Before publishing the Kosovo Memory Book, a joint project of the Humanitarian Law Center in Belgrade and Humanitarian Law Center Kosovo, public presentations were made around Kosovo. Communities were invited to learn about the project, check whether loved ones they had lost were in the database, and make sure that details about them were correct. (© Humanitarian Law Center)

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1 This is the fourth paper in the collection “Good Practice in Conflict Casualty Recording: Testimony, Detailed Analysis and Recommendations From a Study of 40 Casualty Recorders” www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection

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We welcome feedback and comments on our work. If you would like to discuss any aspect of this study, please contact Elizabeth Minor, Research Officer at Oxford Research Group elizabeth.minor@oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk.
1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 What is the Purpose of this Paper?

Casualty recording requires the collection of information about specific individuals and the circumstances in which they died. As discussed in 'The Range of Sources in Casualty Recording'

This paper reviews what has been learned by casualty recorders about how to work with these sources to establish a record of casualties – from collecting them, to evaluating them and confirming the information that they give. The paper discusses both emerging general principles in the evaluation of sources and the confirmation of information about casualties, and also specific experiences drawn from recorders working intensively with particular types of sources in different conflict settings. The analysis is illustrated with the

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3 For the other papers in this collection see www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection
words of recorders throughout the paper, and all examples given are from the work of recorders who took part in this survey.

1.2 An Overview of the Process of Creating Casualty Records from Source Reports

The core activity of every casualty recorder is the handling of reports from sources. For most recorders surveyed this was a multi-stage process, which required both a well-organised and consistent system for dealing with information, but also room for human judgment and flexibility in the application of systems.

Handling information about casualties involves a logical flow of activities. The process starts with data collection, followed by the storage or coding of the information collected, then the assessment of data or confirmation of cases, and finally the addition of a confirmed incident or death to a central information system. Analysis, publication or the sharing of information follows this.

Many recorders created a step-by-step process to accomplish these activities. This was systematically followed with every piece of information collected, often with different workers or groups working on different stages. The way this process worked for many recorders is summarised in Figure 1 (also reproduced in ‘An Overview of the Field’):

![Figure 1](image)

This paper looks at the processes, as represented by Figure 1, that recorders used to collect, evaluate and confirm information from sources. It examines the principles and processes recorders used to code and confirm all the information they collected, and to handle contradictions in the material.

A systematic approach helps a casualty recorder to discover the limitations of the information available, and can inform strategic decisions about where to focus later stages of information collection. The development of clear systems and processes is a general characteristic of good practice.

“We started with an overview of all available data in libraries, state archiving, newspapers, magazines, books published by either military platoons or local authorities. We went through all these sources and put names and sources in a list. In the field we focused on those names where we don’t have two or three or more sources.”

Particularly among those casualty recorders whose work started some years ago however, many reported that they did not predict the complexities of recording when they started their work and first developed their systems. These complexities were discovered later, in the course of their work, and influenced the further development of their systems and processes.

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4 For other papers in the collection see [www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection](http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection)
It our intention that the accumulation of knowledge and practice documented by this research can help future casualty recorders anticipate and plan for this complexity, based on the experiences of others. This aim informs the discussions on dealing with sources that are set out in this paper.

2. PROCESSES AND PRINCIPLES FOR HANDLING AND EVALUATING SOURCE MATERIAL

'The Range of Sources in Casualty Recording’\(^5\) discusses some of the major issues around accessing various sources, and the different qualities of these sources. This section discusses the key phases and activities of handling what we will refer to generically as source documents:

1. Collecting and storing reports (section 2.1 p5)
2. Extracting and organising data from source documents (section 2.2 p6)
3. Assessing data quality (section 2.3 p6)
4. Handling disagreements between sources (section 2.4 p9)
5. Minimum corroboration of information (section 2.5 p11)
6. Eliminating double counting (section 2.6 p12)
7. Translation and language issues (section 2.7 p12)
8. What casualty recorders revealed about their sources and methodology (section 2.8 p13)

By source documents, we mean material that derives from any source, from published reports, through transcripts of interviews or forms filled by witnesses, to notes taken about tip offs, to tweets. Many of the procedures for handling such documents are the same. Similar considerations apply, for instance, to an interview transcript and a press or media report.

Recorders using an ‘Unknown victim identification’ approach (for a description of the five models of casualty recording identified by this research, see section 2.3 in ‘An Overview of the Field’\(^6\)) were different in their procedures to other recorders, in that the technique of confirmation they used to record casualties was the forensic identification of human remains. Some of the discussion below regarding confirmation procedures therefore may not apply to these recorders. Such recorders did however build databases of missing people for the purpose of case management and investigation, a process to which many of the issues outlined in this section are relevant.

