


The logo for the International News Safety Institute (INSI) is a red square with the letters "INSI" in white, bold, sans-serif font.

INTERNATIONAL  
NEWS SAFETY  
INSTITUTE



# 2021 ANNUAL REPORT

JOURNALISM | SAFETY | RESPONSIBILITY | ACCOUNTABILITY



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– Elena Cosentino, INSI director

Cover: Media equipment destroyed by Trump supporters outside the US Capitol in Washington DC. Camille CAMDESSUS / AFP; This page: Police arrest MyanmarNow journalist Kay Zon Nwe in Yangon as protesters were taking part in a demonstration against the military coup. Ye Aung THU / AFP

# Introduction

Much of INSI's activity in 2021 has been devoted to supporting our members' international news coverage in areas of long-term conflict or instability such as Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Belarus, Gaza or Haiti. While it may feel like a long time ago, however, we shouldn't forget how the year started closer to home for many of our members.

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With 12 journalists injured, dozens more harassed and millions of dollars in broadcast equipment vandalised and destroyed, all in a single day in January. Not in Afghanistan by the Taliban, but in front of the US Capitol, by 'ordinary' American citizens, relentlessly whipped up against the media by their own president. As evidence that nothing happens in a vacuum, the day after, on January 7, a stringer in Kampala told INSI members gathered to discuss the upcoming Ugandan elections how scared local journalists now were. If that could happen in America – they argued – then what chances did they have of covering their own presidential election safely? Which US official would dare raise their voice now if Ugandan journalists were beaten or thrown into jail by government goons?

The logic of those concerns was incontrovertible. The risk was, and remains, that a decline in journalism safety in the west would trigger a nosedive in many other countries, particularly those who weren't media-friendly to begin with.

At INSI we work with our members to make sure everyone is ready. None of them were caught unprepared on January 6 on Capitol Hill. They were also ready for the previous and subsequent protests across America. The same can be said for the fall of Kabul in August. Not even those who'd been in Afghanistan the longest were able to correctly predict the quick collapse of the government forces. Nonetheless, the constant exchange of information, real-time feedback from the ground and expert assessment continuously shared among members meant that no one, down to the smallest of news organisations, was left adrift or without access to a basic but sound plan of action for the worst-case scenario, which did, in fact, materialise. This was equally so with Myanmar, Belarus and Ethiopia, all

countries where the risk to journalists comes primarily from those in charge.

Nearly a full year on from the Capitol events, a new occupant at the White House (and a Twitter ban on Trump) have helped lower the temperature in the US. The Nobel Peace Prizes awarded to the brave and amazing Maria Ressa and Dmitry Muratov were hugely deserved and a powerful solidarity message to a profession with few friends.

But at INSI we are under no illusion. The deep mistrust in, even hatred of, the traditional media that populist leaders across the world have been nurturing for years will likely continue to deepen, fuelled by the 'culture wars' and the politicisation of science. The consequences may not be immediately obvious to the public but, at INSI, we deal with them on a daily basis. Journalists now have to risk assess for any story they cover while their online lives are blighted with no respite by ever-growing amounts of threat and abuse.

This is certainly not a time for the media to be complacent. But there's reason to cheer. Throughout the year we've seen members updating or reviewing their deployment plans as a result of information shared by their fellow members in the INSI network. That is the real measure of the success of our work together, that lessons are learned and shared before, rather than after, something has gone terribly wrong. We've also seen record exchanges and offers of mutual assistance among the news outlets that make up INSI and with our external partner such as CPJ, the Thomson Reuters Foundation and others. We want to keep it that way, to ensure that journalists and the news media industry as a whole continue rallying together and have each other's back, because no one else will.

*– Elena Cosentino, INSI director*

# Members' activities

## Online meetings and briefings

The Covid-19 pandemic continued to affect how INSI interacts with its members with all our meetings taking place online in 2021. As we discovered in 2020 when the pandemic forced us to cancel our in-person meetings, this allowed record numbers of news organisations to join online sessions they couldn't have attended in person.

Numbers attending the web meetings continued to grow in 2021 with our all-members session ahead of the US presidential inauguration joined by 82 people, the most participants ever at an INSI meeting. That large number was partly a reflection of the state of uncertainty and worry among our US members.

