

Seminar 1

Lessons from “Jim: The James Foley Story”

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Overview

This three- to four-hour class session will help students understand and think through the risks and dangers inherent in today's reporting of conflicts, terrorism, and violence. James Foley's capture and death will be examined as a case study to review factors that affect a journalist's safety. The factors include state vs. nonstate actors, dangers inherent in a story, changing attitudes about journalists as noncombatants vs. targets of opportunity, and many other issues.

The class should begin with a viewing of the HBO documentary, "Jim: The James Foley Story," which chronicles Foley's life, capture, imprisonment and torture by the Islamic State and eventual murder in 2014.

Instructors are provided with background to help inform their teaching, as well as readings for students to review in advance of the session. The instructors are also given questions to provoke discussion along with the key points raised by each question.

It is unlikely instructors will be able to cover all of the proposed discussion questions.

Options include watching the documentary in one class and discussing Questions 1 through 8 in a separate class. Another alternative is for instructors to require students to watch the documentary outside of class by accessing it through HBO or Amazon; however, this is not advised because of the emotions raised by the documentary.

Instructor Advance Reading

In addition to the reading below, also study the student reading materials. Each discussion question offers background reading to help you guide the discussion. These readings also will help your understanding for Seminars 2 and 3.

- [White House: U.S. Hostage Policy](#)
- [More journalists killed in first nine months of 2018 than in all 2017](#)
- [Journalists Killed in 2016 - Reporters Without Borders](#)
- [Journalists Killed in 2015 – Reporters Without Borders](#)
- [VICE: Road to Mosul documentary](#)
- ["The Revolution is Being Televised" \(short documentary\) by Adam Pletts](#)
- ["Appeal by Austin Tice's Parents and Reporters Without Borders to the White House"](#)

Austin Tice's parents sat in for part of the White House hostage policy review. This release from Reporters Without Borders shows the Tices' perspective in the talks and how the decision-making process evolved.

- ["One year after Charlie Hebdo, RSF publishes 'Jihad Against Journalists'"](#)
Reporters Without Borders' comprehensive look at the evolution of how armed groups like ISIL, Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram wage war against media personnel

- [“Staying safe” from the International News Safety Institute](#)

This site provides safety information on a number of topics. You do not have to go through every subject area on the site, but browse through those that pique your interest.

Student Advance Readings and Viewing

SYRIA BACKGROUND

[Vox: Syria/Iraq Conflict Explainer Video](#)

- This video explains who the individual actors are in the Syrian conflict, how alliances have formed, and which entities support which sides.

[“Syria: The story of the conflict” - BBC](#)

- A nine-part chronology on the conflict in Syria from Arab Spring to present.

LIBYA BACKGROUND

[“Libya profile - Timeline” \(start in 2011\) - BBC](#)

- A timeline of Libya’s history from origins to present, focusing on events after the Arab Spring.

JAMES FOLEY BACKGROUND

[“Evaporated” by James Harkin](#)

- This piece from *Vanity Fair* details the capture of James Foley and some of the other journalists taken hostage in the region. It was published May 2014, a few months before James was killed.

HOSTAGE POLICY

[“Revised US hostage policy creates new dilemma for Obama – a contradiction” by Raya Jalabi](#)

- The new US hostage policy allows for families of those kidnapped to negotiate with the abductors. The government adjusted its policy to be more flexible on negotiations but still maintains the no-ransom payment policy. This piece looks at what the changes in the hostage policy means.

SAFETY

[“Safety Guide for Journalists” from Reporters Without Borders](#)

- The comprehensive handbook for journalists going to violent areas.

Instructor Notes

Beneath each question that will be posed to students, there are notes and bullet points intended to help instructors focus on the information, controversy and/or issues that students should learn and debate.

Discussion Questions

The documentary often elicits strong emotions from students – and anyone who views it. Viewers may cry or otherwise react to the incidents shown. Instructors are advised to start the discussion with several minutes of conversation about how students feel after viewing the documentary.

Questions that can stimulate discussion include:

- What feelings did this story give you?
- What parts of the documentary most affected you?
- During the hostages' imprisonment, what incidents or conversations surprised you, upset you or otherwise stuck with you?
- The Foley family was featured prominently. Were there particular family members with whom you identified? What did you feel in listening to their stories?

After giving students a chance to air their emotions, move on to the issues raised by the documentary.

1. Why does the U.S. have the hostage policy it does? Where do other countries differ? Why? What does this mean for a journalist captured in a combat zone?

This opens the conversation to reinforce what the U.S. hostage policy is and how that policy compares to those of other countries. Students should be asked to think about a hostage situation from the perspective of the government and the hostage's family, and talk through the challenges of freeing someone.

- The U.S. government prefers to use special operations to conduct rescue missions for those taken hostage and publicly has a no-ransom policy. The U.S. will consider swapping prisoners, however. Origins of this policy date back to the 1970s and the kidnapping of American diplomats.
 - “[Why the US Swaps Prisoners But Doesn't Pay Ransoms](#)” by Brian Michael Jenkins
 - “[No One's Really In Charge' in Hostage Negotiations](#)” by Shane Harris
- The U.S. government holds a no-ransom policy because it believes paying ransom provides terrorist organizations with their main source of funding and incentivizes more kidnappings. It believes other European nations pay ransoms.
 - “[Why the U.S. Does Not Pay Ransoms for Americans Kidnapped by Terrorists](#)” by David S. Cohen
 - “[Reporters Without Borders launches #FreeAustinTice campaign, a first in US media history](#)” by Reporters Without Borders

2. What was your understanding of conflict reporting before watching the documentary and what is it now? How about in Syria, specifically?

