REPORTING AND WRITING GUIDELINES 2022

SMEX
تعزيـز الحقـوق الرقمـية
Advancing Digital Rights

SMEX's Reporting and Writing Guidelines

Why contribute to SMEX?

We believe in human rights, online and offline, and strive to defend access to information, freedom of expression and the rights to privacy and nondiscrimination in online spaces.

We write stories about how digital technology can serve as an enabler of civic participation and the exercise of fundamental freedoms. Nonetheless, we also document violations that are harmful to society, human rights and vulnerable communities in digital spaces.

Through publishing research-based articles and reports, we aim to enable critical engagement with information and communications technologies and challenge dominant discourses advanced by institutional powers: corporate, state, or otherwise.

What are the stories published at SMEX?

Our stories cover issues at the intersection of technology and human rights in the WANA region. We write about a myriad of topics relevant to digital rights including, but not limited to internet access and internet shutdowns, data privacy and security, internet law and policy, surveillance, freedom of expression and speech online, and online misinformation and hate speech.

We seek to inform our audience about the current threats and challenges to digital rights by providing the facts with a critical eye. Each article covers a specific topic in an Arab country. Some articles can cover a topic common to more than one country, i.e. defamation campaigns in Morocco and Egypt.

In our coverage, we rely on credible sources and primary accounts, such as interviews with experts and individuals or entities involved, original documents, and evidence-based research. Beyond stating the facts and contextualizing a certain event (a new law or policy, data breach, content takedown, cases of surveillance, etc.), we also provide a critical and informed analysis of what happened.

Who reads our stories?

The news we publish is relevant to every internet user, but it is specifically helpful for journalists, human rights defenders, civil society actors, technologists, researchers and academics interested in digital rights topics. It also targets technology corporations and governments whose policies and laws directly impact society.

How to write with us

Story structure
The general format for stories published on our website include: headline, lead, context and background, analysis, and conclusion. We usually follow the Inverted Pyramid format to structure our stories.

Inverted Pyramid
This format of reporting helps the reader grasp the core of your story within the first few seconds of reading. Readers are bombarded with information from multiple platforms, all at once, all the time. This is why it's important to lead with the most critical aspects of the story (lede), then move on to providing contextual background and analysis. Once the main points are covered, you can provide further information about the topic or situate it in the larger scale of events. Lastly, finish the article with additional details for those who are most interested in the topic. These would be the "nice to know" additions to the story, but they are not crucial nor necessary.

Headlines
Short and direct headline that states a fact and specifies the country covered.

Lead
A lead (the opening lines of your piece) should grab the reader's attention in the first 30-35 words. The lead should be specific and explain the topic concisely while keeping the reader interested in the rest of the story. It can be a fact, quote, or an anecdote that leads the reader into the topic. A good way to get started on writing ledes is to imagine your friend just asked you what your story is about. What would you tell them? Keep it short and straight to the point.

We often use direct leads in our reporting, but depending on the type of article, a writer may decide to use delayed leads or use a more creative approach if it better serves the piece.

Example: The Ministry of Telecommunications in Lebanon raised prices four-fold to save the telecom sector at the cost of depriving hundreds of thousands their right to communication.

5Ws

The five **Ws** of journalism are the building blocks of your story. They ground the reader and introduce the topic by stating the most important facts. Most of these **Ws** should be answered in your lede or the first few paragraphs. Answer the most important **W** in the opening paragraph, then elaborate on the rest throughout the article.

Who is the story about?
What is the story about?
Where did the story happen?
When did the story happen?
Why did it happen?

Nut graph

After the lead comes the nut graph. It explains, in a nutshell, the point of the story, why the reader should care, and why they should continue reading. It can be formulated by asking: Why is this story significant? The nut graph is the “So what?” paragraph of the story.

Example: The Minister’s decision to raise tariff prices amid a historic economic crisis will be costly for almost every phone holder in Lebanon. Many will have to ration their mobile internet subscriptions, which might affect their work, study, and digital communication. Subscribers are now forced to pay the price for over 20 years of corruption and mismanagement in the telecom sector.

Subheadings

Almost every article should be divided into sections with subheadings. Subheadings should be short, attractive, and informative. They should serve as sign posts for readers, guiding them from one aspect of the story to the next.

