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Reporting safely

An assessment of risk management
practices employed by news organisations
in support of journalists operating in areas
of conflict, 2009-2019

DR MARK GRANT

INSI is proud to publish Dr Mark Grant's ground-breaking work into the field of safety and risk management applied to news deployment in conflict zones. For this research, a **thesis** for a Doctorate in Security Risk Management at the University of Portsmouth, UK, Mark was able to rely on an unparalleled array of first-hand sources and experience throughout his career in news media safety with the world's largest broadcasters. A summary of the thesis can be read below.

Mark is now Global Safety and Security Leader at INSI member Sky News. An article on Mark's experiences working with Sky News in Ukraine can be found **here**.

Cover: AFP journalists, on top of a building, duck for cover while covering heavy shelling between pro-Russian forces and the Ukrainian army, near Donetsk International Airport, on September 14, 2014. © Philippe Desmazes / AFP

This page: A Ukrainian security officer keeps the press away as smoke rises after a Russian army attack in Odessa, on April 3, 2022. © Bulent Kilic / AFP



Executive Summary

Introduction

Modern day news journalism has never before involved so much personal risk. Journalists are no longer perceived as independent or neutral observers but as a target or a prize by a wide range of actors. These changes to the threat level for journalists have had significant impact, resulting in reduced news coverage in Syria, Iraq and most recently Ukraine. Ultimately, the risk versus reward calculation means that deploying journalists to cover events is sometimes no longer considered viable.

Conflict journalists are often portrayed as grittily glamorous and dangerously gung-ho. However, they play a critical role in delivering first-hand accounts of conflict, bearing witness to human suffering, holding power to account and exposing important developments to an international audience. To do this, they are required to travel to some of the world's most inhospitable and dangerous environments, often putting themselves directly in harm's way.

In the decade from 2009 to 2019, at least 289 journalists were killed while covering conflicts: 203 were staff directly employed by news media organisations; 86 were freelancers; and 242 were local journalists, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). Worryingly, this is an increase of more than 36% compared to the decade from 1999 to 2009. The increase was most noticeable for freelancers and local journalists. According to the CPJ, freelancer fatalities rose by 7%, representing 30% of all journalists killed between 2009 and 2019, while fatalities of local journalists increased by 9%, making up 84% of all fatalities.

Background to the research

These alarming statistics make careful and considered risk management all the more important if journalists are to continue going into war zones.

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Modern day news journalism has never before involved so much personal risk

The subject of conflict journalism has attracted a significant amount of academic research, as well as innumerable published first-hand accounts. However, the security measures and risk management processes that the news media industry employs to keep conflict journalists safe have attracted less interest. The result is that very little academic rigour has been applied to

existing risk management policies, risk assessments or mitigation measures for news organisations, highlighting a knowledge gap. This study creates new knowledge that is grounded in pragmatism, using a mixed methods approach of surveys and interviews. It examines real world experience, drawing practicable conclusions from the actions, knowledge and perceptions

of news organisations and journalists regarding existing risk management frameworks for conflict zones.

The focus period is from 2009 to 2019 and all research was conducted prior to current conflict in Ukraine. However, it highlights salient points, details areas for improvements while providing key recommendations for news organisations and journalists operating in areas of conflict including Ukraine.

Main findings

Overall, this research demonstrated that while news organisations have improved their risk management frameworks, they have failed to evolve at a pace to match changes within the media landscape and the related emerging risks.

One notable finding is around the issue of engagement – or lack thereof – with the risk assessment process. The research repeatedly highlighted the broad perception within conflict news reporting of the risk assessment as merely a “tick-box” exercise, with even experienced conflict

journalists sometimes displaying a dismissive attitude towards the process.

The research also identified several practical challenges and gaps that need to be addressed to ensure that those deployed to conflict zones in non-traditional roles (freelancers and local journalists) receive the same attention with regard to duty of care as those in traditional roles.

