

PRACTICAL HANDBOOK

MEDIA REPORTING ON PERSONS MISSING DUE TO 1992-1995 CONFLICT IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

**THIS HANDBOOK IS A PRODUCT OF THE EXPERIENCE AND
PRACTICE OF JOURNALISTS, EDITORS, SPOKESPERSONS,
INVESTIGATORS, AND HUMANITARIAN WORKERS.**

MEDIA REPORTING ON PERSONS MISSING DUE TO 1992-1995 CONFLICT IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

**THIS HANDBOOK IS A PRODUCT OF THE EXPERIENCE AND
PRACTICE OF JOURNALISTS, EDITORS, SPOKESPERSONS,
INVESTIGATORS, AND HUMANITARIAN WORKERS.**

IMPRESSUM

Title:

Media Reporting On Persons Missing Due To 1992-1995 Conflict In Bosnia and Herzegovina:
Practical Handbook

Publisher:

Balkan Investigative Reporting Network Bosnia and Herzegovina

Address:

Splitska 6, Sarajevo

Web address:

www.detektor.ba

Authors:

Lamija Grebo and Emina Dizdarevic

Editor:

Dzana Brkanic

Editor-in-chief:

Semir Mujkic

Executive director:

Denis Dzidic

Project coordinator:

Aida Mahmutovic

Proofreading:

Maida Mehic

DTP:

Jasmin Leventa

Year:

2023.

*This publication was written with professional and financial support
from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).*



ICRC

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD	6
Editor's foreword	6
Introductory notes from the ICRC	7
Why report on missing persons?	8
What are BIRN BiH's standards for reporting on missing persons?	8
For whom is this Handbook designed?	9
IS THERE AN INTEREST IN REPORTING ON MISSING PERSONS IN BiH?	10
APPROACH TO AND COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILIES OF MISSING PERSONS	11
How to communicate with interlocutors?.....	11
How to find interlocutors?.....	13
METHODS OF REPORTING ABOUT MISSING PERSONS.....	14
How to improve and deliver reporting on missing persons?	15
COOPERATION OF PROSECUTORS AND INVESTIGATORS WITH THE MEDIA	16
STANDARDS OF REPORTING ABOUT MISSING PERSONS	17
Communication on social media	18
EXPERIENCES OF PARTICIPANTS	19
CONCLUSIONS	20
ABOUT BIRN BiH	24
ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS	24

FOREWORD

EDITOR'S FOREWORD

Several years ago, the day before I covered exhumations of the missing from the past war for the first time, I had a long talk with an investigator of the Missing Persons Institute of Bosnia and Herzegovina. He shared with me his experiences from the field. He talked about finding the bones of a pregnant woman with a baby in her arms, about skeletons assembled from multiple graves, sleepless nights, and hands tied with wire – in which, as I found out later, he also sought those belonging to his family members.

I had reported for years on the hopes of families to find their loved ones. His experiences and hopes of families probably further influenced my disappointment when no bones were found on the following day, during the exhumation, to which he took the BIRN BiH TV crew. Other crew members visibly shared the same feeling. I remember that we all said we could not even imagine the anticipation and feelings of the family members.

This is why we have tried to illustrate in this Handbook that anticipation; what it means for families and how important our media role is in their search. Through sharing our experiences and doubts, revealing the traps we have faced in our work, providing examples, and describing the tasks you will face, we aim to assist and inspire you in your efforts. You need to understand how you are helping through doing your job with professionalism and compassion.

This Handbook for reporting on missing persons in the past war is a result of cooperation between the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Missing Persons Institute of Bosnia and Herzegovina, State Prosecutor's Office, Balkan Investigative Reporting Network of BiH, as well as journalists from the whole country.

The missing persons issue is an extremely sensitive, but crucial topic about which the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network Bosnia and Herzegovina (BIRN BiH) has been reporting since 2005. BIRN has consistently provided information about progress in finding mortal remains of victims of the past war in news items, feature stories, analyses, TV shows, and investigative pieces.

The content created by BIRN BiH, as a nongovernmental media organization, has since been conveyed – and generated further coverage – by many media outlets from the country, as well as the region and the world.

In the past war, from 1992 to 1995, around 35,000 persons went missing in BiH; around 7,600 of them still remain missing. The weighty responsibility to find them is shared among institutions and investigators. The state is responsible for providing the required resources and a conducive environment to find the missing. To help facilitate – and drive the process forward – the media carries the obligation to report in a professional, unbiased, and empathetic manner.

Information about potential locations of mass graves has winnowed over time. Meanwhile, families of missing persons are passing away. As a result, a growing number of the remaining missing will have no one to bury them in case they are found. Media management and public interest in this topic is in decline, only episodically spiking for anniversaries. Outside those dates, families of the missing will often tell you, this issue is forgotten by all.

Having recognized this, in 2021, the ICRC offered support to BIRN BiH to strengthen media reporting on this topic, as well as to educate students and young journalists. Through this collaboration, students and young journalists were given the opportunity to improve their skills, learn, receive editorial assistance, support, and a platform for publishing the content they created.

