

Covering Conflicts Safely

Reducing Risks for Freelancers and Local Journalists



Conference Summary and Next Steps

On January 20, the U.S. Department of State brought together journalists, media executives, like-minded governments, foundations, training providers, and NGOs for a conversation aimed at identifying concrete steps that can be taken to address gaps in safety resources available to journalists in conflict zones. The focus was on helping journalism's most vulnerable members – the freelancers and local reporters who often work without the training and support networks available to their colleagues from large news organizations.

The day's conversation was framed by some sobering statistics provided by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). The past three years have been the most dangerous period for journalists ever recorded. In 2014, more than 200 journalists were imprisoned and at least 61 journalists were killed, of whom 44 percent were deliberately murdered because of their work. In 38 percent of those murder cases, the journalist was threatened beforehand. A full 30 percent of journalists killed in 2014 were freelancers – compared with 17 percent in 1992 – and 87 percent were local journalists working in their own countries. In most instances, no one was brought to justice.

Given this reality, conference attendees agreed that the news industry and supporting organizations must urgently act to provide better safety training and protection to those journalists who face the biggest risks.

Participants were asked to consider four key issue areas: identifying a formal coordination structure, developing a standard training curriculum, recognizing needs beyond training, and prioritizing people and places. The resulting discussions and brainstorming sessions developed a number of overarching themes, including but not limited to:

- the need for a basic code of conduct between media organizations and freelancers;
- the urgency of addressing the rapidly changing landscape of conflict journalism, in which journalists are now deliberately targeted because of their profession;
- the role impunity plays in ensuring a safe operating environment for journalists;
- the need for clearer, more accessible information about available safety resources, including improved digital security and combat medical training;

- the value of better coordination of these safety resources across the organizations that provide them;
- the need to reconcile the moral responsibility of employers to protect freelancers and local journalists with the need to tell crucial stories;
- the necessity of avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach to journalist safety by adapting to the unique challenges faced in a range of environments.

In addition to the themes mentioned above, several key questions were raised:

- What are the different challenges faced by freelancers and local journalists, and it is possible to discuss potential solutions for these two distinct groups in one conversation when their realities are often quite different?
- Who else is part of the journalism ecosystem, and should consideration be given to the challenges faced by individuals who support journalists in the field such as assistants, drivers, translators, and their families?
- What basic guidelines are needed when it comes to journalist safety training? Should there be some sort of licensing regime, or more of a commitment from training providers to hold themselves to certain professional standards?
- How should the response to these new dangers change according to the experience, location, and gender of the journalist?
- What is the link between pay and security? Is it possible for freelancers and local journalists to be safe under the current pay structure? If a minimum wage is the answer, how do you ensure that this doesn't crowd out local media organizations that can't afford to pay those higher wages?
- Journalism is a competitive field. How can solidarity across media organizations be factored into a solution? Competition for funding also makes it difficult for the NGO community and training providers to work together. How can supporting organizations better utilize skill sets and specialties in order to coordinate their services and fill necessary gaps?
- Is there too much emphasis on training and not enough on institutional capacity building?

The conference provided an opportunity to frame the problem and hear from a variety of perspectives about potential solutions. The major recommendations and initial next steps that were proposed during the course of the discussion are outlined below. However, the consensus among the attendees was that this is only a first step. They agreed that it is imperative to continue to collaborate on ways to develop concrete action items and mechanisms for coordination that benefit the safety of freelancers and local journalists worldwide.

Note: The State Department's role at this conference was simply to convene. These recommendations and next steps were compiled from the notes taken by our staff during the conference, but it is based on the comments of the outside participants rather than on any U.S. government views or conclusions. The conference took place under the Chatham House Rule, which prohibits identifying participants by name, but we have in some cases identified organizations that agreed to play a leading or coordinating role. We are distributing this paper only to conference invitees and do not plan to publish or release it on any official U.S. government platform.

Recommendations

- 1. Establish a task group to examine journalist safety issues through two distinct lenses -- international freelancers and local journalists.** An international freelancer is someone who is reporting and publishing in countries other than their own and is not a regular staff member of a particular news organization. A local journalist is working in his or her own country, often for a small local or national media outlet, and sometimes cannot leave a conflict area when things get dangerous. Separate solutions and initiatives must be developed for each of these groups.
- 2. Develop a comprehensive standard training curriculum.** This curriculum should include, but not be limited to: risk assessment and mitigation plans; digital and physical surveillance; emotional care; digital security; hostile environment training; and first aid. Clear deliverables for each training module and guidelines for advanced follow-on trainings or refresher courses should be established. While there should be a standard curriculum that ensures a certain quality of training is met, journalist safety courses should not be approached with a one-size-fits-all mentality. There needs to be some flexibility in the curriculum based on location, environment, and course participants.
- 3. Develop a “network of networks.”** Many organizations are doing great work in this field, but freelance and local journalists need to be made more aware of the resources available to them. Organizations operating in this sphere also need to do a better job of communicating with each other. Developing a comprehensive repository of information and resources would allow more journalists to learn about prevention (trainings, on-the-ground support, and equipment), emergency assistance, and best practices. Something as simple as an up-to-date list of safety resources that editors can provide to all the journalists they hire could make a real difference.
- 4. Find creative solutions for encouraging solidarity throughout the journalism “ecosystem.”** This could include naming and shaming news organizations that fail to properly protect journalists or creating awards for organizations that do a stellar job of providing the necessary tools to help freelancers and local journalists stay safe. Members of elected government bodies or multilateral institutions could be paired with individual journalists to highlight their cases and keep the discussion of journalist safety front and center (this has been done in some European countries already).