This duty of care is a legal and moral requirement for news organisations. Failures with regard to duty of care obligations could lead to prosecution or civil suits against risk owners, with a potentially detrimental impact on wider brand reputation.

With the expected increase in the utilisation of freelancers and local journalists in the coming years, this study highlights the critical necessity of further research to assess how this gap, along with the other findings highlighted within this study, can be addressed to ensure the future safety and security of news teams in conflict zones.

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In the decade from 2009 to 2019, at least 289 journalists were killed while covering conflicts

An Al-Jazeera reporter covers an art exhibition honouring her late colleague, Palestinian-American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, at the spot where the veteran TV journalist was killed on May 11 while covering an Israeli army raid in Jenin in the occupied West Bank. © Jaafar Ashtiyeh / AFP

Summary of other key findings:

Risk assessment process

- **75% of those surveyed felt** their risk assessment was fit for purpose
- **78% agreed** that the level of duty of care applied was adequate
- **20% felt** the risk assessment process was not fit for purpose
- **18% had no confidence** in their organisations to manage risk effectively

Engagement in risk assessments

- **25% of survey participants** did not complete a risk assessment before deployment
- **25% of safety advisors** and **35% of camera operators** did not complete the risk assessment process before deployment
- **50% of all participants stated** not all team members engaged in the risk assessment process

Safety training

- **72% of those surveyed felt** that current training was sufficient
- **88% felt** HEFAT was the industry standard and saw it as mandatory



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63% of those surveyed said that safety had improved, however, one third felt safety was worse than 10 years ago



Journalists and residents watch smoke rise after an attack by the Russian army in Odessa, on April 3, 2022. © Bulent Kilic / AFP

- **70% of news organisations** required HEFAT to be re-freshed every three years
- **24% of news organisations** would stop deployment if training had lapsed
- **46% of all participants** received advance medical training before deploying

Deployment of women and LGBTQ+ staff members

- **32% of respondents** to the survey said gender specific risks were not accounted for
- **36% said** that news organisations failed to measure travel and safety risks for women
- **56% of all participants** were not aware of any specific mitigation measures in place for members of the LGBTQ+ community
- **40% said** their organisations did not manage cultural sensitivities within the risk assessment process

Crisis management

- **83% of those surveyed said** news organisations could support them in a crisis
- **74% said** their news organisation could support them in a kidnapping incident
- **57% of producers said** they would be supported during a crisis

Lessons learned

- **57% of survey participants** felt that news organisation did not have an adequate method of collecting key lessons
- **78% felt** the security advisors could provide the correct level of support, though the survey found there is a small pool of good risk advisors
- **63% stated** that safety had improved, however, more than one third felt safety was worse than 10 years ago.

Conclusion

This research demonstrated that while news organisations have improved their risk management frameworks, they have failed to evolve at a pace to match changes within the media landscape and related emerging risks.

While the study was conducted before the Ukraine conflict, it does demonstrate that while most news organisations have continually improved their risk management processes, there are areas that would benefit from fresh evaluation in light of the changing operational environment and emerging risks.

The research has also underlined the critical value to be gained from capturing experiences and lessons learned from previous deployments. There is a need for industry-wide communication and alignment efforts to ensure that improvements benefit all news organisations.

There is also a critical requirement to improve the risk management processes for those deployed in non-traditional roles such as freelancers and local staff, in order to ensure that a commensurate level of duty of care is applied. More research is needed to assess how these gaps can be closed, as reliance on local resources and non-traditional media in conflict areas is expected to continue to increase in coming years. A potential challenge

is posed by the extra costs of these safety improvements, which could outweigh the cost benefits associated with the use of non-traditional roles in the first place, placing news organisations in the position of making an unenviable choice. A balance must be struck.

While the research underlined that most experienced journalists well understood the gravity of the risks faced in conflict zones, it also highlighted some persistently problematic areas, including stigma surrounding mental health issues and the bravado and “gung-ho” attitude towards risk displayed by some journalists, especially those with less experience and more to prove.