2.1 Collecting and Storing Reports

As for each phase of data handling, the collection and storage of data is a continuous and labour-intensive activity. Many casualty recorders attempted to find and store every relevant document, even if it contained incomplete information, and even if they did not have the current capacity to analyse each document.

“We gather information from as many sources as are reporting this specific event, in order to have more information, a more complete version of the information... We are not always able to code everything that we have collected, through lack of resources.”

“We put in the database every single document that mentions that person. We don’t make any distinctions.”

Source documents were collected by different means, both electronic and physical, and casualty recorders stressed the need to be flexible in order to meet the requirements and capacities of those supplying the documents. Ensuring that each source document was linked in some way to the specific event or victim who was being recorded was a priority for most casualty recorders, and a procedure that emerges from the research as an aspect of good practice. Following this practice allows the tracking back of cases, which serves accuracy and transparency. Not all recorders had these referencing systems.

“We add exact text as an attachment. You cannot save the information if you have not attached the document.”

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\(^5\) For other papers in this collection see [www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection](http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection)

\(^6\) For other papers in this collection see [www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection](http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection)
2.2 Extracting and Organising Data from Source Documents

All casualty recorders had a set of pieces of information that they sought to collect and confirm for each incident or victim they recorded. As mentioned in section 1.2 of ‘An Overview of the Field’, recorders collected some of these pieces of information in every case, but some were only recorded when available. Recorders also collected narrative and incomplete information aside from these ‘data points’.

“We code source information, e.g. volume number, page number, primary source quoted.”

Several recorders used standard forms for the submission and analysis of documentary evidence. This assisted the consistent collection of specific points of information. Used for data collection with informants or for data entry on a database or spreadsheet, such forms or questionnaires allowed recorders to shape input to their information system according to their needs. This standardised coding increased the efficiency and reliability of their data collection.

“Informants have a standard form for submitting information.”

“We have on our web page an e-form for submitting data and it’s the same as the questionnaire that researchers have in the field. We frequently use this since lots of people aren’t living in [X] any more, so this is how to reach them and collect data from them.”

Regardless of any efficiencies that recorders had in their information systems, the basic tasks of extracting relevant data from documents, combining these with other data, and making judgments on cases, is time consuming and often repetitive, and requires a great deal of concentration and attention to detail. Recorders must process tens if not hundreds of documents with great accuracy and care. They must do this systematically either for as long as the conflict lasts or until they consider their record complete, if working post conflict. Recording requires a very high level of dedication to basic information processing work.

Beyond having good systems, there is a strong element of judgment in all stages of recording, which can only be improved by doing the work over a period of time and becoming more and more familiar with the issues in methodology and in the country of conflict. One challenge for casualty recorders is to find ways of ensuring consistency and accuracy in their work over time. Another is to retain expert staff. A key recommendation for good practice is to keep written guidelines (e.g. codebooks) and to update these constantly with the decisions recorders make that constitute new rules. The findings of this research give no indication that casualty recording can currently be done without the detailed human scrutiny and assessment of each individual document collected, one by one.

“I think what we’ve learned in this whole process, is that despite an almost 50 page codebook, there are thousands of different scenarios that do not easily fit in predefined categories and must be judged and recorded by experienced coders willing to make difficult judgements. Especially when we have little control over how the reports are written, and none of them are standardized. The data streams that we’re aggregating do not have standardized recording and verification methods, and the quality and reliability of the data we code has to be challenged at every turn.”

2.3 Assessing Data Quality

Many casualty recorders reported that the process of assessing data quality was a multi-stage process, ideally involving different people at different stages. Dividing up the stages of a process between different people simplifies the work (by breaking up a complex task into manageable steps) and can minimise human error (at each stage, the work of the previous stage can be looked at and mistakes or disputes in interpretation of information can be identified).

The process of assessing data quality begins with a simple registration of an individual document’s content (coding), followed by deeper assessments of its credibility and reliability, including looking at contextual information and crosschecking with other reports. This deeper assessment requires much more judgment and, often, strong knowledge of the dynamics of the conflict. Assessments of the range of sources relating

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For other papers in this collection see www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection
to an incident, area or period of time (e.g. for completeness of coverage) come at a later stage, and can inform future data-collection strategy.

“One team handles approval, and one handles verification. Approval is pretty technical, it basically means that all elements of a report are consistent, the categories that have been referenced and the actual source or sources all refer to the same kind of event. Most reports are approved right away; the approval rate is really high for our platform. The verification rate is lower. When we get an approved report it will go through another team for advanced geo-referencing.”

2.3.1 Credibility and Reliability

In assessing the credibility of documents, the position of the author of the report in relation to the incident being reported was an important consideration. This might be shown in the level of detail, his or her physical location in relation to the event, and his or her status in relation to the conflict (e.g. independent of warring parties).