Having students share what they learned will open them up to the realization that they need to do much more research to fully understand the nature of a conflict or a potentially dangerous situation about which they want to report.

There is no right or wrong answer here. The goal is to open a discussion and offer answers to questions through the reading material provided above.

3. What steps do you think should be taken to prepare before going to a combat zone, area of violent civil unrest or other dangerous situations? How, if at all, does preparation differ between freelancers and journalists working for news organizations? What are the risks and how can they be mitigated?

This question allows the instructor to introduce the safety guides and lead a discussion based on the Reporters Without Borders and ACOS materials.

Handout: [ACOS Safety Checklist](#)

Most importantly, instructors should stress that adequate preparation is key and give some sense of scope of the steps and work needed for a reporter to be well-prepared.

- What could James Foley have done differently?
 - He knew the fixer, but chose an unknown driver to save money.
 - He stopped at an Internet café. Did the driver suggest it?
 - At the café, did they stay too long?

Seminar 2 will go into the issues of risk assessment and safety training in depth.

4. What are news “black holes” and what are their consequences?

This is very much a purpose-of-journalism question, and hopefully an exploration of one of the key motivations of being a conflict journalist. If, for example, Syria becomes too dangerous for journalists on the ground, the threat of a news “black hole” – or absence of first-hand, authenticated and unbiased information is a possibility. Comparing Syria to other countries where a free media doesn’t exist will help students think about the importance of newsgathering in these life-threatening environments.

Without independent journalists on the ground, reliable information to allow good decision-making and an informed citizenry is hard to get. Though the situation in Syria is different than the media censorship in North Korea, our knowledge of events and issues in those countries relies in large part on the journalism (or lack thereof) coming out of those countries.

- [“Ten Most Censored Countries”](#) by Committee to Protect Journalists
- [“Citizen Journalists Playing a Crucial Role in Syrian War”](#) by Edward Platt
- [“Whom Can You Trust on the Syrian Border”](#) by Ben Taub

5. Thinking about James Foley’s motivations in going to Libya, and then heading to Syria, how do they resonate with your motivations as aspiring journalists?

Understanding why James Foley went to Libya and then to Syria shows the different realities for conflict reporters versus other journalists. The lifestyle and risk is different. These questions put the students inside the psyche of someone going to the frontline. They also should open up the thought process so as to not think of conflict reporting as a uniform experience, but specific to each area. Instructors could incorporate other potential combat zones such as Nigeria or Colombia.

- James Foley went to Libya out of a desire to give a voice to those without one. After returning from his capture in Libya he said it wasn't worth it, putting friends and family through the stress of getting kidnapped to report in the region. But he headed back after a few months at home and eventually moved to Syria, despite protests from friends and family, saying it was something he felt he had to do.
 - [“James Foley’s Choices”](#) by Mark Singer
 - [“James Foley was a journalist who had to be there”](#) by Manuel Roig-Franzia
 - [“Why the Best War Reporter in a Generation Had to Suddenly Stop”](#) by Mark Warren
- This provides an opportunity to bring up the lure of reporting on crucial issues in dangerous situations, the adrenaline rush that journalists in the documentary describe, the feeling that providing information from war-torn areas is important and meaningful – and how those emotions must be weighed against risks and responsibilities to family.

6. What are the ethical questions in traveling with one side in a conflict?

Reporters in Syria often have had to travel with rebel forces to get access to the frontline. They make choices to get to the story, but face ethical challenges. This question deals with maintaining ethics in a chaotic environment. Ask students to think about how embedding with one side could affect access and bias.

- Traveling with rebel groups is different than being an embedded reporter with the U.S. military because they do not have the same responsibility for your safety. Nevertheless, the potential for bias arises out of extended proximity with the fighters.

7. What did the documentary say about relationships with local populations? What do you do when those connections change?

Students should understand that souring relations with local populations is a distinct possibility. Begin thinking about what that means for your reporting, both ethically and logistically, and your safety. What lessons can you draw from the documentary about this?

- Local populations in Syria initially welcomed Western reporters, but when Western governments failed to improve their situations people grew colder toward reporters. The threat of the Islamic State also can cause civilians to shy away from Western journalists
 - [“The Rules of Conflict Reporting Are Changing”](#) by Janine di Giovanni
- There are two primary issues when depending on local citizens for help – bias in reporting and safety. How much can you trust someone you may not know well when that individual is just trying to survive?

8. What do you think the documentary left unanswered or left out concerning the realities of conflict reporting?

Here is an opportunity for students to contrast their own understanding of frontline reporting with the portrayal in the film. Consider the daily life of James Foley and his colleagues in Syria and Libya.

- Reporting from a war zone, freelancers are often selling their stories to news outlets for meager amounts. Safety training and self-sufficiency are largely on you as the reporter and the other journalists you travel with. There is no backup beyond your colleagues and yourself.

- [“War Reporting in the New Media Landscape”](#) by Brent Crane

Follow-up assignment for students

Write a 500-word analysis of the five most important risk assessments to be made before reporting from a conflict or other danger area, and why; if possible, write about what you think is the most common mistake that reporters make in preparing for a dangerous foreign assignment. Include examples of real conflicts and reporters who have been endangered.