

## **Towards a Research agenda on the safety of journalists**

Safety of journalists is seriously threatened all over the world. According to UNESCO's data, more than 700 journalists and media workers have been killed in the last 10 years. Silencing journalists through death is the ultimate act of censorship. The situation is further aggravated by other threats ranging from intimidation and harassment to restrictive policies and arbitrary detention, including attacks on women journalists. Equally worrying, more than nine out of ten cases of killing of journalists remain unsolved. The end result is a vicious cycle of impunity and a chilling effect on society in a climate of fear and self-censorship.

As the UN agency with a specific mandate to defend freedom of expression and press freedom, UNESCO actively promotes the safety of journalists and those who produce journalism. UNESCO has championed the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, which is the first concerted effort within the UN system to address these issues via a multi-stakeholder and holistic approach. The UN Plan aims towards the creation of a free and safe environment for journalists and media workers in both conflict and non-conflict situations, with a view to strengthen peace, democracy, and development worldwide.

Safety of journalists is understood to be an important requirement for unhindered practice of journalism and freedom of expression. Despite this, unlike the issues of journalism and freedom of expression, journalists' safety has not been a very popular topic of academic research. It has rarely been discussed as a specific research question.

Academic research on safety can significantly increase the understanding of the complex issue of safety of journalists, and through that contribute to creation of safer working conditions for all who practice journalism. To deepen cooperation with academia in line with the UN Plan, UNESCO has developed an academic research agenda on the topic of safety of journalists. By creation of the agenda, UNESCO hopes to encourage new academic research in this important area. The academic research agenda on safety discusses ten broad areas of possible research relating to the safety of journalists, including the physical and psychological aspects of safety. The research agenda is work-in-process, and comments and new inputs are welcomed to improve the draft document.

### **Possible areas/topics of academic research on safety (and impunity) issues**

Journalism safety can be broadly defined following the Implementation Strategy of the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity as: "a broad category that extends from preventive, protective and pre-emptive measures, through to combating impunity and promoting a social culture which cherishes freedom of expression and press freedom." The UN Plan recognises that safety is an issue both offline and online.

The actors concerned are envisaged as those mentioned in the UN Plan, according to which "the protection of journalists should not be limited to those formally recognised as journalists, but should cover others, including community media workers and citizen journalists and others who may be using new media as a means of reaching their audiences". The UNESCO Work Plan on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity refers to the safety of "journalists, media workers and social media producers

who produce a significant amount of journalism”. The term “journalists” below designates this broader sense.

It is well established that securing safe conditions for the practice of journalism depends on ending impunity for attacks against practitioners. Hence, the term “safety” below designates the combined package of safety and impunity issues. This research agenda focuses primarily on the side of the spectrum concerning physical, digital and psychological safety, rather than the broader press freedom pole, even though the two are interlinked.

Ten broad (sometimes overlapping) areas are suggested in this document. “Related areas of research” refers to established areas of media and communication research, under which different types of safety research could be explored.

1. **RIGHTS-BASED ISSUES:**

**Related areas of research:** Communication and democracy; Freedom of expression; Ethics of society and ethics of communication; Community communication

**Possible research topics:**

- Democratic and human rights and safety issues
- Democracy, civic participation and safety
- Freedom of expression (of journalists, civic actors) and safety
- Media development and safety
- Safety trends as an indicator of the broader status of media freedom, governance, democracy and/or development.

**Examples of research questions:**

- How is journalists’ safety interlinked with issues of democratic development, freedom of expression, human and civil rights and media freedom (in a specific context)?
- Can journalists’ safety be utilized as an indicator of democratic development, freedom of expression, civil rights and media freedom (and how)?
- What are the broader/societal effects on democracy and freedom of expression if journalists are threatened, attacked and killed?
- What is the wider impact of attacks in creating coverage gaps and/or a culture of self-censorship within media and society?

2. **CONFLICT ISSUES:**

**Related areas of research:** Peace and Conflict communication; Crisis communication; International communication; Political communication; Environmental and Risk communication; Media, globalization and social change

**Possible research topics:**

- War correspondents, and war correspondence
- Journalists as a target and tool of war propaganda/acts of war/acts of terrorism
- Safety in covering public demonstrations / unrest
- Media coverage of crimes against journalists and impunity

**Examples of research questions:**

- What are the central safety issues concerning journalists working in war or conflict situations in particular?
- What are the special (political and other) characteristics of safety threats in a conflict situation? Could these safety threats be avoided and by what means?

- How do the media cover the issues of journalists' safety and impunity? What are the reasons for media not covering safety and/or impunity issues?

