



Occupational Health & Safety Authority

Media Release

Occupational Health and Safety of Media Employees

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Progress in communication technology has exacerbated the need for up dated information. Media organisations compete dynamically about who can transmit the latest news and events as they unfold, taking an advantage over competitors in securing a scoop and being first on the scene. Some journalists, photographers and camera operators may unintentionally imperil their lives for sensational reports and images.

Most media organizations sending their crew to war-torn countries or areas rife with violence and crises offer advice and training prior to deployment. This may include first aid, risk assessment training, survival skills, protective clothing as well as vital information about the terrain in which they will be working.

The situation is a bit different for those who albeit not sent to cover such crisis areas, still face hazards and risks to secure reportage on a day by day basis. Such situations include coverage of an explosion (such as in a fireworks factory), entering construction sites or quarries and other workplaces which may constitute hazards the journalists or other members of the team might be unaware of.

The OHSA has been approached by a number of journalists and photographers expressing their concern about such work assignments, particularly the pressure exerted on them by editors who seem more intent on obtaining a scoop without perhaps considering the risks these people may be exposed to or the fact that this matter also falls under the remit of OHS legislation in force.

Good Practice Criteria

There are some general precautions which members of the media can take to reduce the risks while carrying out their duties. The following is a short list which although non-exhaustive, is a good indication of basic good practice.

1. Basic Health and Safety Criteria

It is the duty of every employer to safeguard the health and safety of his/her employees. There is a series of criteria that an employer must satisfy to be in line with the law.

Employers must first and foremost conduct a **risk assessment** which covers all the employees and their respective places of work.

They have to also ensure that a **workers health and safety representative** is appointed by the workers to represent them in issues concerning health and safety. Only in those cases where the employees fail to elect such a representative is management legally allowed to appoint such a person. This person is different in scope and purpose than union 'shop stewards' and have in effect more power in the area of health and safety.

As employees, journalists, photographers and camera operators should also be offered relevant and adequate **training** by their employer about any risks that they might face during the course of their employment, wherever this may take them. They also have to be **consulted and informed** about any measures that would be taken and which affect them relating to health and safety. Naturally, information must also be given about any aspects of their work which might pose risks to their health and safety.

Personal protective equipment should also be supplied free of charge by the employer in those cases where it is deemed essential or in any case where the risks cannot be controlled at source.

The above principles are all enshrined into local legislation. However, there are various international codes of practice covering media organizations and staff which have these principles as a guiding light.

The International Labour Organisation recently stated that much more needs to be done by media organizations and representatives of media workers and journalists to provide protection for media personnel. It particularly highlighted the need for 'adequate preparation by journalists and media before going on assignment. Media organizations should provide technical assistance and establish training programmes specifically designed to improve levels of personal safety and to carry out risk assessments related to specific assignments'.

Moreover, the *International Code of Practice for the Safe Conduct of Journalism* clearly states that 'media professionals must be informed and inform themselves about the political, physical, and social terrain in which they are working. They must not contribute to the uncertainty and insecurity of their conditions through ignorance or reckless behaviour'. It goes on to state that 'journalists and other media staff shall be properly equipped for all assignments including the provision of first-aid materials, communication tools, adequate transport facilities and, where necessary, protective clothing'.

2. Role of Journalists and other Media Employees

Journalists and media personnel themselves have a key role to play in safeguarding health and safety.

The same law which outlines the roles of the employer regarding health and safety also metes out obligations on the workers themselves. In fact every worker has a duty to safeguard his/her own health and safety and that of other persons who can be affected by reason of the work which is carried out. Thus, journalists must take responsibility to exercise the highest standards of personal safety and minimize risks to themselves and their colleagues.

Moreover, each worker is duty bound to co-operate with the employer and with the Health and Safety Representative at the work place on all matters relating to health and safety. Journalists should also ensure that they maintain the highest professional standards and

conduct and should not compromise the ethics of journalism in any aspect of the gathering, production or dissemination of news and information.

Journalists have an individual responsibility to anticipate and reduce dangers, and a collective responsibility through their professional organizations and trade unions to campaign for safer working conditions.

One must however keep in mind that workers (including journalists and other crew members) have the right to refuse entry into such areas which could potentially pose a serious and imminent danger.

3. The Price of a Scoop

The above-mentioned *International Code of Practice for the Safe Conduct of Journalism* warns about risk-taking for commercial advantage. Moreover, the International Federation of Journalists in its survival guide for journalists pens the concept of safety to perfection:

‘The job of the journalist is to tell the story, not to become the story. A journalist who puts him or herself needlessly at risk is behaving in an unprofessional manner; one that could ultimately prevent the story being told or the picture being seen.’

A Case in Point

The points outlined above are basic concepts of health and safety at both a personal and collective level. Ultimately, it takes also common sense and responsibility to safeguard health, safety and well-being.

A journalist who is sent to cover the explosion of a fireworks factory, for instance, must ensure that his/her employer has in fact conducted a risk assessment on such incidents, taking into consideration past experiences. They should also ensure that they have all the relevant information about any risks that there might be and they are given the adequate personal protective equipment if this is necessary.

Once on site, they must not enter the area unless given the necessary go-ahead from members of the Malta Police Force or of the Civil Protection Department whose duty it is to do so. They should not, under any circumstances, take unnecessary risks to capture sensational images.

Although the site might appear safe, trained personnel might be aware of other hazards which are not immediately apparent to the untrained eye, such as the possibility that fireworks get contaminated by other chemicals or by water and become unstable, or that there is a risk that the heat from the burning fireworks could cause any nearby flammable or combustible articles to catch fire.

Apart from the intrinsic risks following a fireworks factory explosion, there are usually other risks associated with the nature of the terrain (such as uneven slopes, uncovered pits, pieces of rusty debris, etc) given that such fireworks factories are usually located in rural areas.

One must also keep in mind the psychological aspect. Journalists, photographers and camera operators might suffer a psychological trauma when faced with the horrors of a fatality, especially when this involves the mutilated parts of the corpse caused by the

explosion. While one should point out that it has been proven that the majority of journalists cope well with adversity, it is equally important to note those who do not. It is therefore imperative for media organizations to address the psychological health of their employees.

At the end of the day, the ultimate philosophy should be the holistic recognition that no single story, no matter how dramatic, is worth a life.