

NSI is a charity focused on safety and the prevention of harm to journalists and media workers around the world. It is supported by news organisations seeking to look after their staff and freelancers and to that extent is focused very much on real-time, in-the-field journalism.

But to really understand the current risks to journalists – and to journalism – we need to take a more strategic view. The safety of journalists has wide social and political importance as well. And if we are to tackle the corrosive issue of impunity for those who kill journalists, that social and political link needs to be recognised and pursued.

### **Exposing corruption**

Civil society relies upon information to provide citizens with the opportunity to build political representation, grow economic capacity, improve public health and education and strengthen the quality of life. In providing that information, journalism can oversee the formation and implementation of policy and shine a light on corruption, human rights abuses or poor governance.

It follows that societies, which are closed to scrutiny, where it is impossible to undertake independent journalism, will suffer as a consequence. It also follows that, to the extent journalism has a public responsibility, it must be to pursue independent journalism even in uncivil societies where conditions are hostile towards it. Shining a light into dark corners has therefore always been a core motivation for publicly motivated journalists. In doing so, they place themselves at risk.

By seeking to report from uncivil societies, journalists act in the interests of both local citizens and the wider international community, strengthening public accountability and helping to establish stable conditions for development.

We should recognise therefore that the journalist's impulse to place themselves in danger is not simply, or even, a question of seeking professional exclusivity or personal fulfilment through the exercise of courage. In venturing into dark and difficult places, and attempting to report back, their motivation is rooted in the core mission of journalism to hold others to account on behalf of the public and in so doing fulfil a vital public interest role.

In recent years, there have been at least three key drivers of the increase in violence towards journalists: the loss of neutral status, the growth of global organised crime and the use of technology and compromised digital security.

### **Lack of neutrality**

First, the loss of neutral status. In the wake of the Second World War, journalists working overseas were still regarded as neutral observers, entitled to a degree of protection, both as civilians in harms way and for communicating a just cause or military success to the wider public. During the years of the cold war this status

endured as global conflicts were carried out largely as proxies for the east-west standoff. Following the collapse of communism in Europe (and equally in satellite states) this framework broke down and with it the notion of journalistic neutrality.

As the spectre of mutually assured destruction between two global superpowers shrank, other conflicts grew and became more sharply defined around ethnic nationalism or regional imperialism. So reporters in the Balkans in the 1990s found themselves caught in an ethnic conflict with no clear front line and no clear protective affiliation. And as war in the Middle East developed, first with the 1991 Gulf War, the 2003 Iraq war and the collapse of order in countries following the 2013 Arab Spring, increasingly participants saw conflict in stark binary terms: “you are either with us or you are against us”.

In these circumstances, journalists were not “with” any side – so were increasingly treated as being “against”. Warfare had moved from being concerned with control of territory to control of information and media.

There are many examples of the brutal murders of both local and foreign journalists in the failed states of the Middle East. As a consequence the world knows less about what is happening within parts of Syria, Iraq and Libya than it should. The emergence of IS as a significant force in 2014 appeared to take Western leaders by surprise. At least one reason is that independent reporting had been compromised and limited by the extreme physical threats which journalists faced.

### **Organised crime threatens journalists**

The second key factor is the increase in global organised crime since 1989 and the collapse of communism. Some estimate that the criminal black economy is now worth up to 15 percent of global GDP. As the opportunities for greater production and distribution of illicit goods into the developed markets of Europe and the US became apparent, the opportunity for enormous wealth drove violence, intimidation and murder. Today this is seen in countries like Mexico, a major centre of distribution for the drugs trade, in Africa and in eastern Europe with prostitution, and central Asia with both drugs and people trafficking.

So for journalists investigating crime – and the corruption of governments and agencies, which accompanies it – the risks have grown. It’s clear from the annual figures produced by INSI that local journalists undertaking these kinds of investigations and reporting are most at risk of violence or murder. Unlike international reporters, they are part of the society they report, fixed in place, and therefore more exposed to threats and intimidation.

### **Online intimidation**

The third factor is technology and digital security. The growth of satellite and internet technology has greatly aided journalism allowing reporting from places that were previously unreachable and at a far lower cost than in the past. But it brought with it new dangers that the profession was slow to recognise.

There is no question that online journalism has increased threats and intimidation towards journalists and placed bloggers and citizen journalists at greater physical risk as the technology behind digital news allows the identification and targeting of journalists in ways which most are still too inexperienced to recognise.

For some years, governments have used technology, often provided by Western governments, to track and identify journalists and activists. This was the case in Iran after the 2009 post-election uprising and again in Egypt, Syria and elsewhere following the Arab Spring uprisings.

We now know, after the revelations by Edward Snowden about the extensive levels of US and UK government surveillance, that any unencrypted communications can be easily monitored – risking both physical exposure of journalists working “behind the lines” but also a public exposure of sources assisting journalistic investigations. Further, the internet has allowed so-called citizen journalists and others to report and contribute to public debate in ways, which may expose them to unwitting risks.

Whether for an international correspondent reporting on a global conflict or a local journalist representing the concerns of their community about crime or corruption, these increased areas of risk undermine a core purpose of journalism – to provide an informed society, supporting political representation and social and economic development.

That’s the wider context behind journalism safety. Organisations like INSI, with other partners in the field, may have an immediate focus on individuals and the moment, but it’s important to recognise that work has far wider and longer-term importance.

*This post is adapted from the recent book [Reporting Dangerously: journalist killings, intimidation and security](#) by Richard Sambrook, Simon Cottle and Nick Mosdell. (Palgrave 2016)*