although this aspect is a legally regulated obligation of the editorial office, but also about avoiding manipulation and unreliable data. In particular, illustrative images may contain information or data that does not correspond to the stated facts and indicate a lack of professionalism on the part of the authors. An example of such an error could be a discrepancy between the name of military equipment in the headline or lead and what is depicted. The same can apply to individuals or locations, and overall, this negatively affects the audience's trust in the material and the editorial office that published it. Illustrative photos can accompany messages but require a special indication of this fact.

During military or social conflicts, special caution should be exercised when publishing images of people, vulnerable categories of individuals, as disseminating information about their personal data can cause harm and have tragic consequences. Journalism, as a system for disseminating social information, has developed clear rules for publishing visual content of this nature: photographs of minors can be published only with their consent and the consent of their parents or guardians, and, as mentioned above, such consent is best obtained in writing. In some situations, similar photos are used to confirm violations of the rules and customs of warfare, especially during shelling of civilians, which does not negate obtaining consent.

In some situations, journalists use special means to blur the outlines of faces of crime suspects, police officers, or other service personnel, to avoid harming their personal lives, at least in situations where criminal acts are not proven and investigations are ongoing, and the news concerns the fact of suspected arrests. If a journalist

needs to update such information, we recommend familiarizing themselves with BBC guidelines, national legislation, or international agreements and conventions that regulate professional standards and journalistic ethics.

Special requirements are placed on images during military operations and social conflicts. Alongside ethical norms and requirements for impartial publications, laws and government decrees may be in effect that restrict the transmission of visual information. Such restrictions include data on the location of military units, the location of air defense systems and assets, impact sites during missile attacks or drone attacks, and other information that helps establish the location of important objects and strike them.

During the Russian-Ukrainian war, cases were repeatedly recorded where information about missile impact sites, disseminated in local public pages, allowed for the adjustment of data and the delivery of more accurate repeat strikes. Even more tragic were situations where the dissemination of such information led to the death or injury of volunteers, rescuers, and police representatives due to a repeat strike by Russian missiles in the same location during the mitigation of the consequences of a previous attack.

The main body of the report involves the publication of facts, comments, and other information about the event. The structuring of this information typically adheres to the inverted pyramid principle, where the main information, which is more important for understanding the situation, is presented at the beginning of the report, and less important information follows later in the text (Dovzhenko, 2018). These principles are characteristic of all types of informational genres, as the perception of information at the beginning of the report ensures that the reader maintains interest in what is being reported and reads (or watches) the material to the end.

In the main body, comments and expert opinions are also presented. However, the journalist must clearly separate them from their own text, formatting them as direct speech or an indirect reference with an indication of the expert's identity, or using another designation if the person is not named, for example, by stating "from own sources."

The selection of experts and sources of additional information is based on the following factors:

- The source is competent and possesses the necessary information due to their status, access to information, or position (e.g., a spokesperson for a disaster consequence mitigation headquarters, a head or competent employee of relevant structures (head of a regional medical service), a representative or head of a volunteer organization, a representative of an enterprise (in cases of technogenic disasters) who understands the technologies and materials used in production, etc.).
- The source is a witness or eyewitness to the emergency (one must consider the psychological characteristics and state of such an expert).
- The source is sufficiently well-known or simply a professional researcher of the issues related to the event.
- The source is a government representative authorized to develop and/or implement a strategy for disaster consequence mitigation.

The background is the concluding part of a news report where well-known facts are presented, the course of events is detailed, and previous media publications on the chosen topic are brought to attention. The need for a background in disaster journalism is crucial for several reasons:

- The audience can quickly learn about the essence and causes of the emergency, the unfolding of events, threats, and consequences.
- This textual element allows for ordering the sequence of audience perception of the event.
- Information or links provided in the background help the reader quickly find necessary facts, names, and titles, thereby saving time, which is vital in disaster situations.
- Separately, this element of news text demonstrates the media's consistent approach to covering the event and shows the amount of attention dedicated to informing the audience about the disaster.

Practicing journalists and media researchers (Dovzhenko, 2018) argue that the background may not always be read, and they debate the necessity of its inclusion since it's not a mandatory element

of a report. However, in our opinion, when covering disasters and emergencies, such an element significantly aids in understanding the situation.

When preparing news materials, journalists use traditional techniques that primarily enable them to avoid errors in the structure of the reported information and in forming a sufficient level of audience awareness. These techniques ensure compliance with information activity standards, ethical norms, and requirements. Let's examine the main informational genres: news, report, interview, report, as well as subgenres: photo report and photo collage, video chronicle, each with its additional specific features in preparation and requiring special journalistic approaches to gathering and processing material.

### **Journalistic genres**

News, a note, or a report are variations of the informational genre, aiming to present complete, reliable, and unbiased information about an event. In the case of disasters, it's important to remember the need to avoid emotionality in journalistic text, as the event itself already carries an inherent emotional charge, and adding journalist's emotions might impose specific reactions on the audience. News preparation standards are formed based on requirements for impartiality and the quality of event representation in the media space. BBC standards (editorial guidelines) have gained significant widespread use and adoption in media practice. In addition to standards, journalists must be guided by national and international ethical codes, adherence to which primarily protects the journalist, including from creating situations that threaten the life or health of the subjects of the material.

The operation with facts when preparing news is built on the aforementioned inverted pyramid principle. The journalist selects the facts themselves, especially if they are at the scene or using facts from open sources. An important stage in working with materials of informational genres is fact-checking, establishing their reliability, and using official sources. If information is presented from unofficial sources, such as social networks, additional verification models are used - communication with eyewitnesses, comparison of different reports on the same topic or issue, and technical verification methods for image or video content.

Every emergency manifests itself in a significant number of facts, many of which are important for understanding the situation.

However, it's impossible to reflect all of them in a short message or even within the broader context of prolonged information support for an event. Therefore, when selecting facts, journalists consider those characteristics of the factual material that are important for creating news: these are facts that indicate the scale of the event, possible threats and consequences, the development of the situation, the number of affected individuals, means of preserving life or health, evacuation routes and methods, and organizational measures aimed at supporting the population. During prolonged disaster coverage, it is also important to report on the actual results of consequence mitigation, facts of returning to a normal way of life, the needs of the population in the disaster area if evacuation has not occurred, the activities of authorities, public organizations, and volunteers, the participation of international funds and structures, and philanthropists - that is, to publicize information that will contribute to the normalization of the situation.

The structure of news reports provides answers to the questions "What?" ("Who?"), "Where?", and "When?". Sometimes, the answer to "Why?" is added to this list. For disaster coverage, precise and objective answers to these questions can impact the preservation of human life and health, which again raises the issue of verifying information sources. Given systematic monitoring of the emergency's progress, especially if it's a telethon or another form of round-the-clock broadcasting about the disaster, it may not be necessary to explicitly state the time characteristics of events. However, such data should be included in the news background, where the sequence of the situation's unfolding is important for that part of the audience that cannot track the situation synchronously.

When preparing news, it's also important to consider that official sources do not always disseminate information promptly. Some facts may be excluded or not publicized. Such processes occur to avoid panic or anxiety among the population, to maintain control of the situation, and to ensure the authorities' confidence that the situation will not spiral out of control. Journalists do not have similar restrictions and can consider facts not published in official press releases. However, this places even greater demands on verifying information sources.

A reportage is as popular as a news piece and quite similar in structure and preparation requirements to the previous genre. The principles of information presentation, fact selection, accuracy,

completeness, and reliability of information, adherence to ethical norms, and journalistic impartiality are characteristic of a report, just as they are for news.

The specificity of a reportage lies in creating an impression of being at the scene, reflecting the atmosphere and the unfolding situation at the disaster site. When preparing a reportage, the journalist must ensure a system of facts and establish a circle of experts or eyewitnesses whose impressions and assessments will be used. It's important to consider that during a reportage, answers or comments cannot always be predicted, so the journalist must be sufficiently competent on the topic of discussion and possess good communication skills to stay within the reportage's theme.

A good reportage, according to Polish journalist R. Kapuściński, emerges when the journalist has thoroughly studied their subjects; only then can material be prepared "so that even those who know the topic perfectly are surprised" (Tarasiuk, 2022, p. 17). This once again confirms the thesis that at the center of a reportage is the human being, with their perspectives and needs, which are particularly intensified in crisis situations and emergencies.

For a complete depiction of a disaster situation in a reportage, the journalist must use effects that allow the viewer to feel the atmosphere of the situation: appropriate angles and panoramas, thoughtful sound accompaniment, images of subjects and experts on screen, and perhaps equipment and means of combating the disaster's consequences. The appropriateness of each element is determined at the scene. However, if the journalist fails to convey the atmosphere of the situation, the reportage will not be successful.

A report as an informational genre implies a systematic description of a phenomenon. It is based on official materials and releases and contains all facts relevant to describing the event. The preparation of a report in disaster situations occurs at a stage where certain generalizations are possible, the situation has fully or partially stabilized, and there is official statistics and serious expert conclusions about the causes and consequences of events. To prepare a report, which is not very popular in media discourse, the journalist can also include their own materials and editorial materials to fully reflect the chronology of events and highlight the significance of individual facts. It's worth noting that official reports on the situation should be monitored and preserved, especially if a documentary publication or film about the disaster is planned.

The interview genre belongs to the group of informational genres and can be used to report on a disaster and its consequences. Similar to other genres, it uses a lead that introduces the reader or viewer to the situation, presents the guest, and may include background information. Crucial for this genre is the system of questions that can reveal the interviewee's level of knowledge, thereby satisfying the audience's interest and information needs.

For the visual representation of disaster consequences or their progression, photo reports and photo collages are used. These variations of reports involve the selection and arrangement of visual facts captured in individual photographs. The journalist must organize the work in such a way as to demonstrate the situation as a whole, or a part of it, united by a theme and content. Sometimes, a photo report format is used, where photos convey not only a system of key facts but also form a sequence of event unfolding.

The last type of journalistic material in the informational genre group is the video chronicle. Structurally, it resembles a report, completely covering the event and including all significant facts. Preparing such material requires constant presence at the scene and filming a significant amount of footage. In some situations, especially when a video chronicle turns into a documentary film, materials from other authors, including non-professional journalists, may be included, as well as video clips from open sources and official events. A video chronicle provides an opportunity to visually summarize the situation, represent it in an easy-to-view format, but with an emphasis on key events, facts, and people involved in combating the disaster's consequences.

### **Dissemination of Information Through Various Channels**

Modern journalism focuses on convergent models of information preparation, primarily driven by the audience's need and desire to receive news and other content in a convenient way. Technical development, device accessibility, and improved internet quality are also crucial for convergent journalism. When covering disasters, journalists primarily focus on the platforms and technologies used by their editorial office for broadcasting. Today, there are probably no media resources left that function purely as print or audiovisual media. Every editorial office has channels on social networks, and the intensity of the information flow there often equals or even exceeds that of traditional broadcasting.

Unlike social projects lacking a formal media component, the peculiarity of an editorial office functioning on social media is that it provides verified and reliable information, and generally competes successfully by prioritizing operational speed in informing.

Consequently, journalists must prepare materials in familiar formats, albeit considering the requirements of social networks. For example, character limits or long threads for «X,» visual images of the disaster for Instagram, short videos for TikTok, etc.

Beyond preparing materials for their own editorial office, journalists can collaborate with other media, including international ones, based on various agreements. Such situations require avoiding conflicts of informational needs between editorial offices, agreeing on publication priority on certain resources, and reimbursement for travel and equipment expenses, medical insurance, etc. There are situations where only a part of the prepared materials is intended for publication in other media or agencies, such as photos or video materials, which must also be explicitly stated in agreements.

In addition to the situations mentioned, a journalist may maintain their own blog or account outside the editorial information space. The preparation of materials for such resources must also be separately agreed upon and regulated to avoid misunderstandings and inconveniences.

### **Cooperation with the Editorial Team**

Editorial support for a journalist at a disaster site is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon with several features that require attention even during preparation for a business trip. The first and most significant aspect at this stage is obtaining accreditation and work permits for the relevant zone. The journalist may be additionally required to undergo safety briefings and training, and they may officially receive recommendations regarding equipment and personal belongings (including protective gear, appropriate clothing, and footwear - see “Journalist and (UN)safety: A guide for journalists working in dangerous conditions” (Institute of Mass Information, 2016, pp. 18-69). The editorial team also approves the list of equipment, its insurance (if not done previously), and provides communication means. If journalist works on a freelance basis or similar terms, they must complete these and subsequent stages independently.

Supporting a journalist stay in a disaster zone involves systemic communication, informing about the progress of the assignment, sending materials and reports, clarifying work plans, etc. The key requirements at this stage are the efficiency of equipment and the quality of communication. Live broadcasts from a disaster zone, creation of reports and photo materials, and news publication all require a reliable communication channel, which the editorial team can provide. In addition, the journalist can utilize the capabilities of the disaster consequence mitigation headquarters, support from public or volunteer organizations, or other infrastructure. It's important to remember that in combat zones or locations close to the line of combat engagement, communication capabilities are strictly regulated, and military administrations may impose restrictions for security reasons.

Coordinating broadcasting schedules is another aspect of working with the editorial team, which determines the schedule for preparing materials and finding a stable connection to implement the schedule.

Information gathering for channel needs is another direction of work with the editorial team. These additional tasks are driven by the audience interest in a topic, a problem, or people presented in the material by the journalist's editorial office or other media professionals. Audience requests are easily tracked through social media feedback or audience reach after the material publication. The search for relevant topics can occur during the assignment, or the assignment may be extended or relocated to another area, especially when the journalist is working with a specific individual (or unit, such as a fire service), tracking their work in the emergency zone.

The last area to touch upon in this section is the documentation of the assignment and the materials prepared by journalists. We've already discussed the need to duplicate technical means and information preservation capabilities. Here, we emphasize the necessity of documenting the journalist's activities in disaster zones, forming a factual archive (personal or editorial) based on the assignment results, and preserving facts and documents that may be removed or changed over time. For this, you can take screenshots or photos and store data in reliable cloud services on a personal or editorial account.

## Long-Term Coverage of Consequences

Long-term coverage of disaster consequences should be based on a strategic work plan, as discussed in the second chapter. This plan, of course, is coordinated with the editorial office and depends on many factors, primarily the type and specific characteristics of the disaster itself. Alongside purely organizational conditions (number and duration of assignments, logistics and accommodation, reporting volume), it's crucial to have a deep understanding of the disaster mitigation processes and to maintain audience interest in the situation.

Prolonged coverage of disaster consequences involves studying topics such as:

- State-level planning for consequence mitigation: measures, resources, capabilities, and expected results.
- Participation of domestic and international philanthropists, foundations, and organizations that provide support to the victims and participate in recovery.
- Activities and focus of volunteer organizations.
- Status of the local population, especially in evacuation situations, conditions for return (or accommodation within and outside the country if return is not possible).
- Threats of humanitarian catastrophe in the affected zone and countermeasures.
- Research and statistics on the causes and consequences of disasters.
- Reporting from official and unofficial organizations on their activities, statements about plans and intentions.
- Real examples of recovery, their compliance with statements and intentions.
- Disaster victims and their fate.
- Disaster responders and their efforts in consequence mitigation.

During work in the disaster zone and throughout its duration, a journalist planning long-term coverage should form a list of topics and issues, preferably linked to specific locations and contacts,

which will become the focus of their future attention. It will also be useful to compile a list of experts and specialists who can provide scientific, statistical, and reference information related to the causes and consequences of the disaster, the ecological situation after the acute phase, and possible directions for territorial recovery or consequence mitigation. This list of experts and topics should be quite extensive.

The restoration of territory after a disaster occurs not chaotically but in accordance with a strategy approved at the state level, which may involve the engagement of international partners. Such strategies envisage targeted allocation of funds and their use for defined needs. In turn, executor and contractor teams are formed that are responsible for specific areas of disaster consequence mitigation. Each such stage is documented. To get a complete understanding of these processes, a journalist must track such strategies and their funding, monitor the effectiveness of fund utilization for planned results, thereby fulfilling the media's inherent function of criticism and control.

Directing publications towards issues that are interesting to the international community and disseminating relevant materials to a foreign audience is a good example of international diplomacy. It's important to remember that such publications can become an impetus for strengthening ties between non-governmental organizations and activists in the disaster zone and people and structures that provided support from abroad.

### **Analyzing Your Own Work and Self-Care for Journalists**

The culmination of a journalist's work should be an analysis of their own effectiveness in covering a disaster and its aftermath. This process is crucial for professional growth and development, helping you recognize your missteps and draw conclusions for similar situations in the future. A specific outcome of this work should be a determination of your readiness to work in emergency zones, should such a need arise. We suggest several areas and aspects that are worth objectively evaluating, and perhaps even formulating new algorithms for action in similar situations.

First and foremost, you need to focus on your personal and professional readiness for the assignment. Begin by analyzing any mistakes or oversights made during preparation for the trip to the disaster zone:

- Was your equipment sufficient, and was it comfortable to work with (clothing and footwear, first aid kit and medications, food and water, additional equipment and its ease of use (backpacks, flashlights, multi-tool, other items needed during the assignment))?
- Were your personal and professional technical gear, communication tools and technologies, documents, and supporting materials adequate?
- How effective was your trip planning and logistics?
- What was your physical and psychological state during the assignment?

It's important to document any identified needs or specific circumstances for future similar assignments.

#### Performance During the Assignment

The next component should be an analysis of your work during the assignment:

- Was your professional training sufficient, and do you need additional professional knowledge and skills (e.g., technical in nature)?
- Was the list of experts and specialists you could contact for comments, reference, and scientific information about the disaster's nature appropriate?
- Did you adhere to professional standards and ethics, and what difficulties arose in this regard?
- Did you have to refute previously published information? If so, what were the reasons for disseminating such information?
- How fully and reliably did you manage to convey the situation and atmosphere in the disaster zone, and did it require additional effort?

#### Quantitative and Qualitative Outcomes

The third area for analysis has more quantitative measurements but is no less important for summarizing the data:

- How many materials were prepared and published during the assignment and within the designated sufficient period afterward?
- How many materials were generated for your personal archive?
- Were there any topics you'd still be interested in working on? How many such topics did you note, or do you have materials to start working on them?
- How many new contacts did you gain? How many people did you communicate with? Are you maintaining these connections, or have they been lost (if so, consider what opportunities you might have lost with these connections)?
- Can you identify other benefits from this work besides experience? (Here, you should include any things important to you, from the amount of your fees to new contacts in transnational media holdings).

### **Timely Briefings (How and When to Disseminate Information Quickly)**

In this section, we'll outline two types of briefings that are crucial for disaster journalism. First, there are the traditional briefings given by representatives of the bodies responsible for disaster consequence mitigation. Typically, there are several, such as:

- The initial briefings are highly acute and intense. They define the understanding of the situation and the immediate response models in the broadest sense - from population evacuation to the logistics of using specialized equipment.
- Subsequent briefings are held to report on the progress of the emergency and the effectiveness of mitigation efforts.
- Finally, after the situation has stabilized and responsibility for consequence mitigation can be transferred to local authorities or relevant regional structures, a final briefing is held. This summarizes and analyzes activities during and after the disaster.

These events are accompanied by the dissemination of press releases, which contain significant data and statistics, clearly define the scale of the event and its consequences, and serve as official documents that can be used for preparing materials and further work on the topic.

### *Debriefings*

Another type of reporting is called a debriefing. Its purpose is to analyze the effectiveness of the assignment and how effectively the journalist worked to fulfill the editorial task. The authors of the “Safety Guide for Journalists” (UNESCO, 2017) highlight the following features of its conduct:

“A debriefing after returning from an assignment allows for identifying what succeeded and what didn’t during the task, as well as drawing conclusions for preparing future missions. It also allows senior editorial management to strengthen their understanding of their own responsibility when shared experiences are gained by those returning from an assignment. At France Médias Monde, senior news editors and all team members participate in debriefings, as do representatives of the technical group (sound, broadcast). Their goal is to summarize identified problems that arose during the task, focusing on three aspects: editorial (Do the prepared reports meet the set goal?); technical (Did the equipment and communication work satisfactorily?); human (What was the level of mutual understanding within the team and during information exchange with the editorial office?)” (UNESCO, 2017, p. 87).

The authors further refer to the experience of debriefings at the BBC, where a separate task is set: “to summarize the acquired experience of reporters and editors, and also to contain current advice and new information that will help better prepare for possible future dangers and make their work safer” (UNESCO, 2017, p. 88). As we can see, attention to the results of a journalist’s or team’s work in a disaster zone helps to increase the effectiveness not only of personal skills and competencies but also impacts the overall effectiveness of the editorial office.

### **Thematic Studies**

Research into how disasters are covered in the news largely focuses on the peculiarities of a journalist’s work in difficult conditions. Such research contains information on equipment, preparation, data verification, and ethical considerations in

challenging situations. These works are referenced earlier in our handbook and are included in the bibliography (Institute of Mass Information, 2016; UNESCO, 2017). In the next section, we will turn to sources that will help with the use of modern digital technologies.

A separate body of work consists of research and recommendations regarding the genre system and the preparation of materials within defined genres. This work adheres to professional standards and based on practitioners' recommendations, experience generalization, and analysis of potential difficulties. It's worth noting that the system of handbooks describing the genre or technological nature of material preparation is not updated frequently, roughly once every 10-15 years. The reason for this is the emergence of new challenges from the media reality, requiring scientific or methodological interpretation.

To gain deeper understanding of the specifics of material preparation, we recommend Z. Weischenberg's (2011) textbook on news, as well as studies by national journalism theorists who thoroughly examine this issue. For our part, we can recommend handbooks by Raisa Radchyk (2015& 2019), Volodymyr Pavliv (2015), and Volodymyr Tarasiuk (2022), and the handbook for journalists in conflict zones (Buromensky et al., 2016).

At the time of writing this handbook, we are living in a period where traditional approaches do not fully incorporate cross-media activity models. The experience of using social media is not yet extensive enough to form a thorough theoretical model. So practitioners only use partial recommendations to understand the rules for creating social media content. To increase your professional effectiveness, you can use programs and workshops from practitioners, well-known bloggers, or take specialized courses for working in social media. We predict that within the next 5 years, a theory of working with social media as a genuine means of communicating with a large, mass audience will be emerged. Based on this theory, a new professional profile of journalistic competencies will be developed.

### **Recommendations**

In this area, we can formulate a key piece of advice in three directions.

First, it's essential to focus on understanding the theory and the experiences of colleagues who have worked in emergency or disaster

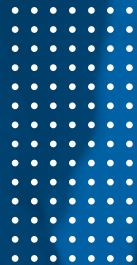
zones. This experience can be tracked through their publications and materials or gained through personal communication. Before an assignment, it's advisable to refresh your memory of the rules and requirements of ethical codes and norms to avoid difficult situations in the disaster zone. If your editorial office has specific editorial guidelines defining its policy for problematic situations, it wouldn't hurt to get a consultation on this topic.

Second, the advice concerns forming a personal archive. This archive should be somewhat broader than your portfolio and contain materials and ideas that weren't included published articles or reports. You will likely need to clarify data or re-evaluate these events later. Use any convenient system to organize information, materials, photos, and video content. You should also create a separate list of contacts combined with locations and a brief communication history. A regular contact list on your phone may not be sufficient, as it won't allow you to record all important situations and specific details.

Third, the advice pertains to a thorough analysis of the situation that should answer a simple question: Are you ready for such assignments, and able to cope with the professional and personal challenges that arise during this type of work? The answer to this question will significantly impact your professional career, and some conclusions may be important not only for assignments in disaster zones but also for other work. And most importantly, this analysis will demonstrate what you learned during the assignment and confirm your readiness to develop for professional and personal growth.

# 1.5.

## Covering Disasters in the Digital Era





## 1.5. Covering Disasters in the Digital Era

### Introduction

The development of information and communication technologies has fundamentally changed the lives of millions of people. Today, we truly live in the information age, as predicted since the late 20th century. The modern digital age is characterized by a high level of mediatization (the involvement of individuals as subjects in the processes of disseminating their own views and intentions to a broad audience, characteristic of media) and the increasing significance of information, the content we consume more and more each year. It would be fair to say that informational images of things and phenomena are not necessarily more significant than real ones, but perhaps “closer” to us. The need for a new mobile phone or sunscreen leads us to its informational image on the internet; of course, we will also get the real product, but we still start with the informational image.

The information production industry, its dissemination tools, and gadgets for operating it demonstrates the rapid development of technologies, an increase in information flow intensity, and a decrease in the accessibility threshold for these capabilities. Growing interest in the practical use of artificial intelligence for everyday needs and the technological development of neural networks are leading some experts to suggest that certain professions will disappear over time, while others will take on new forms. These processes are irreversible and manifest in all spheres of our lives, thus affecting journalism, increasing opportunities, and demanding new knowledge and competencies from media professionals.

In 2012, during a journalism skills training at the FOJO Institute (Kalmar, Sweden), the authors of this handbook and their colleagues were introduced to a technology popular at the time in Swedish local media newsrooms. A journalist going out to report would receive a mobile backpack containing a smartphone, tripod, microphone, and power supply. While the exact details regarding an amplifier for data transmission or additional attachments for better video quality are not mentioned, the technology was functional and quite effective for local media use. At the current stage of technology development, these capabilities have increased, and the size of the backpack has decreased.

For disaster journalism, the development of information technologies has become a factor that has significantly increased the promptness of informing about disasters or their consequences and completely changed the situation surrounding the informational support of emergencies. In our opinion, these changes are manifested in the following characteristics:

- The ability to publish and transmit information on social media has significantly increased, both locally and globally - disasters have become closer.
- The number of broadcasters has grown, and alongside this, so has the amount of inaccurate, incomplete, and sometimes unreliable information.
- Information consumption through social media has reduced attention to traditional media, particularly due to the speed of presenting evidence of a disaster.
- The quality of photo and video content created and disseminated by eyewitnesses or participants in emergencies has improved.
- Open-access means of recording and monitoring have appeared (from stationary surveillance cameras to satellite systems), allowing for the acquisition of additional important information and its use for confirming or refuting information.

### **Disaster Journalism in the Digital Era (Fake News, Social Networks, Information Verification, AI)**

The increasing volume of information produced during disasters is driven by the accessibility of communication tools and the existence of social networks, which serve as open communication channels. Alongside technical regulations and requirements for message content, form, and volume (e.g., text, visual, or audio messages, their volume or duration), these communication channels often do not impose requirements for the event representation quality and completeness. They lack ethical requirements, except those that coincide with legislation, and do not limit the possibilities for falsification or disinformation. In our opinion, the hypothesis that social media reflects society's level of media literacy would be viable if these communication channels were not deliberately used for manipulation and disinformation to achieve certain political

or ideological goals, and sometimes for the commercialization of certain processes. Nevertheless, social networks provide a lot of additional and often quite reliable information, so we cannot afford not to use them when preparing materials about disasters.

During emergencies, people very often overestimate the impact of certain factors or incorrectly scale the event. For example, today, news about fires often includes the area of the blaze, measured in square meters or hectares. Previously, qualitative assessments were used - “a large fire” or some other evaluative component. The emergence of fake news, based on an assessment of a phenomenon, its characteristics, or measurements, indicates unprofessionalism. This is because errors can be detected through information verification. If such verification was not fully conducted, and the journalist believed an eyewitness, there is every reason to doubt the professionalism of the journalist or the editorial office.

Another type of fake news is the publication of unreliable information for a specific purpose. There was once even a term “journalistic duck,” though it didn’t quite refer to a “fake” in its current understanding. The spread of fake news aims to disinform or destabilize a situation. Such messages concern acute socio-political, economic, or military problems, contain components that provoke emotional responses, and create a situation of uncertainty and pessimism. Fakes of this type spread during social and military conflicts. Systemic activity in this direction can be classified as hybrid warfare, where the dissemination of fakes, along with other means of manipulation, leads to noticeable social changes or significantly increases the level of social tension.

Social networks require a special approach from the perspective of information verification. Requirements for the reliability, completeness, and accuracy of reported data are not mandatory. Regarding the challenges and threats of using information from this source, we need to formulate several conditions and approaches that we propose to define as an “objectivity barrier.” Here and hereafter, by “objectivity barrier,” we will understand a set of typical violations of objectivity that may arise due to the specifics of the communication channel and the type of disasters about which information is disseminated. It is appropriate to distinguish between two types of disasters that may have different models of reality distortion during discussion in social media, and therefore require different tools or approaches to verifying such information.

1. The first type includes natural and man-made disasters. The result of these emergencies are phenomena that do not have a distinct social nature; more precisely, their consequences do not imply social stratification or division into supporters and opponents, as everyone suffers equally from the consequences, and there are no conflicting parties to support or not.
2. The second type of disaster, which generates a different wave of fakes and inaccuracies, consists of social and military conflicts. These have a distinct social division, involve the social positioning of ideas and concepts for future life. They are oriented, among towards attracting supporters or explaining positions according to a certain set of rules, laws, notions, norms, or morals.

For the first type of disasters, when using information from social media, it's important to build work considering the possibilities of information verification through communication with the primary source of the message (if possible), comparison of information with other messages, possibly from other public pages, and comparison of audio, photo, and video content. At the algorithmic level, we can outline this situation as follows: find the source, find the frame, find the truth. For example, if information about an extraordinary fire is not accompanied by visual materials, it is probably not fully consistent with reality. If such materials are only from one source, it's worth checking the technical features of video or photo creation, particularly metadata. If the primary source cannot be established or an interview regarding the disseminated information cannot be obtained, and other communication participants are not eyewitnesses, such information should be treated with caution. If you receive several photos of the same event from different sources, you can always compare the angle, dimensional relationships, and time of publication or creation of the message: this cursory analysis will allow you to ask the right questions. The last thing that can be done to verify data is to track information from independent sources, for example, from space through satellite images, from OSINT researchers, or through surveillance camera data, if available in the disaster zone.

For the second type of disasters, those with a clear social division among participants, the approach to information verification should be supplemented with additional techniques to

establish what is truly happening. Such additional checks should focus on identifying the sender of the message: if it is truly a living person? This identification should not only be based on personal data and account history (formal identification) but also on an analysis of content indicators. This includes assessing the source's affiliation with one of the conflicting sides, the content and semantic clarity of previous publications, and reactions to previous acute conflict events. These and other indicators will help ascertain how consistently and accurately the message source describes situations. It's also appropriate to compare the content of a publication about a specific component of the conflict or situation with the processes occurring in the conflict zone to predict the source's informational goal - whether it's merely reporting facts or a way to direct social attention toward a desired understanding of the overall situation.

Let's consider the example of the Ukrainian forces' operation in Russia's Kursk region. The goal of this operation was to compel the Russian military command to redeploy troops from other front lines, thereby easing the situation along the combat line in Ukraine, at least according to official sources. During this operation, Ukrainian social media published information about Russian forces using heavy weaponry, including large caliber aerial bombs, to strike the Kursk region, resulting in the destruction of homes and infrastructure, primarily affecting local Russian residents. Russian social media, on the other hand, disseminated information about alleged war crimes by the Ukrainian armed forces, specifically targeting the local population (non-combatants).

The first reports were accompanied by photo and video evidence of Russian aerial bomb impacts and other heavy weaponry. Importantly, these reports came from various sources, allowing for the verification of the information's reliability. In the second instance, Russian public pages posted interviews or testimonies from individuals claiming to be eyewitnesses to certain situations. However, no video or photo confirmations, or any other factual evidence beyond the interviewees' words, were used.

Even a cursory analysis of this information model logically shows that information confirmed by photo and video evidence from various sources can be disseminated, including by linking to stable social media sources. The other context, known only from the words of a potential eyewitness and recorded by a military correspondent or blogger, appears questionable and requires additional verification.

It is entirely reasonable to assume that these clips could have been artificially created with a specific intent: to accuse one side of the conflict of violating the rules and customs of war.

Identifying fake videos involves extensive analytical research, from assessing a video's metadata to comparing and analyzing footage shot by other users at the site of an emergency and shared on social media. These methods require significant effort and are time-consuming. A hallmark of today's media landscape is the use of artificial intelligence to perform meticulous, primarily mechanical work that demands focus, the handling of large datasets, and the detection of correlations in complex and diverse information environments.

The use of AI not only simplifies a media professional's work and saves time, which is critically important in a disaster situation where impartiality and speed are essential, but also guarantees a high level of objectivity and analytical clarity in identifying fake reports. AI can consider all facts based on the analysis model it employs, ensuring comprehensive verification.

Like any tool, AI requires specific skills and knowledge to use effectively, including understanding the particular features of different neural networks and knowing the types of tasks and analyses they are designed for, as well as their technical parameters for accuracy and reliability. This, in turn, necessitates specialized professional training or the involvement of experts in the field. For example, a newsroom could create specialized tools for analyzing fake reports based on text, video, or audio formats, as each requires its own technological verification model.

We can already predict that the next five years in the media sector will be marked by increasingly comprehensive use of AI technologies. The value of AI lies not so much in its ability to produce news based on data-evaluation algorithms, but rather in its capacity for systematic, objective analysis and its ability to assess the probability of correlations between data in various conditions.

A modern newsroom needs specialists who know how to work with neural networks. This is not just about the IT sector but about media contexts, because without a deep understanding of how information is created and spread, and the nature and reasons behind the dissemination of fake reports, it would be difficult to properly formulate algorithms for analyzing media discourse.

In summary, it's crucial to consider the type of disaster and to formulate data verification algorithms based on this typology. Furthermore, a more careful study of the situation is needed to understand the motivations and reasons that drive people to disseminate certain information. Additionally, it's important to use data verification tools based on technical indicators. Any news from an emergency zone is not created under studio conditions, unless it involves deliberate manipulation. Therefore, many indicators can point to the fake nature of a message.