Contextual and background information

Contextual and background information is always required. Every article should explain the country-specific background for the story and why it is relevant to us today. Always keep in mind that the reader might be coming across this information for the first time, so we ought to provide the necessary local context in which the events are unfolding. Only cover the context (i.e. legal, policy, tech, minorities, etc.) relevant to the story.

Analysis
The analysis is diffused across the article and answers the questions: what does this mean? How will this change, such as a new law or policy, affect digital rights? What are the real-world implications of a certain threat, such as online hate speech? Why did a specific government shut down the internet during this period? How will the event affect human rights defenders or internet users?

This section can be tackled by talking to experts and witnesses, conducting interviews with those impacted, quoting reports and analyses done by other entities, citing commentaries from professionals or influential figures in the field, in addition to providing data such as statistics and studies.

Keep the analysis as objective and impartial as possible.

Conclusion
Don’t leave readers hanging in mid-air after reading your article. Tell them what is expected next, warn about the future implications of an event, and when possible, offer recommendations that align with our values and human rights standards.

Credibility and Accuracy

Always make clear who and what your sources are. If the claims appear in another digital or print publication, make sure to fact-check them for accuracy.

Sources

Claims need to be substantiated with links that are judicious, and from primary sources that are trusted and well-established. If the source appears in a language different from the one in which the article is written, find its equivalent in the appropriate language. In case there is no equivalent source, link the original in whatever language it appears. The aim is to always link back to the original, verified source of the information provided. Obscure and highly politicized websites should be avoided.

Trustworthy personal blogs and social media accounts should be credited if they are the original source of information or news. For example, if a journalist or an expert is sharing a personal incident, making a claim, or commenting on a matter related to public interest, they must be cited as the source. Official entities, such as ministers or state-affiliated persons (i.e. judges, public servants, members of parliament, etc.), that publish statements on their social media accounts can also be cited. One example is the twitter account of the General Directorate of Lebanese General Security (@DGSG_Security). This account is often cited for the tweets they publish and is considered an official entity. Always make sure you are quoting from the official page as sometimes other social media accounts use similar twitter handles, websites, and Facebook pages.

If you receive material that is not sourced, either find a source or request it from the author. Sometimes writers make claims without clearly attributing the source of their information. It is the responsibility of contributors to reach out to the author for the source of their claims, or else they cannot be included in the article.

Hyperlinks / Links

All information should be linked back to the original source through hyperlinks. Hyperlinks serve the purpose of validating claims and information as they appear throughout the article. They also point readers to other credible sources for further context and background. This could be a study published by an entity, a report, a feature or article from a trusted news outlet, or any other verified source.

Avoid linking under generic phrases, such as "read the article" or "watch the video," link instead under descriptive keywords, such as "threatens the privacy of users" or "mass surveillance in Palestine."

If a topic has been previously discussed on our website, use hyperlinks to refer back to it.

No need to hyperlink an entire sentence or paragraph, but specific claims and details. Refer back to the articles published on our website to see how we use hyperlinks at SMEX.

Be generous with links if the piece is a commentary making contentious claims.

Attribution

Attribution is specifying who said something so readers know where the information in the article comes from. When we attribute, we state the source's full name, in addition to any other information that's relevant to the story such as their job title, area of expertise, or their involvement in a story (i.e. witnesses).

Use the full name of the source at first reference, then you may include their last name only. Be consistent with attribution.

Example: Mona Shtaya, advocacy advisor at 7amleh, said that the aim of this war and these violations is...etc.

Make sure to vary the verbs before an attribution. An article that only uses "he/she said" for attribution may become dull and redundant. Instead, you can use other verbs such as, suggested, warned, urged, explained, asked, disclosed, exposed, cautioned, etc., depending on the context of the content.

First-hand sources

In most articles, our authors reach out to entities whose perspective matters to the story. These could be experts on a specific topic, such as journalists, technologists, researchers, public servants, or lawyers, among others, or they could be someone who has been affected by a specific event, law or policy, i.e. internet shutdowns, a hacking attempt or a suspended social media account.