“We assess credibility, the level of detail, and how many specifics there are in the report adds to its credibility. What is a witness able to know based on where/who they are? A doctor might be better able to verify a death, an eyewitness better able to verify weapons.”

“If the feed turns up 5 different stories for the same incident, all of them are read and checked and we would go for the one we considered to be the most informative and credible. We have a number of criteria for that – difficult – inexact science. We’ve got a list of sources we consider credible – so mainstream news media, official public statements from government departments, information from UN agencies, information from NGOs, e.g. HRW. In local media reports we do like to ensure that they are not a reporting mechanism for a conflict party. Then among them we look at the location of the source, and prioritise closer to the scene of the incident. We also prefer to go for authored reports where possible because we think they are notionally more accountable than an unattributed wire report.”

Casualty recorders reported a variety of factors that are taken into account when assessing the credibility, and also the reliability of a particular document (or set of documents). Some casualty recorders had a formal rating scale against which they assessed different sources for both these characteristics. This could be a useful practice for many recorders to adopt, as it helps make source assessments more systematic.

Source documents that have been rated as reliable (that is, consistently trustworthy) by several casualty recorders include those produced by major NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, major press and media organisations, some ministries, courts, and direct witness statements.

“Apart from [reports on one certain type of violence with high political stakes] most things reported in the media are reliable because they are counter-checked. Journalists counter-check the information with hospitals, district officials”

“Witness statements are important for qualitative insight. Court judgments are very important because they provide good descriptions of what happened and are very reliable.”

Casualty recorders also identified sources that were less reliable. This may lead to a decision not to use or include that source. Distortion of information through bias is a major cause for handling a source with caution, and in some cases rejecting it entirely. The picture is not simple, as biased sources that do not give usable information under some circumstances can give good information in others. Where this is the case, assessment of the credibility of each individual report becomes more important than the source’s long-term reputation.

“You can’t have a rule because sometimes very reliable sources become subjectively involved in a particular incident, and in that particular incident they become unreliable. Otherwise unreliable sources may on a particular incident have a more authoritative insight. But broadly speaking there are reliable sources and generally unreliable sources. These are clearly known for each theatre.”

“All the volunteers that are involved in report creation and report verification will have access to the full list of all individual sources we deal with. It’s not uncommon to have someone’s Twitter
account hacked into, and then the account that has previously been producing reliable information is all of a sudden producing information that has been verified as false by our verification team. It’s relatively easy for us to flag that account. And we try to do an audit on all our sources.”

2.3.2 Completeness of Coverage

Once a set of documents had been integrated, casualty recorders were able to address the completeness of coverage. Casually recorders varied in their assessments of the overall proportion of deaths that they had documented. Coverage depended on the sources that were available to recorders, the processes of investigation that they were able to use, and the context, for example the intensity of the conflict. A minority judged that they had recorded the vast majority of the deaths they were aiming to record:

“[X] is a thinly populated area and communication can be very poor so it is entirely possible that there are more [incidents] than we are aware of. But we think we get the vast majority of them.”

Most casualty recorders estimated that their records contained a smaller proportion of the likely total number of deaths, and thought that it was important to recognise this when talking about their work. Limited coverage was generally considered to be due to source limitations and a lack of resources to document more cases.

“Our data is very incomplete. We don’t have the resources to cover the whole country where the conflict is. My estimation is we only cover 60%.”

Casualty recorders identified some specific factors that limited the completeness of their work:

A major factor was the difficulty of collecting source material from remote rural regions. Communications were poor, meaning that press and media did not operate effectively in the region, or the networks and investigators of the casualty recorder could not establish a presence there due to cost or a lack of contacts.

“We think there are quite a lot of casualties that we can’t find and we can’t investigate, especially in rural areas where they have never heard of us or they don’t have access to the internet or social media. Rural areas are our biggest challenge. For example we missed just a few days ago in the distant area of [X] that there were 7 people killed, and we just didn’t hear about them till a week had passed. We are still trying to investigate the 7 people.”

Sometimes, warring parties actively prevent journalists and other informants from investigating incidents and sending reports.

“Security forces try to conceal their own human losses. During military operations no independent media coverage is allowed. Media outlets have to rely on government data.”

The main strategy that casualty recorders had for improving coverage and completeness in their information was undertaking their own pro-active on-the-ground data gathering from direct informants (see section 4 of ‘The Range of Sources in Casualty Recording’8 for a discussion of how recorders went about this).

“We prefer our own networks because they have more weight, in the sense of being more reliable. And then to [quality] control them we check them against the written press reports.”

“The only way we can deal with the data coverage lack is to get ethical clearance and go into the field to interview people on a referral sample basis.”