We recommend taking a specialized course on technical data verification or utilizing resources that help assess content reliability based on technical parameters. Among such sources, we consider the "Verification Handbook" (2016) to be systematic and comprehensive. It details step-by-step possibilities for technical verification of data reliability, including content from readers, images, web pages, and video materials. The authors provide sufficient examples and recommendations to apply this advice in specific content verification cases.

### **Legal Aspects of Disaster Journalism**

Disaster journalism involves media professionals working in complex situations and conditions that can endanger life and health. The international community has developed a system of legislative initiatives that have been embodied in specific legal acts that define journalists' rights in disaster zones, regulate access to information, and establish the inviolability of journalists for conflict participants.

The legal framework for journalists' activities in emergency zones is a topic worthy of a separate, thorough discussion. However, it's worth listing the main documents a journalist can use for a clear understanding of their rights to professional activity in emergency zones. This list includes:

- Declaration of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe "On the Protection of Journalists in Situations of Conflict and Pressure" (Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on May 3, 1996, at its 98th session).
- Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe No. R (96) 4 "On the Protection of Journalists in Situations of Conflict and Pressure" (Adopted by the Committee of Ministers at its 98th session on May 3, 1996).

- Recommendation of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe No. 1706 (2005) “Media and Terrorism.”
- Resolution of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe No. 1438 (2005) “Freedom of the Press and Working Conditions of Journalists in Conflict Zones.”
- Recommendations of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe “On the Protection of Freedom of Expression and Information in Times of Crisis” (Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on September 26, 2007, at the 1005th meeting of Ministers’ Deputies).
- Declaration of the Committee of Ministers “On the Protection and Promotion of Investigative Journalism” (Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on September 26, 2007, at the 1005th meeting of Ministers’ Deputies).
- Declaration of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe “On the Protection of Journalism and the Safety of Journalists and Other Media Actors” (Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on April 30, 2014, at the 1198th meeting of Ministers’ Deputies).
- Resolution of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe No. 2035 (2015) “Protection of journalists’ safety and media freedom in Europe.”
- Recommendation CM/Rec (2016) 4 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to member states “On the protection of journalism and the safety of journalists and other media actors” (Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on April 13, 2016, at the 1253rd meeting of Ministers’ Deputies) (Council of Europe, 2016, pp. 6-49).

During armed conflicts, additional rules and recommendations may be introduced to preserve the life and health of journalists in a crisis zone. The list of such recommendations is formed based on the study and generalization of experience from specific military conflicts, as well as testimonies and feedback from journalists who worked in these conditions (Buromensky et al., 2016). These recommendations are crucial for updating legislation and developing modern approaches to protecting media professionals.

Individuals affected by disasters also have the right to protection and support. Regulatory acts defining such possibilities and directing the efforts of individual countries or the international community stem from the European Convention on Human Rights. Such legal acts define the rights of refugees, principles and terms for providing temporary protection, the level and scope of material support, and so on. After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, the Council of the European Union, at a meeting in Brussels on March 4, 2022, voted to apply Directive No. 2001/55/EC on minimum standards for granting temporary protection in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons and on measures promoting a balance of efforts among member states regarding the reception of such persons and bearing their consequences. The result of this Directive's update was that over 4 million Ukrainians received temporary protection status in the EU, access to medical services, education, and the labor market.

Furthermore, the occurrence of disasters or conflicts can trigger internal migration processes, leading to the adoption and implementation of laws that define the legal status and support for such individuals (from opportunities for providing temporary housing to social payments and benefits). In Ukraine, the status of internally displaced persons (IDPs) is regulated by Law No. 1706 of October 20, 2014, "On Ensuring the Rights and Freedoms of Internally Displaced Persons," which defines rights and benefits for such individuals since the beginning of the conflict (annexation of Crimea in 2014).

Victims and those affected by crisis situations and disasters often become the subjects of journalistic materials. Indeed, through their stories, we learn about the profound tragedy of the situation. To fully reflect the situation, a journalist must have a deep understanding of the legislation that regulates this category people rights. Without this, it is impossible to use criteria for evaluating the situation as a whole and to attest to the existence of problems and prospects in a particular region or country.

### **Psychological Preparation of Journalists**

Psychological preparation for journalists involves developing competencies and skills for working in crisis situations. The nature of stress is well-studied today, and various ways to overcome its consequences exist. Moreover, daily life in the digital era, with an abundance of challenges and the need to respond quickly to

various situations and informational contexts, intensifies the issue of stress in a social dimension. This leads to the development of recommendations, creation of trainings, and the study of situations in serious scientific environments that combine psychology, medicine, neurobiology, and other related disciplines.

The authors of the “Safety Guide for Journalists” discuss the work of editorial offices with journalists after returning from crisis zones (UNESCO, 2017, p. 89). The essence of such work is to alleviate the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder and adapt the employee to the normal rhythm of routine work. Alongside the practice of preventative communication, this also involves attention to collective support, recommendations for families and loved ones, and creating comfortable conditions for this period.

The issue of psychological resilience among journalists is exacerbated during social or military conflicts. For example, in Ukraine, at the initiative of the National Union of Journalists, trainings titled “Psychological Safety for Journalists Covering the War in Ukraine” were held as early as May 2022, just three months after the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion. Additionally, safety handbooks for journalists were updated based on current data, and other work aimed at fostering mental resilience was carried out (Psychological safety of journalists during the war, 2022).

Some seemingly simple pieces of advice can have a significant positive effect because they help shift a journalist’s focus from memories of working in an emergency zone back to everyday life. Valeriia Palii, President of the National Psychological Association, shared such recommendations with journalist Yelyzaveta Zhabska:

- Eat on time and maintain a consistent sleep schedule.
- Ensure sufficient physical activity, which helps synthesize neurotransmitters responsible for good mood.
- After experiencing stress, something sweet can become a “neurohormone of joy.”
- Work in your usual workspace, which reinforces the feeling of a work atmosphere.
- When working with materials that can be psychologically traumatic (viewing footage containing difficult testimonies, elements of violence, injuries, etc.), establish a time limit for this and adhere to it.

- Before viewing difficult footage, such as scenes of violence on screen, it's advisable to preview it in a small window or scroll through the footage to view individual frames - this will prepare the brain for perception.
- During the initial viewing of emotionally challenging visual content, reduce screen brightness and sound. If the technology allows, enable black-and-white viewing or sepia mode - this lessens the sense of presence and helps avoid vicarious trauma. (Zhabska, 2022)

While working in a conflict zone, a psychologist advises using the following means of support and mental health preservation:

- Have a trusted psychologist available for advice or support, to reduce stress through conversation (consultation) with a specialist who understands the situation and knows you and your particularities.
- Create and maintain a shared chat with fellow media colleagues working in the conflict zone.
- Undergo psychological resilience training and mental first aid training before an assignment. During military conflicts, this can help prevent combat psychological trauma for both journalists and those around them. (Zhabska, 2022)

Fear and anxiety are normal human feelings and states that trigger biological resilience mechanisms in the body and mobilize necessary resources. Like any other emotions and mental states, they can be managed or at least their nature and ways of exiting these states can be understood, including through a change in activity. A journalist's work, and not only in disaster zones, requires a specific approach to mental resilience competencies. Therefore, we recommend paying sufficient attention to this and working with professional trainers or specialists to create your own toolkit for overcoming difficult mental states.

Working as a journalist in crisis zones demands a high level of psychological preparedness, including specific competencies and skills to cope with challenging situations. Stress is a well-researched topic, and various methods exist to overcome its effects. The demands of daily life in the digital era, with its constant flow of information and the need for rapid responses, further intensify the issue of stress

in society. This has led to the development of recommendations, specialized training, and in-depth scientific studies combining insights from psychology, medicine, neurobiology, and other related fields.

Editors recognize the importance of supporting journalists returning from crisis zones. The “Safety Guide for Journalists: A handbook for reporters in high-risk environments” (UNESCO, 2017, p. 89) emphasizes the need to mitigate the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and help staff adapt back to their routine work. This support goes beyond preventative communication and includes fostering collective support, offering recommendations for families and loved ones, and creating a comfortable environment during this adaptation period.

### **Helping Disaster Victims**

Journalists inform, identify, and highlight pressing issues. They create messages that shape the public perception of disaster, their needs, and directions for support, often within a broad global context. This aspect of helping disaster victims is difficult to overestimate, especially considering that journalists do not work alone in the system of information exchange. A critical mass of publications stimulates activity and promptness in providing aid, making it commensurate with the challenges posed by the disaster.

Assistance to victims operates on several levels. Typically, this includes state aid, assistance from international organizations, as well as other countries, and direct on-site assistance from various services, organizations, and volunteers (from medics to logisticians). It also includes long-term assistance after the acute phase of a disaster, aimed at recovery and overcoming trauma. A crucial component of assistance at all levels in a disaster situation is support and care, which manifests in creating a sense that people are not left alone in their misfortune.

During a disaster situation, journalist must be prepared to encounter people at the scene who are injured or in poor physical condition and require medical assistance. Such situations are not uncommon and demand correct actions. A person who does not have a medical degree or special medical training (e.g., a certificate of completion of certified first aid or tactical medicine courses) is not permitted to provide such type of assistance. In some situations, this

can lead to administrative or criminal liability, and most importantly, result in loss of health or life.

Another situation a journalist might face is helping victims during a pause in material preparation, or when saving lives is genuinely more important than setting aside the microphone and camera for a while. In this situation, we advise contacting the disaster response headquarters, which coordinates volunteer activities. It's quite possible that what's needed at that moment is not another pair of hands clearing rubble, but a driver who can transport children or deliver a medic to the necessary location. Your initiative and concern at the disaster site are always needed, but the coordinated efforts of rescuers are no less essential.

Separately, we should mention preparing to provide assistance at a disaster site: there are numerous national or international programs that focus on training volunteers and developing the practical skills needed to help the victims. The Erasmus+ program also implements similar initiatives (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2023). Moreover, through Erasmus+ projects, you can become part of an international team, gain more knowledge, and contribute more effort, as modern digital technologies open up opportunities to combine initiatives and efforts for better results.

### **Strategies for Working with Social Networks (The Role of Social Networks During Disasters and Methods for Their Effective Use)**

A strategic model for using social networks in disaster coverage is based on the unique characteristics of this phenomenon. While the tactical level of working with social media data involves information verification, data clarification and comparison, and identifying and working with primary sources (as discussed earlier), the strategic dimension of using social networks during disasters is realized in the following ways:

- Analyzing the intensity of messages and societal reactions to specific messages or facts in social media to seek for themes and issues.
- In this same context, publishing your own materials in abbreviated or segmented form to gauge preliminary reactions, for example, via “X” (formerly Twitter), which allows for short messages.

- Creating specific topics or groups to accumulate information and form a context for long-term study of a topic.
- Working with experts and specialists based on the mass audience's reactions to their judgments and forecasts in social media.
- Using social networks to initiate material or moral support in specific situations.
- Tracking the dynamics of public perception of certain themes and problems based on social media reactions - an increase or decrease in specific types of reactions over a noticeable period (this model is useful when reflecting the course of military or social conflicts).

The list above is not exhaustive but demonstrates the directions of strategic social media use. However, journalists must understand that the data and observations obtained may need to be correlated after verification, especially considering phenomena like “bot farms,” which involve the dissemination of information or reactions from a large number of people using artificially created accounts, typically for a set price per post or reaction.

In many situations involving the strategic use of social networks, journalists deal with analyzing significant amounts of data. During a disaster, and even after returning from the scene, it can be challenging to compare and analyze large datasets. In such situations, neural network tools can be employed to correctly interpret the task and obtain preliminary conclusions or generalizations that can be further refined. For this work to be effective and the results valid, it's advisable to undergo training or attend a webinar on recommendations for working with artificial intelligence.

### **Thematic Studies**

The study of how journalism functions in the digital era has undergone significant changes over the past 5-10 years. Researchers are increasingly focused on neural networks and the potential of artificial intelligence (AI). Today, AI is at the forefront of research due to its potential applications in various fields of science, manufacturing, entertainment, everyday needs, and even creativity. However, journalists cannot do without research on issues that were relevant before this period - scientific and practical handbooks and

monographs on data verification and technological solutions for establishing digital truth. We previously referenced the “Verification Handbook” (2016) and highly recommend it as a comprehensive international study. You can also use any other reliable sources that help verify images or social media messages on your smartphone.

Let’s return to artificial intelligence. The study of this phenomenon has two distinct directions: the first is the philosophy of human existence in the world of neural networks and AI, and the second is the peculiarities of using AI for specific needs. The first direction introduces us to all the predictions, fears, and recommendations that may arise from the development of AI technologies (yes, the authors are also familiar with the “Rise of the Machines” concept). Among such works, we can mention the monograph “Total Automation: How Computer Algorithms Are Changing the World” (Steiner, 2018). Indeed, many serious and relevant studies have been conducted on this topic, the philosophical contexts of some of these publications provide grounds for re-evaluating reality.

The second direction is represented by more recent publications, which makes sense given the relatively short time that AI has been used to meet real needs. These publications are more focused on advice and recommendations, containing algorithms for working with AI or other relevant forms of interaction, and concentrating on the trends in the phenomenon’s development. Publications in the second direction offer a wide range of possibilities for tracking future technological changes and prospects for its use. Among the publications in this area, we will name two studies: “The Creativity Code: How AI Learns to Write, Draw, and Think” (Saitou, 2023) and “Artificial Intelligence in Media” (Krainikova, Voldolazka, Ryzhko, & Sytnyk, 2025).

The prospects for further development of the digital era issues currently focus on the AI capabilities development prospects, as well as the answer to the question: Do they pose a threat to humanity? Notably, it is easier to verify visual data created by AI than to establish that a text’s author is AI. Over time, this could become a problem, as in some situations, neural networks are already used to generate not only news but also the anchors who voice them. However, AI is not yet capable of being deployed to crisis areas, so there is still a great need for media professionals who understand disaster journalism.

## Recommendations

Digital technologies are a priority for developing professional skills and competencies today. Therefore, the first piece of advice concerns the effort you should invest in mastering these technologies. While this effort seems significant, it is measurable: data verification, the ability to use open resources (including satellite data), applying fact-checking tools, and other useful information technology skills will make your materials more accurate and compelling.

Like any human invention, AI can significantly help with professional tasks, yet simultaneously limit development by taking over genuinely complex work. Thousands of years have passed since the invention of the wheel, but we can still walk or use wheels with equal ease. Similarly, we advise you to use the potential of AI thoughtfully: leave monotonous, repetitive, and large-volume work to AI, while creativity and style remain the journalist's domain. Don't disregard AI's capabilities for data analysis, information gathering, and schedule organization - at least not until you stop understanding the intellectual mechanism behind the results AI provides. When that moment comes, learn new methods of working with data, if only to keep pace with AI qualitatively and continue letting it handle tedious, monotonous operations.

Cultivate your own strategies. Daily life and routine tasks can hinder our development by pushing long-term goals and ideas to "later", which may never come. If you've been to a disaster zone and gathered material, if the topic resonated with you, and your notebook contains many thoughts and contacts, then consider writing a documentary book or editing a film, creating an interactive data hub, or organizing a unity festival in a restored location to bring together people who were there during difficult times. Perhaps, when this handbook becomes outdated, the authors of the next study on disaster journalism will be quoting your journalistic work.

A blue-tinted image of a vintage typewriter, viewed from a slightly elevated angle. The typewriter is the central focus, with its keyboard, carriage, and paper support visible. Above the typewriter, several large, white, serif letters are scattered across the blue background, appearing to float or be scattered. The letters include 'D', 'S', 'R', 'E', 'C', 'Y', 'Q', 'B', 'N', 'W', 'G', 'P', 'X', 'F', 'O'. The overall aesthetic is clean and professional, with a strong color palette of blue and white.

## Glossary Of The Guide



## Glossary Of The Guide

The terms provided below and their meanings are general and are given to aid in understanding the content of the handbook. We advise you to pay attention to how these phenomena are defined in your country's legislation and how the content is interpreted and a journalist's actions are regulated during emergencies by that legislation. This is important because there may be quite different approaches to understanding terminology and the content of phenomena, and thus to possible professional actions in the event of emergencies.

- Accident - a dangerous man-made event that poses a threat to the life and health of the population in a certain territory, causes destruction of housing, buildings, and transport, and involves dangerous emissions or other harmful effects on the environment.
- Catastrophe - an emergency or accident that leads to severe or irreversible consequences.
- Civil Protection - a state function consisting of forming means of protecting the population and the environment.
- Civil Defense Means - Special equipment, machinery, medical and pharmaceutical supplies, collective and individual protective equipment used in emergencies and disasters to preserve the life and health of the population and to eliminate the consequences of emergencies.
- Consequence Mitigation - a complex of actions and means aimed at restoring life support systems and networks in the territory where a catastrophe or other emergency has occurred. It is regulated by the legislation of specific countries, typically aimed at meeting basic needs (food, water, health, safety, etc.), and seeks to restore the functional capabilities of the region in meeting the needs of the population and ensuring safe living conditions. National and international organizations, businesses,

foundations, and volunteers are involved in disaster consequence mitigation, coordinated by a specially created state body or bodies. The process involves forming stages for consequence mitigation and defines the goal of each such stage in accordance with the norms and approaches stipulated in the legislation.

- Consequence Mitigation Headquarters - specially organized state structures that coordinate disaster consequence mitigation activities and provide support to victims. The activities of such structures may be regulated by legislation or other normative acts. One of the functions of these structures is to provide official accreditation to journalists and disseminate reliable (official) information about the catastrophe or its consequences. The typology of such structures may differ depending on the nature of the catastrophe; these structures are created under ministries of emergency situations, police structures, or military bodies, depending on the type and nature of the emergency.
- Dangerous Event - any event that poses a threat to human life and health or may lead to material damage.
- Dangerous Factor - a component of a dangerous event, manifested in creating a threat of chemical, biological, radiological, or other emissions, fire, accident, weapon impact, or the consequences of its use, posing a threat to human life and health. When dangerous factors are identified, relevant structures determine or should determine and indicate the causes of such phenomena, which belong to dangerous events and have a broader context of impact on the life of a territory or region. A dangerous factor does not exist separately from an emergency or dangerous event.
- Disaster Journalism - a distinct type of journalism focused on covering disasters and their aftermath, requiring

particular attention to objectivity and promptness of materials, adherence to ethical norms and principles of journalistic activity. Due to the specifics of the objects covered, disaster journalism is accompanied by a complex of legal measures and places special demands on the level of journalists' safety.

- Disaster Victims - an individual person or group of people who have sustained an injury (injuries) as a result of dangerous factors of an emergency phenomenon. Victims also include individuals or groups of people who have experienced collective trauma.
- Evacuation - a set of measures aimed at the organized removal of the population, valuables, and equipment in the event of an emergency or accident to preserve human lives or protect them from the consequences of an emergency, and to preserve valuables and important equipment.
- Emergency Prevention - a set of measures aimed at mitigating the consequences of a potential danger, consisting of legal, political, social, economic, organizational, technical, and sanitary-hygienic factors that ensure monitoring, research, and forecasts regarding possible threats and the mitigation of their consequences to prevent emergencies.
- Emergency - a situation in a certain territory or at an object characterized by a disruption of the normal functioning conditions of that territory or object. The cause of an emergency can be an accident, natural disaster, epidemic, fire, the use of weapons, or another extraordinary event that has already led or may lead to a threat to the life and health of the population.
- International Support During Disasters - the activities of countries and non-governmental organizations aimed at solving problems and meeting the needs of victims. International support is also provided during long-term consequence mitigation efforts.



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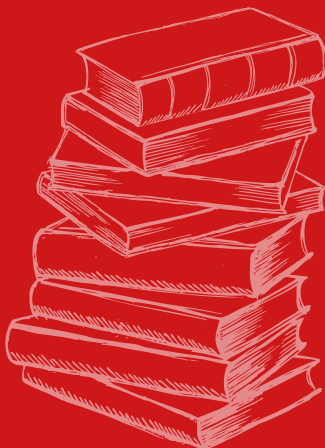
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**CHAPTER 2**

**DISASTER  
JOURNALISM  
ETHICAL GUIDE**





# 2.1.

## What is ethics in journalism?





## 2.1. What is ethics in journalism?

### Introduction

February 6, 2023, 4:17 a.m. A powerful underground tremor shattered southern Türkiye. Within minutes, social media explodes with conflicting reports: “7.8 magnitude,” “thousands dead,” “cities destroyed.” Journalists from local media faced a choice: wait for official confirmation or report what they saw with their own eyes?

A Turkish photojournalist was the first to publish a photo: a shot of the ruins without commentary. Five minutes later, this image was re-broadcast by twenty international agencies. An hour later, it became a symbol of the tragedy. But what if this shot is not from the earthquake’s epicenter but an archive from last year’s accident? What if the journalist made a mistake with the geolocation?

Ethics in disaster journalism is the art of balancing on a razor’s edge between speed and accuracy, between the right to know and the right to privacy, between informing and protecting. While regular journalism often operates with days or months for fact-checking, disaster journalism works in minutes. While regular reporters have the luxury of returning to a topic tomorrow, journalists at the epicenter of a disaster understand that tomorrow might be too late.

According to our survey, 92.2% of journalists admitted a lack of knowledge about the specifics of working in various disasters. It’s a paradox of the profession – we spend years preparing to cover politics, economics, and culture, but we remain defenseless in the face of true chaos. The very chaos that demands the utmost professional excellence.

### Core principles and values of journalistic ethics

#### *The Architecture of Trust*

The ethics of disaster journalism are built on seven cornerstones. They have been shaped by decades of professional practice and painful mistakes as a set of moral principles and professional norms that journalists must adhere to when covering disaster events. Such events include natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, fires), man-made accidents, terrorist attacks, wars, and other mass tragedies.

Truthfulness is the active pursuit of accuracy. In the context of disasters, truthfulness becomes critically important. Inaccurate information about an evacuation could cost lives. According to Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel in “The Elements of Journalism”

(Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001), “the first obligation of journalism is to the truth.” But what is the truth when facts contradict each other and there is no time for verification?

Independence in disaster journalism often means resisting pressure from authorities who seek to minimize the scale of the tragedy. At the same time, independence does not mean ignoring official sources. True independence lies in the ability to critically evaluate all sources of information without allowing oneself to be manipulated.

Fairness requires a journalist to represent all sides of a conflict. In a disaster, the “sides” are not only the victims and rescuers but also those responsible for the tragedy. Fairness means neither concealing the guilty nor falsely accusing the innocent.

Accountability is a journalist’s willingness to take responsibility for their publications. In disasters, this principle takes on special significance: mistakes can have fatal consequences. Accountability also means being prepared to quickly correct errors and publicly admit them.

Humanity is perhaps the most difficult principle to apply in practice. According to our survey, journalists rated the ability to avoid manipulation and maintain humanity at an average of 4.43 out of 5. This high score contrasts with actual practice, where humanity is often sacrificed for sensationalism.

Humanity does not mean silencing painful facts. On the contrary, it requires presenting information in a way that respects the dignity of the victims, does not cause additional harm, and serves the public good. It is the art of showing a tragedy without turning it into a spectacle.

Respect for Privacy becomes a particularly difficult task in disasters. Grief has a public dimension – society has the right to know the scale of the tragedy. But grief also has a private dimension – the suffering of specific individuals. Journalistic ethics require finding a balance between these two dimensions.

Objectivity is perhaps the most controversial principle of journalistic ethics. Complete objectivity is impossible: every journalist has their own experiences, values, and biases. But this does not mean it should not be strived for.

The problem is that disasters rarely afford the luxury of a cold-blooded analysis. When there is panic, suffering, and chaos all around – emotional neutrality can seem like cynicism. Here, objectivity takes on a new meaning: not as indifference, but as the

professional ability to maintain clarity of thought even in extreme conditions.

*The Temporal Paradox: When Time is an Enemy of Accuracy*

Traditional journalism allows for the luxury of time. A journalist can spend days, weeks, or even months researching a topic. They can go back to sources, verify facts, and consult with experts. Disaster journalism mercilessly destroys this luxury – the faster you publish, the greater the likelihood of error. The longer you take to verify, the less the public benefit.

According to our survey, 76.9% of journalists feel a lack of ethical guidelines for working during disasters. This figure reflects the unique challenges the profession faces. Standard ethical codes, created for “normal” times, prove insufficient for extreme situations.

*Emotional Intensity: the Intersection of Professionalism and Humanity*

Regular journalism rarely places a reporter in a situation where their own life is at risk. Even conflict reporting allows for a certain emotional distance. Disaster journalism shatters this distance.

The emotional intensity of disasters creates ethical dilemmas unfamiliar to regular journalism. A journalist sometimes becomes not just an observer, but a potential victim of the tragedy. This forces a re-evaluation of the classic principles of professional distance and objectivity.

*Multiple Audiences: When One Text Must Serve Everyone*

Traditional journalism has a clearly defined target audience. An economic report for a business publication, a political analysis for a public policy medium, or entertainment content for tabloids. Disaster journalism breaks down these boundaries.

During the floods in Valencia in October 2024, Spanish media faced a unique challenge. Their audience simultaneously consisted of:

- Local residents who needed practical information about evacuation;
- Relatives of victims from other regions who were looking for news about their loved ones;
- The international community that wanted to understand the scale of the disaster;
- Experts and officials who needed accurate data for decision-making.

How do you write a single report that satisfies the needs of all these groups? How do you combine the emotional tone for relatives

with the factual precision for experts? How do you ensure local relevance while maintaining international clarity?

*Ethical Responsibility for Consequences*

Traditional journalism rarely has immediate, fatal consequences. An inaccurate economic forecast might affect the market but will not kill anyone. A biased political report may influence ratings, but there will be no casualties.

Disaster journalism operates in a realm of life and death. Inaccurate information about an evacuation can cost lives. A premature report about a radiation threat can cause a panic with human casualties. An underestimated risk assessment can lead to insufficient public preparedness.

**Historical examples of ethical breaches in disaster coverage and their consequences**

***Hurricane Katrina*** (USA, 2005): Sensationalism, Stereotypes, and Forgotten Communities

After Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast in 2005, American media faced an unprecedented challenge to cover the humanitarian disaster in New Orleans and other affected areas. However, they made numerous ethical missteps (Giudici, 2008).

First, in the initial days, a number of leading media outlets spread unverified rumors about widespread looting, violence, and even shootings in flooded New Orleans. For example, there were reports of numerous rapes and murders in the Superdome shelter, which were later not confirmed by an investigation. These sensational claims turned out to be myths born of chaos.

Second, racial stereotypes emerged in the coverage: two photographs of people carrying food from flooded stores were captioned differently. A Black man was described as “looting a grocery store,” while white people were described as “finding bread in a store.” This caused a scandal and accusations of racial bias in the press’s description of identical actions – people were simply taking food to survive).

Third, in the weeks following the hurricane, journalists were critically assessed for focusing almost all their attention on New Orleans, while other heavily affected areas, such as the Mississippi coast, were left on the sidelines of media attention.

***Earthquake and Tsunami in Japan*** (2011): Disinformation and Panic

When a powerful earthquake and tsunami struck Japan in March 2011, global media were quick to cover the tragedy. Overall,

journalists acted professionally, but this event serves as an example of how even unintentional miscalculations in risk communication can lead to consequences.

This refers to the panic surrounding radiation after the Fukushima nuclear power plant accident. In the first days, the media reported extensively on a potential radioactive release and health dangers. On the West Coast of the United States (thousands of miles away), people reading these news reports rushed to buy potassium iodide (anti-radiation pills), even though there was no threat to them.

***Haiti Earthquake*** (2010): Invasion of Privacy and the “Rescuers on Camera”

After the catastrophic earthquake in Haiti in January 2010, which claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, thousands of journalists from around the world arrived on the island. At the same time, some approaches to covering Haiti sparked ethical debates.

First, critics noted a tendency toward the “Western savior”: many reports focused on the activities of foreign (American, European) rescuers and doctors, sometimes turning them into the heroes of the narrative, while the Haitians themselves were portrayed as passive victims. Such a bias may be unintentional, but it silences the local population.

Second, there was an instance where the American television channel CNN used a doctor–reporter (Dr. Sanjay Gupta) in its coverage who personally provided medical assistance to the victims on camera. On one hand, he genuinely helped – he was filmed operating on a child and providing first aid when no other medics were nearby. On the other hand, a debate arose: did this cross the line between journalism and participation? Some colleagues accused CNN of using the drama of rescue to boost ratings, calling him a “hero doctor with his camera.” The doctor and CNN responded that life is more important, and if his medical expertise was useful, he could not stand by – which aligns with the principle of humanity (Folkenflik, 2015).

Third, in Haiti, there were questions about the showing of overly graphic footage. Some European newspapers published photos of numerous bodies of the deceased lying in the open. A part of the audience and media experts considered this excessive, saying, “we know people died there; it’s not necessary to show it so graphically.” Others said that the world needed to see the full horror to be more active in providing aid. This is a typical debate: one side stands on the principle of minimizing harm and respecting the dead, while the other stands on the principle of truth and impact.

***Kiss Nightclub Fire in Brazil*** (2013): Invading Family Grief

In the city of Santa Maria, a terrible fire at a nightclub killed over 230 young people. This event shocked Brazil. Most media outlets covered it appropriately, but one Brazilian tabloid published a large collage of photos of almost all the victims (many of whom were teenagers and young adults) on its front page, sourced from social media, under a headline like “Recognize them: victims of the tragedy.” The relatives of the deceased were outraged – the newspaper had effectively invaded their private grief, turning the portraits of their loved ones into a kind of “wall of death” for the public. This sparked a debate about the right to privacy, even after death, and the tone of the media.

***L’Aquila Earthquake*** (Italy, 2009): When a Scientific Discussion Became a Media Victim

April 6, 2009. A powerful earthquake devastates the Italian city of L’Aquila. 309 people died. But the real tragedy unfolded after the disaster when the Italian media began a “witch hunt.”

Six scientists and one official were accused of manslaughter. Their crime? A week before the earthquake, they had stated that a strong earthquake was unlikely. The Italian media presented this as “safety guarantees,” when in reality it was about probabilistic assessments.

The media campaign turned a scientific discussion into a criminal case. The scientists were sentenced to six years in prison (the verdict was later overturned by the appellate court).

***MH17 Flight Crash*** (Ukraine, 2014): Information Warfare in an Era of War

On July 17, 2014, Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 was shot down over the Donetsk region. 298 people died. From the first moments, the tragedy became a battlefield of competing narratives.

Russian media blamed the Ukrainian Air Force. Ukrainian media blamed pro-Russian separatists in the temporarily occupied territories. Western media tried to establish the facts but fell into a trap of disinformation. Fake evidence, falsified recordings of conversations, and manipulative photos flooded the information space.

The consequence was not only a tragedy for the families of the deceased but also a long-term erosion of trust in the media. The audience felt that the truth was impossible to establish and that all media manipulated facts for political purposes. Only in 2025 did a court in the Netherlands finally conclude that the airliner was shot down by a Russian air defense system from territory not controlled by Ukraine.

## Ethical guidelines for disaster journalism

The ethical challenges described above have prompted the international community to develop clear guidelines and codes for journalists working in crisis and disaster situations. There are a number of documents and recommendations from global organizations – UNESCO, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), the Ethical Journalism Network (EJN), Reporters Without Borders (RSF), and others – that help media professionals navigate how to act ethically. Many national codes of journalism also contain sections or provisions dedicated to covering tragedies.

### *Global Principles Shared by the Codes*

Despite the diversity of their wording, international ethical codes converge on key values that must be applied during disasters:

*Truthfulness and Accuracy.* The IFJ, in its Global Charter of Ethics, states as point #1: “Respect for facts and the public’s right to truth is the journalist’s first duty” (*Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists - IFJ*, n.d.) The EJN speaks of truth and facts as the basis of communication (Ethical journalism, n.d.). This confirms that even when chaos reigns, a journalist must adhere to factual truth. The codes insist: do not falsify, do not take things out of context, and do not engage in disinformation. For disasters, this means verifying data as much as possible and being honest about what you do not know. Correcting errors is also important: the IFJ obliges journalists to “correct any errors as soon as possible, clearly and completely” (*Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists - IFJ*, n.d.). This is highly relevant during a disaster when initial information may turn out to be false – an ethical newsroom will promptly publish a retraction or clarification.

*Independence and Lack of Conflicts of Interest.* The codes (IFJ, EJN, RSF) emphasize that a journalist must serve only the public interest, avoiding any pressure from authorities, business, or personal gain (Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists - IFJ, n.d.). The EJN names independence as the second key value after truth. For disasters, this means the reporter should not become a mouthpiece for official propaganda or, conversely, for anyone’s speculations. They must carefully show different sides – both the government’s position and the public’s voice – and scrutinize official data rather than blindly re-transmitting it. Independence also includes a lack of self-interest – a journalist should not accept gifts or money to cover a disaster in a certain way and should not hide the truth out of fear or loyalty to someone.

*Fairness, Impartiality, and Absence of Discrimination.* The EJN identifies “honesty and impartiality” as one of the 5 foundations of ethical journalism. In its Charter, the IFJ prohibits inciting hatred or prejudice based on any characteristics (geographical, ethnic, religious, etc.) (*Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists - IFJ*, n.d.). In the context of disasters, this includes, for example, the requirement not to sensationalize the ethnicity of victims, not to spread stereotypes (“typical of this nation”), and to avoid biased coverage of different communities. It is known that during disaster coverage in various countries, media sometimes show “double standards” – they empathize more with victims “like us” and less with “foreigners.” International ethical principles call for equal empathy and respect.

