

**Opening remarks at plenary session: “Safety of journalists – challenges”**  
**On the occasion of the Conference on “News Organizations Standing up for the Safety of Media Professionals”**

By Guy Berger, UNESCO Director for Freedom of Expression and Media Development

The primary responsibility to protect citizens – including journalists - is that of the State. This indeed underlies the UN’s new Sustainable Development Goals which, amongst other objectives, aim to strengthen the rule of law, to reduce violence, and to promote public access to information and fundamental freedoms.

Yet a number of states are too often falling short of their duties – either through a lack of political will, or a lack of capacity, or both.

Can the media help change this situation? And what, in the media’s immediate sphere of operation, can media leaders do directly themselves to ensure a degree of safety? That depends to a large extent on how we understand the problems of safety.

To zoom in on the problem more distinctively, for the sake of focus about what we are talking about, we can recognise that press freedom and safety are closely related, but they are also not directly the same thing.

- First, even in contexts where there is press freedom, journalists can be subjected to attacks.
- Second, not all violations of press freedom impact directly on the safety of journalists; a newspaper being banned or website blocked may happen without direct physical harm to journalists.
- Third, press freedom can indeed be restricted, such as through arbitrary jailing of journalists; but as bad as that it is, it is not equivalent to the ultimate censorship of killing a journalist.

The point is that journalists need both press freedom and safety, and while these are inter-related, and yet they are not identical. Today we are trying to do justice to working on the safety angle – how to stop the threats and attacks that can impact physically on a person doing journalism.

Let us also keep in mind that not everyone will agree where press freedom starts and ends, but very few national leaders can stand up and say that doing journalism is sufficient cause to be groped, assaulted, kidnapped, abused or killed.

Safety is an issue around which we can build a very wide coalition.

Thus, while we need to work harder for the full package of press freedom and safety, we can also recognise that if at least it is accepted that journalists are important enough to be protected, that can reinforce the foundation for affirming that the media is also important enough to be able to work in conditions of press freedom.

Focusing specifically on safety, we know that there are different actors and causes that lead to attacks on journalists. But what is common to many of them is the attempt to put an end to the particular journalism under way. Universally, attacks on journalists represent an effort to dictate what messages should and should not go out to the public. As we know some killers even intend an attack itself to be the message. How then can journalists be protected, attacks be deterred, and attackers punished?

As indicated, in order to answer this question, we need to understand the problem more fully, to have deep knowledge about the complex culture whereby journalists worldwide are subjects of ongoing attacks. The types of attacks, the reasons that these happen, and the impact they have on media people, their families, their colleagues, their processes, their content – and on the public as well.

This session in our conference aims precisely to set out the range and depth of the problem. By zeroing in, in order to better understand the problem, this panel sets the scene for the next one, moderated by Christiane Amanpour, which examines industry responses to the problem.

In short, for the moment, we are digging deep into the issue of journalists being on the receiving side – the victims of attacks.

The next session looks at journalists as survivors and resisters, and therefore at the media responses involved in fighting back against attacks and the impunity that surrounds these ills. So let's not blur the two discussions. For now, we're unpacking the problem. And unfortunately it's a very large one.