Over the lifetime of the project, the goal was to preserve the stories of missing persons from being forgotten, so that the public would know that they existed, lived, and were not just numbers, but real people who are still being awaited or searched for. Additionally, the project aimed to provide families who had not had the opportunity to do so before, a platform for their voices to be heard, and to highlight the challenges or shortcomings of institutions. The media was also used as a means for families to appeal to those who know where the bones of their loved ones are to speak out about it.

This Handbook is partly a result of that work and cooperation, offering experiences of journalists and editors who report about missing persons in different settings. Journalists and editors from other newsrooms whom BIRN BiH and the ICRC invited to exchange opinions, knowledge and skills, have also contributed by sharing their practices.

The Missing Persons Institute of BiH and Prosecutor's Office of BiH also contributed to this Handbook for reporting, underscoring the need for media workers to know the rules and obligations, but also offering essential information for this reporting work.

We are grateful to all contributors for their immense effort in preparing this Handbook, which we can all keep at hand so we can write quality content, ask better questions, research more deeply, understand better, and support the search of families more persistently.

The Handbook guides users through various practices, empirically, through stories from the field. It highlights and explains the need to avoid certain terminology, as well as how to create content in a humanitarian manner, giving practical advice to enable all those interested to assimilate new knowledge and further improve the quality and depth of their work.

INTRODUCTORY NOTES FROM THE ICRC

Thirty years since the beginning of war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995), around 7,600 people are still missing. The right of families to know the truth about the whereabouts of their loved ones is established under international and domestic laws.

In 2022, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) marked 30 years of its continuous work in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and therefore, three decades of involvement in addressing the issue of missing persons. This anniversary was an opportunity to reflect upon our experience of working with the families of the missing, institutions, and other actors involved in the tracing process. It also gave us a chance to analyze how ICRC can further contribute to resolving this issue.

Taking a multidisciplinary approach to the missing persons issue, with a continuous work and support to families of the missing, their associations, and institutions of BiH, primarily the BiH Missing Persons Institute, the ICRC has:

- cooperated closely with and continuously provided psychosocial and financial support to more than 40 associations of families of missing persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- realized cooperation with the academic community through support to students of master's and doctoral programs who wish to address the topic of missing persons in their academic work.
- established a network of psychologists and psychotherapists who work with families of the missing - and will continue to do so in the future.
- cooperated with representatives of religious communities, addressing some of the common uncertainties families of the missing have regarding the disappearance of their loved ones and appropriate religious practices.
- conducted research of international archives to obtain information about the missing and potential locations of their gravesites, resulting in over 100,000 pages of documentation that were processed and handed over to the Missing Persons Institute for further analysis and potential actions.

Partnership and cooperation with journalists and the media in Bosnia and Herzegovina represents essential factors in searching for missing persons, not only due to media's vital role as a link between families, institutions, and the public, but also due to the fact that the biggest obstacle in finding the remaining missing persons is the lack of information about potential locations where they might be found. In such a situation, the dispersive role of the media becomes significant and is one of the key factors in spreading information and raising awareness about this issue among the population.

Cooperation with the BIRN BiH also highlighted numerous challenges media are facing when reporting about missing persons, ranging from accessing institutional information to communicating with and gaining access to the families of the missing. The role of ICRC, as an international institution with more than 150 years of experience in searching for the missing persons worldwide, is to address these problems and provide adequate space and platforms to facilitate communication and information flow between these groups.

Through active cooperation with journalists, the ICRC and BIRN BiH endeavor to create an informal partnership network, which will include representatives of media, competent institutions, and families of missing persons, and will help accelerate the tracing process in Bosnia and Herzegovina and provide the families with answers they have been seeking for 30 years.

WHY REPORT ON MISSING PERSONS?

The media can provide the opportunity for families to tell us about the missing they seek: who were they, what were their lives like, under what circumstances did they go missing? How has the long quest to find their missing family members affected *their* lives?

Families often say their only wish is to find the mortal remains of their loved ones and that they have devoted their post-war lives to this search. We can help them by amplifying their voices and showcasing their need for justice, as well as highlighting the obstacles they face in their search.

Reporting must be objective, true, free from taking sides and deprived of any national prefixes.

There is a prevailing sense that the public has been saturated with stories about the war and its effects. Yet it remains important to convey the reality that the search for missing persons remains ongoing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with fewer potential locations to be searched, and around 7,600 real persons still missing. These were not mere numbers, but people who were – and remain – loved by those left behind.

WHAT ARE BIRN BIH'S STANDARDS FOR REPORTING ON MISSING PERSONS?

BIRN BiH strives to educate journalists on the importance of empathy and impartiality when reporting on missing persons, regardless of their identity or the background of the individuals involved. A victim is a victim – regardless of their ethnic, national, or religious affiliation. Centering this moral reality is imperative.

Those are also the backbones of media professionalism.