*Humanity and Respect for Dignity.* This principle is specifically emphasized in many guidelines. The IFJ speaks of respect for the dignity and privacy of vulnerable people (*Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists - IFJ*, n.d.) UNESCO, in partnership with the Dart Center and other organizations, has developed recommendations on “trauma-informed journalism,” where the central approach is “Do No Harm.” These documents advise journalists to be sensitive, maintain confidentiality, especially concerning children and victims of violence, and to avoid using their names or images without consent. When covering disasters, the media must protect people’s private lives even in a public tragedy. For example, the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics directly states: “Private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than public figures... Only an overriding public need can justify intrusion into someone’s grief or privacy.” (*SPJ’s Code of Ethics*, n.d.). Thus, international standards demand: if there is no compelling reason, a camera should not be shoved in the face of a mother sobbing over her child’s body, nor should the name of a person who has experienced trauma be disclosed without their permission.

*Responsibility and Service to Society.* UNESCO and the EJN emphasize that journalism rooted in ethics is journalism in the public interest, built on trust (*Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists*, n.d.). In the context of disasters, international organizations (such as UNESCO or the International Committee of the Red Cross in collaboration with the media) have issued manuals urging journalists to remember their public mission: not only to inform but also to educate, helping people to react correctly to an emergency. For example, the European Journalism Observatory (EJO) proposes the concept of “ethical disaster reporting to help communities” – ethical

coverage of disasters that helps communities cope. In one EJN/Poynter material, five approaches are highlighted: explaining the causes (so that society understands why the disaster happened and who is responsible), showing affected groups (so that marginalized people are not forgotten), not spreading myths (for example, about widespread looting, which is often a myth (Sur & Shaw, 2023), continuing the topic after the “smoke” clears (i.e., covering reconstruction, not just the moment of crisis), and not labeling disasters as “natural,” thereby acknowledging the human factor (Sur & Shaw, 2023).

### **Case studies and thematic research**

#### ***Case 1: The Türkiye Earthquake (2023) – Speed vs. Accuracy***

*The Situation:* On February 6, 2023, at 4:17 a.m., a 7.8 magnitude earthquake devastated southeastern Türkiye. The first reporters arrived on the scene 40 minutes later. Official casualty figures would not be available for another 6 hours.

#### ***Ethical challenges:***

- *Time Pressure:* International agencies demanded immediate information.
- *Conflicting Data:* Eyewitness accounts differed dramatically.
- *Emotional Pressure:* Dramatic footage prompted immediate publication.

#### ***Different Media Approaches:***

- *Reuters:* Chose a cautious strategy. The first publication came 2 hours later with careful wording: “According to preliminary data,” “The scale of the destruction is being clarified.” It sacrificed speed but maintained its reputation.
- *Local Turkish Media:* Published unverified eyewitness accounts. The first casualty figures turned out to be three times too low. They were forced to make painful retractions over the course of a week.
- *BBC:* Applied a scale of reliability. Each fact was accompanied by an explanation of the source: “According to an eyewitness,” “Reported by a local hospital,” “No official confirmation available.”

*The Result:* A month later, media analysts’ research showed that the audience trusted publications that honestly admitted the limitations of their information more than those that pretended to be all-knowing.

*The Lesson:* Professional honesty about the limits of one’s own knowledge builds audience trust more than feigned omniscience.

**Case 2: The Valencia Floods (2024) – Battling Disinformation**

*The Situation:* In October 2024, heavy, intense rain caused floods in the province of Valencia. The death toll exceeded 230 people (228 in Valencia), and thousands of residents were left without access to electricity, transportation, and housing. This event was one of Spain’s largest hydrological disasters of the 21st century.

***Ethical challenges:***

- *Information Chaos:* Dozens of conflicting sources.
- *Fake News:* Spreading faster than the truth.
- *Politicization of the Tragedy:* The opposition accused the government of unpreparedness.
- *Innovative Solutions by Spanish Media:*
- El País: Created a special section for “Real-time Fact-Checking.” Each piece of questionable information was checked within an hour and marked: confirmed/debunked/being verified.
- La Vanguardia: Introduced a “source-context-verification” system for every fact. Readers saw not only the information but also the process of its verification.
- RTVE: Created an interactive reliability map where each area was marked: “confirmed information,” “conflicting data,” or “unverified.”

*The Consequences:* Surveys and fact-checking platforms recorded a rise in trust in traditional media among residents of the affected regions. This is a rare case of increased trust in media during a crisis.

*The Lesson:* Transparency in the fact-checking process can become a competitive advantage for media in an age of fake news.

**Case 3: The Greek Wildfires (2021) – Environmental Journalism vs. Sensationalism**

*The Situation:* August 2021. Wildfires engulfed northern Evia. For the first time in a century, the fire reached Olympia – the birthplace of the Olympic Games.

***Ethical dilemmas:***

- Historical Significance vs. The Current Needs of the Population.
- Environmental Consequences vs. Human Casualties in Media Attention.
- Local vs. International Media Priorities.
- *Different Approaches:*
- Protagonist: Greek television focused on the heroic efforts of firefighters. Emotional interviews, dramatic footage.

Ratings rose, but critics accused the channel of turning the tragedy into a show.

- *Καθημερινή* (Kathimerini): Chose an analytical approach. Detailed articles on the causes of the fires, climate change, and shortcomings in forest management. Less emotion, more context.
- International Media: Focused on the symbolism – the threat to Olympia as the cradle of European civilization. The local needs of the population were pushed to the background.

*The Unexpected Result:* The most significant impact came from stories that combined emotion with analysis. Greek journalist Nikos Vasilopoulos wrote a series of reports about specific families who had lost their homes, but each report concluded with an analysis of the systemic causes of the disaster.

*The Lesson:* The dilemma of emotion versus analysis is a false one. The best disaster journalism combines human stories with systemic analysis.

**Case 4: The Genoa Bridge Collapse (2018) – Responsibility and Accusation**

*The Situation:* August 14, 2018. The Morandi Bridge in Genoa collapsed. 43 people died. The immediate question was: who is to blame?

*Media Strategies:*

- *Corriere della Sera:* Focused on technical causes. It brought in engineering experts and published archival documents on the condition of the bridge. It avoided premature accusations.
- *La Repubblica:* Chose an investigative strategy. It published documents about engineers' warnings that had been ignored for years. It directly accused the concessionaire company.
- *Local Genoese Media:* Focused on human stories. Portraits of the deceased, interviews with families, and aid to the victims.

**Ethical consequences:** A year later, it became clear that all three approaches were necessary. The technical analysis helped to understand the causes. The investigation led to criminal cases. The human stories mobilized public support.

*However:* Some media outlets crossed a line by publishing the personal data of the deceased without the families' consent. The Italian Journalists' Association deemed this an ethical violation.

*The Lesson:* Disasters require a multiplicity of approaches, but each approach must remain within ethical boundaries.

## Insights from a survey: the most important competencies

The results of our survey of practicing journalists in Türkiye, Ukraine, Spain, and Slovenia in 2025 reveal a painful gap between the ideals and the reality of the journalistic profession in the context of disaster coverage.

1. *The Ability to Reliably Convey Facts* (4.46/5). Remember the rule: credibility first, speed second. If the information is urgent but unconfirmed, clearly state this (“according to eyewitnesses...”, “preliminarily...”). If you make a mistake, correct it honestly and publicly.

2. *Avoiding Manipulation and Showing Humanity* (4.43/5). Show context and explain the reasons rather than giving dramatic descriptions. Provide information about the response efforts: which services are involved, what kind of help is needed.

3. *Ethics of Working with Victims* (4.43/5). Do not name the deceased until official publication. Do not show close-ups of the faces of the deceased. When filming, ask for permission: “I am a journalist, may I record/film...?”

4. *Informing Without Causing Panic* (4.35/5). Avoid sensational headlines and overly graphic descriptions. Ask yourself: does this detail serve to help understand the situation or is it just for shock value? Instead of “horribly charred bodies,” write “victims whose bodies were burned.”

5. *Communication with Victims* (4.25/5). Begin by expressing sympathy. Explain why their story is important. Be a good listener – do not interrupt, and show support with a nod.

6. *Preserving Yourself and Your Materials* (4.19/5). Equip yourself with protective gear and a communication plan with the newsroom. After working “in the field,” find time to recover – talk with colleagues, and process what you have experienced.

### Problem Areas: Where Weakness is Felt

- 92.2% of journalists admit a lack of knowledge about the specifics of working in various disasters. This means we are working blind, relying on intuition instead of professional training.
- 81.3% do not have sufficient resources to work in crisis conditions. A lack of technical readiness becomes a source of ethical violations: when you cannot verify a fact, it is easier to ignore it.
- 76.9% feel a lack of ethical guidelines for working during disasters. Our ethical codes were created for “peacetime” and prove insufficient for extreme situations.

- 63.3% need help coping with stress. Traumatized journalists cannot objectively cover traumatic events.
- 70.5% do not know what equipment is needed in different conditions. A lack of technical readiness creates ethical dilemmas: do you publish low-quality material or leave the audience without information?

### Checklists for self-control

Effective and responsible communication, especially in high-stakes environments, requires a structured approach to self-control. This process can be broken down into five distinct phases, designed to guide a communicator from initial impulse to a thoughtful, defensible message.

*Step 1:* The first step, **Pause and Assess**, is a critical thirty-second window for reflection. You must immediately ask if there is time to verify the information. Simultaneously, consider the potential cost of a mistake – such as disseminating false information – versus the cost of silence, which might mean failing to share a crucial truth. This initial assessment provides the necessary context for all subsequent decisions.

*Step 2:* Next, a thorough identification of **Identify Stakeholders** is essential, which should take approximately one minute. This involves discerning who truly needs the information and, conversely, who could be harmed by its publication. A key part of this phase is identifying whose interests are in conflict, allowing for a more nuanced and ethical approach to communication.

*Step 3:* The third step is to **Rank Reliability**, a two-minute exercise in critical thinking. The goal is to categorize the information based on its certainty. You should distinguish what is known for sure from what is merely probable, and, most importantly, what is doubtful. This provides a clear-eyed view of the information's strength and limitations.

*Step 4:* Following this, you have up to five minutes to **Formulate the Message**. This is where you put the previous steps into action by carefully crafting your communication. The message must clearly separate established facts from assumptions. You must also indicate the sources of your information and be transparent about the limits of your current knowledge. This transparency builds credibility and manages audience expectations.

*Step 5:* Finally, you must take three minutes to **Anticipate Consequences**. This final step requires you to consider how the audience might interpret the information. It is crucial to think

about what unexpected reactions are possible and, ultimately, to be prepared to defend your decision to publish the message. This forward-looking approach ensures you are accountable for the impact of your words.

### **Ethical “Red flags” checklist**

In the process of preparing and disseminating information, several ethical “red flags” can serve as critical indicators that a pause for reflection is needed. Recognizing and addressing these signs can prevent missteps and ensure the integrity of the message.

The first red flag is feeling the pressure to “publish first.” In the rapid pace of modern media, the instinct to be the first to report can be strong. When this feeling arises, it is crucial to ask: will a 10-minute delay change the essence of the event? This simple question can create the necessary space to verify facts and avoid costly errors.

Another red flag appears when a source asks to remain anonymous for unclear reasons. Anonymity is a powerful tool for protecting individuals at risk, but it must be justified by specific threats to their safety, not by simple convenience. When faced with such a request, it is essential to clarify the precise risks involved to ensure the anonymity is warranted and not a means of avoiding accountability.

A significant red flag is the moment information evokes a strong emotional reaction in you personally. When a story triggers anger, sadness, or outrage, it is a signal to stop and seek an objective opinion. Emotions are a poor adviser for facts and can cloud judgment. Consulting with a trusted colleague can help you regain perspective and ensure the message is conveyed accurately and dispassionately.

You should be wary when you find yourself using absolute words like “always,” “never,” “all,” or “none.” Disasters and complex events rarely have absolute characteristics. Such language can oversimplify reality and mislead the audience. When you catch yourself using these words, rephrase your message to reflect the nuances and complexities of the situation.

Finally, a red flag to consider is visual content that is shocking even to you. While graphic images can be powerful, they can also be exploitative and may do more harm than good. Consider alternatives; sometimes a thoughtful, well-written description of an event is far more effective and respectful than showing a disturbing image, allowing the audience to engage with the information on a deeper level.

### **Techniques for maintaining ethical clarity under pressure**

Operating with integrity in a complex information landscape requires a proactive approach to ethical decision-making. Certain techniques can be employed to maintain clarity and ensure your actions align with your principles, especially when under pressure.

First, consider the **“Two Voices” technique**. Before you publish any material, read it aloud in two distinct voices: first, as a professional journalist, focused on facts and accuracy, and second, as an ordinary citizen, a member of your audience. If the second voice feels any sense of discomfort, confusion, or doubt, it’s a clear signal to rewrite and clarify the message.

Next, try the **“Mirror Test” technique**. This is a deeply personal and powerful exercise. Ask yourself: will I be able to look at myself in the mirror after publication? Will I be able to clearly and honestly explain my decision to a child? This method helps you connect with your core values and ensures your professional actions align with your personal integrity.

The **“24-Hour Perspective” technique** encourages you to step back from the immediate pressures of the moment. Imagine how you will evaluate your decision not just tomorrow, but in a week or, more importantly, in a year from now. This long-term perspective can help you avoid hasty choices that you might later regret.

Finally, the **“Alternative Scenario” Technique** is a valuable tool for critical thinking. For every major decision, consciously model at least two alternative approaches. Actively justify why you chose your final path over the others. This practice strengthens your reasoning and prepares you to defend your decisions.

### **Developing Ethical Intuition Through Training**

Ethical decision-making is not an innate skill; it is a muscle that can be strengthened through consistent training and reflection.

A great way to develop your ethical intuition is by analyzing **weekly ethical dilemmas**. Take one complex ethical case each week and analyze it without searching for the “right” answer. Instead, focus on understanding the conflicting interests, the potential consequences of different actions, and the layers of complexity involved. This process trains your mind to see the gray areas, not just the black and white.

**Role-playing** exercises are also incredibly effective. Act out a situation from different perspectives: that of the journalist, the editor, the subject of the story, and the reader. This practice builds empathy and helps you anticipate the impact of your actions on all parties involved.

Consider adopting an **ethical-focused media diet**. When you consume news, don't just read the headlines. Actively analyze the ethical decisions of the authors. Ask yourself: why was this detail included? Why was that left out? What would I have done differently? This conscious critique of others' work sharpens your own judgment.

Lastly, **keeping an ethical diary** provides a record of your growth. Write down the difficult ethical decisions you make, big or small. Return to these entries months later and analyze them with the benefit of hindsight. This reflection solidifies your learning and helps you build a strong foundation of ethical experience.

Ethics in journalism is not a set of prohibitions, but a system of guidelines in a professional labyrinth. In the context of a disaster, this labyrinth becomes particularly complex: the walls shift with the speed of events, the lighting is dimmed by stress, and the time for making decisions is minimal. The main lesson of this chapter is that ethical thinking must be formed before a crisis, not during it. When seconds count for people's lives, a journalist's ethical intuition becomes their most valuable tool. But this intuition is not a natural gift; it is the result of conscious professional training. Modern ethical guidelines offer specific tools for working in crisis situations. However, these tools require adaptation to local conditions, cultural contexts, and the specific challenges of each region.

## 2.2.

# Ethical principles in disaster coverage





## 2.2. Ethical principles in disaster coverage

### Introduction

Imagine a journalist standing beside a destroyed building after an earthquake. In their hands, a microphone; before their eyes, human grief; behind them, the pressure from a newsroom demanding speed. In that moment, ethical principles stop being abstract concepts from a textbook. When every second counts for human lives, when a single inaccuracy can cause panic, when a wrongly chosen word can deepen someone's pain, that is when the true value of professional principles becomes clear.

According to our survey, 87.8% of journalists acknowledged that covering disasters involves risks, but 76.9% reported ethical resources. This is a paradox of the profession: the riskiest area of journalism receives the least attention in terms of ethical preparation.

Disasters, whether natural or man-made, present unique challenges for journalists. On one hand, there is an urgent need to promptly inform the public about the danger, the scale of destruction, the number of casualties, and the actions of authorities. On the other hand, there is the risk of doing harm: spreading unverified rumors, unintentionally traumatizing victims with intrusive questions, or becoming a tool for propaganda.

### Accuracy and fact-checking

February 6, 2023, 05:30 a.m. An hour after the powerful earthquake in Türkiye, social media exploded with reports of “thousands killed under the rubble of a school in Gaziantep.” A photo of the destroyed building spread around the world in minutes. Rescue teams rushed to the specified address.

Three hours later, it was discovered that the school was empty because it was a holiday. There were no casualties. The real rubble piles, where people were fighting for their lives, were left without sufficient help. Unverified information did not just disorient; it reallocated rescue resources (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001).

The ability to reliably convey facts was rated by journalists in our survey at 4.46 out of 5, the highest score among all competencies. It's a paradox that we value most what we most often violate under pressure.

The consequences of violating the principle of accuracy are illustrated not only by the devastating earthquake in Türkiye but also in Syria (February 2023). In the midst of the crisis, social media and some media outlets spread unverified reports about the number of dead, the expiration of the critical 72-hour period for rescuing people from under the rubble, and the alleged refusal of Turkish

authorities to accept aid from other countries. Some media resources broadcast these rumors without proper verification. Leading global agencies, including Reuters and AFP, countered the disinformation, explaining that rescue operations must continue for much longer than 72 hours, as there were cases of people being rescued even a week (8 days) after the earthquake (Media Ethics, n.d.). Turkish investigative journalists, particularly from the Teyit platform, actively debunked fakes about the alleged “suspension” of rescue operations for political reasons. Accurate information was critically important not only for coordinating international aid but also for the families of the victims who were waiting for news about their loved ones.

From the first day of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began in February 2022, a huge number of videos, photos, and eyewitness accounts appeared in the information space that required careful verification.

For example, during the liberation of the Kyiv region in April 2022, mass graves of civilians were discovered in the town of Bucha. Russian propaganda immediately labeled this a “staged event,” claiming that the bodies appeared after the Russian troops had withdrawn. Journalists from The New York Times and Reuters conducted a thorough investigation, using satellite images, video geolocation, car dashcam footage, eyewitness testimonies, and forensic expert conclusions to confirm that the mass killings did indeed take place during the Russian occupation (Folkenflik, 2015). Such a thorough approach to fact-checking became critically important for documenting war crimes and ensuring accountability for them.

Instead of categorical statements, use the principle of transparency regarding your sources:

- “According to official services...” – the highest level of reliability.
- “Eyewitnesses report...” – on-the-scene testimony that requires verification.
- “Reports have appeared on social media...” – a signal that the information is unverified.

“The Rule of Three Sources in critical situations

In normal circumstances, journalists rely on the rule of three independent sources. Disasters demand a higher standard. When life and death are at stake, it is worth striving to confirm critically important information from three or more different types of sources:

1. An official source – representatives of services or government bodies.
2. A witness to the events – an eyewitness or a victim.
3. An independent expert – a specialist not connected to the event.

The examples provided demonstrate important lessons. Accuracy requires patience and skepticism toward unverified claims. Journalists must use multiple independent sources, cross-referencing information with official reports and expert data. In the age of social media, this is especially relevant: rumors and assumptions can instantly go “viral,” but a journalist is obligated to filter them through the sieve of fact-checking. In the ethical dimension, as the SPJ Code states, “Intentional distortion is never permissible,” and errors should be admitted and corrected immediately.

### **Objectivity and impartiality**

In emergencies, journalists must remain as objective as possible – presenting information impartially, without distortion or external influence. The audience must be confident that the media are not being used as a tool for propaganda or disinformation, especially during a crisis. Journalism should serve exclusively for the truth and the public interest, even if the truth is inconvenient for authorities or other stakeholders.

Disasters rarely have simple heroes and villains. A natural disaster can reveal both the best and worst of human qualities. Authorities may act heroically in one aspect and fail completely in another. Objectivity is not about finding a “golden mean” but about presenting different perspectives with their context and justification.

During the floods in Valencia, Spanish media faced conflicting assessments of the local authorities’ actions. Residents accused officials of being unprepared. The authorities cited the unpredictable nature of the disaster. Local experts claimed that warnings had been ignored for years.

Instead of choosing one version, *El País* presented a chronology of events from different angles:

- An investigative report on climatologists’ warnings.
- Interviews with officials about technical limitations.
- Testimonies from victims about the lack of information.
- An expert analysis of systemic problems.

Journalists from *Canal Sur* and the national television channel *RTVE* documented not only the disaster itself but also the controversies surrounding the management of dams and delays in declaring a state of emergency, giving a voice to government

representatives, the opposition, and independent experts. This balanced approach allowed them to avoid a one-sided presentation of the tragedy while not concealing problems in the disaster response. The work of regional media was particularly important, as they focused on practical information for affected communities – evacuation centers, rescue routes, and safe zones – separating vital messages from political polemics.

#### Combating propaganda narratives

Disasters are an ideal environment for propaganda. An emotionally exhausted audience is more susceptible to manipulative messages. An illustration of this is the coverage of the missile strike on the Kramatorsk railway station in Ukraine on April 8, 2022, where more than 60 civilians waiting for evacuation were killed. Russian state media and propagandists immediately launched a disinformation campaign, claiming that the strike was carried out by the Ukrainian army. Independent journalists, including reporters from Bellingcat and the BBC, conducted a detailed analysis of video, photos of missile fragments, its flight path, and satellite images to confirm that the missile was launched from territory controlled by Russian forces.

Professional media, including *The Washington Post* and Reuters, did not rush to conclusions: they clearly distinguished between confirmed facts (the type of missile, the number of casualties, the time of the strike) and the statements of the parties in their reports, labeling propaganda narratives as such. They also engaged independent military experts to analyze the technical characteristics of the weapon and the possible circumstances of the strike. This approach helped to counter information manipulation and present the audience with an objective picture of the tragedy.

A similar situation occurred after the Türkiye and Syria earthquake (2023), when some media outlets hastily directed accusations at construction companies and local authorities for shoddy construction, even before rescue operations and expert studies were completed.

The Turkish public broadcaster *TRT* and international agencies *Associated Press* and Reuters, on the other hand, adopted a more measured approach, focusing on the facts of the destruction and rescue operations, and engaging experts in earthquake-resistant construction, geologists, and engineers to explain the complexity of the situation. When covering the subsequent legal proceedings against developers, these media outlets presented information with the necessary legal caveats about the presumption of innocence.

Tools for Recognizing Propaganda in the Context of disasters:

- excessive emotionality without a factual basis.
- absolutism – “always,” “never,” “everyone,” “no one.”
- demonization of specific groups or individuals.
- omission of important facts or context.
- premature conclusions before an investigation is complete.

Principles of constructive criticism:

- Focus on systemic problems, not on personalization.
- Offer alternatives and solutions.
- Take into account context and limitations.
- Distinguish between criticism of actions and criticism of intentions.

To ensure objectivity, it is useful to give a voice to various sides and experts. In the event of a man-made accident or natural disaster, it is worth covering both the position of officials (government, rescue services) and the voices of independent specialists, community representatives, and eyewitnesses. However, balance does not mean artificially equating truth and fiction – a “false balance” also contradicts the principle of objectivity. A journalist must adhere to the facts: if the overwhelming majority of evidence points to one thing, it is not worth promoting debunked versions for the sake of perceived neutrality. Objectivity in disaster journalism is, above all, a commitment to the truth, however bitter it may be, and a resistance to any pressure that might distort that truth.

### **Fairness**

The principle of fairness obliges a journalist to treat all sides of a conflict and all victims with respect and equality, without discrimination. In the context of disasters, this means avoiding hate speech, stereotypes, or biased coverage of a particular group of people. Everyone who has experienced or is involved in a tragedy – regardless of their nationality, race, social status, or role – deserves fair and humane representation in the media. Global ethical standards declare non-discrimination as one of the fundamental principles of the profession.

One of the most subtle manifestations of unfairness in the media is the implicit “hierarchy of victims.” The death of a tourist from a wealthy country receives more attention than the death of a local worker. The destruction of a historical monument receives more attention than the destruction of the homes of poor families.

When wildfires engulfed northern Türkiye in August 2021, the initial reports focused on tourist hotels and resorts. Local farmers who had lost their livestock and crops were left out of the spotlight.

A more ethically balanced approach was demonstrated by *The Guardian* and the Greek newspaper *To Vima*, which prepared a series of reports on farming households in Evia that had lost their olive groves and beehives – the foundation of their economy. The journalists also gave a voice to representatives of various age groups – from young people who were facing such a large-scale disaster for the first time to elderly residents who compared these fires to historical disasters. The multimedia project “Voices from the Ashes” by ERT (the Greek public broadcaster) presented the stories of more than 30 different victims – from firefighters and tourists to farmers and small business owners, providing a comprehensive view of the consequences of the tragedy. .

Disasters disproportionately affect the most vulnerable populations: the poor, the elderly, people with disabilities, refugees, and ethnic minorities. These are the groups that are often left without a voice in media coverage.

Strategies for fair representation:

1. Actively seeking out the voices of marginalized groups.
2. Contextualizing their situation.
3. Avoiding stereotyping and victimization.
4. Focusing on solutions, not just problems.

A positive example of adhering to this principle was the coverage by Spanish media of the situation with Ukrainian refugees after the full-scale invasion began. Leading publications like *El País* and *La Vanguardia* focused on the individual stories of refugees and their integration into Spanish society, avoiding stereotypical generalizations. Spanish journalists, particularly from *RTVE* and *Cadena SER*, intentionally highlighted the diversity of Ukrainian refugees – educators, IT specialists, doctors, workers – demonstrating their professional experience and contribution to society rather than simply portraying them as “victims.” A contextual approach was especially important, with journalists explaining the deep-seated reasons for the forced displacement of Ukrainians without reducing the situation to simplified “war victim” narratives. An example of this approach was the documentary project “Nuevas vidas” (“New Lives”) on TVE, which followed the adaptation of five Ukrainian families in different regions of Spain over the course of a year, depicting them as active participants in building their future, not passive recipients of aid.

## Humanity

When covering disasters, journalists must remember the principle of “do no harm,” showing humanity and empathy toward the victims. Codes of ethics urge reporters to treat the subjects of their stories primarily as people who have experienced grief, not just as sources of information. As the SPJ formulates it: “Show compassion for those who may be affected by your coverage. Be especially sensitive when interviewing or photographing those touched by tragedy or grief. Realize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for callousness.” This principle emphasizes that a journalist must act with respect for the dignity and emotional state of people in a traumatic situation.

According to our survey, journalists rated avoiding manipulation and humanity at 4.43 out of 5. This is a high score that contrasts with actual practice, where humanity is often sacrificed for sensationalism or ratings.

Interviewing victims is one of the most difficult aspects of disaster journalism. A person in a state of shock or grief may say something they will later regret. A journalist must protect the interviewee even from themselves.

An ethical interview with disaster victims requires special skills – a so-called trauma-informed approach. International organizations (such as the Dart Center, UNESCO, and others) have developed recommendations: a journalist should prepare for the conversation, consider which questions might re-traumatize the person, give them the option of having a loved one or other support nearby during the interview, and afterwards, make sure they are okay.

A trauma-informed approach was demonstrated by Greek media during the catastrophic floods in Thessaly in September 2023, when Storm Daniel killed more than 15 people and flooded thousands of homes. Journalists from MEGA TV and SKAI, when working with victims, adhered to principles developed by the Helexpo Media Ethics Initiative: they spoke with people away from their destroyed homes, always asked for permission before filming, and avoided questions that could cause re-traumatization (“What did you feel when you saw your house being swept away by the current?”).

To conduct an interview in a sensitive and ethical manner, especially with someone who has experienced a traumatic event, a journalist should follow the principles of a trauma-informed interview:

- **Informed Consent:** Begin by giving a clear explanation of the interview's purpose and how the information will be used. This allows the person to make an informed decision about whether they want to participate.

- **The Right to Pause:** Give the interviewee the explicit right to stop the conversation at any time. This gives them control and helps prevent re-traumatization.

- **Focus on facts, not emotions:** While empathy is important, the goal is to gather factual information, not to pry into personal feelings. Focus questions on the events themselves, not on how the person felt.

- **Avoid leading questions:** Do not phrase questions in a way that suggests a desired answer. Instead, ask open-ended questions that allow the person to share their experience in their own words.

- **Respect for Silence:** Understand that silence is a natural part of this process. It can mean the person is collecting their thoughts or deciding not to share. Do not rush them or pressure them to speak. Acknowledging that some things are better left unsaid shows respect for their privacy and boundaries.

### **Confidentiality. Children in disasters.**

Children require special protection during disasters – both physical and in media. They cannot fully understand the consequences of their words or actions on camera.

When working with children, journalists must follow a strict **Protocol for Working with Children** to ensure their safety and well-being. This protocol includes several key steps:

- Before any interview or interaction, you must obtain explicit permission from the child's legal guardians.

- To protect the child's identity and privacy, you should be prepared to blur their face, alter their voice, or use other techniques to make them unrecognizable in published material.

- The narrative should highlight the child's ability to cope and recover, rather than dwelling on the traumatic event itself.

- Do not include any information – such as their full name, address, or specific details of the trauma – that could potentially put the child at risk later in life.

It is also important to avoid excessive sensationalism in covering others' grief. It is unethical, for example, to show close-

ups of mutilated bodies or broadcast the despair of loved ones without extreme necessity. Some tragedies – mass shootings, plane crashes – are especially demanding of the media: on one hand, the public has a right to know the truth; on the other, overly detailed or graphic coverage can cause additional pain to those who have already suffered. Here, the rule is appropriate: “respect for privacy and dignity over public curiosity.” If there is no socially significant reason to show shocking footage, it is better not to.

Disasters make private life public. A home that was a personal space becomes an object of media interest. Grief that should have remained intimate becomes news. Journalists must protect people’s right to privacy even when they become part of a public event.

The principle is simple: a disaster does not nullify the right to privacy. The complexity lies in defining the boundaries between public interest and personal rights.

An important example of adherence to this principle was the media coverage of the shipwreck off the coast of Greece in June 2023, when a vessel with hundreds of migrants sank. Greek publications *Kathimerini*, *To Vima*, and ERT avoided publishing photographs of victims without their consent and did not disclose the personal data of survivors. At the same time, if family members of the deceased gave consent, journalists published stories and photographs provided by the families themselves – this approach allowed them to restore humanity to the victims without violating ethical norms.

An important aspect was also the caution regarding the details of traumatic experiences: the media did not publish stories about violence or abuse against refugees without their clear consent and permission to use the data. The Greek Press Council (ESR) noted this case as an example of balanced coverage of a tragedy, where the public value of information did not outweigh people’s rights to dignity and privacy.

During the war in Ukraine, some media and Facebook communities published lists of captured Ukrainian soldiers with full passport details. The families of the victims became targets of telephone terrorism. Scammers used personal data to extort money from relatives for “information about loved ones” or “assistance in their return from captivity.”

Adhering to the principle of protecting privacy is a sign of respect for people and an indicator of professional responsibility. The audience will lose nothing if some personal details remain undisclosed. Instead, the victims will retain at least some of their privacy and dignity during a difficult time for them. Conversely, violating this principle can seriously harm the reputation of the

media and, most importantly, inflict irreparable moral damage on those who have already suffered.

### **Independence**

Disasters create ideal conditions for pressure on journalists. Authorities may limit access to information “for security reasons.” Rescue services may demand, “don’t get in the way.” Victims may ask, “don’t spread panic.”

A journalist’s independence means they act exclusively in the public interest and do not succumb to any external pressure or conflicts of interest. During disasters, maintaining independence can be a challenge, as journalists can be influenced by authorities, businesses, or even their own emotions or connections. Ethical guidelines require standing apart from any interests other than the public’s right to know the truth. Specifically, the SPJ Code instructs journalists to: avoid actual or perceived conflicts of interest, refuse gifts, favors, or special treatment, and decline secondary employment or political involvement that could undermine their independence.

Disasters introduce economic interests into journalism. Dramatic footage increases ratings. Sensational headlines generate clicks. Extended coverage of a single tragedy can build a stable audience. But when economic interests begin to dictate editorial policy, journalism’s independence is jeopardized.

Sometimes, society demands “patriotic silence” from journalists – the suppression of facts that might “harm the country’s image” or “demoralize the people.” This pressure can be especially strong during international disasters when a country needs external aid.

### **Criteria for an independent decision:**

- Does this information serve the public interest?
- Will it help prevent similar tragedies?
- Is the criticism based on facts or emotions?
- Can I publicly justify my decision?

### **Accountability, responsiveness, and education**

Ethical disaster journalism means that the media not only cover events but are also accountable to the public for their work. The principle of accountability means a journalist is willing to take responsibility for the accuracy and ethics of their materials, admit mistakes, and correct them. The SPJ Code directly emphasizes this: journalists should explain their decisions to the audience, encourage people to voice complaints, honestly acknowledge errors, and correct them promptly. Openness to feedback is a sign of a mature media organization. Many publications have correction sections or ombudsmen, publish letters from readers, or host online discussions

where they respond to criticism. This responsiveness helps maintain trust: the audience sees that journalists do not place themselves above the law but are also responsible for what they say or show.

Accountability means being willing to take responsibility for your publications and their consequences. In disasters, this principle is especially important: mistakes can have fatal consequences. In the context of disasters, accountability is particularly crucial because the price of a mistake can be high. If the media spreads false information or acts unethically, public apologies and clarifications are necessary. A good example is the reaction of the Greek TV channel MEGA after it provided inaccurate information about the number of victims during the wildfires on the island of Rhodes in the summer of 2021. The news anchor at the beginning of the report announced “at least two dead,” based on unverified data. An hour later, when official sources confirmed there were no fatalities, the channel not only corrected the information but dedicated a separate segment to explaining how the mistake happened: journalists openly discussed the source of the unverified data and publicly apologized to viewers and the residents of Rhodes. The channel’s management also published a memo for its reporters on verifying information during natural disasters, demonstrating a responsible approach to their mistakes.