Casualty records that do not give complete coverage or contain every detail about victims and incidents are still very valuable for the picture of conflict that they give, and can be used for a range of important purposes (see the discussion of the range of casualty recording in section 2 of ‘An Overview of the Field’

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8 For other papers in this collection see www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection
and the discussion of the uses of recording in ‘Why We Record Conflict Casualties’). The only way to achieve completeness is to collect and analyse whatever limited data is available at any given time, filling in gaps as new information comes in or as circumstances change (as discussed in section 2.5 of ‘An Overview of the Field’). Publishing or sharing detailed but incomplete data at an incident or individual level can also be a strong invitation to informants to come forward with new information to fill the gaps.

“So when we were touring the exhibition, people would come up to the graph and look for their relative’s death on the graph. Then we would have people coming to us and saying actually this is wrong, that death there on that date that person wasn’t twenty-one he was twenty-two.”

2.4 Handling Disagreements Between Sources

An issue that every casualty recorder had to deal with was the existence of differing information about the same event or victim within a set of source documents. The general procedures used were:

2.4.1 Prioritising Certain Sources

Sometimes recorders prioritised one document over another based on their judgment of the reliability of different sources (as described in section 2.3.1, p7 above):

“We don’t tend to record the higher or lower one, but one which is more credible, better reporting. Standard of the reports matters as well as the judgement of the person who records the information. There is a possibility that he/she can misjudge the report.”

2.4.2 Reporting Disagreement, and the Use of Ranges

Some recorders, who published incident or individual level data, decided that the best way to handle disagreements was not to make a decision between different documents, but to report the disagreement and leave the reader to make their own judgment.

For those casualty recorders whose data was organised by incident, a key priority was to provide information on the number of people killed in each incident. To accommodate disagreements between reports on the number of deaths, some casualty recorders provided a range, rather than a single number. This range might express the lowest and highest reported numbers of deaths.

“If only one source disagrees we won’t include its information. If two disagree then we include this information in the range.”

“We update the recorded incidents as more information comes in through the news or our sources. Where there are 2 or more reports with conflicting figures [we record] ‘minimum – average – maximum’. We tend to take the most conservative figures”

Practice varied slightly in the application of ranges. For example, some recorders included all reports in their range; others excluded figures that were outliers or overruled by updates; others did not report a range when only one source disagreed. Ranges were also used to account for uncertainty on factors other than the total number of deaths: for instance, in death tolls focused on civilians, a range could account for doubt over the civilian status of some of the dead; or in reports where duplication could not be ruled out, a range allowed possibly-duplicate numbers only to be entered in the higher part of the range. One recorder (who did not take part in this survey) appeared to use a range where the minimum number was the lowest reported number of deaths and the maximum number was produced from adding all the numbers of different reports together (on the principle that they could all be reporting different casualties). It could be useful for practitioners to consider how to standardise the expression of ranges, as they are widely used.

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9 For other papers in this collection see www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection
10 For other papers in this collection see www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection
Some recorders also reported taking averages – a mean or a median of all the figures reported in an incident – alongside using a range. The numbers produced by casualty recording are based in principle only on what is reported or documented, which the practice of using a range attempts to preserve: this practice moves away from this slightly.

2.4.3 Using Categories that Avoid Resolving the Disagreement

One means used by casualty recorders to handle disagreements was simply to record at a level that encompassed both the possibilities reported by the conflicting sources. For example, if two sources disagreed about the village in which an incident took place but agreed about the province, then location was recorded at a province rather than village level in that case. In cases with no disagreement, the recorder would record both the village and the province. Or, if sources disagreed about the civilian/combatant status of victims in an incident, the casualty recorder might record the total number killed, without categorising victims. Again in cases with no dilemma, the recorder would make a status categorisation. (For a discussion of categorisations including status dilemmas, see ‘Definition and categorisation’)

“If there is divergent information about very precise location, we will take the more general geographical category that includes these different [municipalities] to solve the problem. We will also apply this principle to the perpetrators identified by sources, and other aspects of the accounts given.”

“When...attacks happen in most incidents the government will say that all the people who were killed were militant and rarely would admit civilians were killed or injured in their operations, but the locals will say that the victims were local people who were not involved in insurgent activities...In this situation we put the number of the casualty into the category ‘total number of people killed’, and we will not put the casualties under any type of casualty categories...because we don’t really know whether these were civilians or [not].”

2.4.4 Keeping Cases Pending Until There is More Information

Some recorders kept cases where there was substantive disagreement between sources unconfirmed in their information system, until further clarification was received.

Many casualty recorders changed and updated their records and reports as a result of new information coming in. Some chose to wait a relatively short amount of time (e.g. 1-2 days) before attempting to confirm a case, in order to give time for updates from various sources (e.g. media, hospital) to emerge. This openness to new data is a strength and good practice. However, recorders reported that others sometimes misinterpreted it as inconsistency or uncertainty.

“Our understanding of these incidents changes all the time, and we have to adapt to that and where we get it wrong say that. Because that’s the process of recoding and some people see that as vulnerability and as a weakness to attack us on...Actually that’s the very process, but it’s quite hard to communicate that sometimes.”