It is natural that at home we observe things or hear stories about the war that give rise to different emotions. But these must be suppressed in reporting, which should only be based on correct and timely information from relevant sources, such as verified documents or court evidence. Commentary by journalists must be avoided on all occasions. In addition, stories about the missing need to provide adequate space to families – towards whom we shall be empathetic, polite, cultured, and professional.

When expressing condolences and demonstrating respect and compassion, journalists must recognize that it cannot be “harder for them than it is for family members”, as one of the training participants noted. In our choice of words and expressions, we must avoid the theatrical temptations of television.

Family members will often present data about persons whom they suspect responsible for the death of their loved ones, but in case we are unable to hear the other side of the story or support that with an indictment or verdict, such content will not be published.

Whenever possible, we shall also support testimonials by our interlocutors with other sources.

It is critical to make preparations and agree on ground rules, as well as the terms of publication of the story, prior to conducting an interview with families of the missing. If protected witnesses are involved, image and tone distortion should be applied. With the additional use of pseudonyms, they should feel safe.

Ensuring a comfortable atmosphere for interlocutors during the filming or interview will contribute to better results. Journalists should avoid offending their interlocutors in any way. This includes providing space for breaks and – if need be – interrupting the interview so as not to endanger their health.

There is high potential for interviewees to be upset by the questions or the mere fact that they spoke about a traumatic event or remembered their loved ones. After leaving the field, the practice of BIRN BiH journalists is to ensure the health of their interlocutors, to prevent them from being retraumatized. We call them after the interview to check on them.

Plan on investing more patience in working with families, reviewing and extracting the material after the interview. Never interrupt your interlocutors when not necessary or seek information which we know will not be included in your story.

Trust is crucial, particularly in reporting on this topic. We advise you to maintain contact with your interlocutors so they will gain trust and know that they have not been exploited. With your interlocutor’s comfort and trust, you will be rewarded with being the first to receive new pieces of information or being offered a new story by your interlocutor.

Victims of the past war, including families of the missing, are often subjected to prejudice, stigmatization, ridicule on social media, and various other dangers. Cognizant of this the task of the media is to protect them as much as possible by thinking about potential consequences and the correct choice of words and terminology in their reporting.

Sensationalism is utterly inappropriate in reporting about the missing. Life, health, and respect must take precedence over headlines attracting clicks.

Finally, remember that you should never publish a story of which you may be ashamed in five or ten years.

FOR WHOM IS THIS HANDBOOK DESIGNED?

The Practical Handbook for reporting on missing persons is intended for *all journalists*, to help them in their work – as well as future reporters and journalists. It also aims to incentivize editors and directors of media outlets to bring these topics back to prime time, as well as remind professors to engage their students with experience-based examples in addition to theoretical lectures, along with direct readership by students themselves – of all disciplines. Families of victims would benefit from reading the Handbook as well, so they would know what they could expect and what the obligations of the media are. Finally, the Handbook is written to be accessible to a broader readership of all others who want to learn more about the missing and the way in which the media should treat this subject.

IS THERE AN INTEREST IN REPORTING ON MISSING PERSONS IN BiH?

Generally, the topics related to missing persons get very little space in the BiH media. The typical exceptions regard discoveries of large mass graves, as was the case of Tomasic, the International Day of the Disappeared, and other important dates and anniversaries are marked. Specialized media, such as BIRN BiH, report about the topic continuously.

Reporting on missing persons raises awareness that the search for around 7,600 people is *still ongoing* in BiH. Such coverage also provides an opportunity for individual stories about missing persons to be told through the recollections of family members, who are still searching.

During a September 2022 workshop jointly organized by BIRN BiH and the ICRC, journalists and editors from various media outlets exchanged experiences in reporting on missing persons, particularly noting the lack of media space given to such types of stories.

At the workshop, journalists and representatives of the Missing Persons Institute of BiH (MPI BiH) highlighted the relevance of reporting on missing persons, particularly since so much time has passed.

A representative of the Institute told workshop participants that “The role of the media is of crucial importance. It is only the media that can prevent this issue from being forgotten.”

The issue of missing persons remains largely invisible in the public space today due to a range of other and more current news. But it has also been sidelined in favor of the commercial media’s pursuit of clicks and profit. In addition, it is widely believed that the public is simply oversaturated with missing persons topics, but also war-related topics in general.

Colleagues from daily and other media outlets have drawn attention to the fact that these topics, except for marking anniversaries, are covered on a smaller scale due to lack of interest, and sometimes simply due to lack of time or number of available journalists. Journalists may not have enough time to properly prepare news stories on this topic as they are often assigned to multiple tasks during the day

The paucity of interest by media outlets or their editorial offices in publishing stories about the missing came up repeatedly during the September workshop. Participants recommended highlighting the necessity of covering those topics to media management.

Reporting only about anniversaries generates distrust towards journalists among interlocutors. Journalists participating cited examples of interlocutors who expressed anger and criticism at only being contacted on anniversaries – and ignored otherwise. Still others expressed frustration that the same interlocutors are interviewed repeatedly for their stories, while other families are ignored.

“The role of the media is of crucial importance. It is only the media that can prevent this issue from being forgotten.”