Journalists and newsrooms can also face legal liability for violating standards. In 2023 in Spain, three journalists from a local online publication who, without permission, published photographs of Valencia flood victims and interviews with traumatized children, received administrative fines by a decision of the Spanish Audiovisual Media Council. Additionally, the newsroom was required to undergo special training on the ethics of disaster coverage. This precedent became a serious signal to the media community about the unacceptability of neglecting ethical norms, even under pressure for speed and audience attention.

Journalists and media outlets can build trust and maintain credibility through several key **mechanisms of accountability**. These aren’t just reactive measures; they are part of an ongoing commitment to ethical practice.

- **Prompt Correction of Errors:** Don’t wait for the public to find a mistake. It is essential to proactively monitor for accuracy and correct any errors as soon as they are discovered. This shows a commitment to truth, not just reputation.
- **Transparent Retractions:** When a mistake is found, the retraction should be transparent. This means more than just

removing the incorrect information. You must honestly and openly explain how the mistake occurred to provide context and demonstrate a willingness to learn from the error.

- **Learning from Mistakes:** Accountability goes beyond a single incident. It involves using mistakes as a learning opportunity. This means developing and implementing new procedures or checklists to prevent similar situations from happening in the future.
- **Public Reporting:** Regularly inform your audience about your work standards and ethical principles. By being open about your processes, you build trust and show that your commitment to accuracy is a core part of your mission.

Our survey showed that 76.9% of journalists feel a lack of ethical guidelines for working during disasters. This is a systemic problem that requires a systemic solution: incorporating specialized courses into academic curricula, providing regular training for practicing journalists, and creating accessible resources for self-education.

Awareness means understanding the broader context of a disaster: historical, social, environmental, and economic. A journalist who only knows the superficial facts cannot adequately cover complex events.

### Case studies

For a comprehensive understanding of the ethical dilemmas faced by media and journalists, it is necessary to go beyond individual cases and turn to more in-depth academic research and expert resources. The works and sources listed below offer just such an in-depth analysis, allowing for a more detailed study of the theoretical foundations and practical recommendations for the ethical coverage of disasters, which will help in forming a well-considered professional position.

1. Ward, Stephen J. A. (2023). *Ethical Journalism in a Time of Crisis: The Challenges of Covering the Ukraine War*. Routledge.

<https://www.routledge.com/Ethical-Journalism-in-a-Time-of-Crisis-The-Challenges-of-Covering-the/Ward/p/book/9781032413868>



This study, although broader than the specific cases examined in our guide, provides a deep analysis of the ethical dilemmas faced by journalists covering Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Ward examines issues of accuracy in an information war, objectivity in documenting war crimes (such as in Bucha or Kramatorsk), the

pressure of propaganda, the need to minimize harm (humanity) when working with traumatized witnesses and victims, and the challenges to media independence. The book explores how classic ethical principles are adapted to the extreme conditions of a modern conflict, analyzing the practices of both Western and Ukrainian media. This is a fundamental source for understanding the complex ethical problems mentioned in your text regarding Ukraine.

2. Selva, Meera & Nielsen, Rasmus Kleis (2023). Reporting on the Turkey–Syria Earthquake: Lessons for Covering Disaster. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/reporting-turkey-syria-earthquake-lessons-covering-disaster>



This report from the authoritative Reuters Institute analyzes the media coverage of the earthquake in Türkiye and Syria. It focuses on the challenges of accuracy and speed in transmitting information, the fight against disinformation that actively spread on social media, the ethical aspects of showing suffering, and interaction with victims. The report provides practical lessons for newsrooms on preparing for and responding to the coverage of such large-scale disasters, touching on the principles of accuracy, humanity, and independence.

3. Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma. Covering Migration: Resources & Tips.

<https://dartcenter.org/resources/covering-migration>



Although this is not a study of one specific event, such as the shipwreck off Greece (2023), the Dart Center is a leading organization that researches and provides resources on the ethical coverage of traumatic events, including migration crises. Its materials (articles, guides, webinars) are based on research and practical experience. They examine in detail the ethical dilemmas related to protecting the privacy and dignity of refugees and migrants, avoiding stereotyping, obtaining informed consent, trauma-sensitive interviewing, and visual representation. The Dart Center's materials will help you understand the principles of humanity and privacy protection that were mentioned in your text regarding the coverage of migrants' fate.

4. Pantti, Mervi (2019). Media, Emotion and Suffering in Disaster News: The Politics of Showing and Telling. Palgrave Macmillan.

<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1057/978-1-137-51200-6>



This book offers a deep theoretical and empirical analysis of how media cover disasters, focusing on the emotional dimension and the ethics of depicting human suffering. While it does not focus

exclusively on the cases from your text, its analysis is extremely relevant for understanding the principles of humanity and privacy protection. Pantti explores how the choice of visual images and narratives affects audience perception, the risks of sensationalism, and “compassion fatigue.” She analyzes different approaches to covering grief, the dilemma between informing and causing harm, which is key when covering any disaster mentioned in your text (from earthquakes to war).

5. European Journalism Observatory (EJO). Multiple articles on media coverage of Ukraine War, Greek Fires, etc.

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/14648849211040303>

The EJO is a network of research institutes that regularly publishes analytical articles and short studies on media trends and ethical issues in Europe. On their website, you can find numerous materials related to the coverage of the war in Ukraine (including the fight against disinformation and the ethics of working with sources), wildfires and floods in Greece and other countries (analysis of accuracy, objectivity, and political influence). These articles are often based on local research and media monitoring, providing an up-to-date analysis of ethical practices and challenges in specific national contexts, similar to those mentioned in your text. A search for keywords (Ukraine, Greece fires, disaster reporting ethics) on the EJO website will yield many relevant results.

6. Bunce, Mel, Scott, Martin, & Wright, Kate (Eds.). (2020). *Reporting Humanitarian Crises: Ethics, Representation and Practice*. Routledge.

<https://www.routledge.com/Reporting-Humanitarian-Crises-Ethics-Representation-and-Practice/Bunce-Scott-Wright/p/book/9781138502184>

This collection analyzes the ethical challenges of covering humanitarian crises that often accompany disasters and conflicts. It covers topics relevant to many cases in your text: fair and non-stereotypical representation of victims (as in the case of foreign students in Ukraine or migrants), the ethics of interacting with vulnerable groups, the role of local journalists, the influence of humanitarian organizations on the media narrative, and issues of independence. The research in this book is based on real-life cases from various regions of the world, providing a deep understanding of the principles of fairness, humanity, and independence in the context of humanitarian journalism.



7. Hänska, Max & Bauchowitz, Stefan (2017). Tweeting #refugees: A computational analysis of the impact of traditional news media and citizen reporting on the public discourse on refugees. *Information, Communication & Society*.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1389082>



This study analyzes the role of social media (using Twitter as an example) in shaping public discourse on refugees, comparing the influence of traditional media and citizen journalism. Although it precedes some of the events in your text, its methodology and conclusions are very relevant for understanding the spread of information (and disinformation) during crises, such as the earthquake in Türkiye or the evacuation from Ukraine. The study shows how quickly certain narratives (including potentially biased or unverified ones) spread in the online space, which poses a challenge to traditional media regarding fact-checking, accuracy, and countering stereotypes (the principle of fairness).

8. Allan, Stuart (Ed.). (2019). *The Routledge Companion to News and Journalism* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

<https://www.routledge.com/The-Routledge-Companion-to-News-and-Journalism/Allan/p/book/9781138481717>



This extensive handbook contains sections dedicated to various aspects of journalism, including ethics, coverage of crises, war, and disasters. Individual chapters, written by leading researchers, analyze the theoretical foundations and practical challenges of adhering to ethical principles (accuracy, objectivity, humanity, privacy, independence, and accountability) in different contexts. While it does not focus on a single case, the handbook provides a fundamental basis and references to numerous studies that will help you gain a deeper understanding of ethical norms and their application in situations similar to those described in your text.

### **Disaster publication checklist**

When reporting on a disaster, adherence to a strict checklist can mitigate harm and ensure accuracy. This framework is divided into two phases: mandatory checks before publication and essential monitoring after.

#### **Before publication (mandatory points)**

Before a single word is published, several critical steps must be taken to ensure the highest ethical standards. Sources must be verified with a minimum of three independent confirmations for critical information. The reliability of the information should be

tagged and clearly stated, letting the audience know the degree of certainty. Context must be added to explain the significance of the facts and help the audience understand the broader picture.

A crucial step is to minimize harm. This involves a careful check to ensure the publication will not cause additional distress or danger to those involved. Confidentiality must be protected by hiding the personal data of victims to preserve their dignity and safety. The language used must be checked to avoid any stigmatizing or discriminatory terms. Finally, visual content must be filtered, with a thorough assessment of the appropriateness of any graphic images. Sometimes a description is more powerful and respectful than a photo.

### **After publication (monitoring)**

The work doesn't stop once the story is live. Effective monitoring is key to maintaining integrity. This includes actively **tracking reactions** by monitoring comments and social media to understand how the information is being received. A mechanism for a **readiness to retract** is essential, allowing for the quick correction of any errors. Finally, the material should be seen as a living document; **information updates** should be made regularly to supplement the material with new facts as they emerge.

### **Phrases as indicators of ethical problems**

Beyond the checklists, certain phrases can act as subtle but significant warnings of potential ethical issues, both in your own writing and in the information you receive.

#### **Red flags in your own texts**

Pay close attention to phrases that suggest a lack of rigor. For example, "All experts agree..." may indicate that you've only spoken to one or two sources or are misrepresenting a consensus. The phrase "We cannot show this due to its graphic nature..." is a warning that an alternative method is needed to convey the information effectively and ethically. Similarly, noting that "The source asked not to be named for unclear reasons..." is a strong signal that you need to clarify their motives before proceeding. The most significant red flag is the phrase "This information cannot be verified, but..."; this is a clear signal to refrain from publishing, as it immediately undermines your credibility.

#### **Yellow flags (require special caution)**

Yellow flags require a pause and extra caution, though they may not always stop a publication. Information from a single source should always be treated with skepticism until it can be corroborated.

Emotionally charged eyewitness accounts need to be handled with extreme care, as a person's emotions can affect their perception and memory. When dealing with complex subjects, technical data without expert commentary can be easily misinterpreted. Likewise, statistics without context or comparisons can be highly misleading and are often used to manipulate an audience. Be vigilant and question the data until you can present it in a clear, meaningful way.

### **Crisis protocol for newsrooms**

In a crisis, a clear, three-phase protocol is essential for newsroom efficiency and ethical rigor.

#### **Phase 1: First reports (0–30 minutes)**

The first half-hour is a period of intense activity and requires immediate, coordinated action. The first priority is to appoint a responsible editor to oversee all aspects of the coverage. Immediately activate verification channels, relying on pre-established contacts and databases. Establish contact with official sources as soon as possible, as they will be the primary source of confirmed information. To handle the rapid flow of information, prepare templates for updates that can be quickly populated with verified facts.

#### **Phase 2: Active coverage (30 minutes – 6 hours)**

As the crisis unfolds, the focus shifts to sustained and organized reporting. Organize the rotation of journalists to ensure continuous coverage without burnout. Create an internal chat for coordination to allow for real-time information sharing and fact-checking. A dedicated fact-checker must be appointed to verify all incoming reports before publication. Finally, establish communication with local colleagues who may have on-the-ground access to information.

#### **Phase 3: Analytical coverage (6+ hours)**

After the initial hours, the focus broadens from reporting to analysis and context. It's time to engage experts and analysts who can provide deeper insight into the events. Prepare contextual materials that help the audience understand the historical significance and potential long-term consequences. The team should analyze its own coverage for errors and be ready to issue corrections. Finally, it's crucial to plan long-term coverage of the consequences, ensuring the story continues to be told beyond the initial dramatic moments.

The ethical principles of disaster journalism are not abstract ideals but practical tools for professional survival. They help journalists maintain humanity in inhumane conditions, find truth in a chaotic sea of disinformation, and serve society even when society is going through its toughest times.

The main lesson of this section is that ethical principles do not limit journalistic effectiveness – they enhance it. Accuracy increases audience trust. Humanity opens access to important sources. Fairness ensures a long-term reputation. Independence allows you to serve the public, not narrow interests.

But principles only work when they are understood, accepted, and can be applied. According to our survey, 76.9% of journalists feel a lack of ethical guidelines for working during disasters. This section is an attempt to fill this gap, to transform abstract concepts into concrete actions.

# 2.3.

## Reporting on events before a disaster





## 2.3. Reporting on events before a disaster

### Introduction

Imagine a seismologist who sees alarming signals on a screen, precursors to a potential earthquake. Their research is accurate, critically important, but it remains in a scientific journal, inaccessible to the general public. Or a meteorologist who predicted a destructive hurricane, but their warning gets lost in the labyrinths of bureaucracy. In such moments, journalists become something more than ordinary reporters – they transform into the nervous system of society, transmitting a signal of danger.

Preventive disaster journalism does not just inform about potential threats. It actively prepares society for possible challenges. This approach is radically different from the traditional reactive model, where the media only appears after a tragedy to document ruins and grief.

According to our survey, 95.6% of journalists believe that reporting on disasters should educate the audience on how to act during emergencies. This consensus indicates a fundamental shift in understanding the role of journalism – from a passive chronicler to an active defender of public safety.

The ethical value of preventive coverage is that it allows journalists not only to document tragedies but also to prevent them. When a reporter uncovers flaws in an evacuation system or weaknesses in fire safety, they are potentially saving lives before a disaster occurs.

### Disaster preparedness as a part of ethical reporting

The traditional model of disaster journalism relies on the principle of news delivery: “who, what, where, when, how.” The preventive model adds a critically important question: ‘How does this affect the reader and what should they do?’ This is not a departure from journalistic standards, but an expansion of them to include practical utility.

Preparing society for disasters is an important mission of the media, which is considered in global practice as part of the Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) strategy. According to the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 (adopted by the UN) (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001), the media should play a key role in reducing disaster risks, acting actively at all levels – from local to global – to raise public awareness of hazards (Giudici, M. (2008). This means that journalists should not wait for a tragedy, but report on potential threats in advance: from natural (hurricanes, floods, fires, earthquakes) to man-made (accidents, leaks, epidemics).

It is important that such advance information is presented accessibly and responsibly. The Sendai Framework emphasizes that the media should disseminate accurate and non-speculative information about risks in a simple, transparent, and understandable form, in close cooperation with relevant authorities. For example, when reporting on a flood threat, a journalist should provide verified data from hydrometeorological services, explain the risks for specific areas, and remind people of evacuation routes – all without exaggeration. Ethics demand that even potentially alarming information must not be turned into sensationalism. Instead, it must serve a practical purpose: to help people understand the danger and prepare.

Principles of ethical preventive coverage.

Ethical preventive coverage is paramount in ensuring public safety and well-being, particularly in the face of potential crises. To uphold this standard, several key principles must be rigorously applied:

Firstly, verification by experts is non-negotiable. Every piece of advice or guidance disseminated must be thoroughly vetted and confirmed by specialists in the relevant field. Relying solely on “common knowledge” or anecdotal evidence is insufficient and can lead to dangerous misinformation. Expert validation ensures accuracy and reliability.

Secondly, local adaptation is crucial. Universal advice, while well-intentioned, often needs to be tailored to specific local conditions. For instance, recommendations for earthquake preparedness that are effective in Japan, with its distinct building codes and infrastructure, may not be directly applicable or suitable for Türkiye, where building types and seismic vulnerabilities might differ significantly. Contextualizing information makes it more relevant and effective.

Thirdly, the use of accessible language is essential for broad comprehension. Complex technical advice, while precise, can be incomprehensible to the general public. It must be translated into clear, understandable language without compromising its accuracy. The goal is to inform, not to confuse, ensuring that critical safety information reaches and is understood by everyone.

Finally, timeliness is a critical factor. Safety information, by its very nature, can quickly become outdated. Evacuation routes may change due to new hazards or infrastructure developments, and emergency contact numbers are frequently updated. Therefore, preventive coverage requires constant review and revision to ensure that the information provided remains current and actionable.

### Balancing information and anxiety

One of the most difficult aspects of preventive journalism is how to warn without frightening. Excessive dramatization can lead to panic. Insufficient seriousness can lead to a disregard for danger.

In 2021, the Spanish publication *El País* covered the risks of wildfires amid record-breaking heat. Climatologists warned of an extremely dry summer. The materials from *El País* combined scientific forecasts with advice for readers, avoiding sensationalism that could cause panic.

The newsroom chose a strategy of “threat gradation”:

- Green level: “Normal caution”
- Yellow: “Increased readiness”
- Orange: “Serious risk”
- Red: “Critical danger”

Each article contained a clear level designation and corresponding recommendations. The result: the population reacted appropriately to the changing situation without panicking.

### **The role of journalists in reducing potential risks to society**

Preventive journalism transforms the reporter from a passive observer into an active agent of positive change. By identifying systemic problems before they lead to tragedy, journalists can influence policy, mobilize public opinion, and compel authorities to act.

**Systemic thinking vs. isolated problems** Effective preventive journalism requires systemic thinking. It is not enough to identify a single problem; it is necessary to show how it is connected to others, how minor shortcomings can lead to major disasters.

**Mobilization of public resources** Preventive journalism can mobilize not only the authorities but also civil society. By showing how ordinary people can help in disaster preparedness, the media creates a network of mutual assistance.

International standards explicitly oblige journalists to present only confirmed data. For instance, the International Federation of Journalists (International Federation of Journalists, n.d.) calls for strict adherence to its Code of Ethics during disasters, as its principles are the best remedy against disinformation. Above all, journalists must report facts, relying on reliable official and scientific sources, and avoiding speculation. For example, in a situation of an impending epidemic, one should quote doctors and the World Health Organization, not rumors from social media.

### **Considering the human factor and preventing panic**

Another side of a journalist's work is preventing panic. The balance between informing and preventing panic is a delicate ethical issue. On one hand, society must be warned about the danger candidly; on the other, the form of presentation should not sow irrational fear. Journalists must avoid language that dramatizes excessively. The IFJ specifically recommends avoiding "panic-inducing vocabulary that does not correspond to reality." This means not using exaggerated expressions like "apocalypse" or "the city will turn into a desert" if such descriptions are not backed by facts. Instead, it is better to use a neutral, business-like tone focused on actions and solutions. For example, instead of "a terrible drought awaits us, everything will die," it is more correct to say: "almost no precipitation is expected next month, so water problems are possible – authorities and residents should take measures." Accuracy without excessive emotionality is what builds trust and encourages rational behavior, not panic.

Grading threat levels – a clear classification allows people to react appropriately to different levels of risk.

Dealing with rumors and disinformation The pre-disaster period is a fertile ground for the spread of rumors and disinformation. People look for information, and the lack of it is filled with speculation.

Greek media, while preparing for the 2021 wildfire season, faced a massive spread of rumors about "deliberate arson" and "sabotage." Instead of ignoring them, leading publications chose a strategy of "preventive debunking":

- They created special fact-checking sections.
- They regularly published official statistics on the causes of fires.
- They engaged experts to explain natural causes.
- They showed the work of services investigating arson.

The result: the level of trust in fake news significantly decreased, and the population was better prepared for real threats.

### **Building social awareness: proactive communication strategies**

Effective preventive communication requires using all available channels: traditional media, social networks, local community organizations, and educational institutions.

After the 2019 floods, the Spanish region of Valencia developed a comprehensive communication strategy for future disasters:

- Traditional media – in-depth analytical materials, expert commentary, historical context.
- Social networks – quick updates, visual instructions, interactive risk maps.
- Local activists – adapting information to the specifics of particular areas, working with vulnerable groups.
- Schools – educational programs for children who become conduits of information in their families.

#### Culturally sensitive informing

Different cultural groups perceive information about risks differently and react to danger differently. Effective preventive journalism takes these features into account.

In Türkiye, while preparing for an earthquake in regions with a large number of Syrian refugees, the media faced the problem of a language barrier. Many refugees did not understand Turkish warnings and instructions.

Local media developed a special strategy:

- They translated key information into Arabic.
- They involved leaders of refugee communities as trusted individuals.
- They used visual instructions that were understandable without words.
- They adapted advice to the living conditions in refugee camps.

In countries where hurricanes are frequent (USA, Japan), local media publish special issues every year before the storm season: how to create an evacuation plan, what should be in a first-aid kit, what apps to install on a phone for notifications. This has gradually become part of the population's safety culture. By regularly reading or catching such materials, people learn to be proactive: not to wait until the last minute, but to act in advance.

#### Principles for building a safety culture:

- Regularity – safety information should appear not only before threats but constantly.
- Diversity of formats – from serious analytical materials to entertainment programs with educational elements.
- Integration into everyday life – safety advice should be organically woven into materials on other topics.
- Positivity – focus on opportunities for protection, not on the horrors of disasters.

## **Cooperation with local communities and experts**

### *The Journalist as a Network Coordinator*

Effective preventive journalism requires creating a network of trust between various participants: experts, authorities, public organizations, and ordinary citizens. The journalist becomes the coordinator of this network. At the same time, the task of journalists is to ensure that information is presented honestly, without omissions and unnecessary “politics.” Ideally, the media acts as a bridge: receiving risk data from specialists, they translate it into understandable language and bring it to the attention of citizens, and they relay the reaction and requests of citizens back to the authorities.

### *Expertise as the Foundation of Trust*

Preventive materials must rely on the best available expertise. But not all experts are equally useful for journalistic work. One must be able to distinguish true specialists from impostors.

Criteria for selecting experts:

- Professional qualifications and experience.
- Independence from commercial or political interests.
- The ability to explain complex things in simple language.
- Willingness to be publicly accountable for their words.

### *Feedback from the Audience*

Preventive journalism is a dialogue, not a monologue.

Feedback from the audience allows for:

- Checking the effectiveness of informing.
- Identifying new problems and needs.
- Adapting the presentation of information.
- Building trust through openness.

Insights from the Survey: Educational Expectations of Professionals

### *Consensus on the Educational Function*

95.6% of journalists believe that materials about disasters should teach the audience how to act during emergencies. This is the highest level of agreement in the entire survey, indicating a fundamental shift in understanding the role of journalism.

This consensus signifies a revolution in professional thinking: journalists no longer want to be mere witnesses to tragedies – they aspire to become active participants in their prevention.

### *The Gap Between Desire and Capabilities*

Despite the high motivation for educational work, journalists face systemic limitations:

- 92.2% admit a lack of knowledge about the specifics of actions in different disasters. How can one teach what they do not know themselves?

- 81.3% do not have sufficient resources to work in crisis conditions. Preparing high-quality preventive materials requires time, expertise, and special equipment.
- 76.9% feel a lack of ethical guidelines. Preventive journalism creates new ethical dilemmas for which traditional codes do not provide answers.

*What This Means for Newsrooms*

The survey results show that journalists are ready to take on greater responsibility for public safety, but they need support. Newsrooms must invest in specialized training for journalists in the basics of safety, collaboration with experts to verify preventive materials, technical equipment for high-quality coverage of safety topics, ethical protocols for preventive journalism.

**Case studies of preventive reporting**

***Case 1: Wildfire Warnings in Greece (2021)*** – Preventive Journalism in a Crisis

*Situation:* In the summer of 2021, Greece experienced the most severe heatwave in decades: temperatures in some regions exceeded +45°C. The meteorological service and civil defense emphasized the extremely high risk of wildfires, particularly on the islands of Evia, Rhodes, and in Attica. This created a difficult situation: on one hand, the need to warn the population; on the other, the risk of economic panic, especially at the height of the tourist season.

***Ethical challenges:***

- How to inform about the threat without provoking a mass irrational reaction?
- How to maintain public trust in official warnings?
- How to avoid an infodemic and a decrease in tourist flow, especially for small businesses?

*The Greek media's solution:*

- Kathimerini: Developed an interactive map of risk zones that was updated daily based on data from the Ministry of Environment and meteorologists. For each zone, it indicated: permitted activities (e.g., prohibition of burning dry grass), the level of danger (green, yellow, red), and contacts for local services. The messages were accompanied by explanations of why such restrictions were necessary.
- MEGA TV: Launched a series of educational videos – short clips with advice on how to behave under the threat of fires: evacuation procedures, preparing an “emergency bag,” and behavior in case of smoke. They were posted on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, and also included between news broadcasts.

- Local radio stations (e.g., Radio Lamia, Volos FM):

Every day at 8:00 a.m., they broadcast summaries from rescuers and municipalities, including prohibitions on movement in the forest, a list of open cooling centers for the elderly, and other useful information. This was especially important for people without internet access.

*Result:* Although large fires did break out in August 2021 (including on Evia), communities were much better prepared than in previous years. Evacuations in many areas were orderly, and there was almost no panic. Data from the Greek Fire Service showed that the number of casualties and injuries was significantly lower than in similar-sized wildfires in 2007 and 2009.

*Lesson:* Preventive journalism is not just about spreading warnings. It is about filling those warnings with meaning, tools, and context. The gradation of threats, clear visual tools, a calm tone, and regular delivery allow the media to balance informing and avoiding panic. And most importantly, it saves lives.

**Case 2: Flood Preparedness in Valencia** (Spain, 2020)

*Situation:* After the devastating floods of 2019, the region was preparing for a new rainy season. Meteorologists predicted a high probability of intense rainfall.

*El País's innovative approach:* It created an interactive online platform, “Mi Plan de Emergencia” (My Emergency Plan), where every resident could:

- Find out the risk level for their address.
- Receive personalized recommendations.
- Locate the nearest evacuation points.
- Subscribe to SMS alerts.

La Vanguardia organized a series of public lectures in the highest-risk areas with the participation of journalists, experts, and service representatives.

*Result:* Over 200,000 residents of the region used the El País platform. When heavy rains began in October 2020, the evacuation proceeded in an orderly manner, without panic or casualties.

*Lesson:* Interactive technologies can make preventive information personal and effective.

**Case 3: Preventive Communication in Gaziantep** (Türkiye, 2023)

*Situation:* In January 2023, a few weeks before the catastrophic earthquake, the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority of Türkiye (AFAD) issued a series of warnings about increased seismic activity in the Gaziantep region. This was one of the first times that

preventive informing reached a coordinated scale between the state, local media, and educational institutions.

*Preventive Actions:*

Disaster and Emergency Management Authority of Türkiye (AFAD):

- Launched a national information campaign, “Depreme Hazırım” (I am ready for the earthquake).
- Distributed videos with instructions (what to do before, during, and after tremors) via television channels, messengers, and social networks.
- Sent SMS messages with advice for residents of high-risk regions, including Gaziantep, Kahramanmaraş, and Şanlıurfa.

Local media (Antep Gündemi, Gaziantep Olay Medya):

- Published adapted daily tips in the form of infographics:
  - how to prepare an “emergency bag”;
  - how to secure furniture at home;
  - what sirens mean in different parts of the city.
    - Held live broadcasts with representatives of AFAD, municipalities, and psychologists.
    - Throughout January, lessons on seismic safety were held in Gaziantep schools, based on AFAD’s visual materials.
    - Educational evacuations were organized in several elementary schools.
    - Students were given brochures for families with advice on what to do in case of an earthquake.

*Results:* When the powerful earthquake (7.8 magnitude) occurred on February 6, 2023, the Gaziantep region showed a higher level of self-organization than other areas closer to the epicenter. In many areas, temporary aid points were set up in a timely manner. People acted more confidently, were more likely to have packed bags, and knew evacuation routes. AFAD, in its official report, mentioned the “high level of public awareness in some provinces thanks to local communication efforts.”

**Lesson:** Coordination between government agencies, local media, and educational institutions creates an effective preventive ecosystem. This model not only helps prevent panic but also increases communities’ resilience to disaster – especially in potentially dangerous regions.

## **Checklist for preparing preventive material**

Creating effective preventive materials – whether they be for public health, natural disasters, or misinformation – requires a different kind of ethical and strategic thinking. This process can be broken down into three core stages: assessment, content structuring, and effectiveness checking.

### **Stage 1: Risk and audience assessment**

Before you write a single word, you must have a deep understanding of your audience and the risks they face. The first question is risk relevance: Does this information genuinely concern your audience, or is it a distant, abstract threat? Next, assess their knowledge level on the topic. What basic information do they already have, and what gaps do you need to fill? Always consider the cultural features that could influence their perception of the information. What beliefs, traditions, or historical events might affect how they receive your message? Finally, identify and consult with local experts who can provide invaluable insight and credibility.

### **Stage 2: Content structuring**

Once you understand your audience and the risks, you can structure your content for maximum impact. Start with the basic information; make sure the essence of the risk is crystal clear and easy to grasp. Provide step-by-step instructions that outline specific, actionable steps the audience can take. Ensure there is local adaptation, meaning the content considers local conditions and resources. Lastly, clearly list help sources, such as official websites, hotlines, or local organizations, where additional support can be found.

### **Stage 3: Effectiveness check**

Before releasing the material, you must check its potential effectiveness and impact. The content must be clear and accessible to non-specialists, avoiding jargon and complex language. It must also provide motivation by encouraging specific actions without being overly alarmist. A critical check is the anxiety level it causes: does it cause unjustified panic, or does it empower the audience? Finally, ensure there is an opportunity to receive feedback, allowing you to monitor the material's impact and make future adjustments.

### **Template for preventive material structure**

When creating preventive materials, a structured template can guide you in crafting a clear and impactful message that resonates with your audience.

This structure begins with a **Headline** with a specific benefit. The headline should immediately tell the reader how the information will help them, for example, “How to Create a Home Evacuation Plan in 30 Minutes.” Following this is a **Lead** with motivation, designed to capture attention by posing a relevant question and using a statistic to highlight the importance of the topic. A good template is: “If [threat] happened now, would you know what to do? [Statistics] show that most people are not ready. Here’s how to change that.”

The body of the material should provide **Context** without dramatization. This section should explain what the risk is, why it is relevant to the reader, and what the possible consequences could be, all without causing unnecessary alarm. The most crucial part is the step-by-step instructions. These should be actionable and simple, with each point designed to be performed in a single, manageable go, and numbered by priority.

To ensure the material is truly useful, include local specifics. This includes contacts for emergency services, details about local infrastructure, and any cultural nuances that might affect the audience’s response. Next, provide resources for further study, structured to include official sources, educational materials, and contact information for consultations.

The material should end with a clear **Call to action**. This final phrase should encourage the reader to take a small, immediate step, for example, “Start with one item on this list today.”

### **Algorithm for verifying preventive recommendations**

Just as a structured template guides the creation of preventive material, a systematic algorithm is essential for verifying the recommendations contained within. This process ensures the information is not only clear and actionable but also safe, reliable, and effective.

#### **Step 1: Source verification**

The first step is to rigorously **verify the source** of the recommendations. Ask if the recommendations are approved by reputable expert organizations and if they comply with established international safety standards. It is equally important to check if they take into account local peculiarities and available resources.

#### **Step 2: Testing for clarity**

The next step is to **test the clarity** of the instructions. Can a person without special training or expertise easily follow them? Consider accessibility: are there alternatives or modified instructions for people with disabilities? It is also critical to account for the

audience's economic limitations, ensuring the recommendations are practical and do not require expensive equipment or resources.

### **Step 3: Assessing negative consequences**

Finally, you must **assess for potential negative consequences**. Could the recommendations, despite their good intentions, lead to unjustified panic? Is there a risk of misinterpretation that could cause harm? The newsroom must be prepared for the final question: are we ready to handle possible questions and criticism from the audience after publication?

### **Advice for proactive work before a disaster**

Ethical journalism is not just about reacting to events that have already happened; it's also about responsible proactive work. Here are practical tips on how to ethically and effectively cover events before disaster strikes:

1. **Research and Understand Your Region's Risks.** Be proactive: study which threats (natural, technological, social) are most relevant to your audience. Is your area located in a seismic zone, prone to floods, or wildfires? Are there dangerous industrial facilities nearby? Is there a threat of epidemics or conflicts? A deep understanding of potential dangers will allow you to create relevant and timely materials, rather than waiting for something to happen.
2. **Collaborate with Experts and Official Sources (But Maintain Independence).** Establish contacts with scientists (seismologists, meteorologists, epidemiologists), civil defense specialists, and local authorities responsible for emergency preparedness. Use their forecasts, data, and recommendations as the basis for your materials. However, don't limit yourself to being a mere relay. Ask critical questions: Is enough being done to prepare? Are evacuation plans realistic? Is the necessary equipment available? Your independence ensures that the information is not only official but also verified and complete.
3. **Explain Complexities in Simple Language, Avoiding Panic.** When discussing potential threats, your goal is to inform, not to frighten. Use clear language, avoid professional jargon, or explain it. Present information about risks calmly and judiciously. Instead of headlines like "We are all in danger of dying!", use more neutral ones: "Experts warn of increased flood risk: how to prepare." Clearly distinguish between probability and

inevitability. Do not speculate on fears; instead, provide facts and constructive advice.

4. **Focus on Preventive Measures and Preparedness.** Your materials should not only warn about danger but also give the audience concrete instructions: what to do to prepare? This can include advice on an “emergency kit,” property insurance, home reinforcement, rules of conduct during a specific disaster, and checking a home first-aid kit. Report on local evacuation plans, shelter locations, and emergency service contacts. This type of solution journalism transforms passive news consumers into active participants in ensuring their own safety.
5. **Highlight the Human Factor and Past Experiences.** Remind your audience about past disasters and the lessons learned (or not learned). Tell stories of people who successfully navigated similar situations due to their preparedness. Also, shed light on potential risks linked to human activity: non-compliance with building codes, neglected infrastructure, and environmental issues. This helps the community understand that many disasters have not only natural but also human-made causes that can be influenced.
6. **Debunk Myths and Disinformation Proactively.** Don’t wait for a disaster to happen to combat fakes. If false beliefs about certain risks exist in society (for example, “earthquakes are impossible in our region” or “garlic cures this disease”), refute them in advance, relying on scientific data and expert opinions. Proactive fact-checking will help reduce the level of disinformation during a future crisis.
7. **Use Diverse Formats for Maximum Reach.** Don’t limit yourself to just news articles. Create infographics, video tutorials, podcasts, interactive risk maps, and educational special projects. Run information campaigns on social media. The more diverse and accessible your preparedness materials are, the more people will see and absorb them. Adapt content for different audiences (children, the elderly, people with disabilities).
8. **Engage the Community in Dialogue.** Organize discussions, public hearings, and roundtables with experts, authorities, and residents on emergency preparedness issues. Give ordinary people a voice – their fears and suggestions.