2.4.5 Dialogue with Sources

An important practice that recorders across the field used, if they were able to, was to contact or re-contact all the sources that gave information about a particular case if there were unresolvable contradictions between them. Sometimes this dialogue involved, for example, contacting journalists who authored conflicting media reports in order to ask them to check their notebooks and clarify details that were vague. This could be a relatively quick process of investigation, and recorders working during conflict often used this technique. Sometimes a process of dialogue with sources was more drawn out, involving re-interviewing witnesses, discussing in detail the possible different versions of events with multiple sources, and seeking new or alternative sources to try and clarify the case. Such detailed investigation was key to

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11 For other papers in this collection see [www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection](www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection)
2.5 Minimum Corroboration of Information

The majority of casualty recorders sought corroboration for any source document before adding an incident or victim to their information system. The general rule developed in the field was to seek a minimum of two independent sources; quite a few casualty recorders required three.

“The absolute minimum is two reputable and independent sources.”

“To decide that something is final that eventually a person has been killed we need information from three independent sources.”

In some cases, casualty recorders recorded cases for which there was only one source. This was often where the source was considered to have particular authority. Sometimes these cases were explicitly flagged, within a recorder’s information system or publicly, as single-sourced. When this flagging was in public materials, the purpose was to allow readers of users of the information to make their own judgments about how these cases should be considered.

A key issue for casualty recorders was the determination of what was an independent source. Explicit criteria for independence were not mentioned in the interviews, and the impression we get is that most casualty recorders judged independence informally on a common-sense basis.

2.6 Eliminating Double Counting

Casualty recorders raised the risk of duplication or double counting cases most frequently in relation to difficulties with names. For example, inconsistent spellings, transliterations from other alphabets or the use of nicknames by sources meant that a recorder risked documenting the same person more than once. Naming conventions in the country of conflict also posed difficulties.

“In some remote villages the whole village has the same last name and of 50 with the same last name, 30 of those might have the same first name, so it is really hard to identify who we are talking about and who is his father.”

Minimising double counting requires the cross-referencing of multiple pieces of information about a victim and the circumstances of their death to eliminate duplicates. With more detail available and documented by recorders, more detailed cross-referencing and so greater certainty is possible. Recorders should therefore always collect as much information as possible about incidents and individuals to help eliminate duplication.

Duplication can also occur where cases are not or cannot be adequately followed up, or new information is not incorporated into records. An issue that recorders highlighted, which could either lead to duplication or under-counting, is the fact that deaths often occur or are reported when the victim is no longer at the place where the violent incident occurred. For example, a hospital official may record the death of a particular individual at a certain time, and a police official at the scene of an incident in the same area at the same time may report a certain number dead, without identification of specific individuals. It will then be unclear whether the two reports include the same or different individuals.

“In health records the incident is not mentioned, what would be mentioned is that this person came and he was either brought dead or he had an injury at so and so a time… I believe there would be a problem of duplication [with other types of report]…So we are grappling with that.”

It is good practice for recorders to record injuries and attempt to follow these cases where possible, because injuries may later result in a death. However, over-counting can also occur when sources state that a victim has died when in fact they were injured. Again the only solution for recorders faced with such

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12 For other papers in this collection see [www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection](http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection)
problems is to seek multiple sources, follow up cases, and incorporate updates and new information into their work as much as possible. Dynamic recording reduces errors.

2.7 Translation and Language Issues

In some areas, particularly mono-ethnic or mono-cultural locations, and where the casualty recorder was located in the country of conflict, linguistic issues were not a particular problem. However, many conflicts cross ethno-linguistic boundaries. The workers of casualty recorders were not necessarily fluent in the different languages used in their source material. This meant in a minority of cases that interpreters or translators were used (especially for interviews with local informants), or more commonly that there was a gap in the recorder’s coverage in relation to those sources. A significant minority of casualty recorders operated outside the country of conflict, and were staffed predominantly by people whose first language was English.

“[The local language] is a blind spot for us at the moment...We do believe there will be the most detail in the original [local] language reports. There are two issues, one is a translation issue and...we’re not resourced to deal with that.”

A language barrier sometimes meant that not only was source material inaccessible to a recorder, but source material that could be accessed was less easy to interpret. For example, one recorder, working in English but recording casualties in a country where the local language was not written in the Latin alphabet, noted that the different transliterations of place names into English caused difficulties. Different transliterations could cause confusion over whether the same incident was being referred to by different sources, or different incidents had happened in similarly named towns.

At the other end of a recorder’s work, many casualty recorders published only in English (as the universal language of many international agencies, such as press and media and international NGOs). This could limit the access of conflict-affected communities.