APPROACH TO AND COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILIES OF MISSING PERSONS

During the last three decades, many families have told stories about the persons they seek, or those whose bone fragments they buried, while continuing to search for the rest of their mortal remains. Unfortunately, some bodies have been found in multiple mass graves. Several hundred stories remain untold. The media can give voice to these families still searching, to illuminate for the public the lives and stories of those yet undiscovered.

Journalists and editors who have covered such stories for years, emphasized that in the past it was easier to find interlocutors for this topic. Earlier, everyone wanted to tell their stories, so they proactively approached the media. At the time, there was a prevailing hope and trust towards journalists, as well as the institutions dealing with this issue.

Over time, many family members who have searched for their missing relatives have passed away, and families have grown reserved to journalists, either due to the repetition and retelling of the same story, or the loss of hope that their story will make a difference. Unfortunately, in some cases, the terms of publication of stories were not respected, destroying trust in the journalistic profession.

During the workshop, one of the journalists said that a family member searching for their loved ones drew her attention to the fact that they were not just numbers. Yet this has not always been taken into account.

“Media information expressed in numbers is very attractive. Especially for TV. It is convenient to manipulate them - they are placed on graphs, they can be very tele visually displayed,” she explained, adding that we must not forget that the numbers of missing persons represent real individuals with lives and families, and not just impersonal statistics.

Each time we discuss this topic with our interlocutors, we should bear in mind that they are *reliving their loss*. Hence, communication with families of the missing requires a special approach in accordance with the ethical standards of the journalistic profession.

Victims’ families often resent the national prefixes that are frequently attributed to victims in media reports – so these should be avoided.

HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH INTERLOCUTORS?

Whenever we can, we should talk to our interlocutors *in person*, rather than over the phone or written communication. Introducing ourselves, the media outlet we work for, and then presenting the idea for our story helps build a relationship and trust with families of the missing. This can convince them that we have approached them with respect. A preparatory interview following will help them conclude that we intend to tell the story about their missing family members as best we can.

Preparation even prior to the introduction and preliminary discussion with the family of the missing is crucial. This includes research of the location and conditions under which the victim went missing, the town he/she came from, their family, and the formulation of questions when possible.

It is necessary to demonstrate – professionally and appropriately – a high level of compassion when talking to families of the missing. Interlocutors can assess very easily if a journalist has only come “to get just one more story.” In addition to this being disrespectful and unprofessional, a bearing leading interlocutors to conclude that they are being “mined” for more content can lead to lower quality of statements and interviews – even their refusal to talk to the journalist altogether.

It is important that we bear this in mind: our interlocutors relive their loss when they discuss their missing loved ones. They will think about it for long after the end of the interview. For that reason, the utmost care must be taken in the approach for – and conduct of – an interview. Efforts should be taken in advance to ascertain the medical condition and overall health of our interviewees – this will inform the conversational dynamics.

In particular, we should carefully listen to our interlocutors and not interrupt them even when it seems that they have digressed from the matter. Rather, if this occurs (as it often does), attempt to gently redirect the interviewee back to the story. Interlocutors often start crying during the interview. In those moments, it is important to demonstrate sympathy, give them space to compose themselves, then – if that works – try to continue the interview. It is very important to not subject them to any sort of pressure. *Do not insist* on continuing if they are incapable – or unwilling – to continue.

“I was ready to terminate the interview with a woman, who was crying and who, as I found out during the interview, was pregnant. There’s no story or editorship for which I would put someone at risk,” said one of the participants – pointing out that sometimes we simply have to give up on our story.

Recognize and respect the fact that our interlocutors give us their trust by telling us about the most important and painful parts of their lives.

Recognize and respect the fact that our interlocutors give us their trust by telling us about the most important and painful parts of their lives. We must justify this trust that they place in us not only in our conduct and approach, but in the quality of our final story about the persons whom they seek.

We should ask ourselves if we sufficiently put ourselves in the shoes of the families, reflecting on the weight of life in perpetual uncertainty for nearly 30 years.

While this may seem inconsequential, when going to our interlocutors, it is necessary to present ourselves not just professionally, but tactfully. This also applies to our choice in clothes, makeup, and jewelry.

“Family members themselves were often victims of the most horrible crimes; some live on the verge of poverty. Thus I always make sure to adapt to the surroundings I’m visiting. It would be inappropriate to come with glitter makeup and ask a person to tell us how they feel about losing someone,” said one of the female journalists.

When we contribute to finding a solitary missing person through our reporting, this is the most significant award and reward for our work and profession.

Recommendations:

- *Prepare and research ahead of interview;*
- *Go to the field to talk to interlocutors in person whenever possible;*
- *Explain to them who you are, what we do, and how the story about their loved ones will be presented;*
- *Develop an honest relationship with your interlocutors, demonstrating appropriate and sincere compassion;*

- Allow them enough time to tell their story, without interruption;
- Don't expose them to pressure, and stop the interview if need be;
- Call them after the interview to check how they are doing and by all means send them the story to read or TV footage to watch it.

HOW TO FIND INTERLOCUTORS?