It is crucial to include statements and commentaries by two or three people/entities involved in the matter at hand with different points of view, if possible, or different aspects of the story. This allows the piece to explore a specific topic from multiple perspectives and to enrich the narrative by covering multiple layers.

Guidelines for contacting sources

- Always introduce yourself, stating clearly your role and profession, and why you are contacting someone. *"I am reaching out to you as a contributor at SMEX, a digital rights organization in the Arabic-speaking region, to discuss the implications of internet shutdowns on students in Yemen. I would like to conduct a short interview on the matter and quote some of your statements to be published in a story on SMEX's online website."*
- Interviewees should be initially contacted by email, unless they explicitly state that they prefer using another medium, such as an instant messaging application.
- Keep records of all communications with someone you've interviewed, including email and chat logs, recorded conversations, and the script of the interview.
- Ensure the interviewee explicitly agrees to be recorded via a recording device. If not, type out the conversation during the interview.
- Mark the exact date and time of when the conversation took place. When possible, mention the place as well.
- SMEX complies with the interviewee's request to remain anonymous if revealing their identity will put them at risk or cause them any inconvenience. The reason for withholding their name must be stated explicitly in the article when quoting someone anonymously, i.e for safety reasons.

Interviews

Reporters conduct two kinds of interviews:

News interview: The purpose is to gather information to explain an idea, event or situation in the news. This is the most common type of interview we conduct for articles on SMEX.

Profile: The focus is on an individual. A news peg often is used to justify the profile.

For effective interviews, reporters should prepare carefully, and ask questions that induce the source to talk freely. Questions are directed at obtaining information on a theme that the reporter has in mind before beginning the interview.

Interviewees must be informed beforehand about how their information will be used. The interviewer can provide the interviewee with a copy of the interview and the statements that will be included in the final version of the article.

Remember these four basic principles of interviewing:

1. Prepare carefully, familiarizing yourself with as much background as possible.
2. Establish a relationship with the source conducive to obtaining information.
3. Ask questions that are relevant to the source and that induce the source to talk.
4. Listen and watch attentively.

For every pitch, the author provides a sheet outlining the contacted sources and the statements directly communicated to SMEX. At the same time, state all statements collected from news outlets and link the media outlet from which those statements are obtained.

Anonymity

Anonymity is a last resort. Identify sources whenever possible, and question sources' motives before promising anonymity. Anonymity should only be used in situations where the information provided risks the safety and wellbeing of those reporting on the story or those involved directly in the events.

Do not offer a source anonymously without first pressing to use a name or other helpful identification. If concealment proves necessary, writers should tell readers as much as possible — without violating the promise of confidentiality — to help them assess the source's credibility.

In most cases it may also be valuable to explain why the source will not speak for attribution. Do they fear for their job or safety? Does their company forbid workers to speak to reporters? Is the information classified? But be wary of rote phrases that convey little information and suggest an autopilot approach to attribution. It provides little insight merely to say that a source "was not authorized" to speak, or sought anonymity because the topic was "sensitive."

Anonymity should not be used as a cloak for personal attacks.

Revisions and Editing Process

Revising is part of writing.

Our editorial team works tirelessly to thoroughly revise and edit any submitted article to ensure it adheres to our editorial guidelines. We usually engage in an editing process that would require at least three rounds of edits before an article is published on our website and shared with our audience.

If revisions are not sufficiently or seriously addressed after the second round, we may choose to end the collaboration.

Writers may reach out to us on any point for further assistance in their writing process.

Step-by-Step Submissions and Editing Process

- The contributor fills out the pitch form.
- The editorial team reviews the idea and either accepts or rejects the pitch.
- The team then agrees with the contributor on an outline, deadline and payment.
- The contributor sends the first draft to the editorial team.
- The editorial team reviews the first draft, and adds crucial comments about content structure and organization, missing information or sources, additional interviews, angle of coverage, etc.
- The contributor addresses and resolves the editor's comments in the text within the agreed-upon timeline.
- The language editor adds feedback to the second draft and shares it with the contributor.
- If needed, the editorial team may request additional rounds of editing.
- Contributors might be asked to read the translation to double-check the accuracy of the material.

***Please note that articles that require a substantial amount of time and effort to edit will not be considered.**