Members are increasingly contributing essential content and intelligence to our meetings, enhancing and enriching them immeasurably with their expertise and local knowledge on specific topics. With the coup leaders' media crackdown raging in Myanmar, for example, we held a meeting that included an excellent presentation from a member organisation sharing vital tips on helping local staff and freelancers protect their digital footprint.

In another well-attended event, an international correspondent from a digital member outlet shared an exclusive and detailed account of his team's safety issues and protocols while on a high-risk embed with anti-Al Shabaab forces in Somalia.



Associated Press journalists stand in shock next to the rubble of their offices in Jala Tower following an Israeli airstrike in Gaza. MOHAMMED ABED / AFP

An Apple Daily journalist holds copies of the newspaper's last edition as the pro-democracy tabloid was forced to close after 26 years under a sweeping new national security law. Daniel SUEN / AFP



We regularly invite experts and leaders in their field to speak at meetings.

In early April we hosted an expert briefing with a terrorism expert focussing on the IS attack in Mozambique, its significance and other potential Islamist hotspots. Sadly, just a few weeks later, the kidnap and murder of two experienced Spanish journalists, David Beriáin and Roberto Fraile, by Islamist militants in Burkina Faso and the kidnap of French journalist Olivier Dubois by an Al-Qaeda affiliate in Mali, confirmed the importance of engaging our members regularly on countries not frequently at the top of the news agenda.

April also saw growing concerns about the Delta variant and we ran a detailed and informative briefing to explain the current science and data on Covid-19 variants and to respond to specific concerns raised by members about travel and deployment.

Also in April, we looked at the legal risks and mitigations for foreign and local journalists working in Russia following the signing by President Vladimir Putin of a law allowing journalists to be declared 'foreign agents'. A prominent Russian media lawyer

was our guest speaker. Events in Gaza prompted a strong rallying of members around the AP and Al Jazeera whose building in Gaza was targeted and destroyed by an Israeli missile in May.

The war in Tigray and Ethiopia remained a major concern for members, both for deployed and local staff as well as local sources. INSI stepped up with an all-members' brainstorming, a briefing by a correspondent in the field, an advisory and an active confidential email group disseminating both shared information and intelligence that was proactively gathered by INSI from our own sources in the country.

We also reached out to members who don't traditionally get involved in INSI's safety conversations. This year it was sports journalists preparing for the Tokyo Olympics and the Beijing Winter Olympics in February 2022. A members' meeting on the Beijing Olympics revealed that cyber security is the biggest concern with regards to deployments to China, especially off the back of the Pegasus spyware revelations.

We are also working on a cyber safety manual for our members to be released soon.



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– Elena Cosentino, INSI director

### Exclusive advisories and briefing reports

Briefing notes were circulated following each meeting which members who couldn’t attend – and even those who could – tell us they highly appreciate. The briefings included detailed notes on the wave of arrests in Hong Kong, the presidential election in Uganda, the coup in Myanmar, Afghanistan evacuation measures and preparations for the Beijing Olympics.

As members struggled to cover Belarus because of lack of access and security concerns for local staff, we secured and distributed an exclusive confidential account of the recent detention of a foreign journalist in Minsk.

As a group we were lucky to count the Japanese public broadcaster NHK as our member which meant our meetings and briefings on the Tokyo Olympics brought useful first-hand knowledge and local expertise to the table. This was particularly important as the Olympic safety plans were still largely unclear until close to the



start of the Games. Our advisory on the Olympics, which was not confidential, saw a record number of shares.

We also published our annual 2020 Killing the Messenger report of journalist casualties from around the world. Journalist deaths were slightly higher than the previous year, despite the pandemic reducing newsgathering worldwide, and with the standout feature being the brutality of many of the assassinations in countries technically at peace.

### Information exchange groups

INSI remains unrivalled when it comes to the unique ways we support both international and domestic coverage. One example is our confidential information exchange groups which have gone from strength to strength. The email groups, which started last year, increased in number and popularity in 2021 with numerous members sharing invaluable information and intelligence with the INSI network.



