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Where are we now? – (Almost) a decade with the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity

Kurzfassung: Dieser Aufsatz nimmt die akademische Forschungsagenda der UNESCO zur Sicherheit von Journalisten zum Ausgangspunkt. Wir geben einen Überblick über die Beiträge zu einer Reihe von Forschungskonferenzen und wissenschaftlichen Publikationen, die sich auf die Sicherheit von Journalisten konzentrieren, und kategorisieren sie gemäß der Forschungsagenda. Das übergeordnete Ziel besteht darin, sowohl die Erforschung von Mechanismen, die unsichere Bedingungen schaffen, als auch mögliche Strategien und Lösungen unter praktischer, theoretischer, nationaler und internationaler Perspektive zu diskutieren. Auf diesem Wege arbeiten wir heraus, wo die Schwerpunkte liegen und wessen es in der aktuellen Forschung zur Sicherheit von Journalisten ermangelt. Zugleich dient diese Diskussion als Einführung in die Kapitel des vorliegenden Themenheftes.

Abstract: This article takes UNESCO's Academic Research Agenda on Safety of Journalists as its point of departure. We present an overview of contributions to a selection of research conferences and academic publications focusing on safety of journalists and categorize them according to the research agenda. The overall aim of the contributions is to discuss research on ideas and practices that create unsafe conditions, as well as possible strategies and solutions from practical, theoretical, national or international perspectives. Through this exercise, we find where the focus areas are and what is lacking in current research on safety of journalists, and the discussion serves as an introduction to the chapters of this special issue.

1. Introduction

The UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity begins by quoting Barry James[1]: "Every journalist killed or neutralized by terror is an observer less of the human condition. Every attack distorts reality by creating a climate of fear and self-censorship". Nevertheless, over the almost ten years since the process of drawing up a UN Plan of Action started, attacks on journalists have continued relentlessly.

The articles presented in this issue of *Conflict & Communication Online*, were selected from papers written for the annual Safety of Journalists conference organized by the Media, War and Conflict research group at Oslo Metropolitan University. The annual conference was set up to support research on the safety of journalists, in line with recommendations of UNESCO's Research Agenda on the Safety of Journalists.[2] Besides furthering new knowledge on safety issues, it also seeks ways to construct a network of researchers able to produce knowledge vital to improving safety of journalists internationally. In our call for contributions to the 2017 conference, we wrote:

> An attack on a journalist is an attack on the freedom of expression. Silencing journalists happens through a variety of actions ranging from threats such as bullying and online harassment, restrictive policies and random detention, to the decisive act of censorship – death. Knowledge about journalists' working conditions is important to improve the training of new journalists.

We wanted to discuss both the processes leading to unsafe conditions and possible strategies and solutions and asked for papers with practical, theoretical, national or international perspectives that critically examine challenges related to the issue of safety of journalists.

One feature that perhaps distinguishes the annual Safety of Journalists conference in Oslo from most other academic events is support the organizing committee receives from The Norwegian National commission for UNESCO, The Freedom of Expression Foundation Oslo and Oslo Metropolitan University. This has made it possible to make the conference open and accessible without conference fees or other costs for participants. What is more, the support helps finance grants for participants coming from Latin America, Africa, the Middle East or Asia, as we believe it is necessary to ensure that researchers from the Global South are included in research projects, academic networks and research conferences on the safety of journalists. Due to the risks they face, many of these researchers are uniquely placed to investigate and understand the most urgent issues affecting the safety of journalists around the world.

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1 Barry James in Press Freedom: Safety of Journalists and Impunity. UNESCO Publications: 2002
2 UNESCO, Towards a Research agenda on the safety of journalists, Draft Document 1 June 2015,
https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/draft_research_agenda_safety_of_journalists_06_2015.pdf , accessed 15.1.2019.

