Ethical guidelines for war reporting

Covering wars is difficult for journalists, it can have lasting impacts in terms of stress and trauma. It is also an area of journalism that demands the highest ethical standards so that the readers, listeners and viewers and those impacted directly by war can trust the coverage and that journalists act with integrity and as credible witnesses.

1) In the first instance the NUJ's Code of Conduct offers guidelines that should be observed by members who are covering wars and so remain faithful to truth telling, respecting private grief, ensuring the primacy of the public interest and defending source confidentiality.

2) Journalists should keep readers, listeners and viewers informed as to the conditions under which they are reporting.

3) Journalists should not take information at face value without questioning whether it is accurate and, where possible, should seek out voices from all sides and avoid stereotypes and prejudice.

4) Journalists should humanise the conflict and recognise and communicate that they are reporting a human tragedy and that they are witnessing and reporting death, appalling suffering and the displacement of people.

5) The journalist shall counter disinformation and misinformation.

6) Ethical journalism can often encounter difficulties such as access. If journalists are embedded, the fact of being embedded and any conditions that come with that should be communicated to the audience, so they understand the limitations imposed on the journalist.

7) Journalists must give sources for all information, unless a promise of confidentiality has been made. The public must know if information or images are supplied by either side of the conflict.

8) Journalists should inform themselves of the context of the conflict and also make themselves familiar with the various laws, rules and conventions that cover conflict. They must be as accurate as possible when describing an event as contrary to international law, humanitarian law or the rules of war.

9) Journalists should use language with care, sensitivity and accuracy. Place names have different meanings to different people; use of words such as terrorist, assassination and murder resonate differently with different sides in a conflict. It may sometimes be necessary for a journalist to explain why they are using certain words or terminology.

10) Employers and commissioning editors have ethical duties towards journalists, including freelances, who take risks to supply content. Journalists, including freelances, covering conflict should be properly insured and have attended, where possible, a hostile environment course. They should be supplied with suitable protective equipment and offered counselling to deal with trauma.