



## Strengthening Conflict Sensitive Coverage in Ukraine's Regional Media

### SELF-REGULATION GUIDELINES FOR JOURNALISTS IN UKRAINE ON COVERING INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE

This is a purely practical set of suggestions designed to help journalists through the challenges of covering one of the most sensitive aspects of a conflict – the plight of Internally Displaced People (IDPs). It is not theoretical but has been compiled with the help of a large group of senior Ukrainian journalists and editors, participants of the project called Regional Voices: Strengthening Conflict-Sensitive Coverage in Ukraine's Regional Media. The project is supported by the European Union.



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Covering events in a conflict zone is one of the most difficult tasks journalists will ever face. What's even more demanding is covering conflict within your own country. Journalists will be under constant pressure from military, political and even family sources to take a more sympathetic line on their own country's actions.

This guide is by no means exhaustive, but should serve as an aide memoire for anyone who wants to report more effectively and fairly on a major humanitarian issue. At the heart of this challenge is how journalists can help the public to understand that more than 1.6 million IDPs is not merely a statistic but a collection of individual human beings, each with a tale to tell.

Reporting on Internally Displaced People (IDPs) is a highly sensitive issue which demands great skill and compassion from journalists.



The public can usually relate to human-interest stories and it is important to remind a wider audience that although IDPs have been uprooted from their homes, jobs and often families, they still have so much in common with everyone else.

Since some of them will have experienced terrible trauma, loss and grief it may take time for journalists to win their trust. Some will be extremely wary of the media and frightened they could harm family left behind if they speak out. We have to respect that.

At the same time, we cannot assume everything we are told is the unvarnished truth. Journalists must continue to be professional when they hear stories of personal loss and suffering and gently probe the facts behind what they are being told.





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It's perfectly fair to ask if IDPs have any photographs or documentation to back up what they are saying. If it's a story to do with benefits, what are the names of the people and organisations that they have been dealing with? As long as the information is obtained in a sympathetic way it can add greatly to the strength of your story.

Finally it's critical to be as open minded as possible and not make assumptions about any individuals you come across, even if you fundamentally disagree with their point of view or the loyalties they express. Many lives have been turned upside down by this conflict and opinions vary greatly on what has happened and what should happen next.

Our job is to report as faithfully as possible on what we are told and what we see. You know only too well that as journalists we are uniquely privileged to report on people and places that the general public rarely encounter. At the same time, we have a huge responsibility to make sure that our reporting is to the highest standards of truth, balance and accuracy.



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### Here are **20** points you might like to think about:

- 1 Avoid stigmatising:** stereotypes are quick to form when talking about any group but IDPs can become an easy group to stigmatise on sensitive socio-economic topics including housing, employment or social benefits.
- 2 Chose your language carefully:** the terms 'IDP' and 'refugees' are not interchangeable as refugees are deemed to have left their own country. These are very specific terms endorsed by national and international bodies including the United Nations.
- 3 Don't think of them as different:** many IDPs resent being defined by their status and insist that they are first and foremost Ukrainian citizens with the same rights, ambitions and ties as any other citizen.



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### Protect children where possible:

children often provide a compelling element to a story but it's crucial to ensure they're not used as a propaganda tool and interviews must be carried out only with parents' permission and in a sensitive way.



**5 Don't separate them from the wider community:** before the conflict, all Ukrainian citizens could move freely around the country but now IDPs must prove their status with a special certificate. That doesn't mean they are not Ukrainian.

**6 Protect their identity when necessary:** many IDPs still have families in the non-governmental controlled areas who could suffer adverse consequences if they are identified with a family member who appears to be a Ukrainian sympathiser.

**7 Show empathy and understanding:** many IDPs will be suffering from the trauma of leaving their homes and families behind. Some may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) which can affect individuals at any stage.

**8 Build trust:** some IDPs are very suspicious of the media and fear journalists have an agenda of their own which is hostile. Establish common interests where possible in areas from sport to family. Make it clear you are interested in them as an individual.

**9 Ask open questions:** open questions are simply those which do not pre-suppose the answer. So "tell me about your journey here" is a more appropriate question than "were you attacked on your way here?"

**10 Take your time:** although time is frequently at a premium it is particularly important to give IDPs as much time as possible to tell their stories. The best way to get a positive response from someone who has suffered a loss is to show patience.





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- 11 **Try not to fan the flames:** the sensitivity of the issue means journalists must be especially careful to be as balanced as possible and avoid inflammatory writing. While journalists should never shy away from the truth, always ask whether certain information is indeed central to the story.
- 12 **Take a step back:** especially if you have just carried out an emotionally charged interview, it's important to have time to reflect before writing. Always try to put the statements in the interview into a broader context — just don't miss your deadline.
- 13 **Humanise the story:** look for details which help people to get a better picture of the person you have interviewed. Eye and hair colour, gestures, clothing and the way they talk are all worth describing to build a more complete picture.
- 14 **Be analytical:** always try to see the story behind the story and put the flesh on the bones. Does this have wider consequences or could it lead to a change in the way IDPs are treated? Is this a one-off or are many IDPs similarly affected?
- 15 **Separate facts and opinions:** however strongly you feel about an issue, journalists have a duty to keep their own opinions for editorials or opinion pieces which are clearly labelled as such.

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**Question official statements:** it's terribly important that journalists hold public officials and experts to account for what they say. Ask for evidence to back up the statements and statistics.



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**Do a follow up:** if you've secured a good interview, don't forget to go back and do another interview after a specified amount of time to find out how things have changed.



**18 Put the numbers in context:** too often journalists accept numbers without asking the basis on which they have been calculated. If it's a poll, establish how many were questioned as less than 1,000 may not be statistically valid.

**19 Work with civil society organisations (CSOs):** civil society in Ukraine has blossomed since the crisis in the east and often has excellent contacts with the IDP community and can facilitate dialogue with potential interviewees.

**20 Reflect changing circumstances:** nothing stays still and the situation of IDPs today is not what it was when the crisis erupted. Do IDPs still think they will return or are they now settled in their new community? Are they doing more to help themselves? Have children managed to put their traumas behind them?

**These recommendations have been compiled by Thomson Foundation consultant, Mark Webster, during the concluding editorial forum which took place in Kyiv, Ukraine on 13th and 14th February, 2017.**

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