

Washington Press Association

The Newsletter/August 2013

A FREELANCE JOURNALIST ABROAD

Freelance reporting and writing is a tough enough business when you're trying to cover your own city, state or country. Imagine how much tougher it is if you don't know the territory, the people, even the language, and you don't have the backing of a major news organization.

But there's no shortage of topics, issues, places and people to report on beyond our borders. Some journalists specialize in those stories, because they're intriguing and important to audiences here; others go after them motivated by a sense of adventure.

Jennifer Karchmer is one of those bold types. A frequent winner in WPA's annual communications contest, she's taken the plunge into learning how to be a foreign correspondent and has already had successes (it's unlikely the association has ever before had an entry submitted for a story published in an Icelandic newspaper). She's picked up some useful guidelines and tips to pass along to WPA members.

BY JENNIFER KARCHMER

American award-winning journalist Janine di Giovanni has been covering conflict regions since the 1980s, starting with Palestine and Bosnia. Luckily, she has never been injured or attacked but has had some harrowing experiences covering the effects of war. Years ago, while reporting in Kosovo, she and two French journalists were held for several hours by a Serbian paramilitary group. "They grabbed us, took our stuff and said they would kill us," she said. The three were able to escape unharmed but shaken.

I met di Giovanni in June at the lecture: "War Reporting: At What Cost?" held at the Brooklyn Brewery in New York City. She and Jim Frederick of Time.com talked for two hours about conflict reporting as a profession and how freelancers can protect themselves amid tighter newsroom budgets with less support from home base.

"The safety net isn't there like it used to be," she said. "In the old days, editors said, 'don't do it if it's too dangerous.'" Today, however, young freelancers are doing whatever it takes to get low-pay or no-pay assignments just to gain the experience and get their name out there for future hiring.

As an independent freelance journalist with 20 years of domestic reporting, I felt I was inexperienced and untrained for an assignment to a dangerous region. So when I organized a research project on freedom of the press in 2012, I chose to start with Iceland, a nation known as relatively free and safe in terms of its press. Nonetheless, I took some basic precautions that are advisable for any international story:

- Reporter's travel sheet. I created a typed, easy-to-read one-page sheet with pertinent travel information and shared it with my editor, family members and a trusted friend who followed my progress. I tacked a copy to my refrigerator before departure and carried a half dozen printed copies in my luggage. Info to include: a current, accurately-depicted headshot, your itinerary with exact dates and locations where you're staying, date of birth, current age, your height and weight, distinguishing physical features (e.g., tattoo left ankle, surgery scar right knee), the city and location of your birth, your passport number with the date issued and date expire, current job designation, any known medical conditions (e.g., nut allergy, asthma), your religious belief and next-of-kin to be contacted in case of emergency.

- Get paid. It may be tempting for a freelancer to work for free to gain byline attention and exposure to help land future stories. Sure, I've done the occasional unpaid piece or written an article gratis for a nonprof-



Jennifer Karchmer at the newspaper Morgunblaðið in Iceland in 2012, with editors Karl Blöndal (left) and Petur Blöndal (right), cousins.

it news agencies. However, you're less likely to get paid if you don't outright ask. Be clear with your editor that she is getting quality work that deserves payment. Consider: what other profession allows its trained professionals to provide work for free? Would you tell the plumber who works several hours on your sink that it's good exposure and you'll pass along his name? Would you ask an IT professional to repair your crashed hard drive for free? Journalists need to get paid for our work so make the request, and secure those assignments that compensate.

- Know your passport expiration date. With one year until your passport expires, start thinking seriously about upcoming travel so you're not scrambling at the last minute or in between countries as your passport expiration comes due. To renew a U.S. passport, you must mail back your current passport with your updated information. That means you'll be without a passport for two to six weeks. You can pay extra to expedite the process, but it's a good idea to start culling the necessary paperwork and new headshot early in case you get busy with other things. Website: <http://travel.state.gov/passport/>

- Don't be a tourist. For my Iceland trip, I lived for six weeks at a hostel in downtown Reykjavik so I could meet visitors from around the world. I avoided the tourist spots and found the coffee shop where locals go, used the community library and attended lectures at the university. I make it a habit to buy and read the local paper wherever I am. Di Giovanni suggests freelancers write for reputable news agencies and build a reputation to get the overseas assignments. "Live there, learn the language and make contacts," she said.

- Check safety advisories. Reporters Without Borders (RWB), the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and the International News Safety Institute (INSI) publish reports on hostile regions. Check the U.S. Dept. of State's website for travel warnings recommending areas for Americans to avoid. The Columbia School of Journalism in New York, through its continuing education department, offers the three-day "Reporting Safely in Crisis Zones" taught by veteran journalist Judith Matloff. At \$695, it's pricey for a freelancer, but may be worth it as a career investment. <http://www.journalism.columbia.edu/page/738/8>.

- Get medical training. Whether you're covering civil unrest in the Middle East or reporting on a recent earthquake in Haiti, don't leave home without solid first aid instruction, several reporters say including Sebastian Junger, a war journalist and author of "The Perfect Storm." Junger started RISC, Reporters Instructed in Saving Colleagues, a New York City-based nonprofit that trains conflict reporters to save fellow journalists on the battlefield. To qualify for the free three-day training, you must be a freelance reporter with an assignment in a hostile region. Reporters learn medical techniques to save themselves or their comrades injured in the field, and each carries a specially-designed first aid kit. Junger created RISC as a result of the death of photojournalist Tim Hetherington in Libya in 2011. The duo directed the 2010 documentary, "Restrepo."

While a journalist can take precautions ahead of an assignment, she should expect some learning to happen on the job, di Giovanni said. Based in Paris, she has written several books on her experiences doing war reporting. She said her biggest fear is how to handle herself in crowds. Ultimately, she said, you can't teach that in a hostile-environment course. "Your intuition comes in time. You have to pay attention to it."

Jennifer Karchmer is an independent journalist based in Bellingham. She teaches communication and journalism at Western Washington University. As a volunteer correspondent with Reporters Without Borders-USA, she monitors and defends freedom of the press.

ELECTION OF OFFICERS FOR 2013-2015

With no nominations received for officer positions, the three current incumbents — Bill Virgin, president; Mike Maltais, vice president; and Sarah Smith, secretary — are re-elected by acclamation to two-year terms that began July 1.

We are still in need of a treasurer for WPA. We are also looking for volunteers to work on the contest and other association activities, and for students interested in serving on the board to provide input and perspective on how WPA can better serve them.

Increasing volunteer involvement in WPA is important, because continuation of the annual contest and the association are dependent upon it. Please consider increasing your participation in the association, whether it's writing an article for this newsletter, running or serving on a committee, submitting news items about members and their activities and achievements or offering ideas for the organization. Thanks for your support.

SAVE THE DATE (TENTATIVELY)

Washington Press Association has reserved Saturday April 26, 2014, at the Museum of Flight in Tukwila for the annual awards luncheon for the WPA communications contest.

Look for details and changes to contest categories and guidelines in future editions of the newsletter.

MEMBER NEWS

We invite all members to submit news about jobs, internships, promotions, awards, publications and projects. Student members, if you have graduated and are no longer using a college email address, please let us know so that we may update our mailing list.

Washington Press Association

Bill Virgin, President bill.virgin@yahoo.com

Mike Maltais, Vice President

Sarah Smith, Secretary

<http://washingtonpressassociation.com>