“The people who are most affected by [the violence] are generally not reading about them because all the databases on this are in English, and it is really something we are keen to have done as quickly as possible is [a local language] translation.”

To resolve the major linguistic problems, ideally each casualty recorder should have staff fluent in all the languages involved, and should publish their data in at least two languages (a major local language and English). Resource limitations make this a rarity. Doing this will also not necessarily resolve issues around feeding a recorder’s work back to conflict-affected communities. Other outreach strategies may often be required in order for these communities to benefit from the recorder’s work.

“All the people who won’t be accessible by Internet are the people who are the survivors or the victims. They’re generally illiterate. If you release things on paper, these people do not read [the major local language], so what’s the point of doing that?”

2.8 What Casualty Recorders Revealed About Their Sources and Methodology

Since many casualty recorders prioritised assessing the credibility of their sources, it is unsurprising that they also worked to maintain their own credibility as a source of information for others as part of their activities.

2.8.1 The Principle of Transparency

For many, maintaining their credibility meant being as transparent and open as possible about their own methodology, and their own limitations.

“We can show the whole paper trail, why any incident is on our site.”

“We deal with [incompleteness] by being transparent and acknowledging the limitations of our database.”

“If you’re not transparent I just don’t see how you can defend yourself under this kind of attack [on your credibility]. You can’t.”
“Transparency is the only way we can overcome the limitations of a particular data source. So what we do is define our data source, and allow whoever is using the database to make their own judgement of its utility or otherwise.”

2.8.2 The Need for Safety

Few casualty recorders published all the information that they collected from sources, and there were a number of valid reasons not to do this. One over-riding principle, adopted pretty much without exception in the field, was protection or security of sources.

“There are no circumstances in which we would release all our data including sources. Having given your assurances you can’t break that. But we’re pretty damn transparent – it’s possibly 1% withheld. It’s just simply where we feel it would compromise the source.”

As mentioned in section 4.3 of ‘The Range of Sources in Casualty Recording’13, recorders who collected information directly from witnesses generally had confidentiality procedures, so that the witness could make clear whether they wanted some or all of the information they gave to remain confidential, and whether the recorder could ever release their name. Some recorders, especially those working post-conflict for a full accounting of the past, reported witnesses often had no problem with their statement and identity being made public, and could feel validated by having their testimony published. For other recorders working in repressive and dangerous contexts, high levels of confidentiality were of course crucial. For recorders who only used pre-existing documentation to record casualties, what they revealed about their sources, which were often already in the public domain, could still have safety connotations. One recorder reported for example that though they publicly listed the media articles that were the source of each incident they recorded, they never put the names of the primary sources mentioned by those articles on their website. This was in case the pattern of informing by the primary source that this would reveal could put the source in danger.

Apart from for protecting sources, sometimes information needed to be withheld for the security of a recorder’s own workers. Other reasons reported by recorders for not publishing all the information they held were more to do with practicality or expense. For example, including a list of incidents in a published report would make it impractically long, but the recorder might not have the capacity to put the information they had on a website.

There were various practices in different conflict regions regarding the publication of victims’ names. In some regions, particularly those with active press and civil society organisations, the names of those killed tended to get routinely put into the public domain at an early juncture. Casualty recorders tended to exercise caution in the case that they were the first to put a victim’s name in the public domain.

Regardless of whether names were published, they were a key piece of information for many recorders, as a detail that helped them distinguish different cases from each other, and for the sake of a historical record that might be released at a later time.

3. SOME IMPORTANT GENERAL PRINCIPLES IN EVALUATION AND CONFIRMATION

Certain key principles were consistently reported by recorders as important in the evaluation of sources and the confirmation of information. Though several of these principles are referred to earlier in this paper and in ‘The Range of Sources in Casualty Recording’ and ‘An Overview of the Field’, they are brought together explicitly here for reference. Some of the principles listed here were only raised by a small number of recorders. However, all could be important or useful ideas for the field.

3.1 Multiple Sources Are Needed for Good Quality Information and Effective Confirmation

The findings reviewed in this paper, in ‘The Range of Sources in Casualty Recording’ and in ‘An Overview of the Field’ indicate that it is good practice in casualty recording to reject no source that can give relevant information, even if the information given is minimal. When evaluating information and confirming details of cases, using multiple sources in casualty recording has specific benefits. This is true whichever approach to casualty recording a recorder is using, not just for those using a ‘Multiple source investigation’

13 For other papers in this collection see
www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection
approach.\textsuperscript{14} For example, a casualty recorder only using one type of source e.g. media reports, will benefit from collecting as many reports as possible on the same incident, because these may have different primary sources or provide different details.

Different types of sources can better confirm different types of information. To give some examples (whose validity will vary according to context):

- Information from families will be useful for confirming personal details of victims (e.g. age, occupation). However, families or friends may give inaccurate information on other details (e.g. combat status) for specific purposes (e.g. war benefits) or to preserve a certain image of their loved one. Also, memories are never completely reliable.
- Military sources will be better for confirming weapon types (unless these are being deliberately concealed) than non-specialist eyewitnesses.