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The research also highlighted a lack of engagement by non-traditional journalists with risk assessment processes

Breakdown of results

Since 2009, there have been significant changes to the way news organisations operate in areas of conflict. They have faced challenges associated with new technology, increased competition and changes to traditional business models, which have squeezed budgets and increased operational risks for teams deploying to conflict zones. These new challenges have not been assessed from a risk management perspective, and the risk assessment processes within news organisations have not evolved to meet them.

Members of the Mexican press hold a demonstration in Tijuana to protest against the large number of journalists killed in the country, including journalists Yessenia Mollinedo Falconi and Sheila Johana García Olivera, who were shot and killed in the state of Veracruz on May 9, 2022. © Guillermo Arias / AFP





Journalists gather as bodies are exhumed from a mass-grave in the grounds of the St. Andrew and Pyervozvannoho All Saints church in the Ukrainian town of Bucha, northwest of Kyiv on April 13, 2022. © Sergei Supinsky / AFP

Non-traditional roles and their impact on risk management

There was an increasing reliance by news organisations on freelancers and local staff for conflict zone deployments between 2009 and 2019. The research found that while news organisations offered some support to those in non-traditional roles, they fell significantly short in comparison with what was offered to their traditional counterparts. This is a potential duty of care failure that needs to be addressed immediately by news organisations, given the substantial evidence that those deployed in non-traditional roles are at greater risk than their international colleagues

The research also highlighted a lack of engagement by non-traditional journalists with risk assessment processes. The lack of training around risk awareness provided by news organisations to non-traditional journalists has exacerbated this problem. Non-traditional journalists often deploy without understanding task details, the associated level of risk, or even the composition of the team that they will be entering a conflict zone with. This highlights that current processes are outdated and fail to account for increased diversity in terms of culture, language and risk appetite in modern newsgathering teams. Freelancers and local journalists assess risk from a different perspective, often due to their familiarity with deployment areas.

To address changes to the risk landscape, news organisations increasingly turned to safety advisors. Safety advisors held a myriad of responsibilities during conflict deployments, including medical support, production-

related support and logistics management, in addition to their traditional risk mitigation role. It also underscored that the primary benefit of safety advisors stemmed from the fact they were not editorially focused and therefore more situationally aware. This suggested that, if deployed correctly, the modern safety advisor can add significant benefit for both risk owner and journalist.

Nevertheless, the research highlighted frustrations, notably around inconsistencies in safety advisors' levels of professionalism and their ability to communicate rationale around risk assessments. This caused resentment on the part of journalists and producers who felt restricted by safety advisors who couldn't articulate their decision making. The significant additional costs associated with using safety advisors was also a frustration,

because it occasionally led news organisations cancelling assignments as they were too expensive.

Training

Pre-deployment training remains the main control measure employed by news organisations to transfer risk. Those journalists that have completed the HEFAT programme are deemed "competent" – the minimum level of duty of care that employers must provide under the Health and Safety At Work Act (HASAWA).

While ensuring staff are competent to deploy is a legal requirement, most organisations have not mandated this training, allowing flexibility to deploy untrained journalists for breaking news and other time-sensitive assignments.

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The speed of technological advances makes it challenging for training courses to remain relevant and accurate

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During breaking news incidents or fast-ball deployments, risk assessments are often bypassed

Indeed, training for non-traditional journalists was found to be inconsistent at best due to cost, logistics and a lack of credible overseas training providers.

Mental health awareness and information security were two of the key training gaps. While news organisations have increased dedicated support for staff mental health, it has not been sufficient to significantly reduce stigma around the issue. Interviewees identified persistent attitudes, especially linked to the “macho culture” around conflict reporting, fears over a perceived lack of resilience and reduced career prospects, which continue to prevent openness around mental health and limit uptake of support. Indeed, interviewees expressed fears that they would be denied future assignments if their employers became aware of the true state of their mental health.

