



CHRIS HONDROS - GETTY IMAGES

LESSONS FROM THE FRONTLINE

AS A PRECURSOR TO THE MAJOR GTC WORKSHOP 'LIFE IN THE FIRING LINE' TO BE HELD IN NORTH LONDON ON 31 MARCH 2012, COLIN PEREIRA, HEAD OF SAFETY AND SECURITY AT ITN, OUTLINES SOME OF THE ISSUES FREELANCE CAMERAMEN SHOULD BE AWARE OF BEFORE VENTURING INTO WAR ZONES AND OTHER AREAS OF CONFLICT.

In June 2011, a news colleague semi-joked that he wanted to start a Facebook page aimed at imploring Arab revolutionaries to 'chill out' for a bit to give journalists a break – so great was the strain on the foreign news machine. And that was only half way through the year. 2011 was a year in which the news just did not stop. Revolutions, wars, insurrections, protests, natural disasters and game-changing assassinations – the stream of events pushed news hounds to the limit.

Careers were forged and reputations made, while audiences watched every twist and turn agape. It's been a great time to be a journalist, gaining a front

seat to all this unfolding history... but almost every headline has involved massive risk on the part of the news-gatherers.

During the protests in the Middle East and North Africa, pro government forces posed a real threat to journalists. Firstly, customs officials began by confiscating body armour, riot gear and satellite communications, all of which made reporting that little bit more difficult. To this day, there must be a veritable Aladdin's cave of safety paraphernalia somewhere under lock and key at the Cairo and Bahrain airports. This was followed by intimidation, detentions and, most worryingly, cases of targeted violence. In just a couple of days in Cairo, there

were over a hundred incidents against journalists.

All-out war in Libya involved desert warfare, urban guerrilla fighting, NATO airstrikes and government bullying. Not since the Balkans has a conflict been so easily accessible to freelancers. Unsurprisingly, a huge number of experienced and untried freelancers pitched up, all of them operating on shoestring budgets and ambition. Libya may prove to be the training ground for the next generation of war reporters but, for a great many, journalistic field craft was sorely lacking.

Closer to home, the London riots proved surprisingly challenging. The rioters viewed journalists as fair

game, stealing camera equipment and attacking crews and satellite trucks on the ground.

Then there was the tsunami and Fukushima. Ten-foot waves ripped through towns, lives and a nuclear power station. Overnight, journalists and safety advisors had to become nuclear experts. Safety measures suddenly focused on dosimeters, radiation masks and caesium radiation testing. More often than not, the precautions caused more fear than reassurance as, at the time, hardly anyone really understood them.

Meanwhile, conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Mexico, which would normally have dominated the headlines,

rumbled along in the background, almost forgotten but no less dangerous.

Without a doubt, 2011 took its toll. Colleagues were killed, maimed, locked up, sexually assaulted and psychologically damaged. According to the International News Safety Institute (INSI), almost 120 journalists and media staff were killed in 2011 worldwide. As always, it was the local journalists and freelancers who bore the brunt.

So, what are the lessons from 2011?

Preparation

Journalistic safety is no dark art. Generally it comes down to common sense, experience and luck. But the lucky ones are often those who are the best prepared.

Training

These days there are more hostile environment courses than you can shake a stick at. For freelancers these can work out quite expensive, so do choose carefully. The best ones in my opinion will last four to six days and cost approximately £2000.

Everyone I speak to who has been on such a course always sings the praises of the medical training element. You will find journalists fresh from their training getting over-excited at the prospect of helping with

the slightest office injury as they rush to put their new-found skills to the test. As minorly annoying as it might be having your paper-cut eagerly swathed in a trauma dressing by a newbie trained reporter, it is reassuring to know that they now possess this knowledge and confidence. I have seen journalists apply first aid in the field under fire and have no doubt that the medical training can be the difference between life and death. The benefits of the security elements are less obvious.

Most courses are generic. The security training aims to make students more aware of common dynamics in a hostile situation to assist with split-second decision-making. The training cannot be a panacea to every security situation. Ultimately, the decision will lie with the person on the ground, and the more aware an individual is, the better that decision-making will be.

Hostile environment courses are generally valid for three years and refresher courses should take about two to three days.

Risk Assessment

Before departure for any assignment, putting together a risk assessment can really help. Journalists are generally negative about risk assessments, viewing them as unnecessary form filling. If treated like that, then they will be. But if you sit down for even



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a few moments to think about what you are about to do; what you need to take; and how to deal with something if it goes wrong – it can make a massive difference.