Media can become a platform for building a culture of safety in the community, where everyone feels their responsibility and knows what to do.

9. **Be Consistent, Not Episodic.** The topic of disaster preparedness should be present in your media not just once a year “for the season,” but with a certain regularity. Periodically remind people about safety rules, update information about risks, and report on emergency service drills. This way, you gradually foster a habit of thinking about safety and being prepared in your audience.
10. **Remember Ethics in Every Step.** Even when working proactively, adhere to basic principles: truthfulness, accuracy, impartiality, and respect for people. Do not use information about potential risks for manipulation, political struggle, or commercial gain. Your goal is to serve the public interest through informing and educating for safety.

Your proactive work today is an investment in a safer tomorrow. Don’t wait for the sirens – start preparing society now, responsibly and ethically.

This chapter examines the role of journalists in preparing society for potential disasters, specifically: how media can mitigate risks through information; how to balance informing the public without causing panic; the impact of media coverage on public awareness and readiness; how to account for the human factor to prevent the spread of panic and disinformation; and which proactive strategies for collaboration with the community and authorities are effective. We will also analyze specific case studies from Greece, Türkiye, Spain, and Ukraine, which illustrate the impact of journalism on disaster preparedness, and provide practical advice for journalists. All these aspects are based on international ethical standards — recommendations from UNESCO, IFJ, and SPJ — that set the benchmarks for honest and responsible coverage of emergency situations.

# 2.4.

## Ethical reporting during a disaster





## 2.4. Ethical reporting during a disaster

### Introduction

Imagine a surgeon operating during an earthquake. The building shakes, the lights flicker, but the patient on the table needs immediate help. This is the feeling a journalist experiences during a disaster – the need to work quickly and accurately in conditions where everything around them is falling apart.

Ethical reporting during a disaster is the moment when the theoretical principles from previous chapters clash with a brutal reality. Decisions must be made in seconds, and their consequences can affect the lives of thousands of people.

Unlike preventive journalism, where there is time for expert consultations, reporting during a crisis happens amid informational chaos. Official sources are unavailable, witnesses are in shock, and social media is overflowing with conflicting messages.

According to our survey, 87.8% of journalists admit that covering disasters involves risks, but only 23.1% have access to specialized resources. This gap between the awareness of challenges and practical readiness makes ethical reporting an even more difficult task.

It is in critical moments that ethical principles become not abstract ideals, but practical tools for survival – for both the journalist and society. This chapter shows how to apply ethical standards when time is working against you and the stakes are at their highest.

### **The impact of a journalist's operational decisions on shaping the public narrative**

#### *The Journalist as an Architect of Perception*

During a disaster, a journalist is not just a witness to events – they become their interpreter for millions of people. Every decision, from the choice of a word to the camera angle, shapes how society will perceive the tragedy, who will become a hero, and who will be the culprit.

When the explosion occurred in the port of Beirut on August 4, 2020, the first reporters were faced with a choice of narratives. Some focused on the scale of the destruction – “Apocalypse in Beirut.” Others – on the heroism of rescuers – “The city that does not give up.” A third group – on political responsibility – “The consequences of corruption and negligence.”

Each narrative had its consequences. Apocalyptic footage triggered a wave of international aid but also scared off potential investors. Heroic stories lifted the morale of the population but diverted attention from systemic problems. Political criticism mobilized protests but deepened social division.

### *Mechanisms for Shaping the Narrative*

Selection of facts is the first mechanism. A journalist cannot tell everything, so they choose which facts are more important. This choice automatically creates a hierarchy of significance.

Framing is the presentation of the same facts in different contexts. “100 people evacuated” can be presented as “A successful rescue operation” or as “Only 100 out of 1,000 residents were saved.”

Visual rhetoric is the choice of images that accompany the text. A shot of a crying child creates one emotional tone, a shot of working rescuers – a completely different one.

### **“Speed versus accuracy”: the real-time dilemma**

#### *The Digital Revolution and New Challenges*

The conflict between speed and accuracy has always existed, but digital technologies have made it particularly acute. Today, the primacy in disaster coverage is measured in minutes, not hours. False information published in the first minutes can spread so quickly that its refutation becomes impossible.

64.2% of journalists have faced situations where speed conflicted with thorough verification. This indicator demonstrates the scale of the problem: most professionals regularly face the dilemma of speed versus accuracy.

#### *The Strategy of Phased Publication*

Experienced journalists have developed a practical approach to solving the dilemma – phased publication. Instead of waiting for the full picture, they publish information in parts, clearly indicating the level of reliability of each fragment.

#### ***Stages of phased publication:***

- Signal (0-15 minutes) – stating the fact of the event without details. Example: “An explosion occurred in the center of Istanbul. Details are being clarified. Stay tuned for updates.”
- First details (15-60 minutes) – adding verified facts with source attribution. Example: “According to police, the explosion occurred near a shopping center. The injured are being transported to hospitals. The number of casualties is being determined.”
- Contextualization (1-4 hours) – in-depth analysis with expert commentary. Example: a material about possible causes, the history of similar incidents, and safety measures.
- Analysis of consequences (days-weeks) – a systemic review of the impact on society.

In journalism, a key ethical tool for phased publication is the use of uncertainty markers – linguistic constructions that

transparently signal the limitations of the information to the reader. These markers help manage expectations and prevent the spread of unverified claims by providing a clear indication of a report's reliability.

There are different markers correspond to different levels of reliability. High degree of reliability is used for information that has been officially confirmed. Examples include phrases like "According to official data," "Service representatives have confirmed," or "It has been documented."

Medium degree of reliability is used when the information is plausible but not yet officially verified. Examples include "According to preliminary data," "Unofficial sources report," or "Eyewitnesses claim."

Low degree of reliability is used when the information is unconfirmed and should be treated with caution. This applies to phrases such as "Information has appeared on social networks," "Unverified reports indicate," or "There is no official confirmation yet."

By using these markers, journalists uphold transparency and help their audience make informed judgments about the news.

### **Technology in the service of quick verification**

Modern tools have significantly accelerated the process of information verification, allowing for greater speed and accuracy in a fast-paced environment.

**Real-time geolocation** services, such as Google Earth, allow you to check the exact location of a photo or video in minutes, helping to confirm its authenticity. A **reverse image search** using tools like TinEye or Google Images is essential for detecting the use of old or unrelated footage that has been repurposed to mislead.

Analyzing **metadata** from a file can show the time, place, and type of camera used to create the image or video, which helps establish its authenticity. Furthermore, a growing number of **verification networks**, like Bellingcat, have created communities of experts who collaborate to verify information in real time, leveraging collective expertise to combat misinformation.

At the same time, speed is also important – people need information immediately to make decisions (evacuate, seek shelter, etc.). Therefore, newsrooms must set up internal processes so that information verification happens as quickly as possible: have lists of experts, direct contacts with emergency services, and access to official channels. Teamwork in the newsroom allows for the distribution of tasks: while some journalists are broadcasting live, others are simultaneously checking new data before it airs. This approach helps win both on speed and reliability.

## **Contextualization in a crisis: creating a holistic picture**

### *From fragments to a mosaic*

Disasters are often perceived as fragmented – isolated dramatic episodes without a connection to each other. Ethical journalism requires creating a holistic picture that helps the audience understand not only what happened, but also why and what it means.

When floods hit Valencia in October 2024, the first reports focused on dramatic footage of flooded streets. But Spanish journalist Pilar Ramirez went further – she showed the connection between urbanization, climate change, and infrastructural decisions made decades ago.

### ***Methods of rapid contextualization:***

- Historical context – comparing with similar events in the past helps to assess the scale and uniqueness of the situation.
- Geographical context – explaining the features of the region that may have contributed to the disaster.
- Social context – analyzing how the event will affect different population groups.
- Economic context – assessing the financial consequences for the region and the country.

### *Contextualization without Simplification*

The main risk of rapid contextualization is simplifying complex phenomena into primitive schemes. “The government is to blame,” “The reason is corruption,” “It’s all because of climate change.” Such explanations may be partially correct, but they rarely reflect the fullness of reality.

An ethical approach requires showing the complexity of cause-and-effect relationships, avoiding the temptation to find a single culprit or a single reason.

## **The importance of showing the backstory and consequences, not just sensationalism**

### *The Problem of Fragmented Reporting*

The most common ethical problem in disaster journalism is sensationalism and fragmentation. When the media focuses only on the spectacular moments while ignoring the cause-and-effect context, the audience gets a distorted view.

### **Fragmented reporting has several risks:**

- Loss of learning lessons – without understanding the causes, society cannot prevent similar tragedies in the future.
- Simplification of culprits – searching for “simple culprits” instead of analyzing systemic problems.
- Audience emotional burnout – constant dramatic footage without constructive context leads to indifference.

The “**Full Story**” strategy moves beyond the initial breaking news to provide a complete, in-depth account of a major event or disaster. It’s an approach that ensures the public understands the full context and long-term consequences, keeping the topic in the spotlight beyond the typical news cycle.

This strategy is built around three key component are backstory (prerequisites), climax (the event) and aftermath. First component involves providing a “How did we get here?” section in every piece of material. It reminds the audience of the warnings, similar past cases, or decisions that led to the event. This helps people understand the root causes of the tragedy, not just the event itself.

While covering the disaster as it unfolds, this approach focuses not just on the drama but also on how the system responds. This includes the effectiveness of emergency services and the solidarity shown by people.

Last but not least, the strategy calls for regularly returning to the topic long after the initial news has passed. Journalists cover the recovery efforts, the lessons learned, and any policy changes that result from the event.

### **How to avoid panic and excessive dramatism**

Effective communication during a crisis is a delicate balance. While the goal is to inform and prepare the public, a focus on fear can have unintended negative consequences. Journalists must understand the psychology of how information impacts an audience’s emotional state.

### **The psychology of fear in the media**

Fear is a powerful motivator. It can either mobilize people to take useful, preventive actions or, conversely, paralyze them with anxiety. The key is to leverage this emotion responsibly. Several factors can increase panic, including **uncertainty about the scale of the threat**, **a lack of clear instructions for action**, and **conflicting messages from different sources**. A focus on **worst-case scenarios** and the use of **emotionally charged language** can also exacerbate fear and lead to panic.

In contrast, certain factors can effectively decrease panic. These include providing **specific, verified information** and **clear advice on actions to take**. Demonstrating the **effectiveness of safety measures** and offering **positive examples of overcoming similar situations** can reassure the public and encourage them to take constructive steps.

### **Technologies of anti-panic reporting**

There are specific reporting techniques that can be employed to manage public anxiety. One effective method is the **sandwich structure**, where alarming information is “wrapped” in practical advice and calming context. For example: “Meteorologists forecast heavy rains (alarming information). Here’s what experts advise for protecting your home... (practical advice). The region survived similar rains in 2019 without serious consequences thanks to preparation (calming context).”

Another key technique is to use **soft language instead of alarmist vocabulary**. For instance, use “serious situation” instead of “disaster,” “need help” instead of “in despair,” and “evacuation as a preventive measure” instead of “fleeing from death.” The final principle is to maintain a **focus on solutions**, ensuring that every problem presented is accompanied by information about the measures being taken to solve it.

### **Rapid response and effective communication: coordination in chaos**

#### *The Journalist as a Coordinator of Information Flows*

During disasters, journalists often become not only witnesses but also coordinators of information flows. They can be the sole source of operational information for rescue services, volunteers, and relatives of the affected.

Ukrainian journalist Olena Zelenska, during the 2020 floods in the Pre-Carpathian region, created a Telegram channel that became a central hub for coordinating aid. Information about needs, evacuation routes, and volunteer contacts was transmitted through the channel. In three days, the channel gained 15,000 subscribers and helped organize aid for hundreds of families.

#### ***Protocols of Crisis Communication:***

- Establishing contact with official services – setting up direct contacts with the press services of the State Emergency Service, police, and medical services to get operational information.
- Creating a network of correspondents – involving local residents who can report on the situation in different areas.
- Coordination with colleagues – avoiding duplication of efforts and dividing areas of responsibility among different media outlets.
- Interaction with volunteer organizations – journalists can help coordinate volunteer activities by disseminating information about needs.

### *Ethical Boundaries of Journalistic Intervention*

A journalist's active role in coordinating aid raises the question of professional boundaries. Can a journalist remain objective if they are actively influencing events?

Most ethical codes do not prohibit journalists from helping in crisis situations, but they do require transparency about such a role. If a journalist becomes an organizer of aid, they must honestly inform the audience about it.

### **Emotional intelligence and empathy at the scene**

Professional distance is a crucial part of journalistic ethics, but in extreme situations, it can conflict with basic human values. When a journalist sees a child under the rubble, should they continue filming or rush to help? According to a survey, 63.3% of journalists need help coping with stress. Working in a disaster zone traumatizes not only the victims but also those who cover it.

### **Principles of Empathetic Journalism:**

In the field of journalism, dealing with traumatic events is common, and understanding the role of empathy is crucial. Empathetic journalism is guided by several key principles that allow reporters to cover difficult stories with humanity while maintaining their professional integrity.

First, journalists are human and have emotions. It's important to acknowledge emotional impact and recognize how personal feelings might affect professional decisions. While it's vital to remain objective in reporting, a journalist should not suppress their own emotional response; instead, they should understand and manage it as part of their work.

Second, a journalist's primary role is to inform, and there are limits to personal intervention. While a journalist might have the skills to help someone in a crisis, they must be careful not to cause additional harm. Their main responsibility is to provide quality coverage, which often has a greater and longer-lasting impact than a single act of direct assistance.

Third, self-care is a necessity. Working with traumatic content can take a significant toll. Journalists need to take regular breaks, seek psychological support when needed, and discuss their experiences with colleagues. This helps prevent burnout and ensures they can continue to do their job effectively.

Finally, empathetic journalism requires a long-term perspective. Reporters must understand that producing a well-researched, quality story can bring far more benefit to a community or society than a single, timely act of help to one person. By

providing a full and accurate account, they contribute to a broader understanding that can lead to systemic change and greater public awareness.

### **Case studies of ethical reporting during a crisis**

#### **Case study: a journalist in an earthquake zone**

During the 2023 earthquake, Turkish journalist Ayşe Demirel found herself in a situation where she saw an elderly woman trapped under rubble. The journalist had basic first aid skills and realized she could help. Demirel put down her camera, helped pull the woman from the rubble, and provided first aid. She later honestly recounted this episode in her report, explaining why she made that decision. “I could have remained just an observer, but then I would have ceased to be human.” she later explained. Her report received positive feedback from both colleagues and the audience, who appreciated her honest and humane approach.

#### ***Insights from the Survey: The Real Experience of Professionals***

Data from a 2023 survey reveals the painful realities of journalists’ work during disasters:

- 87.8% acknowledge the risks of covering disasters, but only 23.1% have access to specialized resources.
- 64.2% have faced a conflict between speed and accuracy, with 78.9% feeling pressure from management regarding publication speed.
- 70.5% do not know what protective or technical equipment is needed in different conditions – an indicator of the profession’s technical unpreparedness.

#### **Case 1: The Türkiye Earthquake (2023). Phased Verification System**

*Situation:* February 6, 2023, 4:17 a.m. A powerful earthquake devastates southeastern Türkiye. Social media explodes with contradictory information.

*Decision of leading Turkish media:*

- Hürriyet and Cumhuriyet used “official” and “being verified” labels and engaged Teyit.org to check videos and reports.

*Result:* Turkish media avoided the large-scale spread of fake news that accompanied the informational chaos after the earthquake.

*Lesson:* Pre-developed verification protocols work even in extreme conditions.

#### **Case 2: The Spain Floods (2024). “Positive Verification” Strategy**

*Situation:* October 2024. Valencia is underwater. Social media is filled with fake videos from other disasters and conspiracy theories.

***Innovative approach of Catalan media:***

- Spanish fact-checkers (Maldita.es, Newtral.es, RTVE Verifica) actively worked in real time with “confirmed” and “refuted” labels.
- Online maps with status updates were developed by government services, such as AEMET and Civil Defense (GVA-112), which were then disseminated through the media.

*Result:* Research showed that the audience better remembered truthful information presented positively than refuted fakes.

***Lesson:*** Actively spreading the truth is more effective than passively refuting lies.

**Case 3: The Greece Wildfires (2021).** Humane Interviewing Protocol

*Situation:* August 2021. Wildfires on Evia. Hundreds of victims need help but are also experiencing trauma.

Decision of ERT (state television):

- Developed a “humane interviewing protocol”:
  - Mandatory consent to be recorded.
  - The right to end the conversation at any time.
  - A focus on facts, not emotions.
  - A ban on leading questions about losses.
  - Concluding interviews with information on where to find help.
- Journalists’ training included a mini-course on the trauma-informed approach.

*Result:* ERT received the highest trust ratings among Greek media during the crisis. Victims noted the respect and professionalism of the journalists.

***Lesson:*** Investing in training journalists in a trauma-sensitive approach pays off with audience trust.

**Case 4: A Missile Strike in Ukraine (2024).** Media Coordination in a Time of War

*Situation:* March 2024. A missile strike on a residential area. The need to balance the right to information with security requirements.

***Coordination protocol of Ukrainian media:***

- A balance between safety and informing. For example, Suspilne, Ukrayinska Pravda, and Channel 24 declared a delay in publishing precise locations to ensure evacuation.

- A unified time delay – an agreement not to publish details about the impact location during the first hour to complete the evacuation.
- A shared information pool – leading media outlets shared verified facts to avoid competition at the expense of safety.
- A focus on help – prioritizing information on how to help, not just on the scale of the destruction.

*Result:* A quick mobilization of volunteer assistance while maintaining operational security.

**Lesson:** Coordination among media is possible even in a highly competitive environment when people’s lives are at stake.

### **Practical tools for working in real time**

In a high-stakes, fast-paced environment, having a quick, ethical decision checklist can be a powerful tool to maintain integrity and prevent misinformation. This algorithm is designed to be completed in just a few minutes, ensuring a rapid yet responsible response.

#### **STEP 1: Lightning Assessment (15 seconds)**

The first step is a rapid, initial assessment to determine the immediate significance and potential impact of the information. Ask yourself three critical questions:

- Can this information save lives?
- Can it cause harm?
- What is the level of reliability?

#### **STEP 2: Quick Verification (2–5 minutes)**

Once the initial assessment is complete, take a few minutes for quick verification. You need to establish the credibility of the information. Ask yourself:

- Who is the source and how reliable are they?
- Is it consistent with other reports?
- Can the key facts be quickly checked using available tools?

#### **STEP 3: Formulation (1–2 minutes)**

After verifying the information, the next step is to formulate the message carefully. This is where you apply the principles of anti-panic reporting. Make sure to consider:

- Has a reliability marker been added to the message, clearly indicating the level of certainty?
- Is the language non-panic-inducing, using soft language and focusing on clarity?
- Is there a practical benefit for the reader, providing them with actionable steps?

#### **STEP 4: Publication with Readiness for Correction**

The final step is to publish, but with a plan for what comes next. The

process doesn't end with a click of a button. You must be prepared by:

- Monitoring reactions from the audience.
- Having a readiness for a quick correction if new information emerges.
- Having a plan for further updates, ensuring the story evolves with new, verified fact

#### ***Templates for Different Message Types:***

- First report on an event: "In [location] at [time], a [event] occurred. According to preliminary data, [main facts]. Emergency services are working at the scene. Detailed information will be available after verification."
- Update with new facts: "UPDATE: According to official data from [service], [new facts]. Previous information about [what exactly] is confirmed/refuted. We continue to monitor the situation."
- Correction of inaccurate information: "CLARIFICATION: We previously reported [inaccurate information]. According to verified data, [correct information]. We apologize for the inaccuracy and will continue to track the situation."

#### ***Templates for Different Message Types***

Effective communication in a crisis requires quickly and clearly formulated messages. Using standardized templates can be a valuable tool in this process. For the first report on an event, a good template is: "In [location] at [time], a [event] occurred. According to preliminary data, [main facts]. Emergency services are working at the scene. Detailed information will be available after verification."

When new information becomes available, use a template for an update with new facts: "UPDATE: According to official data from [service], [new facts]. Previous information about [what exactly] is confirmed/refuted. We continue to monitor the situation."

Finally, to correct inaccurate information, apply the correction of inaccurate information template: "CLARIFICATION: We previously reported [inaccurate information]. According to verified data, [correct information]. We apologize for the inaccuracy and will continue to track the situation."

#### **Protocol for Working with Visual Content**

Working with visual content in a crisis requires a systematic approach that prioritizes speed, accuracy, and ethics. This process can be divided into three phases: quick authenticity checks, ethical assessment, and legal clearance.

#### **Phase 1: Quick Authenticity Check**

The initial step is a rapid review to verify that the visual

content is legitimate and relevant. This involves a reverse image search using tools like Google Images or TinEye to detect if the image or video has been used before in a different context. It's also critical to check the metadata of the file (if available) to confirm the time, location, and device used to capture it.

### **Phase 2: Ethical Assessment**

Once the authenticity is confirmed, an ethical assessment is essential. You must compare the visual content with known landmarks or other verified images to ensure it depicts the claimed location. Most importantly, you must evaluate the content's potential impact. Ask yourself: Does it violate the dignity of the people depicted? Does it contain graphic or overly disturbing details that might be traumatizing to the audience? And finally, is the content truly appropriate for understanding the event, or is it being used for sensationalism?

### **Phase 3: Legal Clearance**

Before publishing, a final check for legal compliance is necessary. You must determine if there is explicit consent from the author for use and if its use would infringe on any copyrights. Additionally, consider if it's necessary to blur faces or other identifying features to protect the privacy and safety of the individuals in the image.

### **Crisis Communication Protocol for Newsrooms:**

#### *Readiness Phase (before the event)*

- List of emergency service contacts.
- Verification protocols for different types of disasters.
- Training the team on the basics of crisis communication.
- Technical provisions for mobile work.

The readiness phase, which takes place before a crisis event, is crucial for effective response. This preparation involves several key actions. First, it is essential to compile a comprehensive list of emergency service contacts to ensure rapid communication with the appropriate authorities. Second, organizations must establish clear verification protocols for different types of disasters to quickly and accurately assess a situation. Additionally, teams should be trained in the fundamentals of crisis communication to ensure they can respond clearly and consistently under pressure. Finally, making technical provisions for mobile work is vital, as it allows operations to continue even if physical office locations are inaccessible.

#### *Response Phase (first hours)*

The first step is the appointment of a responsible editor, who will oversee all aspects of the coverage. This person acts as the central point of contact, making sure everyone on the team is aligned. Simultaneously, the organization must activate its verification channels to quickly confirm information from official sources and eyewitnesses.

An internal coordination group is then created to manage the flow of information and tasks. This group helps reporters, editors, and producers work together seamlessly. Lastly, it is vital to establish contact with colleagues on site as soon as possible. These on-the-ground reporters provide firsthand accounts and crucial context that cannot be found elsewhere. This coordinated effort ensures the newsroom can respond effectively and responsibly during a crisis.

The response phase, particularly during the critical first few hours, focuses on immediate and coordinated action. It begins with the appointment of a responsible editor to oversee communications and messaging. Concurrently, the team activates all verification channels to ensure that information is accurate. An internal coordination group is immediately created to streamline decision-making and assign tasks. Finally, establishing contact with colleagues on site is a top priority to get real-time information and ensure their safety.

#### *Stabilization Phase (first days)*

Following the initial rush of a crisis, a newsroom enters the stabilization phase. This period, typically lasting the first few days, focuses on ensuring the accuracy of reporting, planning future coverage, and taking care of the team. That is why crucial first step is to analyze their own coverage for errors. The team reviews what has been published to identify any mistakes and issue corrections if necessary. This self-assessment is essential for maintaining credibility. At the same time, the newsroom begins to plan for long-term coverage, moving beyond the immediate breaking news to think about in-depth features, follow-up reports, and analysis.

The well-being of the team is also a top priority during this phase. News organizations provide psychological support to their staff, recognizing the emotional toll that covering a traumatic event can take. Finally, the team will prepare reports on their work during the crisis, documenting their response and outlining lessons learned for future events.

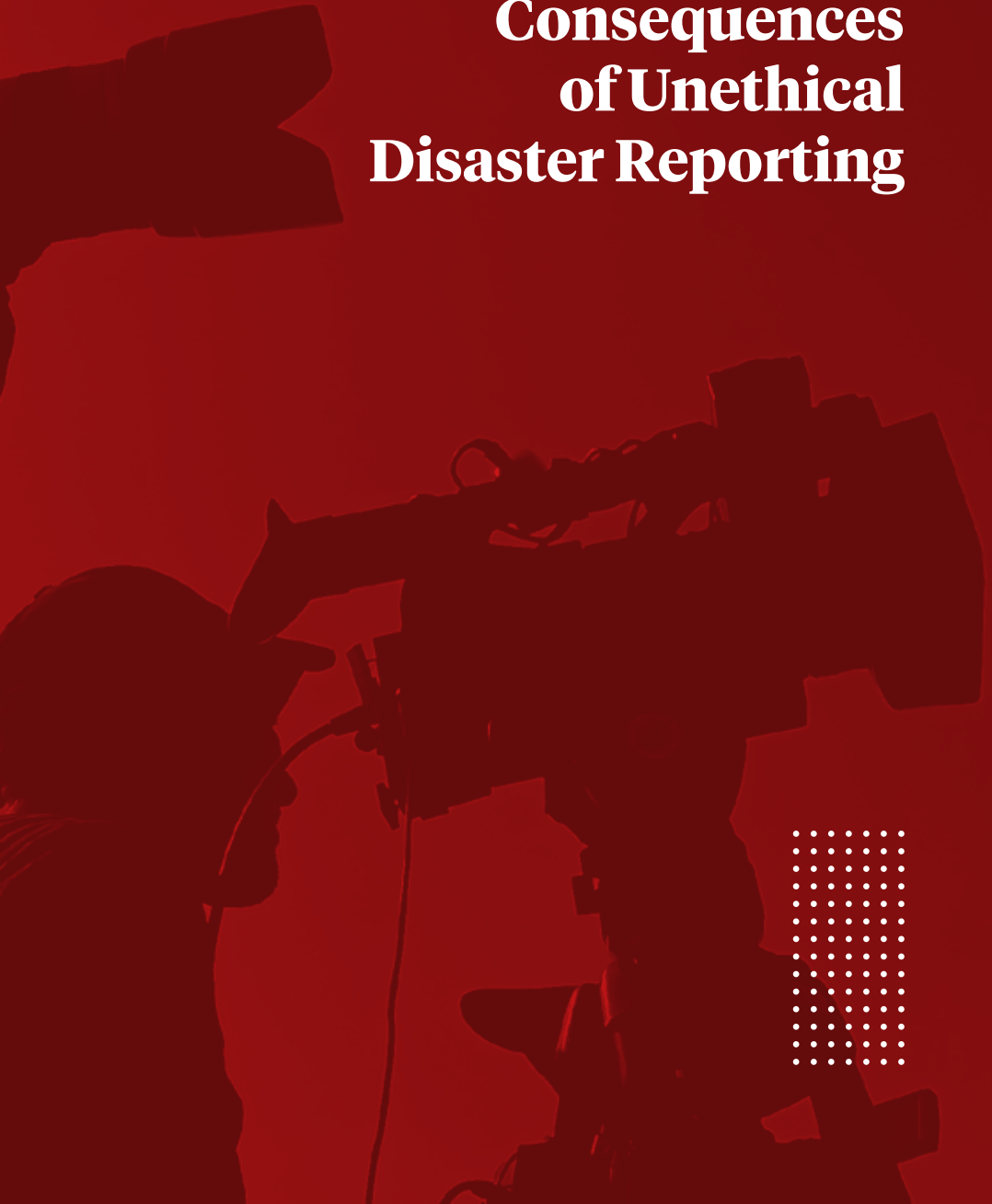
The stabilization phase, which occurs during the first days following a crisis, focuses on assessing the initial response and planning for the future. A critical first step is the analysis of your own coverage for errors to ensure accuracy and address any

mistakes. This is followed by planning for long-term coverage to maintain consistent and responsible reporting. During this time, it's also essential to provide psychological support for the team, acknowledging the stress and trauma they may have experienced. Finally, preparing reports on the work during the crisis helps to document actions, evaluate effectiveness, and inform future strategies.

Ethical reporting during a disaster is the art of making the right decisions when there's no time to think and the stakes are at their highest. This chapter has shown that, in such moments, ethical principles are not abstract ideals but practical tools that help journalists navigate informational chaos.

# 2.5.

## Consequences of Unethical Disaster Reporting



A silhouette of a person, likely a journalist or photographer, stands with their back to the camera. They are holding a camera in their right hand. The word "PRESS" is written in white capital letters on a blue rectangular background on their back. The background is a dramatic sunset sky with orange and yellow clouds, and a dark horizon line at the bottom.

**PRESS**

## 2.5. Consequences of Unethical Disaster Reporting

### Introduction

Imagine a firefighter who, instead of putting out a fire, sets new fires. Or a rescuer who, instead of helping, creates additional dangers for those around them. This is the toxic role journalism can play when ethical standards are violated during disaster reporting. What was supposed to heal society, inform, and unite people turns into a source of additional suffering.

Disasters and emergencies are always a test not only for the victims but also for the media. During crises, society relies on journalists to find accurate information and explanations for what has happened. However, when the reporting of such events becomes unethical – whether consciously or unconsciously – the consequences can be devastating.

The consequences of unethical disaster reporting are not limited to the moment the material is published. Like radiation, they have a long half-life, lasting for years, affecting the lives of specific people, shaping society's attitude toward the media, and even changing the course of political processes. These are not abstract theoretical risks – they are real harm that can be measured in human fates, lost trust, and social conflicts.

Understanding the consequences of unethical behavior is not an attempt to intimidate future journalists, but on the contrary, a way to show the importance and power of their future profession. When we understand the harm that unethical journalism can cause, we better realize the good that responsible journalism can bring.

### Re-traumatization of victims

People who have survived a disaster are in a state of fragile psychological balance. A traumatic experience changes the way the brain works, making a person extremely sensitive to any reminders of what they have been through. In psychology, this phenomenon is called triggering – when an external stimulus causes the return of traumatic memories with the same intensity as during the event itself.

Unethical disaster reporting can be a powerful trigger for victims. When journalists:

- Focus on the most horrific details.
- Use dramatic images unnecessarily.
- Violate people's privacy.
- Coerce emotional reactions.

...they force victims to relive the worst moments of their lives again and again.

### ***Forms of Media Violence Against Victims***

- Intrusive interviewing of people in a state of shock. Journalists often do not understand that consent to a conversation, given by a person in a state of acute stress, cannot be considered full and valid. Coercing emotional reactions during an interview can be especially traumatic. Questions like “How do you feel?” force a person to delve into their traumatic experience for the sake of getting “vivid” quotes.
- Violation of the right to privacy. Publishing personal details, photos of destroyed homes, or intimate moments of grief is a form of media violence. This not only violates ethical norms but can also lead to additional stigmatization of the victims.
- Using children as “living illustrations.” It is especially unethical to use images of children to enhance the emotional impact of materials. Children cannot give full consent to participate in journalistic materials, and their psyche is extremely vulnerable to re-traumatization.

### ***Long-Term Psychological Consequences***

Re-traumatization through the media can lead to:

- Development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or the deepening of existing symptoms. People may begin to avoid news, social contacts, or public places out of fear of once again falling under the journalists’ attention.
- Disruption of the recovery process. When victims are forced to relive the trauma through the media, it can significantly slow down their psychological recovery and return to normal life.
- Loss of trust in social institutions. A negative experience of interacting with the media can lead to a general distrust of the information space and social institutions.

### **Erosion of public trust: from skepticism to cynicism**

Trust in the media is one of the fundamental elements of a democratic society. When people believe that journalists are providing them with truthful and complete information, they can make informed decisions as citizens. This trust is built over years of responsible work but can be destroyed in a matter of hours by unethical reporting of a major disaster.

### ***Stages of Trust Degradation***

1. Healthy skepticism. People start checking information from different sources more often. This is a healthy process that can even improve the media literacy of society.

2. Selective trust. People start trusting only certain journalists or publications, which leads to the fragmentation of the media space and the creation of informational “bubbles.”
3. Cynicism and complete distrust. People begin to believe that all journalists are dishonest and that truthful information does not exist at all. This is the most dangerous stage for democracy.

When society loses trust in professional media, it becomes more prone to believing unverified information from dubious sources. Growth of conspiracy theories. The lack of trust in official sources creates fertile ground for the spread of various conspiracy theories. Undermining democratic processes. In a society where people do not trust the media, it is difficult to hold fair elections and ensure the transparency of power.

### **Deepening social divides**

#### *Mechanisms for Creating Discord*

Disasters, at first glance, should unite society in the face of a common misfortune. However, unethical reporting can turn the unifying potential of a tragedy into a source of conflict.

- Searching for “scapegoats.” Instead of analyzing the systemic problems that led to the disaster, the media often focuses on finding culprits among specific people or groups. This simplifies complex problems but can lead to unfair accusations.
- Ethnicization and politicization of tragedies. When disasters are interpreted through the prism of ethnic or political conflicts, natural disasters or technical accidents turn into pretexts for deepening existing social divides.