Information security was identified as another critical training gap. Most interviewees agreed that the speed of technological advances made it challenging for courses to remain relevant and accurate. Many felt the lack of knowledge spread across all levels of their organisations and that a stand-alone training package offered by subject matter experts would improve the training offering.

Risk ownership

Risk owners are legally required to ensure the competence of their journalists before deploying. This can be achieved through experiential learning and training. The research concluded that experiential learning from conflict zone journalism is not effectively gathered, recorded or considered within the majority of risk assessments. This failure by risk owners to regularly consider journalistic experience when planning deployments may also result in a failure to ensure that the team is competent to the minimum legal standard.

The research highlighted cynicism among news teams about risk owners' attitude to the risk assessment process, with many stating that risk owners treated the process as a “tick box” exercise to pass on responsibility for dangerous deployments.

Nevertheless, it also highlighted that risk owners frequently refused to sign off on risk assessments where journalists failed to provide the correct mitigations or context, suggesting they are aware of their legal obligation (as well as moral) to ensure that the mitigations and safety measures taken are sufficient as far as is practical.

Nevertheless, the research highlighted that risk owners need to be aware of the potential increase in risks for deployed teams associated with pressures inherent in modern newsgathering. Editorial pressures related to the 24/7 news cycle, such as the need for live shots and frequent requests for updates when teams are deployed, have the potential to increase team's risk exposure.

Conflict journalists are often characterised as “gung-ho”, and while there is a basis of truth in this cliché, many experienced conflict zone journalists interviewed for this study showed a heightened aversion to risk.

Bassam Masoud, a cameraman working for Reuters Television in the Palestinian territories, is evacuated after being wounded during clashes with Israeli forces along the border with the Gaza strip east of Khan Yunis on May 18, 2018. © Said Khatib / AFP





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Nearly all those interviewed felt that their employers were well-versed in crisis management

Journalists and press officers of Peruvian presidential candidate Veronika Mendoza work in close proximity to each other in Lima, on March 25, 2021, amid the Covid-19 pandemic and growing infection rate in the country. © Ernesto Benavides / AFP

Risk assessments

There is no single widely accepted risk management framework for news organisations deploying journalists to areas of conflict. Many organisations' risk assessment processes were developed from in-house experiential learning that has not been shared across the industry. This means that approaches can differ significantly, especially based on risk appetite. Despite efforts by several industry organisations to collate this information, there has been limited buy-in from news organisations for a set standard.

It was evident that some journalists pay little more than lip service to the risk assessment process. This failure to engage resulted in teams deploying without the correct mitigations.

Emerging challenges

The research highlighted two key emerging considerations for news organisations. It showed that risk apathy stemming from prolonged or repeated deployment to conflict areas can result in limited engagement with the risk management process. The increased use of non-traditional journalists may heighten organisations' exposure to the consequences of risk apathy. This is because non-traditional journalists are often stationed in areas of conflict for longer periods or reporting from their doorstep, which may result in desensitisation. The research underlined that risk apathy is not accounted for within current risk assessment processes.

The researcher coined the term 'competitor risk pendulum' to highlight the phenomenon whereby existing risk mitigation measures are disregarded in situations where news organisations want to ensure that competitors do not

gain advantage. For example, the research indicated that, during breaking news incidents or fast-ball deployments, the risk assessment process is often bypassed, or risk tolerance changed due to the competitor risk pendulum.

This undermined the risk management process and reduced confidence in risk owners and engagement by journalists in risk assessments. Any relaxation of safety measures to match competitors' risk appetite is a concern for the entire industry, as the resulting domino effect clearly increases risks for all news teams.

Contingency planning, crisis management, lessons learned

The research reflected generally positive perceptions around contingency planning for conflict zone deployments. It did identify some areas where improvements are necessary. The vast majority of news organisations do not conduct any stress testing, particularly with respect to scenario-based risk testing or realistic assessments of the workability of crisis management plans in different locations.