Top left: Philippine journalist Maria Ressa talks to members of the media after attending a court hearing in Manila on charges of tax evasion. AFP; Top right: A member of the Taliban special forces pushes a journalist covering a demonstration outside a school in Kabul. BULENT KILIC / AFP; Bottom right: A journalist wears a face mask as a preventive measure against Covid-19 in the Main Press Centre at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. Tauseef MUSTAFA / AFP



Supporters of Haitian politician Youri Latortue sit atop his car in Port-au-Prince as he leaves following a hearing in the wake of President Jovenel Moïse's assassination. Valerie Baeriswyl / AFP

With the storming of the United States Capitol in January marking a new low in the relationship between a segment of the US population and mainstream news media, we ran a confidential email group to allow news organisations to exchange real time information on events in Washington from January 6 through to Inauguration Day.

Our American members in particular told us they appreciated the email groups, as covering domestic US politics was never considered a dangerous beat before and they were struggling to bring domestic teams up to speed on safety matters.

Also related to events in the US, we had to reactivate a 'US protests' thread in the days preceding the verdict in the George Floyd case, as Minnesota state troopers appeared to target journalists covering protests.

Planning and safety at the Tokyo Olympics was another info-exchange group that was particularly interesting and important because it brought together members from the sport departments who are not usually involved with INSI on a regular basis.

From July onwards Afghanistan became our focus as the most dramatic and complex challenge INSI members were facing. The July 15 death of our colleague and fellow member, Reuters Pulitzer

Prize-winning photojournalist Danish Siddiqui, while embedded with Afghan special forces, shocked our membership to the core.

A confidential email group on Afghanistan was joined by representatives of every INSI member news organisation and, by the end of August, the number of exchanges on the topic was well over 100. Nobody, including those who'd been on the ground in Afghanistan for years, was able to correctly predict how quickly Kabul and the Afghan government would fall.

The standoff at Kabul airport fully demonstrated the value and need for INSI to continue being the broker of exchanges and members' mutual assistance in real time. It is a significant and time-consuming effort but arguably the best use of INSI's resources at the tangible service of its members.

Director Elena Cosentino also responded to dozens of individual requests from members for help on a wide range of issues from the assassination of Haiti's president to the political upheaval in Tunisia. Members tell us this quick and personal response to individual needs is one of the best features of INSI membership.

Elsewhere, we also ran a joint event with CPJ on the elections in Iran.

# New members and board changes

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Iran International joined INSI as a member, bringing a unique and complex perspective on the issue of state-sponsored threats faced by journalists.

We also warmly welcomed Caroline Drees of NPR, Ian Phillips of the AP and the BBC's Paul Danahar to INSI's board. We thank them for their cooperation so far and look forward to their deepening involvement in our work.

## Staff Changes

INSI has continued to strengthen INSI's structure by hiring team assistant Tommy Hodgson, who covers both administrative and editorial tasks. We have enjoyed working with Tommy to improve INSI's processes and structure to better support and expand all our activities for the safety of our members.



A Taliban official addresses journalists in Kabul after at least 19 people were killed and 50 others wounded in an attack on a military hospital. Wakil KOHSAR / AFP

# Know Your Rights Guide

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INSI was particularly proud of the publication of our Know Your Rights Guide For Journalists with the support of the Thomson Reuters Foundation and its CEO, our board member Antonio Zappulla. The guide, with further backing by UNESCO, is a manual compiling the advice of some of the world's top law firms to help journalists explore what legal recourse they have in 14 countries to defend themselves against online harassment in all its forms.

There is nothing else like it around. As tech companies are unable or unwilling to solve this increasingly intractable issue, this guide is a powerful attempt to acknowledge and support the need for legal accountability for the crimes against journalists committed by online harassers and abusers.

# Cyber Security Audit

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Following Board member Cilla Benkö's suggestion, we organised a cyber security audit to further strengthen INSI's cyber security profile. It was an extremely useful exercise and led to positive outcomes, including an offer from the company that conducted the audit to deliver an in-depth cyber security briefing for our members; further data privacy training for our staff; the latest email encryption options; and developments on account protection, anti-phishing and vulnerability scanning in the wake of Pegasus and other 'zero click' cyber threats.






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Back cover image: Israeli soldiers shoot tear gas near reporters as they disperse Palestinian protesters in the West Bank. JAAFAR ASHTIYEH / AFP