2. Safety of journalists emerging as an academic topic

In recent years we have witnessed an increased focus on how academic inquiry can contribute to achieving safer conditions for journalists. This emerging aim is often seen in light of the Sustainable Development Goals agenda (16.10) that contributes to developing free and independent news media worldwide and creating a safer environment for journalists and journalism. UNESCO has taken an active role in this process, encouraging academic coordination, collaboration and exchange. UNESCO also provides a number of reports of significance for international understanding. Earlier experiences show that the field of freedom of expression and safety of journalists is particularly challenging to examine, due to the politically sensitive features of the topic and the need to continuously strive for consensus within a multi-national organization (Rønning & Orgeret, 2015). Therefore, academic collaboration may be particularly useful both for the sake of greater independence and for theoretical and principled perspectives. In 2014 UNESCO developed a ten-point research agenda in line with the UN Plan of Action, and promoted it through a call for research cooperation with academic scholars. By creating the Academic Research Agenda on Safety of Journalists, UNESCO aimed to inspire new academic research in an area that previously had been covered only by a limited number of scientific studies. The research agenda suggests ten broad and sometimes overlapping areas within which different types of safety research could be explored:

Rights-based issues; Conflict issues; Societal issues; Legal issues; Practitioner issues; Psychological issues; Economic issues; Digital issues; Thematic issues; Educational issues

By developing the agenda, UNESCO has definitely encouraged academic research in the area of journalist safety. The agenda has been followed up by several higher educational institutions, such as the Centre for Freedom of the Media at University of Sheffield, the Universities of Gothenburg and Helsinki and Oslo Metropolitan University. The two first were central in organizing the first academic conference entirely dedicated to the topic during UNESCO's World Press Freedom Day celebrations in Helsinki in May 2016. The Centre for Freedom of the Media in Sheffield is building a worldwide Journalism Safety Research Network (JSRN) and named Professor Jackie Harrison to the first UNESCO Chair on Media Freedom, Journalism Safety and the Issue of Impunity on May 3, 2018. The Department of Journalism and Media Studies at OsloMet University and the research group MEKK (Media, War and Conflict) has organized four annual conferences associated with safety of journalists (2015-2018).

3. The Helsinki conference and *The Assault on Journalism*

Based on an examination of the themes discussed in the 48 academic research papers presented in Helsinki, Reeta Pöyhtäri (2016) found that the number of studies devoted to each of the topics covered by the research agenda was the following:

Topic	Number of studies
Rights-based issues	1 study
Conflict issues	7 studies
Societal issues	no studies
Legal issues	6 studies
Practitioner issues	16 studies
Psychological issues	5 studies
Educational issues	1 study
Economic issues	2 studies
Thematic issues (gender, sports, photojournalism, indigenous journalists)	5 studies
Digital issues	4 studies
Methodological issues	1 study

Within this sample, Pöyhtäri shows that most research concentrates on practitioner issues, followed by studies on safety in times of conflict and legal issues. Typically, a research paper would cover the type and extent of threats experienced by journalists in a certain country.

Drawing on contributions to the 2016 Helsinki conference, an anthology was published entitled *The Assault on Journalism. Building knowledge to protect freedom of expression*. In the anthology, editors Ulla Carlsson and Reeta Pöyhtäri present 26 research articles and 7 research highlights, reflecting the profile of the overall findings from the conference. In their introduction, the editors stress that if progress is to be made, knowledge is a prerequisite.

> For us researchers it is of the utmost importance that we broaden our theoretical and analytical frameworks. This has too often been ignored in the contemporary research, but now there is an urgent call for empirical results, theoretical insights and analytical concepts. … academic research … is essential

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and can significantly improve our understanding of the complex issue of journalist safety, and in this way contribute to creating safer working conditions for everyone who produces journalism. What's more, it can help resolve broader issues and systematic problems in society such as corruption, lack of good governance, weak rule of law and inequality. The challenge is not only to explain problems, but also to contribute to solutions and to communicate with the people in power so that research findings will make a difference (Carlsson & Pöyhtäri 2016).

The authors included in *The Assault on Journalism* are 55% women and 45 % men, indicating that this is a field of research where both genders are well represented. Most of the authors are researchers, but a few are full time practitioners.

Some articles present overviews of the situation of safety for journalists internationally, and of those with a specific country focus, the majority deal with an Asian country. The profile of the articles in the anthology reflects the conference they stem from, with a fourth of the chapters (8 of 32) focusing on practitioner issues, such as journalists' experiences, risk management and survival tactics. The second most popular topic is conflict, with five chapters covering challenges related to conflict reporting in specific countries, as well as in regions and the 'global war on terror'.