See also sections 2 and 3 of ‘The Range of Sources in Casualty Recording’\textsuperscript{15} for a discussion of the relative merits of various sources in relation to different pieces of information.

Using multiple sources can also help recorders to resolve differences between source documents, and can give increased coverage. Most types of source cannot be taken on their own:

- All types of sources can potentially be unreliable and have biases, from government sources to NGOs to eyewitnesses. Using multiple sources can help identify and correct these biases and give a more complete picture of an incident. This can also help resolve contradictions between different source documents.
- Using multiple sources can also help recorders identify fabrication by sources.
- Different sources will also suffer from different practical constraints, meaning that one type of source will not give all the information that a given recorder could collect. For example, some media sources can sometimes omit to publish incidents because of missed deadlines. Hospital data or reports from medical personnel are a very useful source especially on causes of death, but will not help a recorder where victims have not passed through the medical system.

3.2 Casualty Recorders Should Always Keep their Records Open for Updating as New Information Emerges

It is an important principle to integrate new information into casualty records, for accuracy. Injured people may die later, or initial reports may be inaccurate. Records created even a long time ago in an on-going conflict are important to update, because the information held about these cases affects the overall numbers and analysis produced by a recorder now. Post conflict, a recorder’s purposes will be different, but updating documentation will be just as important for purposes such as generating an accurate historical record and memorialising victims. New information will continue to emerge years after conflict violence has ended: recorders reported new disclosures about events from over thirty years ago. This means that records should never be closed.

3.3 Systems and Rules are Crucial, but Casualty Recording Still Requires Expert Judgment

Many recorders reported that though they aimed to develop the most robust rules possible, and constantly update their guidelines, in the end interpretation and subjective judgment were still needed in many cases, especially where there were dilemmas or ambiguities. There were no indications given in the work of the recorders in this survey that this human judgment could be eliminated from casualty recording in the near future, if ever. Some recorders noted that they felt there was no standard of absolute proof in recording: recorders just had to establish as much evidence as they could in various ways.

“There’s no one gold standard, is the problem. So you’re trying to get as much triangulation as possible…there’s no absolute proof on any of this I think.”

3.4 Verification and Source Credibility and Reliability Scales Could Be Useful Tools

For expressing both ambiguity in published records and the standards that recorders adhered to, verification scales and source credibility and reliability scales could be useful public facing as well as data processing tools. A small minority of recorders used these tools.

\textsuperscript{14} For the model of five approaches to recording identified by this research, see ‘An Overview of the Field’.

\textsuperscript{15} For other papers in this collection see www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection
A verification or confirmation scale could help a recorder to express the discretion or individual judgment used to document a case. The aspects of source credibility (such as the level of detail given by a source) could be defined on a scale. Source reliability scales could be dynamic, as certain sources may become less or more some reliable over time. These scaled could also be adapted to the relative credibility or reliability of different types of sources in relation to different types of details, as mentioned in section 3.1 (p13 above) and discussed in sections 2 and 3 of ‘The Range of Sources in Casualty Recording’.

The use of these tools could be an issue for recorders to consider as part of a discussion on standards and standardisation in the field of casualty recording.

3.5 Trend Analysis Could Be Useful for Quality Control

Some recorders working during conflict reported that analysing the trends in their numbers helped them identify possible anomalies or fabricated reports. It also helped recorders to track changes in reporting from different kinds of sources. Through this different sources’ usefulness and reliability could be monitored. Changes in the data provided by different sources can indicate better systems and increased quality, or possible fabrications and bias.

3.6 A Multiple Stage Checking Procedure Makes Information More Robust

As mentioned in this paper (in sections 1.2 p4 and 2.3 p6) and in section 3.2 of ‘An Overview of the Field’ one of the key features of a model recording system is the separation of the process of confirming and checking information into different stages undertaken by different people. This increases accuracy and consistency in recording. It will promote accuracy because if no one is allowed to check his or her own work human error at different stages can be minimised. It will also promote consistency because involving different people on the same cases can compensate for individual preferences regarding rules, and help these be consistently applied where possible. Where more subjective judgment is needed, disagreement between workers at different stages can indicate the need for team discussion, or the ruling of a senior member of the organisation (depending on how the recorder functions).

3.7 The Methods Used by Casualty Recorders Can and Do Develop

Many recorders reported that their procedures for confirmation and their processes (as well as the definitions and categorisations) evolved and developed in response to:

- The responses of audiences and others to their work, which made some recorders refine their definitions, prioritise greater transparency, or make more efforts to show that they were objective;
- Changes in the dynamics of the conflict meaning that they needed to investigate more complex forms of violence;
- The work of others, and useful methodologies and tools that they came across in the course of their work.