5. **Encourage the media industry to do a better job covering the issues that journalists face and why they matter.** No one has more effective publicity tools at their disposal than news organizations themselves. A more targeted and consistent approach to raising the public profile of journalist safety issues – and their relationship to the protection of democracy and freedom of expression – could help galvanize support and encourage real change within the industry.
6. **Implement basic guidelines for conduct between freelancers and media organizations.** These guidelines, which are being considered by many news organizations, should recognize the shared responsibilities of both freelancers and media organizations to ensure that people are adequately trained and protected when working in conflict zones or other hostile environments. If a media organization is sending someone on a dangerous assignment, there should be a standard set of rules that outlines what safety resources should be provided to freelancers and what safety resources news organizations require freelancers to provide for themselves.
7. **Explore the possibility of a standard minimum wage for freelancers.** Freelance security is directly linked to pay. If freelancers do not receive wages that are sufficient enough to be able to afford safety equipment and training, it is impossible for them to protect themselves. They also may feel compelled to take unnecessary risks.
8. **Use local journalist networks more effectively.** CPJ's data shows that local journalists are the most vulnerable members of the journalism community, but they often have the worst access to safety resources. A number of organizations have built up networks of local journalists within specific countries or regions. Utilizing these networks, or even more informal journalist networks, to increase the information and safety resources available to these underserved individuals should be prioritized. For example, the mobile app being developed by the International Women's Media Foundation provides an emergency alert system to anyone with a smart phone or SMS capability. Resources like this are free and widely accessible, but they need to be better publicized.
9. **Find solutions that allow journalists to move safety equipment across borders more easily.** There are many conflict zones and hostile environments around the world in which journalists find it difficult or impossible to transport necessary safety equipment into the country. Having increased flexibility and assistance as they move equipment across borders would allow them to protect themselves better.
10. **Prioritize the issue of impunity for crimes against journalists in bilateral and multilateral meetings.** Many of the countries with the highest impunity rates (Mexico, Colombia, Pakistan, and Brazil, for example) are places where the United States and like-minded governments maintain strong but complex bilateral relationships with many competing priorities. Ending impunity for crimes against journalists should be a priority and regular point of discussion in bilateral and multilateral meetings with countries that have particularly egregious records on this front.

11. Provide clear protocols for Embassy personnel about when and how they should help journalists in crisis situations. Journalists often receive very different responses when they ask embassy personnel to assist with a crisis situation overseas. Standardizing the government's response so that it is less dependent on the individuals involved and more clearly tied to coherent policy objectives and procedures would go a long way towards helping journalists understand the role governments can play in this process.

Next Steps

The Ground Truth Project, together with the Rory Peck Trust and Reporters Without Borders, agreed to serve as coordinators in the establishment of a task group on journalist safety. Several other interested parties have already committed to participating in the group. It will have two distinct subgroups: one focused on international freelancers and tying pay directly to safety, and a second focused on local journalists and working together to address impunity for crimes against journalists. The group will meet three milestones over the next four months:

- February 12: Official establishment of the task group (in coordination with Columbia University's launch of standards and practices).
- April 23: Finalization of the task group's goals, including the identification of priority issues as well as plans for assessing needs and taking action (in coordination with the National Press Club's event on journalist safety issues).
- May 3: Official progress report (in coordination with World Press Freedom Day).

The International News Safety Institute and the Frontline Freelance Register volunteered to lead the effort to develop a standard training curriculum. They are proposing a six-month timeline for outlining a curriculum to support freelance journalists, noting that standards for local journalists might not be the same. They plan to work with trainers on the curriculum's content, bring what they develop to a new journalist safety group (including those who participated in the conference), and then present the proposed curriculum to a wider audience.

Several media representatives have already been cooperating behind the scenes to develop guidelines for how news organizations and freelancers should work together in conflict zones. A core group of individuals from Reuters, Associated Press, the Overseas Press Club, the Ground Truth Project, and the Frontline Freelance Register are leading this effort. The guidelines are now being circulated to major news organizations so they have time to consider them and sign on prior to their public unveiling at Columbia Journalism School on February 12. Conference participants are encouraged to think about how their organizations can support these guidelines in the implementation phase.

The U.S. Department of State will:

- explore additional funding options for journalist safety training programs like the S.A.F.E. Initiative and other efforts to help protect journalists (particularly local journalists) around the world, including efforts to ensure that information about these

programs is widely available to freelancers and local journalists;

- work to more fully integrate the issue of impunity against journalists into its bilateral and multilateral agenda;
- develop worldwide protocols within the U.S. embassy community on when and how to provide assistance to journalists working in conflict zones or other hostile environments.
- coordinate with relevant countries on possible exemptions for accredited journalists carrying protective gear across international borders.