We can see that topics not covered, or only barely touched on, in both the Helsinki conference and the resulting anthology, were societal issues, such as for instance impact of attacks on society more broadly, economic matters, for instance discussing the role of employers and media institutions and the question of methods. In addition, multidisciplinary approaches, cross-country comparisons, as well as studies combining empirical evidence from practitioners with theory have been mentioned as needed viewpoints (Pöyhtäri 2016: 105). Pöyhtäri also shows that journalism education was also poorly represented in the Helsinki sample, but discusses how this was later remedied by a conference in November 2016, entitled "Best Practices in teaching conflict, war and peace journalism" at OsloMet University.

In the following we suggest a similar method in an overview of four high profile international journals of importance to the field of journalism, as well as of papers from Oslo conferences held in 2016, 2017 and 2018. We categorize contributions according to the UNESCO research agenda, to see where focus areas are and also what is lacking in current research on safety of journalists.

4. Oslo Metropolitan University conferences

The conferences are organized for the first week of November each year in relation to UNESCO's International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists, which is the 2nd of November. The 2015 conference was dedicated 'Gender, War and Conflict'. The 2016 conference was entitled 'Best Practices in teaching conflict, war and peace journalism'. The 2017 Oslo Metropolitan University conference's topic was Safety of Journalists – Covering Conflict and Sensitive Issues. The conference dealt with the safety of both journalists and their sources, for instance when covering sensitive issues such as corruption, human rights, refugees and migration. In November 2018 the conference was entitled Safety of Journalists – the chilling effects, and had a particular focus on how the cycle of violence against journalists and the fact that most abuse of media professionals remains uninvestigated and unpunished, and may result in self-censorship, which further reduces press freedom.

Examining the papers presented at two conferences in 2017 and 2018 – 144 in all – and categorizing the topics according to the UNESCO research agenda, we find some interesting trends. Practitioner issues score high as a topic of the papers, and qualitative interviews are the most frequently used method. Societal, psychological and economic issues are dealt with less in the conference papers. In terms of geography, the conferences have provided a platform for researchers from a wide range of countries, including Africa, a continent that has thus far received little attention in other research on the safety of journalists (see below).

At the 2017 conference, 55% of those presenting research papers were women and 45% were men, and in 2018, the respective percentages were 53% women and 47 % men.

In terms of the conference papers' content, we note that the UNESCO research agenda does not introduce gender as an individual topic, but mentions it under 'thematic issues', together with topics such as Media and ethnicity; Media and environment and Media and religion (2015). It is well known that women journalists face greater risks in covering war and conflict than their male colleagues. Women journalists are confronted with dangers in the course of their work not only in the field, but also online, as there is a growing trend to increased digital threats and online abuse. An IWMF and INSI study (2014) interviewed nearly 1,000 women media workers from around the world and found that nearly two-thirds of respondents had experienced some form of intimidation, threats or abuse in relation to their work, ranging in severity from name-calling to rape and death threats. There are good reasons to focus on the particular threats and challenges faced by female journalists when researching safety of journalists. When it comes to gendered experiences of male journalists, we know much less. The 2015 OsloMet conference and the resulting anthology *Gendering War and Peace Reporting* edited

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by Rune Ottosen and Berit von der Lippe (2016) initiated some very interesting discussions, and three chapters of the anthology were dedicated to a section on 'Masculinities, Heroes and Victims'. Nevertheless, there is still much to be done in including male experiences in the gendered perspectives of safety of journalists.

5. Safety of journalists in international journals of journalism

Over the last two to three years, major international journals of journalism have published a few research articles related to safety issues. While the number of articles is not large, a small but growing body of literature is emerging from the international journals. At least 14 articles relevant to the Research Agenda on Safety of Journalists were published in *Journalism*, *Journalism Practice*, *Data Journalism* and J*ournalism Studies* in 2016, 2017 and 2018.[3]