It is an important principle for the field that recording can develop and improve. This is something that this study and the other activities of Oxford Research Group hope to support.

4. CONCLUSIONS: KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Taking a systematic approach to casualty recording improves the quality of a recorder’s records, and the efficiency with which they are able to do their work. This paper has set out some key principles that recorders used to create rules and procedures in the processing and confirmation of information about casualties. The ideas set out in this paper were used across the range of approaches in casualty recording (as described in section 2 of ‘An Overview of the Field’). Though different casualty recorders will be able

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16 For other papers in this collection see www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection
17 For other papers in this collection see www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/casualty_recording_practice_collection
to achieve different levels of confirmation or certainty in their records due to the range, detail and quality of their source material, recorders faced many of the same issues and used many of the same rules to process the source documents they had.

The key findings of this paper and recommendations for good practice are summarised below:

1. Every piece of relevant evidence should be collected and stored, where relevant, even if there is not sufficient capacity to analyse it all at the time of collection (see section 2.1 p5 and section 3.1 p14)

2. Extraction and organisation of data should be by a standardised set of pieces of information, which are stored for every case in a recorder’s information system. This standardisation should be reflected in interview forms and data-collection or data-submission forms or questionnaires (see section 2.2 p6)

3. Coding and assessment rulebooks have been developed as a good practice by some casualty recorders. However, assessment of documents will always requires expert human scrutiny and an element of subjective judgement based on experience and contextual knowledge (see section 2.2 p6 and section 3.3 p15)

4. Coding and assessment of documents should be a multi-stage process involving different people (see section 2.3 p and section 3.6 p16)

5. Credibility and reliability of documents should be assessed with respect to key objective factors, such as the position of the informant in relation to the incident, and the degree of assessment undertaken by the author of the document (e.g. a media organisation has its own standards of verification). Good practice is to systematize the criteria used in a codebook or manual (see section 2.3.1 p7)

6. Completeness is a key goal, but collection and publication of incomplete data is useful. It can also encourage informants to come forward with new information to fill the gaps (see section 2.3.2 p8)

7. Casualty recorders must generate rules to handle differences between reports. Transparency about the contradictions or incompleteness of source information in public materials can be a useful practice. Differences between reports can be accommodated, for instance, the use of ranges when reporting numbers killed, and explicit flagging up of uncertainty about details such as civilian/combatant status, specific location, or the precise name of the victim (see section 2.4 p9)

8. It is good practice to update cases when new information is found concerning cases that are already documented (see section 2.4.4 p11, and section 3.2 p15)

9. The general minimum standard of corroboration in the field of recording is that each case should be supported by at least two independent sources. Where only one source is used, even when the source is highly reliable, this should be flagged in some way (see section 2.5 p11)

10. Verification scales to express the level of certainty that a recorder attaches to different records or cases, and credibility and reliability measures for different sources, could be useful tools for casualty recorders (see section 3.4 p15)

11. Trend analysis could also be a useful tool for quality control of data (see section 3.5 p16)

12. Eliminating double counting requires the collection and comparison of as much detailed information about different incidents as possible, including injury data where possible (see section 2.6 p12)

13. Casualty recorders should have personnel fluent in local languages of the communities in which the violence has occurred (see section 2.7 p12)

14. Always taking into account considerations of safety, the publication policy of casualty recorders should be informed by the level of information that they expect or want to be released by others.
The greatest detail possible at incident and victim level should be shared, subject to security and resource constraints (see section 2.8 p13)

15. It is an important general principle in recording that the methodology of a casualty recorder can, should and does develop in response to experience, the needs of audiences, and changing situations in the country of conflict (see section 3.7 p16)
ABOUT OXFORD RESEARCH GROUP

Oxford Research Group (ORG) is a leading independent think-tank, non-governmental organisation and registered charity, based in London. ORG has been influential for thirty years in promoting the idea of sustainable approaches to global security as an alternative to violent confrontation, through original research, wide-ranging dialogue, and practical policy recommendations.

ORG is committed to the principle that every life lost to armed violence should be properly recognised. For this to become possible, every casualty of armed violence, throughout the world, must be promptly recorded, correctly identified and publicly acknowledged. In support of this goal, the Every Casualty programme at ORG (www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/rcac) works to develop an improved understanding of the range of available casualty recording practices, along with guidance for their implementation. This work has included extensive research into existing casualty recording practice, research which is contributing towards the identification and development of standards and good practice that can be implemented by a range of actors, including non-governmental organisations, states, and intergovernmental organisations alike.

In addition to carrying out research, ORG facilitates an International Practitioner Network of casualty-recording organisations (www.everycasualty.org/practitioners/ipn) and is at the forefront of integrating policy goals into existing policy frameworks at the national and international level.

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