3. **SOCIETAL ISSUES:**

**Related areas of research:** Audience studies; Media literacy and education

**Possible research topics:**

- Public awareness of the character of journalistic profession, its role in democracy and importance for the safe exercise of freedom of expression
- Public awareness and perceptions of crimes against journalists, and journalists' safety issues, including impunity
- Audience and societal effects of threats towards journalists' safety

**Examples of research questions:**

- To what degree is the public (in different countries) aware of journalists' safety issues?
- What are the public perceptions of journalistic profession, and their reactions to journalists and journalists' safety threats specifically?
- What are the societal effects of threats to journalists' safety? (eg. societal chilling, legitimising, solidarity, citizen confidence in media, citizen confidence in state)

4. **LEGAL ISSUES:**

**Related areas of research:** Communication and media law; Communication law and policy

**Possible research topics:**

- Normative and legal instruments, law and safety (national, regional, global)
- Impact of these instruments on safety

**Examples of research questions:**

- Which normative and legal instruments are there to protect journalists?
- Are normative and legal instruments protecting journalists efficiently? How could the instruments be developed to protect journalists better?
- Are certain normative and legal instruments creating hindrances or threats to journalists' safety?
- What is the role of extra-legal protections in relation to that by legal instruments?

5. **PRACTITIONER ISSUES:**

**Related areas of research:** Journalism studies

**Possible research topics:**

- Journalists' perceptions and awareness on safety
- Journalists' awareness, roles and professional skills in coverage of safety issues
- Status of journalists in society
- Ethics of journalistic work and safety
- Journalists' individual/professional roles and capacities and safety
- Freelancers and safety

**Examples of research questions:**

- How do journalists themselves perceive safety issues in their work?
- Does journalists' professional behavior take into account safety issues and minimize possible risks?
- How could journalistic practices be improved to safeguard safety better?
- Do journalists themselves raise awareness on safety issues?

- To what extent do journalists organise collectively or show solidarity with others, on safety issues?
- To what extent do safety threats affect the actual contents of journalism?

6. **PSYCHOLOGICAL ISSUES:**

**Related areas of research:** Media psychology; Communication and social cognition

**Possible research topics:**

- Effects of threats, killings and harassment on conceptions of victimhood, survivorhood, persecution, isolation and solidarity, etc.
- Psychological effects
- Self-censorship effects on journalistic work, contents and products (chilling)
- Effects on individuals and groups related to a journalist

**Examples of research questions:**

- What are the psychological effects of threats to journalists' safety, both for journalists and other individuals and groups?
- Safety threats and self-censorship: what are the main causes of self-censorship of journalists in different contexts and how does this affect journalistic contents?

7. **ECONOMICS ISSUES:**

**Related areas of research:** Media management, economics and policy

**Possible research topics:**

- Media houses' actions to support safety and journalists
- Working conditions and employment of journalists
- Newsroom policies and safety

**Examples of research questions:**

- What kind of working conditions, newsroom policies and other support do media houses have for journalists to guarantee their safety?
- Does the form of employment have an effect on journalists' safety?
- What is the impact on staff turnover or rotation in newsrooms as a result of attacks on the safety of journalists?
- What are the cost implications of digital and physical protection of journalists?

8. **DIGITAL ISSUES:**

**Related areas of research:** Digital culture and communication

**Possible research topics:**

- Digital journalism/digital world and safety

**Examples of research questions:**

- What are the safety threats to journalists in digital environment/online?
- To what extent are journalists aware of specific safety threats online, and know how to protect themselves?
- How could journalistic practices and journalists' media and information literacy be improved to safeguard safety online?
- How do digital vulnerabilities and threats online affect the work of journalists?
- What kind of safety risks is surveillance creating for journalists and their sources?
- How can journalists' sources be protected and public trust guaranteed despite surveillance?

9. **THEMATIC ISSUES:**

**Related areas of research:** Gender and media; Media and ethnicity; Media and environment; Media and religion

**Possible research topics:**

- Journalism, safety and gender/ethnicity/nationality/religion
- Safety in relation to different beats covered by journalists (environment, investigative, crime, etc.)

**Examples of research questions:**

- Do the topics/beats covered affect the threats that journalists are exposed to? How?
- Are women journalists or journalists representing an ethnic/religious/national minority exposed to specific threats? What type of threats? Is this taken into account in their work?

10. **EDUCATIONAL ISSUES:**

**Related areas of research:** Media education research; Training and development

**Possible research topics:**

- Research on academic curricula and trainings in journalism and safety

**Examples of research questions:**

- Are safety issues a part of academic journalism curricula? How is the topic of safety covered in different curricula? How could the curricula on safety be developed?
- Is journalists' safety a part of existing professional trainings? How could the trainings be developed on safety issues? What are the good practices to be shared?

**Issues of research methodology that could be discussed under many of the above mentioned areas of research:**

- Types of threats to journalists
- Taxonomies of reasons and motives to threats and attacks
- Development of typologies to assess threats
- What results can be gained by using UNESCO's Journalists' Safety Indicators, and other such indicators, as a part of academic research?

Suggestions and more information:

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