Nearly all those interviewed felt that their employers were well-versed in crisis management, mainly due to the experiential learnings gained from previous conflicts. Many had anecdotes about crises managed against the backdrop of fractured states, poor infrastructure and challenging environments. However, the research indicated that this could detrimentally impact journalists' level of risk acceptance, meaning they often deployed into high-risk areas with limited risk mitigation measures in place, but confident in their organisation's crisis management. This blind belief in crisis management was actually contrary to their own experience and understanding.

Unsurprisingly, there is also a significant gap in terms of crisis management for those employed in non-traditional roles in conflict zones. The most significant gap relates to ownership of duty of care obligations. For organisations deploying freelancers, there is ambiguity about where one task starts and another ends, compounded by a lack of communication between news organisations, meaning that freelancers have sometimes been left without support. Local journalists working in their home environments are vulnerable to targeting by hostile actors while going about their everyday lives, something that regular crisis management plans are not equipped to account for.

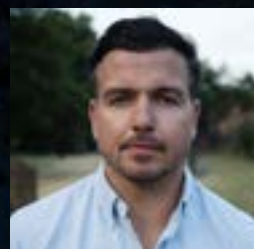
Recommendations for consideration

The recommendations below are aimed at news organisations but will have significant benefit for journalists, especially around engagement with the risk assessment process and lessons learned.

- It is vital that news organisations capture critical lessons learned by recording data and experience from conflict zone deployments as part of the risk management process. This requires a confidential method of information collection and reporting, actions to guard against a blame culture and organisational buy-in to enforce these measures. The lessons learned would help inform future training and risk assessments, ensuring that as the nature of the news reporting landscape changes, risk management processes evolve alongside it, enabling journalists to safely deploy to conflict zones.
- The research suggested that many journalists felt that some risk reduction measures were overly restrictive, hampered creativity and brought their competency into question. Again, news organisations must leverage experienced staff members who have benefited from and understand the risk assessment process to bring about a change in attitude. News organisations should reassess how they apply risk assessments in the field, especially dynamic risk assessments. By building awareness among risk owners and journalists of conditions determining the application of dynamic risk assessments, news organisations will enable more flexibility and confidence in the process.
- Simplifying and standardising the risk assessment process would reduce potential points of friction and harmonise approaches to risk management. News organisations deploy journalists they deem to be 'competent' to operate in that environment. Therefore focusing on the top line risks that are specific to their task, rather than a set of generic risks, would ensure more engagement. The aim of any risk assessment process should always be active engagement.
- It was found that, because the risk assessment is viewed as a bureaucratic necessity rather than a critical aid to manage risk, it is often completed by less experienced journalists. Encouraging experienced journalists (who are generally more cognisant of and adverse to risk) to play an active role in the process would have a three-fold effect: it would improve the quality of risk management provided by organisations; increase news teams' awareness of the risks; and underscore the importance of the risk management process to less experienced journalists. If done well, this could add significant value, by improving engagement, and therefore increasing the credibility of the risk assessment process.
- While most news organisations are signatories to the ACOS Freelancer Safety Principles, the roles of freelancers, local producers, fixers and other non-traditional journalists have to be effectively accounted for in the development and design of risk management frameworks. This should include accounting for multiple variables, including cultural difference, awareness of the risk assessment process and language barriers. This is vital as those in non-traditional risks face an increased level of risk, in comparison with their 'traditional' journalist counterparts. Third-party audits would ensure that they were forced to consider non-traditional journalists while designing and enacting crisis management protocols.

About the author

Dr Mark Grant is the high risk, safety and security lead at Sky News. Mark has operated in high risk environments around the world and has previously supported and managed security for the BBC and CNN. He holds a master's degree and a professional doctorate in security risk management, with a specific focus on journalism security. Mark is also a co-founder and non-executive of **MiRiskMedia** – an app based solution providing news organisations with direct access to vetted, qualified and experienced safety and security advisors.





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A journalist takes pictures of the Russian Ministry
of Foreign Affairs in Moscow on January 27, 2022.
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