Due to families' (sadly often warranted) suspicion and wariness towards the media – as well as the prevalent view that statements are always taken from the same persons – it is important to seek new interlocutors, who have still not told their stories. That is not hard as it seems, given that we can obtain information about the missing from multiple sources – be it from our fellow journalists, associations of families of the missing, or often from war crimes trials in cases covering missing persons. Our source can also be indictments, as well as verdicts available on the official web page of the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but they can also be obtained from other courts dealing with war crimes cases on request. It is recommended to also research the archives of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY – colloquially also known as The Hague Tribunal) and judgements delivered by the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals, IRMCT.

The ICRC maintains close relations and can refer you to associations of families of missing persons, which are good starting points for research. Through their activities and operations, the associations are most familiar with the topic and members, and they can recommend to you an appropriate interlocutor.

You can certainly also turn to the Missing Persons Institute of Bosnia and Herzegovina (MPI BiH) for help. You can obtain the most relevant and reliable statistical data from the Institute itself.

“As a spokeswoman, I'm really committed to being a source of information for journalists. I cannot offer *exclusive* information, but I can be a starting point. It's the easiest thing to call me, ask for statistical or other data, figures, data about families. You can start from me, I can guide you as to what might be a good story,” said MPI BiH spokeswoman Emza Fazlic.

One should wait for official information to be released prior to publishing reports about exhumations or discovery of new mass graves. Families waiting for loved ones to be found should learn through official channels, rather than media reports.

By linking newsrooms, a network is established for exchanging contacts or even ideas for stories. Sometimes, a particular newsroom can turn a story idea over to another. We can also make contacts while working on other stories in the field. A great deal of information is also available on social media.

Despite scarce media space, a good story resonates. This can prompt interlocutors to contact you themselves for a new story they want to share with the public. Alternatively, they may reach out to you to introduce or recommend you to another interlocutor.

Recommendations:

- Contact associations of families of the missing, as well as other victims' associations in Bosnia and Herzegovina;
- Contact the Missing Persons Institute of BiH, as well as the ICRC;
- Consult second instance verdicts for war crimes, The Hague Tribunal's archives;
- Reach out to other contacts, including your network of journalists.

One should wait for official information to be released prior to publishing reports about exhumations or discovery of new mass graves. Families waiting for loved ones to be found should learn through official channels, rather than media reports.

METHODS OF REPORTING ABOUT MISSING PERSONS

Apart from marking anniversaries, important dates or the International Day of the Disappeared, there is a broad range of possibilities for how and in what manner to create stories and content about this topic.

In addition to writing on the basis of press releases on exhumations and identifications, which we receive from official institutions, reporting on the missing can be conveyed through feature stories, analysis pieces, and TV stories. Spend a day with a family searching for its members – show who they are, how they live now, and how they lived before the tragedy. Illustrate the cocktail of suspense and tedium involved in years of searching and protracted uncertainty. Such a story will be viewed; every reasonable person will identify with it.

Use a humanitarian method of reporting to show who the missing person is, what they did for a living, what they liked, and what they dreamed of. Showing positive stories is also worthwhile. For instance, if someone contacted another person with information about a grave – share that.

“When people see such stories in the media, they’ll start contacting you as they will want to share their experiences too. And that, in some way, is the role of the media and our help,” said one of the women journalists during the workshop.

Throughout the life of the ICRC-supported project with journalists across BiH, some interlocutors contacted BIRN BiH after reading stories about missing persons, wanting to share their stories too, increasing the planned number of stories.

While it is important for each journalist to write life stories in which they can bring emotions, it is also relevant to highlight shortcomings facing our country in searching for missing persons.

These have to date included challenges facing the Institute relating to parliament not approving the budget to purchase terrain search machinery. The coronavirus pandemic halted field work, witnesses are dying over time, graves were relocated (and tips may not lead to them as a result), and so on.

TV stories and short video materials that can be posted on social media can have a great resonance, especially in the era of digitalization. Reporting on missing persons increases the chances for finding them. People may come forward with potential information about graves.

“We must insist on the process of searching for missing people being concluded after all these years. And you, the media, play an important role in that, you can make a significant contribution. Different stories can be delegated. Your insisting on being committed to the missing persons topic can influence a change in editors’ thinking,” Fazlic said. He added that the responsibility did not always rest upon editors; it is also up to journalists to make a compelling case for pursuing the stories that they want to realize.

TV stories and short video materials that can be posted on social media can have a great resonance, especially in the era of digitalization.

HOW TO IMPROVE AND DELIVER REPORTING ON MISSING PERSONS?

Despite the perception that the media is oversaturated with war crime and missing persons topics, journalists need to pursue getting these stories covered. Presenting their editorial teams with story ideas which are likely to be accepted is important.

As media workers, we must insist on having the search process expedited, so as to find as many missing persons as possible. The media play an important role in facing this (increasingly uphill) challenge.

One of the ways to recover and build interest in these topics is through organizing teach-ins and roundtables with representatives of associations, journalists, and editors. Public broadcasting services have a special obligation and responsibility to cover these topics.