#### *Inequality in the Coverage of Suffering*

Especially destructive to social cohesion can be the unequal coverage of the suffering of different population groups. When media coverage disproportionately focuses on victims from specific social strata, ethnic groups, geographic regions, or political beliefs, it’s known as selective attention or bias. This can lead to a distorted public perception, making some victims seem more worthy of attention or sympathy than others. This phenomenon is often linked to the concept of the “identifiable victim effect,” where people are more willing to help a single, identifiable victim than a large, anonymous group. When media outlets choose to highlight a certain type of victim, they are, intentionally or not, guiding public empathy and attention.

### ***Long-Term Consequences of Social Divides***

- Fragmentation of society. The deepening of divides can lead to the formation of closed groups that do not trust each other and are not ready for cooperation.
- Political polarization. Social divides often turn into political ones, which complicates the adoption of consensus decisions on important issues.
- Decreased solidarity. In a divided society, people are less inclined to help representatives of other groups even in critical situations.

### **Disinformation as a long-term consequence**

#### *The Lifecycle of False Information*

Disinformation generated by unethical disaster reporting has its own dynamic of development, similar to the spread of viruses:

- The initial phase is characterized by the rapid spread of unverified or distorted information. During disasters, people are especially active in sharing news on social networks, often without checking its authenticity.
- The consolidation phase begins when false information starts to be perceived as fact by a significant part of the population. At this stage, people use this information to explain other events, incorporating it into their worldview.
- The resistance phase is when refutation becomes significantly more difficult, as people psychologically resist information that contradicts their established beliefs.

“Hybrid” fakes are especially dangerous, as they are messages that combine elements of truth with false information. Such materials are harder to recognize and refute.

#### *The Institutionalization of Disinformation*

Over time, some types of disinformation can become part of official narratives or even enter textbooks and encyclopedias. This happens when false information is not refuted in a timely manner or when the refutation does not get enough widespread attention. Correcting it requires significant effort and may encounter resistance from those who have an interest in preserving the false narrative.

### **Economic and political consequences of inaccuracy**

#### *The Economic Price of Disinformation*

Unethical disaster reporting can have measurable economic consequences that go far beyond the direct damages from the event itself.

When the media exaggerates the scale of destruction or the duration of danger, it can lead to mass cancellations of bookings

and tourists avoiding entire regions. The economic losses from such “reputational damage” often exceed the direct damage from the disaster itself.

Potential investors who rely on media reports to assess risks may decide to withdraw capital or abandon new projects based on inaccurate information.

#### *Impact on Financial Markets*

Inaccurate information about disasters can cause significant fluctuations in financial markets. The shares of companies that have allegedly been affected by a disaster can plummet, even if the actual damage turns out to be much less.

Currency markets also react to news about disasters, especially if they concern developed economies. Exaggerating the scale of the economic consequences can lead to an unfounded depreciation of the national currency.

#### *Political Manipulation and its Consequences*

Unethical disaster reporting creates favorable conditions for political manipulation. Politicians can use inaccurate information to accuse opponents, justify unpopular decisions, or divert attention from other problems.

Especially dangerous are attempts to use disasters to promote populist or extremist ideas. When people are under stress, they are more susceptible to radical decisions.

#### *International Consequences*

Unethical disaster reporting in one country can have a domino effect on the international stage, complicating diplomatic relations, disrupting trade, and undermining global trust, which can ultimately impact humanitarian aid efforts.

#### **Professional degradation**

When unethical practices during disaster reporting do not face adequate criticism or punishment, they gradually become the norm. This process of professional degradation is cumulative – each new case of impunity makes subsequent violations more likely.

#### ***Culture of Irresponsibility:***

- Normalization of violations. When unethical behavior becomes common, young journalists may perceive it as a professional norm. This creates a vicious cycle where each new generation of professionals has lower ethical standards.
- Pressure of competition. In conditions of fierce competition for audience attention, journalists may feel pressure to use unethical methods to get exclusive information or create more “vivid” materials.

### ***Impact on Journalism Education:***

- The gap between theory and practice. When students see that in practice, ethical principles are often ignored, it can lead to a cynical attitude toward professional ethics in general.
- Changing priorities. Educational programs may begin to focus more on technical skills and commercial success than on the ethical aspects of the profession.

### **Case studies**

**Case 1: The Türkiye Earthquake (2023).** Violation of the “Do No Harm” Principle

*Context:* During the coverage of the devastating earthquake in Türkiye and Syria in February 2023, some media outlets violated basic ethical principles.

*Unethical practices:*

- Displaying the bodies of the deceased without the consent of relatives.
- Interviewing children who had lost their parents without the presence of a guardian.
- Spreading unverified rumors about the number of victims.
- Dramatizing the situation to increase ratings.

*Consequences:* Families of the victims filed complaints against the media for violating privacy. Inaccurate information about the scale of the destruction complicated the work of rescue services and led to panic in unaffected regions.

**Lesson:** Even in conditions of immense public interest, journalists must remember the human dignity of the victims.

**Case 2: The Spain Wildfires (2022).** Creating Panic

*Context:* During a series of wildfires in Spain in the summer of 2022, some media created panic among the population.

*Unethical practices:*

- Using sensational headlines like “Spain is Burning.”
- Showing the most dramatic footage without context.
- Spreading rumors about possible new fire outbreaks.
- Ignoring official evacuation recommendations.

*Consequences:* Despite high public interest, some reports contributed to an emotional escalation. Some tourist areas where there were no fires suffered economic losses due to booking cancellations.

**Lesson:** Even in critical situations, journalists must choose their tone carefully and not heighten anxiety without a factual basis.

**Case 3: The Greece Floods (2023).** Discrimination in Coverage

*Context:* The floods in central Greece in the autumn of 2023 affected

different communities differently, but media coverage also turned out to be uneven.

*Unethical practices:* Greek media paid significantly more attention to victims in wealthy areas and popular tourist zones than to poor rural communities or refugee camps.

*Consequences:* The uneven coverage led to an unequal distribution of charitable aid. Marginalized groups were left with virtually no support, which deepened social divides.

**Lesson:** Journalists must consciously ensure equal coverage of all affected groups.

**Case 4: The Missile Strikes on Ukraine (2024).** Violation of Information Security

*Context:* During the coverage of the consequences of missile strikes on Ukrainian cities, some journalists and media violated the principles of information security.

*Unethical practices:*

- Real-time publication of precise geolocations of the strikes.
- Photos that allowed the identification of specific infrastructure objects.
- Information about the effectiveness of air defense in different regions.
- Ignoring requests from the military to limit publications.

**Security consequences:** The publication of detailed information could have helped the aggressor adjust subsequent strikes and evaluate the effectiveness of the attacks. This could potentially have led to additional casualties among the civilian population.

**Ethical dilemmas:** Ukrainian journalists found themselves facing a difficult dilemma between the public's right to information and security requirements. Some chose the path of self-censorship; a minority continued to publish all available information for the sake of hype and views.

**Lesson:** In extreme conditions, journalists must balance the right to information with the safety of people.

#### **Ways to restore trust**

##### *Acknowledging Mistakes as the First Step*

Restoring trust after unethical disaster reporting begins with a honest acknowledgment of mistakes. This is not just a formal apology but a deep analysis of what went wrong, why it happened, and what steps will be taken to prevent similar situations in the future.

An effective acknowledgment of a mistake should include:

- Specificity – accurately describing what the mistake was.

- Responsibility – taking full responsibility without excuses.
- Actions – describing concrete steps to rectify the situation.
- Prevention – explaining how to prevent similar mistakes in the future.

### *Transparency of Processes as the Foundation of Trust*

Restoring trust is impossible without demonstrating how the media is working to improve its standards. This means openness about editorial processes, criteria for selecting news, methods of fact-checking and mechanisms for quality control.

#### ***Practical steps:***

- Creating special pages that explain ethical principles.
- Publishing procedures for working with sources.
- Open mechanisms for submitting complaints.
- Regular reports on working through mistakes.

#### ***Systematic education of journalists***

Regular training of journalists on ethical standards for working during disasters should become a mandatory part of professional development. Creating specialized courses on the ethics of covering crisis situations, which would include:

- Psychological aspects of working with victims.
- Legal restrictions in crisis situations.
- Technical aspects of information verification.
- International standards of journalistic ethics.

#### ***Building supportive structures***

To help journalists navigate the challenges of covering disasters, news organizations and professional communities should focus on creating strong support systems. One effective way to do this is by establishing professional communities, or networks where journalists who specialize in disaster reporting can offer each other mutual support and share experiences.

Mentorship programs are vital. Experienced journalists can guide their younger colleagues, helping them avoid common mistakes and navigate difficult situations with greater confidence. Finally, providing readily available psychological support is crucial. Journalists who regularly cover traumatic events are at high risk of secondary traumatization, and having access to mental health resources ensures they can continue their important work without sacrificing their well-being.

### ***Long-term strategy for restoration***

- **Patience and consistency:** You can't expect quick results from individual initiatives. Systemic work over many years is needed to gradually demonstrate the media's commitment to ethical standards.
- **Continuous work:** Trust is not a static state but a dynamic process. Even after it is restored, you need to constantly work on maintaining it through high-quality, ethical journalism and openness to dialogue with society.

To restore trust after unethical disaster reporting, media organizations must follow a multi-faceted approach that goes beyond a simple apology. This process involves honest acknowledgment, transparency, education, and long-term commitment.

### **Acknowledging mistakes as the first step**

The first and most crucial step is to genuinely acknowledge mistakes. This isn't just about saying "sorry"; it's about a thorough, public analysis of what went wrong. An effective acknowledgment must be:

- **Specific:** Clearly describe the exact mistake that was made.
- **Responsible:** Take full accountability for the error without making excuses.
- **Action-oriented:** Detail the concrete steps being taken to correct the situation.
- **Preventive:** Explain how similar mistakes will be avoided in the future.

### **Transparency as the foundation of trust**

Restoring public trust is impossible without showing how the media is working to improve. This requires being open about your internal processes, including editorial procedures, the criteria for selecting news, and your fact-checking methods.

Practical steps to achieve this include:

- Creating special sections on your website that explain your ethical principles.
- Publishing your procedures for working with sources.
- Establishing open and accessible mechanisms for submitting complaints.
- Releasing regular reports on how you've addressed past mistakes.

### **Systematic Education of Journalists**

Continuous education is vital for preventing future errors. This should be a mandatory part of professional development and include specialized courses that cover:

- **Psychological aspects** of working with victims.

- **Legal restrictions** in crisis situations.
- **Technical aspects** of information verification.
- **International standards** of journalistic ethics.

### **Building Supportive Structures**

Journalists who cover disasters need support to perform ethically and responsibly. Organizations should build structures to help them, such as:

- **Professional communities:** Creating networks for mutual support among journalists.
- **Mentorship programs:** Experienced journalists can guide younger colleagues.
- **Psychological support:** Providing access to mental health services to help journalists cope with the emotional toll of their work.

### **Long-Term Strategy for Restoration**

Restoring trust is a long-term process that requires patience and consistency. You can't expect quick results from individual actions. Instead, it requires a sustained, systematic effort over many years to demonstrate your commitment to ethical journalism. Trust is a dynamic process, and even after it's been restored, it must be continuously maintained through high-quality, ethical reporting and open dialogue with the public.

When a journalist discovers a mistake, the **algorithm of actions after discovering a mistake** provides a clear, four-step process.

#### **Step 1: Rapid Response**

The first priority is to act quickly. You must immediately stop the spread of inaccurate information, for example, by taking down a social media post or an online article. Next, if possible, contact the victims of the misinformation to acknowledge the error directly. Finally, inform the entire editorial team about the situation so everyone is aware of the mistake and can take appropriate action.

#### **Step 2: Situation Analysis**

Once the initial spread is contained, a thorough situation analysis is necessary. This involves identifying the causes of the mistake to understand how it happened, assessing the scale of the potential harm caused by the error, and determining the best way to correct it to minimize further damage.

#### **Step 3: Public Correction**

The next step is to publicly correct the record. This involves publishing a clear refutation or correction, which should explain exactly what was inaccurate. A sincere apology to the victims is also a crucial part of this step, demonstrating accountability and respect.

#### **Step 4: Preventive Measures**

Finally, to prevent future mistakes, it's important to implement preventive measures. This means making changes to editorial procedures to close the gap that led to the error, conducting additional training for the team on best practices, and creating checklists to ensure similar mistakes are not repeated.

##### **How to communicate with victims after a mistake**

When engaging in dialogue with those affected, the principles of effective dialogue are paramount. First, the conversation should be marked by sincerity and openness, demonstrating a genuine commitment to addressing the issue. You must show a readiness to listen to the victim's perspective without interruption. It is crucial to avoid making excuses for the mistake; instead, focus on the facts and the impact. Finally, be prepared to offer concrete proposals for harm compensation, such as a public apology, a correction, or other appropriate actions.

##### **What NOT to do**

To maintain trust and integrity, certain actions should be strictly avoided. Never ignore complaints, as this can escalate the situation and be seen as a sign of disrespect. Do not blame information sources for the error; as the publisher, the ultimate responsibility rests with you. You should not minimize the significance of the mistake, even if you believe it to be minor. Lastly, you must never refuse to publicly acknowledge the mistake, as transparency is key to rebuilding credibility.

##### **Creating a culture of responsibility**

Building a culture of responsibility is a long-term effort that operates on both editorial and personal levels.

At the editorial level, this involves regular discussions of ethical dilemmas to keep the team sharp and aware. A mentorship system for young journalists can guide them in making sound ethical decisions early in their careers. It's also important to encourage reports of potential problems without fear of reprisal and to provide training for the entire team, not just journalists, on ethical standards.

At a personal level, a journalist can foster responsibility through continuous self-improvement, such as by participating in professional seminars or reading professional literature on ethics. A key practice is reflection on one's own mistakes, using them as learning opportunities rather than failures.

The analysis of the consequences of unethical disaster reporting reveals a troubling picture – what should inform and unite can turn into a source of additional suffering and divides. The results

of the survey of journalists also confirm the existence of a critical gap between professionals' awareness of ethical risks and their practical readiness to work in crisis conditions. However, the most important conclusion of this chapter is that negative consequences can be prevented and overcome. Restoring trust in the media is possible through: honest acknowledgment of mistakes, transparency of processes, systematic education of journalists, and the creation of supportive structures.

Understanding the potential harm from unethical behavior should not scare future journalists, but on the contrary, motivate them to the highest professional standards. Ethical disaster journalism is not about following rules; it's about actively participating in the healing of society after tragedies.



**Key Terms,  
Concepts,  
Organizations,  
Source**





## Key terms, concepts and organizations

1. **Active listening:** a communication technique that involves fully concentrating on what is being said rather than just passively hearing the words (Rogers & Farson, 1987). It involves paying attention to both the verbal and nonverbal cues of the speaker, reflecting back what is being said to confirm understanding, and asking clarifying questions. The goal of active listening is to create a safe and supportive environment for the speaker to express themselves fully.
2. **Crisis intervention:** a short-term, active, and directive approach to helping individuals who are experiencing an acute emotional crisis (James & Gilliland, 2017). It focuses on providing immediate support and stabilization, assessing the individual's needs, and developing a plan to help them cope with the crisis. Crisis intervention aims to restore the individual's pre-crisis level of functioning and to prevent further deterioration.
3. **Contextualization of news:** refers to the process of providing background information, analysis, and perspective to help audiences understand the broader context and significance of a news event (Gans, 2004). It involves placing a news story within its historical, social, political, and economic framework, enabling audiences to make sense of the information and its potential impact.
4. **Dramatization in the media:** refers to the use of techniques to make a story more exciting or interesting, often by exaggerating certain aspects or by focusing on the emotional or sensational elements (Silverman & Benoit, 2015). It can involve the use of vivid language, emotional imagery, and compelling narratives to capture the audience's attention and to create a sense of urgency or importance. While dramatization can be effective in engaging audiences, it can also lead to distortions and misrepresentations of reality.
5. **The Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma is a resource center** (at Columbia University) that specializes in educating and supporting journalists in their coverage of trauma, violence, and disasters. It offers practical ethical recommendations.

6. The “**Do No Harm**” approach is a guiding ethical principle, especially important when dealing with trauma. It requires journalists to be aware of and minimize the potential harm that their actions or publications might cause to sources or the audience.
7. **Ethical Disaster Reporting to Help Communities** is a concept of disaster journalism that focuses on the media’s role not only in informing but also in providing socially useful information, explaining causes, combating myths, and promoting community resilience and recovery.
8. **Empathy**: the ability to understand and share the feelings of another (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2023). It involves putting oneself into the other person’s shoes and experiencing the world from their perspective. Empathy is a complex process that includes both cognitive and emotional components. Cognitively, it involves understanding another person’s thoughts and feelings. Emotionally, it involves sharing those feelings.
9. **Emotional burnout**: a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged or excessive stress (Maslach, 2003). It is characterized by feelings of cynicism and detachment, a loss of personal accomplishment, and emotional depletion. Burnout can occur in any profession, but it is particularly common in helping professions, such as healthcare, education, and social work.
10. **Ethical visualization**: the use of photographs and videos that respect the privacy and dignity of victims, avoiding the exploitation of their pain for sensationalism (Commission on Journalism Ethics, 2020).
11. **The Ethical Journalism Network (EJN)** is an international coalition that supports ethical standards in journalism through educational resources, training, and the promotion of five key principles of responsible journalism.
12. **The Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists (IFJ, 2019)** is an updated international code of ethics from the International Federation of Journalists. It establishes fundamental principles and duties for journalists worldwide, including respect for the truth, independence, and humanity.
13. **Journalistic ethics**: refers to the principles and standards

that guide journalists in their work, ensuring responsible and ethical reporting (SPJ's Code of Ethics, 2023). It encompasses a wide range of issues, including accuracy, fairness, impartiality, accountability, and transparency. Ethical journalism seeks to balance the public's need for information with the potential harm that can be caused by the dissemination of information.

14. **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD):** Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that can develop after experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event, such as war, natural disaster, or serious accident (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2023). It is characterized by intrusive memories of the event, avoidance of reminders of the event, negative alterations in cognitions and mood, and hyperarousal.
15. **Stereotypes in journalism:** generalization or simplification of information about people or events that can create a biased perception of the audience (Ethical Content-Gathering for Public Communications, 2024).
16. **Trauma-Informed Journalism** is an approach to covering tragic events that is based on understanding the psychological consequences of trauma. It requires the use of sensitive methods when working with victims.
17. **The UNESCO Guide “Do No Harm “ (2022)** is a practical UNESCO guide for journalists that focuses on safe and ethical methods for covering traumatic events. Its central principle is the minimization of harm to both sources and reporters themselves.

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CHAPTER 3

**DISASTER  
JOURNALISM  
SAFETY GUIDE**





## Introduction

The role of journalists is to inform, which is why practicing journalism in disaster contexts is one of the most complex and challenging tasks in the profession. Reporting from the scene when lives, safety, and truth are at stake, requires not only courage, but also preparation, ethics, and a profound sense of social responsibility. Disasters, in any of their forms, affect not only the populations involved but also those who document them. Journalists working in these environments must be able to report accurately without fueling panic, to protect their own safety without abandoning their commitment, and to preserve the dignity of victims without yielding to sensationalism.

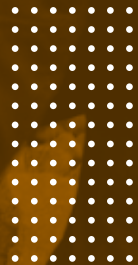
As part of the Erasmus+ project focused on disaster journalism, this guide was developed in response to a real need expressed by more than 100 media professionals from various European countries such as Türkiye, Spain, Slovenia, and Ukraine. Through a survey, they identified multiple shortcomings, including lack of specific training, limited emotional preparedness, insufficient knowledge of safety protocols, and deficiencies in the ethical use of visual materials during emergencies. Over 90% of the surveyed journalists stated that they do not have enough resources or support to cover such situations safely and responsibly, highlighting the general lack of preparedness among professionals in the sector.

In addition, the need to address the psychological well-being of journalists, as well as their training in safety procedures, emerged as other key concerns in the survey. This basic guide is intended for journalists of all levels, as well as for media outlets, training organizations, and associations aiming to improve news coverage in high-risk environments. It includes numerous essential elements designed to ensure journalists' safety from both a physical and psychological perspective—ranging from ethical principles and self-protection guidelines to action protocols and tools to strengthen both physical safety and emotional resilience.



# 3.1.

## Basic fundamentals of journalism in disaster contexts





### 3.1. Basic fundamentals of journalism in disaster contexts

Disaster journalism generally encompasses any journalistic activity carried out during a catastrophic event, on the ground. Such activity may include anything from reporting to visual work, as long as its primary objective is to truthfully inform about the event. The journalist covering a disaster does not merely report: They also translate chaos into understanding, give voice to those affected, and present the facts to society to help provide orientation in times of crisis. In such contexts, the role of disaster journalism goes beyond recounting facts; it involves acting with responsibility, sound judgment, and sensitivity. Reporting during a disaster poses a challenge for all parties involved, and it is essential to consider the psychological, physical, and sociological aspects of the context in which the disaster occurs.

The responsibility and safety of the journalists when performing their duties in these situations require prior knowledge of the most basic aspects of the profession in such environments. This chapter serves as an introduction to the guide, exploring the role of journalism in disaster scenarios, the particularities of the environment, and the ethical, emotional, and logistical challenges involved in reporting from the epicenter of an emergency. Understanding that role is the first step toward safe, accurate, and humanitarian coverage.

#### **The role of journalists in emergency situations**

In an emergency context caused by a disaster, journalists must act as a bridge between information and the population. Emergency services are available to society to coordinate and protect the public during such events; likewise, journalists are also part of a civil protection system that, in coordination with emergency services, share the duty and responsibility of protecting the population. During these types of events, the public requires reliable information about the extent of the damage, affected areas, official recommendations, and available channels of assistance.

Disasters, whether natural or caused by human activity, abruptly disrupt daily life, generating chaos, loss, and a high level of uncertainty. In such scenarios, the journalist plays an essential role as a transmitter of reliable information, a social guide, and an

active witness to the events. One of the key elements of journalism in disaster contexts is providing useful and verifiable information in real time. This type of coverage demands a rigorous approach, as the dissemination of inaccurate data can increase risk, provoke confusion, or hinder the work of emergency services. For this reason, journalists must apply strict standards of accuracy, source verification, and clarity in writing, prioritizing content that contributes to mitigating the impact of the event on the population. Moreover, the treatment of information must consider the potential emotional impact on the audience.

The journalist may also play a role of critical observation regarding the performance of public authorities and organizations involved in the disaster response. Coverage can include evaluating the measures adopted, the effectiveness of emergency protocols, the transparency of institutional communication, and the attention given to vulnerable populations. This oversight should not be interpreted as a confrontational stance, but rather as a professional exercise oriented toward the public interest. Gathering information from multiple perspectives allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how the event is being managed, always within the limits of authorized access and in compliance with the applicable laws and regulations of the country or local administration where the event is taking place.

Practicing journalism in disaster scenarios entails physical, emotional, and logistical risks. Presence in unstable or unsafe areas requires specific knowledge of personal safety, first aid, communication protocols in hostile environments, and self-protection strategies. It is also important to consider the psychological impact that may result from prolonged exposure to emergencies, death, or trauma. According to the data extracted from the analyzed questionnaire, a significant majority of professionals perceive deficiencies in terms of training, technical resources, and emotional support to adequately cover such events. This situation highlights the need to strengthen training plans, improve access to essential equipment, and promote institutional policies that protect the integrity of media professionals. The professional practice of journalism in disaster contexts fulfills a technical, informational, and social role that requires specialized preparation, and strengthening journalists' competencies in this area is essential to ensure effective and respectful coverage, aligned with the professional standards of the sector in high-risk situations.

## **Types of disasters: general dissemination and specific challenges**

From a general perspective, disasters can be classified according to a typology that distinguishes between natural disasters and those caused by human activity. This classification allows for adapting news coverage to the specific characteristics of the event, making safe decisions on the ground, and providing useful and contextualized information to the audience. Although there is no single typology, since disasters can be of natural origin, human origin, or a combination of both, their impact largely depends on the population's vulnerability and institutional response capacity.

In turn, disasters present particularities according to their typology that influence journalistic work, both operationally and ethically. Understanding these challenges allows for planning appropriate coverage, reducing risks, and ensuring informational quality. In this sense, the type of disaster deeply conditions the conditions of journalistic work. Identifying these challenges is key to making informed decisions, protecting the work team, and guaranteeing ethical and effective coverage.

**Natural disasters: These are events caused by physical or biological phenomena without direct human intervention. They include:**

- **Geophysical:** Earthquakes, Tsunamis, Volcanic Eruptions.
- **Meteorological:** Hurricanes, Storms, Tornadoes, Heatwaves or Cold Waves.
- **Hydrological:** Floods, Droughts, Landslides.
- **Biological:** Epidemics, Pandemics, Plagues.

Some of the challenges to consider in this category are:

- **Logistical challenges:** Limited access due to infrastructure destruction, communication breakdowns, or restricted mobility.
- **Physical risks:** Seismic aftershocks, sudden floods, or exposure to extreme weather conditions.
- **Informational challenges:** Lack of immediate official data, need for verification in chaotic environments.

Although their origin is natural, their impact is conditioned by human factors such as urbanization or land management.

**Human-origin disasters: These arise from human actions, whether voluntary or accidental. They are divided into:**

- **Technological/Industrial:** Chemical accidents, nuclear incidents, explosions, structural failures.
- **Cyber and digital:** Cyberattacks, disruption of critical infrastructure.
- **Conflicts/Clashes:** Wars, terrorism, forced displacements.

From this classification, we can also identify risks such as:

- **Legal and political limitations:** Restricted access to industrial zones or areas under military or police control.
- **Security risks:** Exposure to hazardous materials, assaults, arrests, or surveillance.
- **Information manipulation:** Corporate interests, censorship, or pressure from authorities. These events are often associated with technical failures, negligence, or organized violence, with significant social and environmental consequences.

### **Complex disasters**

Additionally, complex disasters involve the interaction between natural and human causes. Examples vary from floods worsened by poor urban planning, a nuclear accident caused by an earthquake, or epidemics in war zones and extreme poverty. The challenges in these cases align with those of the first two types:

- **Unstable environments:** Combination of humanitarian crises, insecurity, health outbreaks, or misinformation.
- **Ethical dilemmas:** coverage of victims in conflict, identity protection, decisions on publishing sensitive images.
- **Emotional overload:** Prolonged exposure to human suffering and institutional collapse.

This type of disaster requires multidisciplinary approaches and recognizes that social and political factors amplify the effects of the threats. Correctly identifying the type of disaster allows for more accurate and safer coverage. It is essential to consider:

- The origin and evolution of the event.
- Reliable sources according to the context.
- The social, environmental, and political dimensions involved.

### **Ideal profile of an emergency journalist**

In professional terms, disaster journalism requires not only vocational skills but also emotional and psychological aptitude. Journalistic work in high-risk contexts goes beyond the general competencies of the profession. Factors such as exposure to dangerous situations, the need to act under pressure, and the social responsibility of storytelling make disaster journalists a specialized professional profile. Using the traditional war correspondent as a reference, the disaster journalist shares a series of similarities in terms of professional attitude and aptitude. In general, the disaster journalist's profile must consider a set of prior factors and attitudes:

### **Technical knowledge and competencies**

Journalism professionals must have prior knowledge in various areas related to safety and the context of the news they are covering. The following competencies are particularly important:

- **Training in crisis reporting:** Basic knowledge of risk management, first aid, emergency communication, and information ethics.
- **Rapid verification skills:** The ability to cross-check sources in real time and distinguish reliable information in high-uncertainty environments.
- **Proper use of technological tools:** Proficiency with mobile equipment, geolocation apps, and other technologies such as drones or radar, secure transmissions, and digital backup protocols.

## Personal qualities and professional attitude

The journalist must possess essential social and psychological skills for the effective practice of their profession, as well as a strong sense of ethics and impartiality. In general, the following traits stand out:

- **Emotional resilience:** Stress tolerance, self-control, and the ability to maintain critical judgment in the face of suffering or external pressure.
- **Ethical awareness:** Sensitivity toward victims, respect for human dignity, and rejection of sensationalism.
- **Adaptability:** Willingness to work under changing conditions, with limited resources, and within logistical or regulatory constraints.

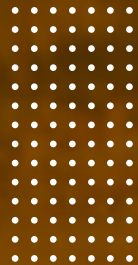
## Teamwork and coordination

A journalist's ability to work in dynamic, changing teams is essential for smooth performance in disaster contexts. Professional activity often depends on communication among various members of a journalistic team, as well as with other key actors in disaster situations (civilians, emergency teams, military personnel, medical staff). At the same time, the ability to work autonomously is equally important.

- **Effective communication with colleagues, civilians, and emergency teams:** smooth collaboration in multidisciplinary settings and respect for collective safety norms.
- **Autonomous risk management:** the ability to make quick decisions, assess personal safety, and act without compromising team integrity.

## 3.2.

# Personal safety and protection in the field





### 3.2. Personal safety and protection in the field

This chapter serves as the central axis of the guide and aims primarily to inform and instruct readers on the essential actions and considerations related to the personal safety of journalism professionals operating in disaster or high-risk environments. Journalist safety relies on applying both active and passive principles. The former refers to actions applied directly to oneself, while the latter involves all preventive safety measures that professionals must take to minimize risk during a catastrophe, considering the various factors that may affect their professional performance.

It is important to recognize that a journalist working in risky contexts must possess different qualities from the average journalist, as outlined in the first chapter. In addition, the journalist should receive additional training in first aid and even acquire knowledge of emergency procedures used by national emergency services. Ongoing training in risk prevention and personal safety will always be a valuable asset.

Initially, before undertaking any journalistic assignment that may involve risk, it is crucial to consider the professional objectives of the task, as safety measures vary depending on whether the coverage relates to a conflict zone or a natural disaster. This guide is designed to highlight the essential safety measures to be taken, as well as key considerations for action protocols in specific situations, with attention to both active and passive safety factors.

In general terms, the differences between active and passive safety can be clarified

- **Active safety:** Strictly related to incident prevention and early risk detection. It relates to measures taken to prevent problems from occurring in the first place and direct actions to mitigate risks during events.
- **Passive safety:** Related to damage mitigation, recovery, and risk response.

#### **Prior preparation for journalists**

The planning phase prior to covering a disaster is essential to reduce both personal and operational risks, and to ensure safe and effective journalistic intervention.

Both freelance journalists and media organizations must adopt a series of preventive measures before deploying to an affected area. As an initial step, a preliminary assessment of the environment where the story will be covered should be conducted. It is crucial to study the context and location in detail before initiating the deployment. This assessment can be carried out through contact with local journalists and media outlets, reports from humanitarian organizations or official sources, as well as up-to-date risk maps.

This process should include:

- **Identification of the type of disaster and its specific characteristics:** Duration, associated hazards (aftershocks, floods, violence), level of access.
- **Security conditions in the area:** Brief research on the political situation, presence of armed forces or groups, potential civil unrest or looting.
- **Health and environmental conditions:** Existing diseases, water quality, waste management, or exposure to toxic substances.
- **Infrastructure status:** Availability of transportation, telecommunications, electricity, hospitals, or evacuation centers.
- **Local response capacity:** Presence of authorities, NGOs, international organizations, or civil protection networks.

On the other hand, to ensure responsible and safe coverage, prior bureaucratic and administrative preparation must be carried out, including all documentation necessary for legal and health protection. Therefore, it is essential to obtain an official press accreditation, issued either nationally or internationally, depending on the location of the disaster. Official press credentials ensure credibility, safety, and professionalism for both the journalist's and the media's outlets.

In addition, the journalist must make sure they have the proper documentation to guarantee their safety before accessing restricted or controlled areas. This includes:

- **Access permits:** Local authorizations in order to enter emergency zones, especially where there is a military presence or health-related contagion risks.

- **Necessary visas and vaccinations:** Required for international coverage or work in endemic areas.
- **Backups** of all relevant documents in both physical and digital formats.
- **Prescriptions and medication:** Having a copy of the prescription with its international name is crucial, as well as carrying a sufficient supply in compliance with each country's customs regulations.

Ultimately, it is very important to have protection through insurance providers. Purchasing international health insurance that covers evacuation, infectious diseases, and accidents can be invaluable in certain situations, as well as having life insurance and travel assistance coverage. In the case of freelance journalists or contributors without institutional support, it is recommended to seek assistance from organizations that offer insurance and specialized guidance for high-risk reporting, such as Reporters Without Borders, Rory Peck Trust, or the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).

Avoiding sensitive personal information is another key aspect to highlight. Carrying personal electronic devices, such as your private mobile phone, USB drives with sensitive data, or photos of family members, can pose a risk in certain situations where a journalist might be subject to extortion or blackmail. In such cases, it is advisable to travel to conflict zones with blank digital devices (containing no previous content) and to avoid bringing any equipment that holds personal data beyond the essential professional information required for the assignment. Prior preparation is vital in disaster coverage. Anticipating risks, having the proper documentation, and ensuring legal and medical coverage not only protects the journalist, but also strengthens the quality and continuity of their work in adverse situations.

### **Active safety:**

Resuming the initial classification, *Active Safety* refers to measures taken to prevent problems from occurring in the first place, as well as direct actions to prevent and mitigate risks during critical events. This section focuses on measures primarily related to the journalist's personal physical safety.