Equipment

Journalists are used to carrying flak jackets and first aid kits to hostile environments, but it is important to keep up with improvements in the kit and to make sure your equipment is still fit for purpose.

For instance, in response to the threat from improvised explosive devices, manufacturers now make body armour where the plate goes in from the side. Top loading plates have a tendency to pop out when there is a blast from below and can even injure the wearer. These days even Kevlar underwear is available to protect your bits from an explosion.

First aid kits now include tourniquets and clotting agents to stop major arterial bleeds. Again, developed by the military in Iraq and Afghanistan, these simple bits of kit are regularly saving lives on the battlefield, whereas only a few years ago they were frowned upon. It is only sensible that journalists take advantages of such improvements.

Crucially, know what is in your first aid kit, where it is and how to use it. There is no point taking kit you do not understand; if you are not familiar with your first aid bag, you will lose vital time when dealing with an injury.

Tracking devices with panic buttons are now being used more frequently. In areas with a kidnap threat or in remote locations, the ability to discreetly raise the alarm and notify your location by the press of a button will speed up any rescue operation.

Contingency Planning and Insurance Things going awry are an occupational hazard in journalism. So do put a flexible contingency plan in place and make sure you communicate this to someone responsible, preferably before deployment.

Know whom to call if things go wrong or if you get detained. A carefully placed word by the right person often proves to be the quickest and safest solution.

Think about what you would do in a medical emergency. Many experienced journalists often reply when I ask them what their medevac plan is: "We have a satellite phone." But when I then ask them "Who are you going to call and what are they going to do about your medical emergency?" they are flummoxed.

You can always tell those journalists who have actually carried out a medevac. It's a complicated and expensive business that can take days depending on where you are. So, along the way it's a good idea to take note of hospitals and places you could receive care if need be.

If you are unlucky enough to require an evacuation, make sure you have the contacts for a reputable evacuation company and know what their capabilities are.

Most importantly, take out the correct insurance. This means talking to brokers, not just buying travel insurance online which will probably not cover you. It's expensive, but if you do not have it and something goes really wrong, you will kick yourself when your mother has to sell her car to fund your evacuation and subsequent treatment.



▲ Vaughan Smith, founder of the Frontline Club, filming in Croatia

In the Field

Social Media and Working Together Twitter and Facebook came of age as effective safety tools throughout the Arab Spring.

In Cairo, Twitter proved the best way of keeping across developments in Tahrir Square and journalists tapped into the revolutionary networks who in turn were monitoring police movements, evacuation points, medical clinics and exactly what was happening in the throng of thousands.

On Facebook, the Vulture Group allows journalists to share their experiences and best practice. Advice about visas, fixers, transportation, where checkpoints are, and so on, is made available almost instantly and all for free.

On the ground, it is often best to work with other journalists. If going to cover riots, for example, bear in mind that it can turn nasty in an instant. So, working in a team gives you strength in numbers and in a worst case scenario there will be a better chance of someone raising the alarm.

Communications and Security

Throughout the Arab Spring, communications proved difficult. Mobile networks were regularly taken down. Invest in a satellite phone and know how to use it.

Regularly contact your base. Twice a day is sensible. If you go missing, your base can put out the word that you have not checked in and people

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▲ In the recent riots across major cities in the UK, cameramen and photographers could quickly find themselves targets

can start looking out for you. In many cases, journalists are only released from detention when someone starts asking about them. If no one asks, then your stay with the security forces could be a long one.

Above all, guard your contacts carefully. If you have revolutionaries or local journalists in your phone book, you can compromise them if you are detained. It takes discipline on your part, but fake names and slightly

altered numbers can save their lives.

Security Advisers

The major broadcasters used security advisers on almost every deployment during the Arab Spring. They are an expensive resource and consequently infrequently available to freelancers.

However, a freelancer today can be the customer of tomorrow so security advisers are generally willing to help out. Do not hesitate to ask for advice or a lift if you are in the hotel bar sitting next to one. Bear in mind, advisers are always keen for information and to build a network, so a favour can work both ways.

If you can afford a security adviser, make sure you vet them properly. There are a lot of cowboys on the security circuit and a charlatan generally does more harm than good.

Remember, advisers are primarily there to prevent you getting into trouble and, if you do so, to get you out of it. Many journalists seem to think they are there to organise interviews; while that is a nice add-on, it is not really what they are there to do. That is what your fixer is for.

Luck

Being 'in the wrong place at the wrong time' is often attributed as the reason why things went wrong in the field. And, to be fair, there is a huge element of this. However, having the ability to realise you are in the wrong place at the wrong time comes down to experience and awareness. Being

able to make sure you get out of there or can handle a situation if it all goes wrong, comes down to training and planning.