Workshop participants drew attention to creativity in designing projects to be submitted to donors, as well as writing proposals, given that the topic of missing persons pertains to the entire region, as well as demonstrating commitment to EU integration.

These can be either reporting or advocacy projects in their essence. Podcasts, such as new audio-video forms, audio testimonials, customized content, and new digital media reporting methods of new digital media should be employed, so new generations born after the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina could learn and be informed about missing persons.

Developing finished products to offer to print and broadcast outlets through projects and cooperation with MPI BiH provides one avenue to get such stories in mass media. Those media outlets not having enough journalists to cover this topic would get the content, which they could release through their platforms for free.

Many media outlets do not prioritize coverage of these stories; this is especially the case with commercial media. Journalistic awards, such as the 'Nino Catic' award and others, demonstrating that reporters could get recognition for their effort and commitment, could stimulate the production of such stories.

Recommendations:

- Podcasts, audio testimonials, multimedia content;
- Customized content and methods of reporting for new digital media;
- Through projects, engage journalists whose content will be offered to other media outlets;
- Education of all media workers, raising awareness about the need to cover such topics;
- Stimulate journalists to cover these topics through journalistic awards;
- Better cooperation between all journalists and media outlets.

As media workers, we must insist on having the search process expedited, so as to find as many missing persons as possible. The media play an important role in facing this (increasingly uphill) challenge.

COOPERATION OF PROSECUTORS AND INVESTIGATORS WITH THE MEDIA

During the workshop, journalists, and editors talked to representatives of the Prosecutor's Office of BiH about the process of exhumation and identification, as well as about mutual cooperation.

Participants got a firsthand explanation of the exhumation and identification process from the perspective of those involved, so they would know what may be disclosed and how, so as not to compromise the investigation or disturb families by releasing unverified information.

The State Prosecutor's Office explained that no authorization was required for coming to and being present at exhumation sites. They are public. However, those attending must respect the rules, as well as instructions they receive from investigators or prosecution staff managing the process. The investigator is the crew boss, who gives instructions for what will be done and when the exhumation will end.

The "yellow tape rule" must be respected, as it is an enclosed area not to be entered by civilians, to ensure that evidence is not tainted or destroyed. The area where representatives of victims and associations, journalists, and others stand is specifically designated.

When an exhumation is carried out, contact the spokesman, who will inform the prosecutor that a certain media crew will come to the scene.

Journalists who attended the workshop cited the need for institutions to provide detailed press releases and more quality photographs, which are necessary as accompanying content.

The BiH Prosecutor's Office explained that they could not publish personal information or cases that could be associated with a victim. This was to protect the privacy of – and to avoid causing undue hardship for families. Prosecutors, investigators, and police officers cannot discuss "a living" or ongoing cases, but the media still need information.

So, what should be done when it comes to a brief statement? Check whether an exhumation had been previously carried out at that location; this can be used as background information in the article. The text will also be enriched with information on how many persons have been found in the area in question, as well as how many persons remain unaccounted for. The Missing Persons Institute can provide this information to journalists. Contact presidents of associations of missing persons and victims to give you a broader context.

Careful consideration must be given before revealing the identity of victims found. Until results of DNA testing have arrived and until families have been informed, names should not be published, the Prosecutor's Office warned. Victims are waiting in hope, and understandably become upset when surprised by media reports. Identification is not completed until the families have been informed.

Until all official data has been collected, there is no need to rush information out.

Though they cannot offer the media a large amount of data, the Prosecutor's Office highlighted that the journalists' job was very important.

The International Day of the Disappeared, they said, typically spurs an influx of information to the Prosecutor's Office, due to the increased media coverage. Such new data helps verify previously held information, as well as develop new leads – demonstrating the crucial role of reporting and the media in not only seeking the missing, but justice long denied.

STANDARDS OF REPORTING ABOUT MISSING PERSONS

The economic crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic, as well as inflation, have affected the financial stability of the media, not just in BiH, but globally. In addition, national or ethnic divisions are palpable in BiH's media outlets – and reflected in media coverage.

Some participants observed that the media reported solely about one (“their”) ethnic group. This phenomenon does no good for victims.

A victim is a victim – regardless of their national and ethnic background – and they should be reported upon with the same level of professionalism and compassion. This pertains for both war crimes victims and those persons who remain missing, whose remains are as yet undiscovered.

Such content must not be written tendentiously, nor should we count how many persons from any of the national groups got killed or went missing. Victims must not be of secondary importance when reporting about the missing or commemorations.

Efforts must be made to ensure that articles are balanced, not insulting anyone and respecting members of all nationalities in BiH who are searching for their family members.

Deliberate disregard of those rules must not be a journalistic practice. The same goes for exaggerating the suffering of one side only. Politics must be avoided in covering these topics.

When reporting about the missing, appropriate terminology is important. Instead of saying *corpse*, for example, use the word *body* or *mortal remains*; instead of *aggression*, use *war*. These terms were established in the ICTY verdicts. Nor should the legal classification of genocide be minimized by calling it “a horrible crime”.