## **Minimum recommended equipment: safety backpack**

Personal equipment is a key component of journalists' safety. A well-prepared safety backpack allows professionals to operate autonomously in hostile environments, maintain operational capacity, and respond to unexpected health, technical, or logistical issues. This gear must be compact, functional, durable, and adapted to the expected duration of coverage. The backpack is the most suitable way to carry essential safety items. Its selection should be based on size, layout, and other features such as:

- Good grip and ergonomic design
- Material suitable for adverse conditions such as fire or heavy rain
- Proper pocket and zipper arrangement

While contents may vary depending on the type of disaster (as explained in the next section), there are essential common elements:

### **Documentation and basic communication devices**

- Passport, press credentials, and access permits
- Physical and digital copies of emergency contacts and credentials
- Professional mobile phone (not personal) with charger, power bank, and local SIM card
- GPS device or geolocation app, compass
- Portable radio or walkie-talkie (for areas without mobile coverage)

### **Health and first-aid**

- Basic first-aid kit: Gloves, bandages, antiseptics, painkillers, antihistamines, water purification tablets
- FFP2/FFP3 masks and hand sanitizer
- Sufficient supply of personal medication for several days
- Wet wipes, sunscreen, insect repellent
- Drinking water (at least 1.5 L) and emergency food rations (non-perishable items)

### **Personal protection**

- Helmet with verified quality certification (in seismic/conflict zones or unstable structures)
- Reflective safety vest and/or bulletproof vest with press identification, depending on the context
- Weather-resistant clothing (waterproof, thermal, lightweight—adapted to local conditions)
- Protective goggles and gloves
- Safety footwear or sturdy boots

### **Technical work equipment**

- Waterproof notebook and durable pens
- Camera or audio/video recorder, depending on the coverage
- Blank memory cards, adapters, secure storage (encrypted USBs, external hard drives)
- Cables, chargers, universal adapters, and surge protectors
- Waterproof or dust-resistant cases for electronic equipment

### **Other recommended items**

- Headlamp with spare batteries
- Emergency thermal blanket
- Multi-purpose duct tape, rope, and multi-tool knife
- Cash in local currency
- Alternative credit/prepaid card with emergency funds
- Printed copies of maps or evacuation routes

Having the proper equipment not only enhances the journalist's operational capacity on the ground but is also a fundamental self-protection measure. A well-prepared safety backpack should allow the journalist to function autonomously for at least 72 hours, particularly in scenarios where basic services are overwhelmed or unavailable. It's essential to emphasize that the backpack's contents

must be adapted to each specific situation, considering the type of disaster, climate, geographic location, duration of coverage, and access to external resources. Preparation should go beyond gathering materials, it also involves knowing how to use them correctly and keeping them in good condition.

Additionally, media organizations and journalistic institutions have a responsibility to provide logistical support and specific training in the use of this equipment, especially for high-risk coverage. Investing in protection and preparedness not only safeguards lives, but also ensures the continuity and quality of journalistic work. The safety backpack should not be seen as an optional accessory, but as an essential tool that is an integral part of professional journalism practice in emergency contexts.

### **Health precautions**

It is essential to travel with a clear understanding of one's current health status. Under no circumstances is it advisable to travel if suffering from a disease or condition that prevents maintaining a proper working pace in a high-risk environment. The following conditions are particularly critical:

- Cardiovascular diseases or heart conditions
- Oncological diseases
- Diabetes or related conditions
- Acute sensory impairments
- Mobility issues
- Pregnancy

Before traveling to a risk zone, it is strongly recommended to undergo medical check-ups to certify the journalist's health condition. Knowing one's blood type can also be extremely useful, and a dental check-up should also be considered as a final step. As previously emphasized, it is crucial to carry prescriptions with international denominations and to have a sufficient supply of medication readily available in case of emergency.

Before entering high-risk areas, journalists should update their vaccination schedule with basic vaccines, including diphtheria,

tetanus, polio, whooping cough, measles, mumps, and rubella. Depending on the destination, additional travel-specific vaccines may be required, so it is advisable to consult updated sources such as the *Institut Pasteur* ([www.pasteur.fr](http://www.pasteur.fr)). In tropical regions, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, malaria poses a serious threat, causing hundreds of thousands of deaths each year. Prevention includes the use of repellents, mosquito nets, prophylactic medication before, during, and after the trip, as well as rapid diagnosis of any fever episode to begin appropriate treatment promptly.

### **Basic first-aid knowledge**

In the midst of disaster journalism, professionals may find themselves in situations of direct physical risk to their own lives where it becomes necessary to intervene without proper medical equipment. Having basic first aid knowledge can be critical—it may significantly mark the line between life and death in high-risk areas. While these skills are no substitute for professional medical care, they allow immediate and effective action in emergencies.

The main goals of first aid are to mitigate immediate danger once it has occurred. The primary objective is to preserve life, facilitate recovery until medical assistance arrives, and protect both the injured person and those around them during the intervention. During moments of crisis or danger, the journalist may face scenarios requiring first aid response. The following list outlines common physical emergencies during disaster coverage and the appropriate first-response actions:

- **Wounds and bleeding:** Stop the bleeding by applying direct pressure with a clean gauze or piece of clothing; elevate the injured limb if possible.
- **Fractures or sprains:** Immobilize the injured area without trying to reposition bones; use improvised splints if necessary.
- **Loss of consciousness or fainting:** Check for breathing and pulse, place the person in the recovery position, and monitor vital signs.
- **Cardiac arrest:** If the person is not breathing, begin cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) if trained and familiar with the correct procedure.

- **Burns:** Cool the affected area with clean water for several minutes, cover with a sterile dressing, and do not apply home remedies.
- **Shock:** Recognize the signs (paleness, sweating, weak pulse, confusion); keep the person lying down and warm until help arrives.

Journalists providing first aid must always prioritize their own safety, avoiding intervention in hazardous situations such as unstable structures, fires, or exposure to toxic materials. When treating wounds, it is essential to use gloves or protective barriers to avoid infection or contamination. Medical help should be requested as soon as possible using any available communication methods.

It is also advisable to have access to a well-stocked, updated first aid kit, tailored to the type of coverage and the environment where the journalistic work is taking place. Ideally, journalists operating in emergency zones should have completed at least one basic first aid course, such as those provided by the Red Cross, Red Crescent or specialized organizations in hostile environments. Some situations may require advanced training in pre-hospital care or tactical first aid, especially in conflict zones or remote locations.

First aid practices are part of the essential skill set for journalists in disaster contexts. Knowing how to act in the first few minutes can save lives, protect physical integrity, and ensure a safer, more professional response until medical services are available.

## **Passive safety**

### **Entering the realm of passive security**

Passive security encompasses all elements and actions aimed primarily at mitigating harm once the risk has materialized. In this regard, it includes both the immediate response to danger and the short-term recovery phase following a hazardous event. Although preparation is crucial throughout all stages of risk management, passive security plays a particularly important role during the preparation phase. This is why it is essential to thoroughly understand the journalist's pre-deployment preparation in high-risk contexts. Many factors that help protect the physical integrity of the journalist and the tools of their trade are directly linked to passive

safety measures. Several key components fall under this category and should be considered by all journalists and media organizations:

### **Protocols for operating in hostile zones**

Paying close attention to behavioral protocols in high-risk areas is critical during the early stages of deployment planning. This aspect is closely linked to geographical and strategic planning, particularly in terms of location and logistics in the field, including every key point of interest—from accommodation to transportation. When working in hostile environments such as conflict zones, areas impacted by severe disasters, or regions facing social unrest, a journalist’s safety largely depends on their conduct, planning, and adaptability. Adhering to a few basic safety norms can significantly reduce potential risks. All these considerations influence how journalistic work is carried out on the ground.

### **Accommodation**

As the most private and secure space available to the journalist and their team, safe accommodation is of utmost importance. Accommodation must serve as both a base of operations and a rest zone, offering the ability to safely organize gear and plan work. Key factors to consider include:

- Prioritize well-known and verified lodgings recommended by local sources, NGOs, or fellow journalists. Avoid remote facilities or places with limited evacuation routes. Hotels or designated journalist accommodations are generally the safest option.
- Registering at the chosen lodging is essential to confirm the journalist’s presence on-site and to inform support networks of their exact location.
- Maintain a low profile on the ground—avoid displaying expensive equipment. Visible press IDs should only be used when absolutely necessary, and personal information should not be shared with strangers.
- Be aware of evacuation plans and locate all emergency exits in the building.
- Store sensitive documents and gear in a safe and accessible place for quick evacuation if needed.

## Transportation

Getting around in conflict zones is part of the daily routine for journalists. Once again, safety is the main factor that determines how transportation should be handled. Travel typically occurs between accommodation sites and high-risk work areas, and it is vital to engage in prior planning, which includes analyzing the routes to be taken as well as identifying key points of interest such as rest areas, parking lots, supermarkets, and population centers.

Key considerations include:

- Use reliable, discreet, and preferably local transportation, avoiding vehicles with media logos if that increases the risk. If necessary, a visible press identifier on the vehicle's body may suffice. Having your own road vehicle is highly recommended. In certain situations, vehicle escorts by emergency services during travel may become necessary.
- In many cases, public transportation is not advisable in high-risk areas, even if it appears to be running normally. If it must be used, official rail services are preferred over road transport. If choosing a bus, opt for a nationally or internationally recognized company, rather than informal or local operators.
- Whenever possible, travel with others and avoid nighttime journeys or routes that are not well known.
- Plan travel routes in advance, steer clear of high-risk zones, and share the itinerary with your team or security contacts.
- Always carry a charged phone, printed maps, and emergency contacts, as well as ensure enough fuel and backup resources for unexpected situations.
- Wear a seatbelt and remain alert for roadblocks, checkpoints, or unusual activity along the route.
- Ensure the vehicle has spare tires, emergency signaling beacons, flashlights, and extra fuel containers.
- Carry all valid vehicle permits and insurance required for each country, along with visas and/or passports readily accessible.

## **Checkpoints**

In many risk and conflict zones, it is common to encounter checkpoints where authorities conduct searches for vehicles and passengers. These checkpoints are very frequent in war zones or areas affected by major natural disasters. Passing through checkpoints is one of the most sensitive moments during coverage in hostile environments. Interaction with armed forces, militias, security personnel, or non-state groups requires a neutral, cooperative, and respectful attitude.

During these procedures, it is recommended to remain calm, avoid any behavior that could be perceived as confrontational, and limit communication to what is strictly necessary. Professional documentation should be available and up to date; it is advisable to present only what is requested, without offering additional information that has not been asked for. Recording or taking photographs at checkpoints is not permitted without express authorization, as it may be considered an infringement or a threat by those in charge. Additionally, sensitive materials such as recordings, journalistic files, or databases should be protected through encryption, backups, or secure storage in anticipation of possible inspections. Under no circumstances should personal data of sources, detailed itineraries, or confidential information be shared, except when justified by legitimate authorities for security reasons. Discretion and neutrality must guide conduct at all times.

## **Preservation of journalistic material**

In disaster contexts or hostile zones, protecting journalistic material is a fundamental part of the reporting work, whether in physical or digital format. The integrity of collected data not only ensures the continuity of journalistic work but can also be a critical factor for the safety of sources, the journalist themselves, and the teams collaborating on the coverage. Considering these three actors involved in the security of journalistic material, the following characteristics can be established:

### **Digital information security**

All digital material gathered (photographs, videos, interviews, documents, locations, databases, etc.) must be securely stored and backed up. To this end, it is recommended to:

- Use encrypted hard drives and password-protected USB drives.
- Perform regular backups, both physically and cloud-based, using platforms that guarantee end-to-end encryption.
- Avoid storing sensitive files on shared devices or those exposed to theft, loss, or unauthorized inspection.
- Use folder or storage unit encryption software and restrict access only to authorized personnel.

The use of public or unsecured Wi-Fi networks should be avoided when transferring files, especially if they contain unpublished or confidential material.

### **Protection of physical material**

When material is stored in physical format such as notebooks, printed documents, analog photographs, or recorders, it is essential to keep it protected from damage, theft, or confiscation. To do so, the following guidelines should be considered:

- Use waterproof and durable covers for equipment and documents.
- Store physical media in secure locations, preferably separate from the main devices.
- Transport essential copies separately from the original material in case of loss or seizure.

In evacuation situations or imminent risk, there should be a strategy to safeguard, hide, or selectively destroy sensitive information whose disclosure could compromise third parties or endanger the integrity of the team.

### **Protection of sources and sensitive data**

The confidentiality of sources must be preserved through the use of anonymization, coding, or pseudonymization systems in notes and files. Interviews or testimonies containing sensitive information should not be shared through unsecured channels, and all communication with sources should be conducted, whenever possible, via encrypted and verified platforms.

## **Evacuation procedures and safe zones**

In situations of disaster, conflict, or collapse of essential services, planning evacuation routes and knowing safe zones are fundamental to ensure the safety of the journalist and their team. Evacuation should be understood as part of a preventive protocol, not only as an emergency measure, and must be considered from the start of any coverage in high-risk environments.

### **Pre-Coverage planning**

Before traveling to the location, it is essential to identify the following:

- Alternative exit routes, previously evaluated by local personnel or up-to-date maps.
- Safe zones established by authorities, humanitarian organizations, or embassies, where minimum protection and access to assistance are guaranteed.
- Safe meeting points agreed upon with the team in case of separation or loss of communication.
- Available means of transport for a quick exit, considering fuel restrictions, road closures, or military checkpoints.

It is recommended to keep a written evacuation plan and communicate it both to the team and to media supervisors or external support networks.

### **Actions during evacuation**

If an evacuation procedure is activated, the following guidelines should be followed:

- Remain calm and maintain constant communication with the team or an external contact point.
- Use the safest route, not necessarily the shortest, avoiding conflict zones, landslides, fires, or other active threats.
- Carry only essential equipment, documentation, communication devices, and a first aid kit.
- Inform local authorities, NGOs, or emergency services if support is needed during the route.

For prolonged coverage or in areas without state presence, it is advisable to conduct internal evacuation drills to reinforce team preparedness.

### **Staying in safe zones**

Once a safe zone is reached, basic protocols for staying there should be established:

- Confirm entry with responsible entities and notify the support network that you have arrived safely.
- Assess the possibility of relocation or extraction if the security situation does not improve within a reasonable time frame.
- Limit public exposure, especially on social media or digital platforms, to avoid compromising the team's location.
- Coordinate the secure transfer of journalistic material if conditions allow.

Safe and planned evacuation processes are not a sign of operational failure but professional practice that preserves life and the continuity of journalistic work. Incorporating these procedures into the coverage plan ensures a greater capacity to respond to critical situations and reinforces a culture of safety in disaster journalism.

As analyzed in Chapter 5, acquiring knowledge in first aid and other essential personal safety practices is very important to guarantee the safety of the journalist and their professional work. Continuous training and regular drills are fundamental due to the unpredictable, changing, and demanding nature of these scenarios. Disaster coverage exposes professionals to environments where decisions must be made quickly, under pressure, and in conditions of high physical and emotional vulnerability. In this regard, ongoing training not only updates technical knowledge but also strengthens essential soft skills, such as stress management, decision-making under pressure, and effective communication in critical situations.

### **Specific guidelines for women in disaster situations**

This additional section delves into considerations for women practicing journalism in certain high-risk contexts, as they may face

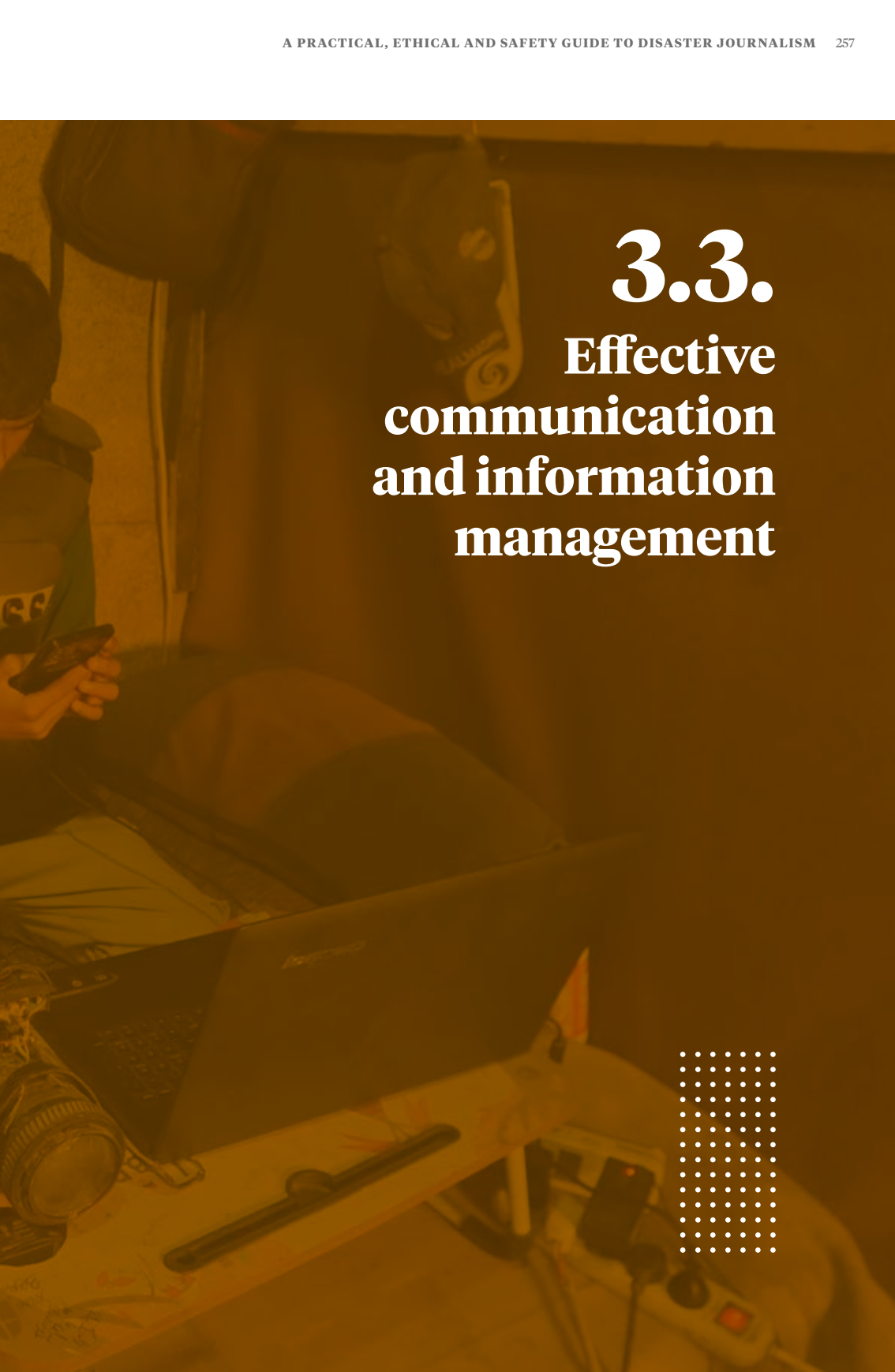
differentiated risks linked to gender factors, both in terms of physical safety and exposure to particular social dynamics. In some regions or scenarios, being a woman can influence how authorities, security forces, armed actors, or local communities treat them. Therefore, it is essential that coverage conducted by women includes specific considerations regarding self-protection and planning.

In certain contexts, women journalists may be especially vulnerable to harassment, stalking, sexual violence, or access restrictions due to cultural norms or patriarchal structures present in some disaster areas. To mitigate these risks, it is recommended to:

- Conduct a prior analysis of the cultural and social context, evaluating local practices around the role of women and freedom of movement.
- Adopt attire appropriate to the sociocultural environment, especially in regions where local laws or customs impose specific dress codes.
- Inform oneself about available resources in cases of gender-based violence, including support centers, protection organizations, and local and international emergency hotlines.
- Establish direct communication channels with trusted persons and avoid, as much as possible, traveling alone during risky hours or in isolated areas.
- Consider accompaniment by local personnel or female interpreters in situations where the presence of a male might limit access to sensitive testimonies.

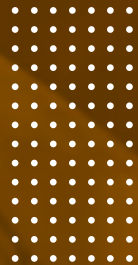
There are international organizations that offer specific support to women journalists in high-risk or disaster areas, such as the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF) or the Women in News section of the World Association of News Publishers (WAN-IFRA). These entities can provide anything from preventive guidance to legal or psychological assistance in emergency cases.





# 3.3.

## Effective communication and information management





### 3.3. Effective communication and information management

Carrying out professional work in the information sector requires knowledge and responsibilities that must be acquired and considered, especially in the risk contexts that characterize disaster journalism. The responsible management of information during a disaster situation constitutes an essential tool both for the protection of affected people and for the effectiveness of social and institutional response. In these scenarios, where uncertainty, chaos, and an abundance of data are frequent, the role of the journalist requires rigorous verification, clarity in conveying facts, and sensitivity to the social consequences of their messages.

Using the project questionnaire as a reference, the importance of effective communication in this field is highlighted, with source verification being one of the most prominent issues, as well as a strong sense of professional ethics. In this regard, more than 70% of respondents indicated that they do not have sufficient resources to communicate and transmit information ethically. This chapter addresses the fundamental principles of effective communication in emergency contexts, focusing on various aspects that can help journalists improve communication in risk contexts and the ethical handling of content. All of this aims to strengthen the credibility of the journalist and their profession in highly sensitive scenarios, ensuring that their work contributes usefully, respectfully, and rigorously to the understanding of events.

#### **Reporting without causing panic or anxiety**

Informing is the journalist's primary objective; however, in disaster contexts, numerous factors can interfere with how the public responds. During a risk event, it is crucial to pay attention both to the message and its components to ensure that the information reaching the public is not only accurate but also objective and does not cause social alarm.

Panic can be a very dangerous enemy in disaster contexts, and journalistic work is a useful tool to control it. To inform without inducing panic, it is advisable to use constructive messages, focusing on what the audience can do rather than emphasizing the danger. A clear structure in content should be prioritized, distinctly separating

verified information from possible future or speculative scenarios. Additionally, the use of official and local sources adds credibility and reduces the perception of uncertainty.

In disaster or emergency contexts, journalistic work directly influences the public's risk perception. Therefore, it is essential that the information disseminated is truthful and useful but also proportionate. In general terms, some recommended good practices are as follows:

- **Avoid alarmist or sensationalist language:** Use neutral terms and avoid expressions like “imminent catastrophe” or “total disaster” unless supported by competent authorities.
- **Contextualize data:** Present figures or facts accompanied by clear explanations (e.g., proportions, comparisons, or temporal evolution) to help reduce the perception of chaos.
- **Prioritize official and verified sources:** Report only with verified data from recognized entities (Red Crescent, Red Cross, UN, local governments, etc.) to avoid spreading rumors.
- **Include action-oriented messages:** Combine risk information with clear and feasible recommendations for the audience (how to act, where to go, what to avoid).
- **Structure content clearly:** Use precise headlines, accessible language, and logical order to facilitate message comprehension, especially in information-saturated contexts.
- **Respect timing and dissemination channels:** Adapt tone and level of detail according to the medium (print press, radio, social media) to avoid overloading the public with unnecessary or misinterpreted information.
- **Care for the visual treatment of images:** Avoid constant repetition of emotionally intense scenes or visible victims, especially without consent.
- **Warn about possible psychological reactions:** When appropriate, include messages about mental health: how to detect signs of stress or anxiety and where to seek help.

Furthermore, it is essential to avoid spreading unsubstantiated hypotheses, refraining from speculation, personal predictions, or unconfirmed information that could cause unfounded fear among the population. At the same time, the journalist must maintain a professional and empathetic attitude, showing respect toward affected people and the general public, avoiding both excessive dramatization and trivialization of events, and always prioritizing communication based on responsibility, prudence, and sensitivity.

### **Professional ethics in highly sensitive situations**

Another important aspect to consider is the ethical sense of disaster journalism. Reporting on a risky event must not overlook the human and ethical responsibilities that everyone involved in a disaster must uphold. Although the journalist is not part of the emergency team in a risk situation, their role and work have a significant impact on how the population acts and can directly interfere with the activity of emergency services. In situations where lives are at risk and populations are vulnerable, the way information is gathered, handled, and disseminated directly affects the people involved and the social perception of the event. Therefore, respect for human dignity, protection of sources, and responsibility in representing the facts should guide every editorial decision.

One of the key principles is the protection of victims, especially when it comes to minors, injured people, displaced people, or those in psychosocial vulnerability. Showing explicit images of suffering or conducting interviews during moments of shock or deep pain should be avoided unless there is clearly justified public interest and informed consent is obtained. Media exposure must not aggravate emotional harm or turn others' pain into spectacle. Organizations such as Reporters Without Borders recommend acting with prudence, sensitivity, and restraint in these scenarios.

Likewise, the principle of truthfulness takes on special relevance. In environments rife with rumors, misinformation, or unverified versions, it is the journalist's responsibility to rigorously verify every fact before publication. Pressure for immediacy or competition between media outlets should not justify spreading incomplete or potentially erroneous information that could cause serious consequences for the affected population.

Another fundamental ethical aspect is the protection of sources. In disaster contexts, many people share testimonies in conditions of emotional fragility or under threat. The journalist must ensure the anonymity of sources who may be at risk and refrain from publishing statements obtained under pressure, fear, or misinformation. Ultimately, any form of instrumentalization of the disaster for purposes unrelated to the public interest must be avoided. This includes using coverage to promote commercial, partisan, or personal interests, as well as manipulating the narrative for sensationalist or ideological purposes. Objectivity, balance, and social responsibility must prevail over any other motivation.

Applying ethical responsibility in journalism is not a secondary element in crisis contexts but a crucial condition to guarantee respectful, responsible, and useful coverage for society. Trust in the media and the well-being of affected people largely depend on the ethical behavior of professionals reporting from the field.

### **Dignified and humane treatment of victims**

In any risk activity involving victims, special consideration must be given to how they are treated. In professional journalism, victims play a very important role, as they are often the direct or indirect protagonists of the news being covered. The informational treatment of victims in disaster contexts must be guided by respect for human dignity, sensitivity to suffering, and recognition of the affected individuals' right not to be revictimized through public exposure. The journalist holds not only professional responsibility but also an ethical and social one in how they approach, represent, and narrate the experience of human pain.

To carry out proper professional work in ethical and moral terms, some general guidelines must be considered when dealing with victims while covering news in a disaster context:

- **Prioritize respect over newsworthiness:** The dignity of the person must prevail over the informational value. Not all information that can be obtained should be published.
- **Avoid the instrumentalization of suffering:** The victim should not be used as a visual or narrative resource to dramatize the coverage or capture the audience's attention.

- **Ensure consent:** Before taking images or collecting testimonies, the person must be informed about how the content will be used and their consent requested. If the person is in a state of shock, confusion, or extreme vulnerability, any type of interview or direct exposure should be avoided.
- **Protect the identity of vulnerable individuals:** In the case of minors, displaced persons, seriously injured people, victims of violence, or those at risk of stigmatization, it is recommended to preserve their anonymity and avoid details that allow direct or indirect identification.
- **Avoid uncomfortable or invasive questions:** Interviews should be conducted sensitively, avoiding questions that revive trauma or expose the victim to moral judgment, responsibilities, or additional emotional pressures.
- **Respect personal space and mourning:** People should not be interrupted or invaded during funerals, searches for relatives, moments of prayer, or scenes of evident emotional collapse.
- **Do not publish graphic images without clear ethical justification:** Images of corpses, injured people, massive destruction, or bloody scenes should be avoided unless their dissemination is justified by public interest and handled with extreme editorial caution (for example, with prior warnings and without sensationalism).
- **Verify testimonies before dissemination:** In emergency contexts, many people share incomplete, confused, or perception-based versions. Before spreading a narrative, it is necessary to cross-check with additional sources to avoid misunderstandings or rumors.
- **Adopt a humanitarian perspective:** Journalism in disaster situations should not only inform but also contribute to understanding the causes, consequences, and needs of the victims. Including information about aid channels, social context, or assistance networks contributes to more empathetic and constructive coverage.

Victims are at the heart of many disasters, and the way human suffering is reported can positively or negatively influence emotional recovery, social response, and public perception of the event.

## Source management

As mentioned in previous chapters, source management is a key point when gathering reliable information within a disaster context. It is a process that must prevail in all phases of journalistic activity but becomes even more important during the organization phase prior to covering a story and traveling to the field. In scenarios marked by misinformation, fragmented data, and urgent reporting, properly selecting, verifying, and protecting sources becomes a central responsibility for the journalist. Each type of source, whether official, anonymous, or citizen, entails specific advantages, limitations, and precautions that must be considered with professional judgment.

The ethical and rigorous management of information sources constitutes a key pillar of journalistic practice in disaster contexts, where speed in delivering facts cannot compromise the reliability or responsibility in handling information. In these scenarios, journalists often rely on different types of sources: official, anonymous, and citizen, each with their own characteristics, advantages, and limitations.

- **Official sources**

Official sources, such as civil protection agencies, security forces, health authorities, local governments, or international organizations, provide structured data and institutional communications that help contextualize the scope of the disaster, its consequences, and the response measures underway. While these sources generally have greater legitimacy, it is also necessary to apply a critical approach to possible errors, omissions, or underlying political interests, especially in situations where there may be opacity or information censorship. Therefore, it is recommended to verify the consistency of messages, cross-check between different authorities, and accompany their statements with independent voices or eyewitness testimonies from the field.

- **Anonymous sources:**

At the same time, anonymous sources can play a key role in accessing sensitive or restricted information, such as reports of irregularities in disaster management, testimonies from officials fearing reprisals, or accounts from victims who prefer to protect their identity. However, the use of this type of source demands high professional

responsibility: the journalist must corroborate the truthfulness of the information, assess the source's motivation, and apply appropriate anonymization protocols to guarantee their protection. This involves measures such as removing personal data, using pseudonyms, editing images or recordings, and securely storing the collected material.

- **Citizen sources**

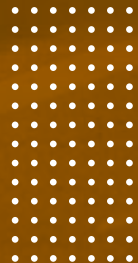
Citizens, as direct witnesses or those affected by the disaster, often constitute a primary source of valuable information, especially in the initial hours of the event when institutional access is still limited. Through social networks, messages, photographs, or videos, these actors can document newsworthy facts that media outlets have yet to cover. However, the abundance of user-generated content poses significant challenges for verification, contextualization, and the ethics of publication. Before disseminating this type of material, it is essential to confirm its authenticity, geographic origin, timing, and possible editing or manipulation. Likewise, the right to privacy of those appearing in the images must be respected, and prior consent obtained as much as possible, as discussed in the previous subsection, especially if the subjects are injured, deceased, or in a vulnerable state.

The professional management of sources in emergency contexts requires combining speed with accuracy, and sensitivity with rigor. Not all sources offer the same reliability, nor should all information be published without prior analysis of its implications. The journalist must act with the ability to discern and document each piece of data while protecting the identity of those who require it and providing sufficient context so that the transmitted information is useful, understandable, and socially responsible. In highly sensitive scenarios, the quality of information coverage is directly linked to the ethics with which others' words are managed.



# 3.4.

## Mental health and psychological support





### 3.4. Mental health and psychological support

Journalism, in its essence, demands the search for truth and respect for professional ethics in relation to society. Journalists are the intermediaries between situations that can be shocking and the rest of society. This means that reporters, photographers, and cameramen are exposed to events marked by human suffering. Added to this is the pressure imposed by the immediacy of news and a constant self-imposed demand to fulfill the mission assigned to them with criteria and ethics. This represents not only physical but also mental exhaustion, which becomes a psychological challenge for journalists.

Traditionally, journalism training and professional guidelines have proclaimed objectivity and detachment as the necessary means to avoid any kind of interference by the reporter. This contrasts with the intrinsic humanity of the journalist and the need to empathize in order to connect with the stories of the victims.

Experts are talking about a context that navigates between journalism and mental health, because repeated exposure to moments of extreme pressure, devastation, pain, and even the loss of human lives are factors that end up affecting journalists both professionally and personally. Stress and anxiety disorders, along with other mental health problems, burden reporters with fears, distress, panic, depression, mood swings, sleep disturbances, memory problems, and addictions, among other conditions, which ultimately deteriorate their quality of life and their personal relationships with family and friends.

#### **Emotional impact of disaster coverage**

Journalism is a profession that involves many challenges, one of the greatest of which is the endurance and resilience that journalists must develop to do their job. This is especially true when journalists are covering natural or man-made disasters. This is a context in which the emotional state of the victims as individuals and the community affected by the disaster as a whole and it can have an impact on the professional and personal dynamics of journalists. Although universities and journalism manuals debate the role of journalists and their lack of prominence, their non-interference in the events they cover, their compliance with the code of ethics of not manipulating reality or victims for news purposes, and not prioritizing the human connections or relationships that arise in the

midst of coverage over the events and news themselves, journalists are also required to have a high degree of sensitivity and empathy.

This requirement is necessary and important, but that does not mean that it is easy to fulfill and that it does not bring with it challenges, not only professional but also personal, for the journalist, since at no time should we lose sight of the fact that journalists are also human beings with emotions. Reporters, photographers, and cameramen are not immune to the constant exposure they face to situations of intense drama and human tragedy, with the added pressure of meeting deadlines for their respective media outlets and the self-imposed requirement to carry out their work in an ethical manner, with due respect for the victims and the audience.

An iconic case is that of South African photographer Kevin Carter. In 1993, he traveled to Sudan to show the world one of the worst famines in Africa in the 20th century, caused by war and the rise to power of a radical group. He captured an image that became popular as the photo of “The Girl and the Vulture,” which was published by The New York Times and earned him the Pulitzer Prize. The image shows a vulture stalking a malnourished girl, although years later it was revealed that it was a malnourished boy. Three months after the announcement of the prize winners, Carter committed suicide.