The research published in these well-established journals presents a fairly diverse range of countries and contexts. The researchers come from countries as varied as Australia, South Korea, Singapore, South Africa, Turkey, Hungary, UK, Denmark, USA, Mexico, El Salvador, Colombia and Chile. However, a closer inspection of the geography of the published studies suggests certain serious structural deficiencies. A few studies of global scope can be found. Others focus on safety of journalists in countries like South Korea, Mexico, Colombia, United Kingdom, USA, Philippines, Denmark and Australia. Nevertheless, the safety of journalists in Africa is not discussed by any of the studies identified here as relevant for the research agenda and published in these major journals (2016 – 2018). The lack of knowledge on African cases and contexts is unfortunate in light of "realities on the ground". Reporters Without Borders lists African countries such as Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, Burundi and Equatorial Guinea as among the most dangerous and difficult countries in the world for journalists. Clearly, if research is to help make work safer for journalists around the world, a far more concerted effort should be made to understand safety issues in African contexts.

Another salient feature is the way digital technologies are approached. Several articles deal with concerns such as internet governance, surveillance, source protection and the safety of user-generated content producers. Nevertheless, little has been published in terms of in-depth analysis of technologies journalists use to do research, communicate with each other or protect themselves or their sources. This is perhaps understandable considering that most of those publishing in the field of safety of journalists come from the humanities or social sciences, where methods such as interviews, surveys or content and discourse analysis are most common. Of the studies published in the four journals, 36 % employ surveys as their main method, 29 % qualitative interviews, 17 % content or discourse analysis, and 17 % could be defined as meta-studies or literature reviews. Still, issues such as digital safety could benefit from more interdisciplinarity, especially if specialists in digital communication and digital safety were invited to enrich the analysis of digital challenges and possible solutions.

Another prominent issue is economic hardship and precarity among journalists. Increasingly, economic crisis and hardship, job insecurity, low pay and inequality are found to have a negative impact on the resilience of journalists faced with threats or violence. From different angles, authors such as Tandoc Jr., Hughes, Mellado, Arroyave, Benitez, de Beer, Garcés, Lang, Márquez-Ramírez and Fay Anderson all touch upon these issues either explicitly or indirectly (Anderson, 2018; Hughes et al., 2017; Tandoc, 2017). Marius Dragomir, meanwhile, explores how governments use "funding to keep media in line" (Dragomir, 2017).

6. Reporting dangerously and defending journalism

The first book dedicated to analyzing safety of journalists, *Reporting Dangerously* by Simon Cottle, Richard Sambrook and Nick Mosdell, addresses insecurity and risks in "relation to the changing industry, professional practices and technologies that inform dangerous reporting". The book seeks to identify why "more journalists are being killed, attacked and intimidated" than ever before. The approach is both historical and contextual, as well as normative, as the authors remind us about the value of critical journalism and the responsibility to protect journalists.

Defending journalism. How national mechanisms can protect journalists and address the issue of impunity. A comparative analysis of practices in seven countries responds to the need for comparative studies analyzing efforts to protect journalists under threat (Saboory et al., 2017). Published by International Media Support, the study discusses measures taken in Afghanistan, Columbia, Indonesia, Iraq, Nepal, Pakistan and the Philippines. The comparative analysis helps the reader understand how different initiatives to support journalists work in a diversity of contexts. As such, it provides the reader with a list of options available to improve the safety of journalists.

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3 The authors acknowledge the many difficulties of drawing a strict line between articles relevant for the research agenda on safety and articles not relevant.

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7. Recommendations

So where are we now and where are we going? What type of research is needed to help make work safer for journalists around the world? Building on the 86 research papers presented at the Safety of Journalists conference in Oslo and the books and journal articles presented above, we find that research has moved ahead on several fronts.

First, scholars have found issues that were not mentioned specifically in the research agenda to be of great importance for the safety of journalists. Researchers are increasingly becoming aware of the key roles played by organizations such as journalist unions. Strong organizations seem to make individual journalists more resilient when faced with unsafe situations. They can support journalists under pressure, and can also play a crucial role in raising awareness and pushing for improvements on a political level.

The overview of research published in the last two to three years shows that publication in established journals is an important contribution, but has proceeded in a rather random manner, and a number of issues have received scant attention from the research community.