Recipe for disaster

Wandering around thinking 'it'll never happen to me' is a recipe for disaster. If it does happen to you, then you are really up the creek without a paddle. And in the high stakes game of foreign journalism, that can cost you your life.

Fact File

Colin Pereira is the Head of Safety and Security for ITN, and Head of High Risk for 1st Option. Until recently, he was a member of the BBC High Risk Team. He has advised on thousands of deployments to hostile environments and has been a producer for BBC Newsnight, BBC World and Radio 4. He is happiest when in the field.

The Chris Hondros Fund supports and advances the work of photojournalists and raises awareness of the issues facing those reporting from conflict areas. www.chrishondrosfund.org

The Frontline Club was founded in honour of colleagues who died pursuing their work as news cameramen. See more at: www.frontlineclub.com

True stories: Andy Portch, news cameraman based in Beijing for Sky News

In this picture I had just been blown through the air by a Taliban mortar and had shrapnel stuck in my thigh. I vividly remember the whizzing thwack as the shrapnel seared into my leg and sent me flying into a mud wall. I was a one-man band, so carried on filming, editing and doing lives. The wound went black with infection very quickly and I left in the following few days.

It really is a lottery on the frontline. We had a freelance producer working with us last year who went on to Libya. He was hit by the blast from an RPG and hasn't walked for months; so far he has undergone 15 operations.

Health and safety in news is tricky. The bottom line is we take extraordinary risks very often. I always say I nearly die at least once a year in the course of my work. I've had everything from bilharzia to frostbite. Luckily, the Taliban shrapnel was removed. In Tibet one time I pushed things too hard and ended up with a near fatal cerebral oedema. The result is a fifty-pence sized permanently damaged section of my brain. Strangely enough, given the range of dangers we encounter, car accidents remain my biggest concern. We take our first aid training courses very seriously; I know these have saved my life.



GTC WORKSHOP: LIFE IN THE FIRING LINE

Date: 31 March 2012 At: RAF Museum, London NW9

GTC Workshops Organiser Clive North writes: Colin Pereira's insightful article 'Lessons from the Frontline', came about due to the GTC's plan to stage a major workshop featuring the work of TV cameramen in hazardous environments such as war zones and riots.

Obviously with recent conflicts and events fresh in everyone's minds, this is a topical subject to cover and we have been helped massively by experts in the field, such as Colin, who is Head of Safety and Security at ITN, and Craig Summers who is Security Operations Manager for BSkyB. The GTC's own Jonathan Young has had considerable experience of working in war zones such as Afghanistan and will contribute to the day.

So, on 31 March 2012, the GTC is running a one-day workshop/seminar

at the RAF Museum in North London, entitled 'Life in the Firing Line'. The aim of the day is multi-faceted – to celebrate the work of the TV cameraman in war zones and riots; to highlight in particular their recent work in Afghanistan and Libya; and to examine their motivation in doing this work along with the risks taken, but at the same time satisfaction to be derived in this kind of work.

Whilst applauding the work of guys such as these and exploring their 'raison d'être' and techniques, we aim to punch home the need for training and knowledge of the risks involved. Far too often, it seems, totally inexperienced cameramen and women head out to war zones, apparently without regard for the risks involved. Some never return as, it has to be said, can also happen to seasoned war cameramen.

A major element of the day will be presentations by TV cameramen and women and also stills photographers.



ANDY PORTCH

Along with Jonathan Young (www.debrouillard.tv) these will include Giles Duley, a well-known stills photographer (www.bbc.co.uk/news/in-pictures-15589763 and www.gilesduley.com) who suffered three limbs blown off while working in Afghanistan but plans to return there in 2012. We are in touch with several other cameramen who hope to be able to help us on the day depending on availability. We expect the whole workshop to be chaired by a well-known TV reporter who will also be able to expand on their experiences under fire.

Personal protection equipment will be on show from Avon Protection while Panasonic Broadcast will take

the opportunity to demonstrate their latest cameras, including the new AG-HPX250 1/3in chip CMOS camera (see pages 30-35 for a full review). We are grateful also to ITN for their generous sponsorship of the day.

This workshop will be of especial interest to anyone considering working in areas of civil unrest or war zones – such as TV and stills cameramen and journalists – but also to those of us who prefer to leave this work to the specialists and to applaud their work on our behalf.

For more details and to book a place: www.eventelephant.com/gtc-warzone



JASON CUDDY