The photographer’s tragic fate was marked by decades of covering violence and death during South Africa’s deep famine, social and political crisis in the 1980s and 1990s, the end of apartheid. Carter’s lens saw the worst of humanity for many years. The constant tension and pressure found an outlet through self-destructive mechanisms such as alcohol and drug use, as well as depression, fatigue, and loss of focus. This also affected Carter’s personal and family life, damaging his relationship with his partner.

The photo for which he received the Pulitzer Prize was not well received by the entire Western audience, with critics from the public and the media pointing out that Carter could have saved the girl from the vulture. But the story behind the photograph is another one, and it was revealed years later.

In 2011, the Spanish newspaper El Mundo, ran a special report, sending a journalist to Ayod (Sudan), where Carter took the photo. It was not a girl, but a boy, who died of malaria as a teenager. That

boy was in a UN humanitarian aid camp and was being cared for. For their part, vultures were a common sight in the landscape, but they do not eat children; they eat carrion. Carter simply did his duty to photograph and show the world what was happening in Sudan regarding famine and child malnutrition.

And as if that weren't enough, months before taking his own life, one of Kevin Carter's colleagues and friends who was also covering the crisis in South Africa, Ken Oosterbroek, was killed while on assignment. At that time, there was little talk of mental health, self-care, and supportive therapy for journalists and photojournalists. But all these heavy events overwhelmed Carter's ability to carry on with his daily life. In July 1994, at the age of 33, leaving behind his six-year-old daughter, Kevin Carter committed suicide. An excerpt from the note Carter left behind shows that this is not a game and that the work of a reporter in this type of context can be exhausting and overwhelming.

In September 1994, journalist Scott Macleod of Time magazine wrote about Carter's death and quoted an excerpt from the note left by the photographer. Those words show that the work of a reporter in this type of context is not a game and can be exhausting and overwhelming:

*Depressed . . . without phone . . . money for rent . . . money for child support . . . money for debts . . . money!!! . . . I am haunted by the vivid memories of killings & corpses & anger & pain . . . of starving or wounded children, of trigger-happy madmen, often police, of killer executioners . . .” And then this: “I have gone to join Ken if I am that lucky..*

The professional, social, and emotional demands placed on those who cover catastrophic events and human tragedies are very high and sometimes bear no relation to what reporters must face on the ground. Unlike other professions exposed to disasters, such as doctors and rescue workers, among others, journalists receive little psychological training on how to deal with this type of coverage. That is why journalists must be aware of the importance and care required for their mental health, something that requires the same consideration as that given to journalistic ethics and physical integrity.

## Disorders and reactions that may arise from disaster

Disasters, whether natural or man-made, present journalists with challenges that go beyond the search for reliable and timely information, the verification of various sources, understanding the context, providing answers, and sticking to the facts. Scenes of devastation, uncertainty, human suffering, violence, and even death entail intense physical and psychological stress. And reporters must also deal with this. Contact with victims, who may be traumatized depending on the magnitude of the disaster, is a priority to gather the information that will be conveyed to the public. So is the pressure to complete the task at hand while adhering to journalistic rigor and the deadlines set by the media. No journalist covering a disaster is exempt from this. And that translates into a routine that can become a silent but harmful snowball. Without knowing when or how, the burden that the journalist has been carrying can overwhelm them and affect their mental and physical health. The three factors that can most affect a reporter are: acute and prolonged stress, exposure to trauma, and emotional and physical fatigue.

### Stress

The World Health Organization (WHO) states that stress is not a disorder, but in the long term it can lead to mental health problems. Specifically, it is “a state of mental worry or tension generated by a difficult situation... It is a natural response to threats and other stimuli” (WHO, 2023). There are different types of stress. In the case of journalists covering disasters, the most common are acute stress, chronic stress, and work-related stress. The American Psychological Association (APA) states that the difference between acute and chronic stress is that acute stress is shorter in duration and its symptoms are less severe. Work-related stress, on the other hand, is distinguished by the context in which it arises. Briefly discussing the types of stress will provide information that will be very helpful to journalists in dealing with the stress they will encounter in disasters and afterwards. These are:

- **Acute stress:** This is the most common type of stress and arises from pressures and demands from the recent past or near future. In specific situations, this first phase of stress may bring with it a small emotional burden, but the problem is its exposure over time, which can be exhausting. Acute stress is

usually recognized by the person affected and, as it is a short-term stage, it does not manifest the symptoms of sustained stress over time (American Psychological Association or American Psychiatric Association, 2010).

- **Chronic stress:** In this case, there is no room for minor emotions; it is constant, daily, and long-lasting stress that wears down those who suffer from it. It is endless for those who experience it, to the point that it becomes entrenched when the person perceives it as something with no way out, and this lack of hope leads to an inability to seek solutions (American Psychological Association or American Psychiatric Association 2010).

“Chronic stress destroys the body, mind, and life. Chronic stress kills through suicide, violence, heart attack, stroke, and even cancer. People wear themselves down until they reach a final and fatal nervous breakdown” (American Psychological Association or American Psychiatric Association, 2010).

And in social conflicts that lead to disaster or those that arise from a natural disaster, the inhabitants of the affected areas often suffer from this type of stress, precisely the context that journalists, photographers, and cameramen must cover. A reality in which the reporter must immerse himself despite the psychological risks involved.

- **Burnout:** This syndrome is also known as “being burnt out” and is defined in the eleventh version of the WHO’s International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) (2019). For this organization, it is a phenomenon that results from a negative or poorly managed work environment, either by the person suffering from stress or by their colleagues and bosses. There are three dimensions that reflect this condition: a feeling of lack of energy or exhaustion; total disconnection from work and negative or cynical feelings towards it; and a perception of low professional performance and lack of fulfillment.

## Trauma

Trauma is an emotional and psychological response to extreme or disturbing situations that can overwhelm a person. The events that trigger trauma can be a real or perceived threat to both the person

experiencing it and others. Exposure to extreme situations that may involve scenes of despair, pain, violence, injured or dead individuals is the trigger, but it is not the trauma itself. Trauma is a person's response to that event, a harmful response that leads to mental and physical problems (American Psychological Association or American Psychiatric Association, 2010).

- **Acute Stress Disorder (ASD):** This is a trauma that can last between three days and one month after exposure to an event such as death, serious injury, or sexual violence. This event may have occurred or may be a threat to the affected person or to third parties with whom they have direct or indirect contact. Symptoms may manifest as intrusive thoughts (recurring and distressing dreams or memories); negative mood; dissociative symptoms (altered sense of reality or memory loss regarding events); avoidance of memories; and symptoms of alertness (American Psychological Association or American Psychiatric Association 2010).

- **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):** This is one of the most common types of trauma. PTSD presents most of the symptoms described in ASD, but one of the major differences lies in the time of onset of symptoms and their duration. Symptoms usually appear within the first three months after the traumatic event, although there may be a delayed onset of months or years. Recovery can also take months or years. Medical literature mentions one of the causes most closely linked to journalists and disaster coverage in relation to this trauma. It refers to repeated exposure to details of the traumatic event, a task from which reporters covering the scene cannot escape. Intrusive, avoidant, mood (negative alterations), and reactive symptoms remain, but it is emphasized that in this case, the duration of the altered states is longer than one month (American Psychological Association or American Psychiatric Association, 2010).

- **Secondary or vicarious trauma:** Trauma occurs due to continuous and repeated empathetic exposure to the suffering and trauma of others. This can happen without the affected person having been in danger, and the symptoms are like those of PTSD (American Psychological Association or American Psychiatric Association, 2010). It is a response to so

much human pain and can occur without the journalist having been in the danger zone because the emotional burden does not only appear through face-to-face contact, but also when listening to audio recordings of interviews or viewing photos and videos laden with the suffering of those who did experience the disaster firsthand. However, ceasing to be empathetic for fear of suffering this trauma is not the solution. One of the pillars that can make a difference in the journalistic coverage of a disaster is empathy towards the victims, which will translate into more humane and contextually coherent information. The challenge lies in establishing the boundary between empathy and professional detachment to avoid an emotional bond that could affect the reporter's mental health. It is a difficult task and can only be resolved by being on the ground; it is not that simple. Choosing to establish an extreme barrier can desensitize the journalist to the event and the human drama suffered by the victims.

## **Anxiety**

As explained above, covering a disaster event places mental and emotional demands on journalists that can overwhelm them. In fact, these demands are so great that certain reactions prior to a disorder become common and normal a certain degree of stress, anxiety, and even depression. Fatigue, sadness, mood swings, and difficulty sleeping, among others, are natural reactions after a disaster. The problem arises when these symptoms do not diminish over time but become recurrent and increasingly severe.

Anxiety is often discussed as if it were a single condition, but there are different anxiety disorders, and in this guide, we will mention the most common ones following disaster events. Something that the different anxiety disorders have in common is fear and anxiety itself, but in excessive form. Although they often occur together, it is necessary to differentiate between the two factors. Fear is an emotional response to a real or imagined threat; it is a natural defense mechanism against imminent danger, but it can also be triggered excessively. Anxiety, on the other hand, is associated with constant vigilance or alertness to thoughts of future dangers, which can lead to avoidance behaviors and muscle tension (American Psychological Association or American Psychiatric Association, 2010).

- **Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD):** Excessive worry focused on one or multiple events and generalized apprehension define GAD. As does its persistence over time, lasting no less than several months. Symptoms include nervousness, motor restlessness, sleep disturbance, and muscle tension (WHO, 2019).

- **Panic Disorder:** Exposure to traumatic events, such as disasters, can leave lasting effects such as panic attacks. These are unexpected, recurring, and intense episodes of fear that can last for minutes. Symptoms include palpitations, rapid heartbeat, feeling of suffocation, dizziness, fear of losing control, and even the feeling that one might die at that moment. Faced with these symptoms, the concern that new attacks will occur is real (American Psychological Association or American Psychiatric Association, 2010).

- **Specific Phobia:** this is a constant and excessive fear or anxiety of objects or situations that are related in some way to a traumatic event. As a result, any type of contact with that object or event is avoided, and even though the person is not in any real danger or threat, the fear and anxiety they feel are intense. Specific phobia lasts for at least several months, and its symptoms can cause problems in social relationships at the personal, family, and work levels (WHO, 2019).

## Depression

The term “depression” is often heard and is associated with sadness and discouragement, elements that are part of the depressive state but are not the only ones. As in the case of anxiety, there are several types of depression. Depressive disorders are reflected in a person’s negative mood, and along with sadness and discouragement, there is irritation, loss of pleasure, feelings of emptiness, memory loss, and lack of concentration, which can affect the physical health and social relationships of those who have this disorder. All these factors, taken together, alter and impair the functionality of the depressed person (American Psychological Association or American Psychiatric Association, 2018). And this is a silent enemy that journalists who cover disasters can live with for years, consciously or unconsciously.

- **Major Depressive Disorder (MDD):** after a traumatic event, a person's life can become emotionally unhinged. In such cases, MDD is the most severe level of depression. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) establishes nine symptoms that must be evaluated, especially if five or more symptoms occur almost daily. These symptoms manifest themselves intensely and must be present for at least two weeks (American Psychological Association or American Psychiatric Association, 2014). These symptoms are;
  - Depressed mood most of the day, nearly every day
  - Significant decrease in interest or pleasure in all or nearly all activities.
  - Significant weight loss or gain and appetite
  - Insomnia or hypersomnia (sleeping too much)
  - Psychomotor agitation or retardation nearly every day
  - Fatigue or loss of energy most days
  - Feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt
  - Decreased ability to think or concentrate, or to make decisions, most days
  - Recurrent thoughts of death (not just fear of dying) and suicidal ideas without a specific plan, suicide attempt, or a specific plan to carry it out.
  
- **Persistent Depressive Disorder (Dysthymia):** This disorder occurs most of the day through a depressed mood for at least two years. It differs from MDD in terms of duration and intensity; in this case, the duration is longer, but although the symptoms also occur almost every day, their intensity is lower. Therefore, if symptoms coincide with MDD for two years but with lower intensity, the person should be diagnosed with persistent depressive disorder (American Psychological Association or American Psychiatric Association, 2014).

- **Mixed Depression and Anxiety Disorder:** This is a mixed disorder with symptoms of both depression and anxiety lasting more than two weeks. There is no preponderance of one type of symptom over another. When evaluated separately, no set of symptoms is severe enough to diagnose a depressive disorder or an anxiety disorder. Lack of interest in daily activities and discouragement are the most common depressive symptoms in these cases, while anxiety symptoms are more varied and range from nervousness, lack of control over worries, fears, and muscle tension, among others (WHO, 2019).

## Indicators

To accurately illustrate the difficulties that journalists may face in relation to mental health during their professional practice, numerous cases can be cited that reflect the importance of this issue. In many cases, these events can be transformed into statistics, allowing us to see the magnitude of this issue in quantitative terms. Indicators are a very important factor for measurement in journalism.

In an article by the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma entitled “Covering Trauma: Impact on Journalists,” the authors reviewed literature related to the impact that covering traumatic events has on journalists. They found that between 80% and 100% of journalists have been exposed to traumatic events because of their work, and that 92% of journalists reported having experienced at least four traumatic situations (Smith, R., Newman, E., Drevo, S., & Slaughter, A., 2015).

These figures show that it is not only journalists who are at the scene of the event who are exposed to disaster situations, but also reporters in the newsroom or on special assignments who are equally affected in terms of their mental health. As already explained, continuous exposure to audio recordings of interviews, audiovisual recordings, and photographs taken from disaster areas can cause trauma in journalists, and it is not necessary to be at the scene of the event for this to happen.

Another study (Feinstein, A., Owen, J., & Blair, N, 2002) cited by the US National Center for PTSD evaluated the symptoms of psychological distress in 140 journalists who had covered at least one war and 107 who had not. War journalists reported higher

alcohol consumption and higher levels of depression and PTSD. The prevalence rates of depression and PTSD among war correspondents were higher than the average for the population, with PTSD at 28.6% and depression at 21.4%.

In the survey conducted for the Disaster Journalism Project, 63.3% of journalists said they needed help coping with stress and trauma while working in disaster areas. This means that journalists are aware of the risks to their mental health when covering a disaster. However, there is one big question: Is it possible to avoid psychological trauma? The answer is no. Even experienced and veteran reporters can be affected at the most unexpected moment while covering a minor disaster, despite having covered more demanding and larger-scale disasters in the past.

On the other hand, misinformation also plays an important role in professional journalism and can severely damage a journalist's reputation, indirectly affecting their mental health and also harming third parties. Sometimes fake news can reach a country's government, as in the case of Slovenia, where some national and foreign media outlets spread false news about the shipment of 155mm Indian grenades to Ukraine, according to the Ministry of defense of Slovenia (2024), with the aim of harming the Republic of Slovenia and discrediting its international role as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

Misinformation can also affect not only individuals or groups but also entire populations in regions or countries. An example of this was seen in Türkiye after the earthquakes of February 6, 2023, in the Kahramanmaraş region, when a false rumor circulated on social media that a dam had burst in Hatay. This rumor caused several search and rescue teams, including volunteers, to stop their work and move to areas considered dangerous, losing three and a half hours of effective intervention. The false news not only caused delays in rescue efforts, but also generated collective panic and overburdened emergency teams, making it difficult for those in real need to receive help. (Doğan & Şenol, 2023).

Another example of misinformation that caused quite a stir in Spain During the devastating cold drop that hit Valencia in October 2024, numerous fake news stories circulated on social media, many of them related to the underground parking lot at the Bonaire Shopping Center. Among them, the most widely shared claimed that “700

tickets were not issued” from the car park that day, which would imply that hundreds of cars (and therefore people) were trapped, suggesting potential hidden or ignored victims. This message was widely shared, causing alarm and speculation.

The reality is that the Bonaire car park does not use tickets, as it is a free car park with no exit control system. This fact can be verified on the shopping center’s official website, which clearly states that it has 5,700 free parking spaces with no time limit.

The general narrative of these hoaxes points to an attempt to discredit the responsible institutions and generate public mistrust. This dynamic can undermine the public response, delay solidarity, and hinder crisis management, especially when false content is spread in times of emergency.

This case clearly illustrates how a viral rumor based on a false premise can spread rapidly and have serious consequences, even in humanitarian crises. It refutes the crucial importance of verifying before disseminating, and how responsible journalism can protect both the truth and social welfare. VerificaRTVE. (2024, November 4).

### **Preventive measures**

Although there is no foolproof recipe for avoiding stress and anxiety disorders, along with other emotional and psychological conditions, what is possible is for reporters to become aware that at any time, especially when covering disasters frequently, they may be affected by mental disorders. They are not immune to this possibility. Underestimating these types of conditions can be the first mistake, because discomfort that is addressed in time can mean a temporary and minor ailment that, as medical literature suggests, the person themselves can usually overcome in a short time. That is the first preventive measure.

Another important element in prevention is self-assessment and transparent communication with editors and coworkers before and during coverage. If a journalist, for any reason, whether personal or external, does not feel able to carry out the task assigned to them, they should be honest and communicate this to their bosses. This applies in the preliminary phase, but also during the coverage itself. In the latter case, in addition to talking to their bosses, they can also rely on their colleagues for support. To make this possible, editors-in-chief, directors, and media owners must also promote frank and

open communication internally (Reporters Without Borders, 2017).

Researching and learning about the history, culture, and socioeconomic situation of the area you are moving to is helpful, as it is better to have a realistic understanding of the context you will be facing. Similarly, establishing contacts with authorities, journalists, and organizations present at the disaster site or related to that context is beneficial in the event of any eventuality. Self-care will also be helpful during coverage. The first step is to exercise caution in disaster scenarios, as underestimating the context can lead to dangerous consequences. Secondly, it is often a good idea to take time to assess whether you are experiencing more visible and common symptoms such as fear, sadness, anger, fatigue, irritability, sleep disturbances, feelings of distress and suffocation (shortness of breath), agitation, panic attacks, sudden urges to escape or avoid reality, violent behavior, and recurrent use of alcohol, tobacco, or other substances. But there are more subtle symptoms that can go unnoticed, such as a lack of interest in topics and activities that used to be important, feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt, problems with concentration and decision-making, excessive concern about unlikely future events that do not pose a real risk, among others. Recognizing several of these symptoms and talking to more experienced journalists who have covered similar stories, as they are likely to have gone through similar situations, as well as discussing it with the editorial team and the rest of the team in the field, is a good step.

Even while covering the story, take time for physical activity, which could be a simple routine of muscle stretching, deep breathing, or walking; your body will always thank you for it. It is a moment of disconnection. Finding time and space to communicate with family and friends is essential so that you do not become absorbed only by the demands of journalistic work. At this point, although it would be a preliminary task, avoiding going to cover a disaster while leaving conflicts or problematic situations at home unresolved is a valuable decision. Given the traumatic events witnessed in a disaster and the unexpected elements of reality in such contexts, working in scenarios of this type while dealing with unresolved family problems is exhausting and even dangerous in terms of mental health.

On the other hand, constant, cordial, and healthy communication with family during free time is a great help to reporters covering

disasters. This is possible if there is awareness within the family environment of the physical and psychological risks faced by a journalist, so that they can cooperate with communication that promotes peace of mind and affection. This is something that any journalist will appreciate while working amid the tensions and distress of a disaster.

### **Aftercare**

One of the results of the survey conducted in the content of Disaster Journalism project among journalists was that 41.6% of respondents recommended that journalists covering disasters should be prepared for psychological rehabilitation. In other words, a significant number of reporters believe that psychological rehabilitation is a real option. However, reality shows that it is not standard practice in the media for journalists to have access to psychological therapy due to their exposure to disaster coverage.

The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma and the Department of Psychology at the University of Tulsa (Sachs, E., Newman, E., Porterfield, K., Hockensmith, K., & Shapiro, B., 2025) promote the Journalist Trauma Support Network (JTSN) program, which has been addressing this situation in the United States since 2021. Psychologists who provided care at the JTSN indicated that the most common mental health problems among participating journalists were secondary or vicarious trauma (the most common), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depression, clinically significant anxiety, work-related stress (burnout), feelings of institutional betrayal, work-related guilt or moral injury, grief or loss, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation (13% of participants).

However, despite this diagnosis, journalists reported that there are barriers that make it difficult for them to receive care. One of these barriers is the perception that psychologists have little knowledge of the working culture of journalists and the risks involved in the profession, which requires a more specialized type of therapy. Other significant barriers include the lack of programs that provide assistance to all journalists who need it, the absence of a clear referral protocol for therapy in both the media and institutions that support journalism, and the high cost of therapy for freelance journalists.

Despite this situation, psychological care is important and generates positive results, as indicated by the JTSN program itself. With a model of 20 sessions over six months, the results reaffirmed the

positive effects of therapy. At the beginning, 60% of journalists showed clinically significant distress, and after the therapists' intervention, that figure fell to 23%. Between 53% and 72% of journalists showed a statistically reliable improvement in symptoms of PTSD, depression, anxiety, and stress. Thirty-five percent of journalists reported an increase in their subjective well-being. And of the five journalists who reported suicidal thoughts at the beginning of therapy, at the end of therapy they reported that they no longer had those thoughts (Sachs, E. et al., 2025).

Although there is no international consensus or protocol at the journalistic level to promote psychological rehabilitation, given results such as those of the JTSN, it is necessary for reporters to know that seeking therapy when clear symptoms appear or when they feel overwhelmed by what they have experienced in a news story or by the stressful dynamics of journalism is the best decision. This is also part of a professional's self-care.

And while psychological care can make a difference, an important factor that journalists instinctively turn to cope with traumatic situations, and which they must continue to develop not only in disaster coverage but also in their personal lives, is resilience.

The American Psychological Association or American Psychiatric Association (2011) defines resilience as the process of adapting well to traumatic events, threats, or adversity. The important thing is that resilience is ordinary, not extraordinary; people demonstrate resilience frequently. Being resilient does not mean that a person is not exposed to distress, pain, or emotional problems. All human beings suffer from these illnesses, but we also have the capacity to be resilient.

To build and develop resilience, the American Psychological Association or American Psychiatric Association (2011) offers the following recommendations: establish good family and social relationships, avoid seeing crises as insurmountable obstacles, accept that change is part of life, set goals and work toward them, make important decisions in adverse situations and do not ignore the problem that led to that situation, take advantage of difficult moments to discover or rediscover yourself, have a positive outlook on yourself and trust in your ability to resolve the complications that arise. Despite pain or distress, try not to lose perspective and put things into perspective, do not lose hope, and take care of yourself.



# 3.5.

## Continuing education and basic recommendations for disaster coverage





### 3.5 Continuing education and basic recommendations for disaster coverage

Disaster scenarios are changing and highly complex: new verification technologies, digital disinformation dynamics, and civil protection protocols are evolving rapidly. Therefore, continuing education is essential for those who practice journalism in this field. Initial training is not enough; it is necessary to constantly update skills in ethical coverage, personal safety, handling official sources, use of digital tools, and responsible communication strategies. In this way, journalists can fulfill their social role rigorously and effectively, helping to ensure that citizens have accurate and useful information at critical moments.

News coverage of earthquakes, fires, tsunamis, wars, terrorist acts, explosions of critical infrastructure involving chemicals harmful to humans, and other disasters are events of the utmost importance for the media, society, and governments. However, the priority given to these events is not reciprocated when it comes to preparing media professionals (journalists, photographers, and cameramen) to deal with such uncertain and risky scenarios. The survey accompanying this guidebook found that 95.6% of respondents said that part of journalists' training should be devoted to preparing them for how to act in different types of disasters. Meanwhile, 92.2% said they did not have enough information about the activities that should be carried out when covering a disaster. In fact, 85.1% of the journalists consulted responded that practical exercises or simulations were not included as part of disaster training.

It is a reality that not all media outlets provide prior and ongoing training to their employees on how to cover a disaster. When it comes to freelance professionals, the situation is even worse, as they do not have the backing of a media outlet. Although this is the most common scenario, given the many challenges and situations of stress and danger that reporters must overcome when covering a disaster, offering this type of training in the media is an obligation, and it can also be a valuable professional and personal decision to take these courses on one's own initiative. Let us not forget: It is the journalist, flesh and blood, who is exposed, so this training should be a priority and comprehensive.

## Drills and practical exercises

While it is true that reality always surpasses fiction, simulations and field exercises are extremely valuable. Replicating the stress and uncertainty experienced during coverage is difficult. It will never be exact. But learning in controlled situations may be required at the most unexpected moment during a real activity and knowing how to act can make all the difference. Organizations such as the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and the International News Safety Institute (INSI) support this type of training. The CPJ's Journalist Security Guide (Smyth, F., Lowenthal, T., & O'Brien, D. 2012) emphasizes that a first step that cannot be overlooked or underestimated is that journalists must familiarize themselves with personal protective equipment and emergency plans, and that only comes with practice. However, 70.5% of the professionals surveyed clearly stated that they were completely unaware of the type of equipment they should carry for each type of disaster.

Simulations and preparedness exercises should focus on working on these factors: risk management, quick decision-making, handling pressure, and first aid techniques. And just as importantly, it is very helpful for journalists to receive personalized feedback from trainers. Specialists should evaluate participants' emotional and psychological responses, share them with them, and offer exercises to improve if necessary. On the other hand, journalists' evaluation of these courses is also important, not only to measure their level of satisfaction but also to know which exercises should be improved or added to the training.

Some of the basic important training exercises and drills that can help journalists carry out their professional activities in high-risk areas include the following:

- **Hostile Environment & First Aid Training (HEFAT / HEAT)**

Residential courses (3–6 days) covering kidnapping, border crossings, active shooter drills, ambushes, communications, risk assessment, and emergency first aid for severe injuries (such as amputations). BBC requires this training for reporters deployed in hostile environments.

- **Immersive drills with fire, actors, and special effects**

Programs such as Reporters Instructed in Saving Colleagues (RISC) recreate war-zone injuries with fake blood, smoke, and simulated gunfire to train journalists in emergency medical response.

- **High-Stress hostile environment workshops**

Exercises that include bandaging mock wounds, passing through simulated checkpoints, surprise evaluations, and even demonstrations with live weapons to show that a car is not safe cover. Designed to induce stress and assess reactions.

- **Virtual Reality (VR) training**

VR recreates environments such as protests, war zones, or natural disasters, provoking authentic emotional responses in a safe setting. Useful for preparing reporters to face trauma without real danger

- **Advanced Disaster Management Simulators (ADMS)**

AI-driven and 3D simulation platforms designed to train decision-making during large-scale emergencies such as fires, mass accidents, or urban catastrophes.

- **Situational awareness and safety gear training**

Continuous drills on risk assessment, proper use of protective gear (vests, helmets, masks), de-escalation techniques, and personal safety planning.

- **Risk assessment, hygiene, and logistics**

Learning to research the nature of disasters (hurricanes, earthquakes, chemical spills), secure insurance, remain self-sufficient, avoid obstructing rescue teams, and update newsrooms regularly about location and status

- **Information and risk reduction communication training**

Workshops on Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) journalism, focusing on constructive reporting, community resilience, and sustainable development narratives.

- **Practical manuals with exercises and case studies**

Handbooks like the *IWPR Crisis Area Guide* provide field exercises, reporting standards, and safety protocols tailored for conflict and disaster contexts.

- **Crisis simulations with actors**

Exercises with trained actors simulating victims, used in coordinated emergency drills to enhance realism and test communication skills.

- **War crimes and conflict coverage courses**

Online training such as *For the Record: Covering War and Conflict* teaches journalists how to document, archive, and report on atrocities with sensitivity and accuracy.

Each emergency is unpredictable, shaped by unique political, social, and environmental conditions. A journalist who is not adequately trained risks not only their own safety, but also the accuracy, timeliness, and ethical quality of their reporting. In crisis situations, misinformation can spread as quickly as the disaster itself, and unprepared journalists may unintentionally amplify falsehoods or hinder emergency operations.

By engaging in realistic simulations, medical drills, VR scenarios, and situational awareness training, journalists gain the ability to make calm, informed decisions under extreme pressure. Beyond physical survival, these exercises build resilience, improve teamwork with rescue services, and strengthen the capacity to communicate responsibly with affected communities. This exercises and practices empowers journalists to fulfill their role as reliable witnesses and communicators during humanity's darkest hours. It ensures that the stories they tell not only inform the public, but also contribute to safety, accountability, and recovery in the aftermath of crisis.

### **Pre-coverage plan**

It is essential to have a pre-established emergency protocol in place, to be familiar with it, and to follow it. The most important thing is to guarantee and preserve the lives of journalists and other media workers. It is also recommended to familiarize yourself with the conditions of the location before arriving; maintain a predetermined

communication mechanism with both the team on site and key contacts in the newsroom and outside it (authorities, human rights defenders, representatives of organizations linked to journalism, among others); based on the events that occur, assess the potential for real risk; have a first aid kit (51.7% of respondents said they carry a first aid kit with them, but that data reveals that 48.3% do not); small, lightweight foods that provide energy and water; a power bank and mobile phone battery charger; check maps in advance and, upon arrival, look for exit points or routes in case of a possible evacuation; and any other precautionary measures, along with common sense and prudence, will be a good support (Smyth, F., Lowenthal, T., & O'Brien, D. 2012; INSI, n.d.).

Based on the literature consulted and echoing its content (Reporters Without Borders, 2017 ACOS Alliance, n.d.; Doc Society, 2020; Shelton, M. & King, G., 2017), a list may be helpful:

### 1. **Risk management:**

- Identify and assess risks before and during coverage
- Have a clear action plan to mitigate risks and respond to emergencies
- Prioritize personal safety and decision-making that ensures it
- Continuously monitor and evaluate the security measures adopted
- Be modest and respectful in the field.

### 2. **First aid and food:**

- Knowledge of basic techniques
- Ability to assess emergency situations
- Ability to provide immediate assistance if necessary
- Small, lightweight foods that provide energy (canned food, protein or energy bars, fruit, nuts, candy (for low blood sugar)
- Water (hydration)

### 3. **Managing stress and negative emotions:**

- Practicing emotional management and self-care
- Persuasive and argumentative strategies for conflict resolution
- Relaxation and control techniques in critical situations

#### 4. **Immediate and effective communication:**

- Have a pre-established communication plan
- Be clear about who the key contact is for communication in extreme situations or situations of real risk
- The key contact must know what to do in case communication is lost
- Immediately communicate the situation, location, and, if possible, needs
- Be clear and precise when conveying information
- Listen effectively and empathetically in the field

#### 5. **Protecting information and documentation about the incident:**

- Managing and using passwords to preserve content and other information (1Password)
- Keeping communications encrypted (ProtonMail, Signal, or One Time Secret)
- Backing up all material and keeping it encrypted (VeraCrypt)
- Share files securely (SpiderOak ShareRooms)
- Browse the internet securely (Tor)
- Document any incident with key details if it is safe to do so

### **Collaboration with authorities, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and emergency teams**

Collaboration with authorities and rescue teams during a disaster is key both for the safety of journalists and for the precautions that must be taken regarding those affected and public opinion. Likewise, authorities should also guarantee the physical integrity of media professionals, although depending on the political context and the disaster itself, this is not always the case. In addition to this operational role, state institutions and their spokespersons are primary sources of information. Their statements should be carefully recorded as an official source. However, an official source does not necessarily mean that it is infallible and completely reliable. In contexts of disasters and situations that are hostile to journalists, authorities may also respond to political, partisan, and economic interests, and their data may or may not be accurate.

Even when dealing with an official source, journalists have an obligation to verify the information provided by the authorities

and to clearly cite the source whenever data comes from an official source, indicating the name of the institution and, if it is a spokesperson, identifying them by name and surname along with their position. And if the information is offered to the reporter under the slogan “unofficial,” it must be verified even more thoroughly, and the relevance of its dissemination must be analyzed in detail to avoid the spread of rumors and false information that could upset the population. If it is published, it must be cited as “unofficial” information.

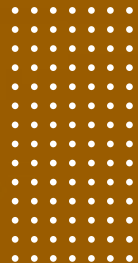
At this point, one of the most important collaborations between the press and NGOs arises. In theory, applying the methodical doubt that should prevail in the practice of journalism, these organizations are the opposite of the interests that could lead authorities to offer information that is not transparent or that shows signs of being manipulated.

NGOs are associations that emerge as independent entities supporting society and its various rights. They act as a counterweight to the political, economic, judicial, military, and police power of the state administration (including rulers, opposition figures in public office, and the entire structure of civil servants). For this reason, they can be an independent source of information on disaster-related issues such as humanitarian needs, impacts on vulnerable communities, management of resources allocated to disaster response or prevention, among others. This information can be of great value in informing society.

Another direct link that should exist between journalists and NGOs is that there are organizations dedicated to defending journalists and their fundamental rights, including the free exercise of their work, freedom of the press and expression, as well as the right to life and non-criminalization for political reasons. So, staying in touch with international NGOs and those in the country where the disaster is happening, or at least having their contact details, is something you should do when planning your coverage. These organizations can help you gather information before and during your coverage and prevent risks. They also function as a channel for reporting possible attacks or harassment during and after work at the scene. And they often offer legal support and access to psychological therapy (Horsley, W., Stone, M., & Mijatovic, D, 2014).



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# A Practical, Ethical and Safety Guide to Disaster Journalism

Journalism plays a key role in shaping public opinion and sentiment. In today's world, numerous events and phenomena—including disasters—are largely received through the lens of media presentation and registered in collective memory accordingly.

Disaster journalism, as a distinct and specialised branch of traditional journalism, constitutes a communication practice that not only informs the public about existing or potential hazards but also provides comprehensive guidance on risk-reduction strategies, protection measures, relief, and response procedures, as well as methods to minimise potential impacts. A disaster journalist constructs their reporting upon a three-pillar foundation: field competence, ethical principles, and safety requirements.

This guidebook, prepared within the scope of the European Union's Erasmus+ Programme project titled "Disaster Journalism: Preventing the News from Turning into a Disaster", sets out in detail the essential considerations journalists must take into account when reporting on disasters.

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