An example is how the gender perspective should be expanded to include attitudes and experiences of male journalists, as Ottosen & von der Lippe (2016) have reminded us. As much of the research is linked to particular case studies of safety issues, a next step would be analyses enabling us to understand both universal challenges, as well as particular challenges to local journalism, for instance in cases where there is a need for deep insight into local contexts. Creating and improving local structures, institutions and education would make parachute trainers with limited or no knowledge of the local setting superfluous. There are quite a number of interesting studies on economics, inequality, the economic crisis and safety issues related to the digital turn in journalism. However, so far little research has focused on the technological aspects of digital safety or possible solutions to these challenges. To mention a few other emerging topics that need to be considered in future research: The role of global teamwork and research on safety in global investigative networks; research on training special police units and judges in questions linked to the safety of journalists and issues of impunity; how journalism in one locality might affect safety of journalists in other localities.

The following articles of this issue of *Conflict and Communication Online* address some of the above concerns. However, much more of a coordinated and collective effort needs to be undertaken if the ambitious goals laid out in the research agenda are to be achieved in the near future. A fruitful approach to strengthen the emerging field of research, as well as to fill gaps in existing research, seems to consist in building a network to ensure that research will meet high quality standards and that underreported topics and regions will be dealt with. Comparative analyses are also important. Such a network will ensure continuity of efforts and will increasingly carry empirical observations onward in analysis and discussion.

8. Articles in this issue of *conflict & communication online*

The first article of this special issue is Guy Berger's 'Getting from the global to the local', which covers norms and systems for protecting journalists. The article discusses the results of UNESCO's consultation on how to strengthen implementation of the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists within the context of the Sustainable Development Goal indicator 16.10.1. Berger analyzes the potential to develop norms for monitoring at the country level, as well as to create applicable monitoring mechanisms for systematically tracking threats against journalists. He emphasizes how despite immense challenges around the world, in recent years the evolution of global norms related to the safety of journalists has progressed significantly at the international level.

The second article, 'Afghan journalists in a balancing act. Coping with deteriorating safety' by Elisabeth Eide, Abdul Mujeeb Khalvatgar and Hasina Shirzad, discusses the situation in one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists, namely Afghanistan. Through interviews with 28 reporters from a variety of regions, ethnicities and media outlets, the article discusses the crucial question *How do Afghan journalists regard their professional safety?* in a context that has gone from bad to worse in terms of the security situation.

In 'Safety culture – changing visual representations of wars? The case of Afghanistan', Saumava Mitra investigates Afghan photographers' perceptions through in-depth research interviews and analysis of two sets of images of Afghanistan chosen for a comparative case study. Mitra demonstrates how the 'safety culture' that emerged after 9/11 within the practice of international conflict correspondence is unevenly realized. Local photojournalists are exposed to increasing dangers, and it is possible that local photographers from conflict-ridden countries who work for international media may portray conflicts differently than international photographers.

Altaf Khan's 'Fixer in the Corporate Media' sheds light on the 'fixers' in North Western Pakistan and the systematic destruction of their professionality and existence in global journalism. Seeing the fixer as the local element in the glocal narrative, the article discusses how local fixers are becoming increasingly important due to rising security threats and budget cuts within international media. Khan shows how, despite this background, local fixers are

getting a very 'raw deal' in the present setting – their lives are in danger and they are working for minimum wages without any recognition. Also, training exercises are never really aimed at any long-term solutions, Khan argues, but serve organizational self-interest or contribute to other policy measures.

According to 'Digital Security Awareness and Practices of Journalists in Turkey: A Descriptive Study', journalists in Turkey experience security issues ranging from personal threats to physical and digital attacks. Author Behlül Çalışkan employs online surveys to reveal that journalists in Turkey rely heavily on digital technology. The study concludes that journalists lack awareness of digital security risks, and only a small percentage have taken safety training to protect themselves and their sources, either in the physical or digital world.

Marta Milena Barrios, Lina Vega-Estarita and Luis Manuel Gil investigate security for journalists after the 2016 peace accord between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrillas. 'When Online Commentary turns into violence: The Role of Twitter in Slander against Journalists in Colombia' analyzes a confrontation via Twitter between former President Álvaro Uribe and renowned journalist Daniel Samper to illustrate how harassment by government officials constrains journalists' daily work. The authors build on analysis of 592 tweets to document how threats from a political power-holder contributed to the formation of networks engaging in verbal violence on Twitter.

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