A victim is a victim – regardless of their national and ethnic background – and they should be reported upon with the same level of professionalism and compassion.

Instead of saying that “a certain number of missing persons” are sought, try to obtain the precise information from the Institute on the total number of persons still being searched for throughout BiH or in a certain area. Try to always include in your article the total number obtained from relevant institutions.

It is crucial to return the attention of the media and public to these topics.

We must not chase clicks and profit.

Editorial teams and management of media outlets are critical in this process. Transitional justice deserves visibility in every media outlet, especially in public broadcasting services.

COMMUNICATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

While the public may feel oversaturated with these topics, media workers need to find a way to raise awareness, especially in people who can reveal locations of potential mass graves.

It would be desirable for media outlets publishing their content on social media to filter comments on news and articles about missing persons, or to prohibit them.

Social media can greatly help increase readership on topics related to missing persons, coming to terms with the past, and transitional justice.

On social media we can often read followers' comments on topics related to missing persons that contain hate speech, hateful narrative, insults and curse words.

It would be desirable for media outlets publishing their content on social media to filter comments on news and articles about missing persons, or to prohibit them.

“Comments on such content should be prohibited, because we gain nothing from them. The goal is not achieved, but they only serve to foment hate. I think the responsibility rests upon the media,” said some of the workshop participants.

Such comments must not be a way for gaining new views, clicks and profit on other people's stories.

We are individually responsible for avoiding offensive comments on our personal social media profiles. We should also eschew unnecessary discussions that could lead to potential hate speech and similar narratives.

Articles including also those on social media, must not chase clicks and views with gratuitously graphic titles. The rights of those searching for missing persons to tell their story in a dignified manner has precedence.

Titles like: “Sevala buried new parts of her husband” are not professional. Such lurid titles must be avoided.

EXPERIENCES OF PARTICIPANTS

In 2021, BIRN BiH and the ICRC organized a multi-day workshop for both young and experienced journalists from throughout the country, with the aim of improving reporting about the missing and war crimes. For the duration of the year, participants were offered mentorship and editorial support, while BIRN's page detektor.ba served as a platform for a newly created series of stories about missing persons.

Journalists received exceptional comments on dozens of published stories, analyses and feature stories from their colleagues, victims' families, and other interlocutors who were satisfied with the content and style of reporting.

Verification of facts and information often proved difficult, because their interlocutors gave them some first and last names that were difficult to verify. As stated above, in such cases, it is best not to publish such content.

Asked about their experiences in working with families of the missing, journalists related that this was painful.

A journalist from Republika Srpska said that the topic was politicized in that entity – he often came across people who didn't want to talk about it. He noticed that families had lost hope and didn't believe that anything would change.

Generally, it was a challenge for all of them to find interlocutors willing to share their stories, especially on camera. Personally coping with the emotions they had after filming also proved difficult.

"A million different people, different stories and fates. And then, you come home and think where you were, what you did and for what. I guess it will be better and they'll find at least one of the persons we wrote about," said one of the journalists.

"The project is pretty good, it really has an effect. Everyone contacted me later, thanking me for the stories and letting me know if they had someone of their own or if they had heard of some other stories. It meant a lot to people that we revived the memory of their loved ones," she said.

Following the publication of her story, one journalist from the project was contacted by prosecutors who started working on the case.

"A million different people, different stories and fates. And then, you come home and think where you were, what you did and for what. I guess it will be better and they'll find at least one of the persons we wrote about."

CONCLUSIONS

When reporting about missing persons, preparation and preliminary research are crucial. Inquire about the details of the crime and the location from which the person went missing (if known). During an informal interview with an interlocutor, try to determine their medical condition so you can plan the dynamics of your conversation. Some people need investment of time and patience to open up talk – and more space to gain confidence in journalist.

Throughout the course of the interview, observe your interlocutor and be attentive to how he/she is feeling. Take breaks if necessary. Before shifting to the focus of the story, it is good practice to ask informal and general questions, in order to make your interlocutor comfortable.

While talking to victims searching for their family members, it is important to demonstrate a high level of empathy and compassion, as well as respect.

Leave the door open to your sources and interlocutors; take time to give them support even when you are not working on the story.

Augment the traditional forms of reporting about missing persons through podcasts as new audio-video forms, audio testimonials, customized and interactive content, so new generations born after the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina could learn and be informed. These forms of reporting can catalyze coverage by other media outlets, to remind and not let the older generations forget about them. This is especially vital with the commercial media which, understandably, live on commercials and marketing.

One idea for improving the reporting which arose from the workshop was to write stories and produce media content through a project or cooperation with the Missing Persons Institute of Bosnia and Herzegovina, to be offered to other media and TV stations as finished products. Useful, socially responsible, and ultimately educational content can be disseminated in this way. Other media outlets, news portals not having enough journalists or resources for covering these topics, would get the content to release through their platforms for free. This concept deserves to be piloted.

Another idea needing support, which arose from a get together of journalists who shared their experiences for this handbook, is to create a database and archive of missing persons by geolocation.

In addition, the participants committed to better cooperation and exchange of contacts. We invite you to join the development and strengthening of the media community in BiH.

If multiple media outlets act in the same direction and goal – that journalists will not stop covering these topics – the relationship of institutions dealing with the issue of missing persons with journalists and the media could be improved.

Endeavour to communicate with different institutions and associations as much as possible – develop trust.

While talking to victims searching for their family members, it is important to demonstrate a high level of empathy and compassion, as well as respect.

Organize workshops to be attended by representatives of institutions, associations and the media, thus establishing informal relations with them.

The media and journalists need to establish better cooperation with the relevant institutions, as their assistance is essential when working on stories. This is particularly pertinent when they are required to obtain documents and statistical data, as well as detailed data and information, while respecting the victims. Transparency and openness of institutions are crucial in this process.

It is the obligation of each journalist to inform their interlocutors, fully, completely honestly, without a hidden agenda, about the way they will use absolutely every single piece of information obtained, including identity details. Agree with your interlocutor on the manner of eventual publication of photographs – seek permission for publication.

Verify your interlocutor's allegations. For example, your interlocutor might say they saw a certain soldier, whose first and last name they cite, take away their father, who went missing without trace on that day, and claim that the soldier is responsible for his death. However, we shall not publish the name of the soldier until we have checked whether he is mentioned in verdicts and indictments, whether he was accused or suspected, or until we have checked with competent prosecutors' offices whether the person is under investigation – or until we locate him ourselves and give him an opportunity to respond.

Go out in the field, gain people's confidence, and be careful in choosing terminology. With balanced reporting, you can ensure that the topic missing persons is relevant and important.

The media must not give up on their socially responsible role, especially in a post-conflict society such as BiH. Nor can they abandon their educational function. Good journalism can not only convey information, but generate a change in public consciousness. Politics will change; politicians will showcase what serves their agendas. The media must be corrective and constantly bring important topics into focus, regardless of the political issues of the day.

We live in an era of social media. Comments on media posts must be filtered strictly or removed if containing inappropriate content, hate speech, and/or offensive narratives.

Legal regulations should be amended in regard to social media.

There must not be sensationalism in reporting on missing persons – because the story is about someone's search and pain. This cannot and must never be an exclusive topic to an outlet, but a matter of social responsibility.

The media must not give up on their socially responsible role, especially in a post-conflict society such as BiH. Nor can they abandon their educational function. Good journalism can not only convey information, but generate a change in public consciousness.

BIRN BiH

The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network of Bosnia and Herzegovina, BIRN BiH, is a media non-governmental organization based in Sarajevo, specialized in monitoring and reporting on trials for war crimes.

Since its establishment in 2005, BIRN BiH has been informing the public about the prosecution of war crimes by state and local courts in BiH, and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, ICTY.

BIRN BiH supports the development of the media and civil society, as well as enforcement of human rights.

In line with its objectives, BIRN BiH publishes high-quality reports, investigations and analyses on crucial transitional justice themes, opening debates and finding possible solutions.

BIRN's archive is a basis for TV and radio content, containing numerous testimonials by victims, as well as interviews with high-level and relevant persons.

INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS (ICRC)

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an international humanitarian organization founded in 1863, operating today in more than 100 countries worldwide, assisting people affected by conflicts and other forms of violence. Guided by the principles of independence, neutrality and impartiality, together with its partners from the International

Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, it does everything within its power to protect human dignity and alleviate suffering. It also seeks to prevent human suffering by strengthening humanitarian law and promoting universal humanitarian principles.

The ICRC has been present in Bosnia and Herzegovina since 1992 and during the conflict in the region, it visited over 54,000 prisoners at 520 locations, exchanged 18 million Red Cross messages, reunited over 4,500 families, distributed more than 100,000 tons of food, regularly supplied more than 1,000 hospitals with emergency medical supplies and held seminars on international humanitarian law for thousands of soldiers. Most of the activities were carried out in close cooperation with local Red Cross organizations.

Strengthening human and technical capacities and cooperation with nearly 40 associations of families of missing persons throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina are also at the center of ICRC's work.

The ICRC dedicates special attention to the consolidation of a sustainable support network for the families of the missing by providing education to psychologists, social workers, and other relevant experts from all over BiH. Thousands of family members of missing persons have benefited from an exchange of experiences and psychosocial support through projects implemented by associations with financial and technical support from the ICRC.

The issue of missing persons is, above all, a humanitarian issue, and therefore, the ICRC calls on the media in Bosnia and Herzegovina to report on missing persons with caution and empathy towards their families – respecting the lives of people who have names and identities, had a life and a role in their communities and families, and are not just number.



Balkan Investigative Reporting Network Bosnia and Herzegovina
Splitska 6, 71000 Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina
T: +387 33 237 269
F: +387 33 237 292
urednik@birnnetwork.org
www.detektor.ba



International Committee of the Red Cross
Kolodvorska 12
71 000 Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina
T +387 33 56 56 50
sarajevo@icrc.org
www.icrc.org/ba
© ICRC, February 2023