

**COVID-19**

# NEWS ORGANIZATIONS

# SAFETY PROTOCOLS

**Working  
with  
freelancers**



THE SAMIR KASSIR FOUNDATION



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# INTRODUCTION

This resource offers a tool for news organizations to adopt safety protocols that respond to the extraordinary circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic. The document seeks to empower commissioning editors to improve and adapt safety practices so the pandemic is covered professionally and in a way that minimizes risk.<sup>1</sup>

This document pays special attention to working with freelancers, including best practices around key issues like **accreditation, PPE (Personal Protective Equipment), insurance and expenses**. In addition, you may wish to consult the [Freelance Journalist Safety Principles](#), a set of safety practices for news organizations and freelancers.

If you already had safety protocols in place before the crisis broke, you don't need to recreate these but it is perhaps a good moment to review, adapt and expand what you have in place. If you don't have safety procedures in place, now is the time to develop them. Prioritizing safety is a need, not an option.

## WHY?

Safety protocols seek to protect all of your assets, from the health of your journalists to that of your company. Aside from the duty of care and moral imperative to protect all the individuals who contribute to your news product, building robust safety protocols can save your organization from the financial loss and reputational damage of a crisis that could have been carefully managed. For most news organizations the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened what was already a difficult financial situation, however safety should be regarded as an essential investment, not an optional cost.

The COVID-19 pandemic also highlights the responsibility news organizations have towards all journalists and media workers, as well as their duty towards the individuals they cover. Prioritising safety means protecting the individuals we report on.

## WHO?

Safety protocols and agreements provide clarity around roles, responsibilities and management structures. Protocols define who reviews and approves a high-risk assignment, and establish a clear escalation process. For example, additional approval from management may be required depending on level of risk. Who decides an assignment is too risky? Who will take executive decisions in the event of a crisis?

Protocols should define a clear channel for journalists to raise safety concerns, without fear of losing the commission. Engage commissioned journalists/reporting teams in safety deliberations. Approach safety as an ongoing conversation.

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<sup>1</sup> All journalists and media workers – staff and freelance – have rights enshrined in international and national laws to a safe and healthy working environment. In many news organisations such rights are enshrined in union collective agreements, safety handbooks and protocols. All news organisations have a legal duty to take steps to protect the health and safety of those they employ and commission.

# PRE-ASSIGNMENT

## 1 Who do you commission?

### Consider:

- **If the journalist/reporting team are higher risk individuals**

Find guidelines here: [CDC - People Who Are at Higher Risk for Severe Illness](#)

- **Profile and access to story**

Given the travel restrictions worldwide, working with locally-based reporters makes more sense than ever. The current crisis is exacerbating press censorship and many authoritarian governments are targeting local journalists whose coverage is not seen as favourable. Be aware of the potential risks linked to the identity and profile of the journalist, reporting team, photojournalist, videographer or filmmaker<sup>2</sup> you commission (gender, nationality, ethnicity, previous published work, etc.), as this should inform your planning.

If the locally-based freelancer is a foreigner, assess whether the local population may be hostile (in some cases, 'outsiders' are blamed for bringing in coronavirus and attacks have occurred).

- **Relevant experience and training**

Experience is crucial for high-risk assignments. Work with journalists who are aware of the risks. There are several online tutorials and resources that can help commissioned journalists to prepare when there is no access to safety training. More below under Planning.

- **Insurance**

How will the journalist be insured? If needed, can reporters access the right medical care? Be aware that most policies have excluded COVID-19, but the coronavirus has not erased other threats and insurance remains relevant. Check the ACOS Alliance Insurance Resources: <https://www.acosalliance.org/insurance>

- **Access to PPE**

What kind of PPE does the journalist have access to? Can you supply the PPE that is needed for the assignment? If you are commissioning a freelancer, build the costs of PPE into expenses that need to be reimbursed if you can't provide the necessary equipment. More below under Planning.

- **Quarantine**

Can the journalist self-isolate for two weeks after completing the assignment? Depending on exposure, this may be necessary. When working with freelancers, negotiate a rate to compensate for that time. News organizations might also include the costs of living for a required quarantine period upon arrival in the country of assignment, if needed. Travel restrictions will vary over time, and you should account for the possibility of a journalist/reporting team not being able to return home as quickly as planned or desired. Consider all the implications.

## 2 Editorial value vs. risk

Does the editorial value of the story justify the risks involved? Is the assignment essential? Can this story be covered remotely over a call? Commissioning editors can work with the journalists in finding creative ways to cover a story and avoid unnecessary risks. Editors can help assess relevance in the context of what is being commissioned and published.

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<sup>2</sup> From now on referred as "journalist"

### **3 Categorize assignments based on level of risk/exposure**

The process of categorizing should make your planning more agile. For example, depending on the category of each assignment, which can be based on level of risk/exposure, you can establish different assignment approval procedures, communication plans, and pre-determine the type of PPE that is needed.

One way to classify assignments can be:

**Medium/level 1** - Assignment involves face-to-face conversations, meetings, press conferences and interviews with individuals that we can't confirm are infected.

**High Risk/level 2** - Assignment involves interaction with infected individuals and stepping into infected areas, including quarantine locations, hospitals, nursing and care facilities, and private homes.

Don't get too caught up in any classification. Use this to facilitate decision-making and provide clear safety guidelines, but be flexible and adapt where needed. Every assignment is different.

### **4 Planning**

You may have already considered most of the below aspects in your preliminary assessment. Now is the time to make them concrete. Discuss and agree with the commissioned journalist.

We encourage you to use relevant resources to inform your protocols and offer guidance to the individuals you commission. This document includes a selection of reliable resources. Some of these offer standard advice that you may need to adjust to a specific local context. Be aware that COVID-19 advice may change over time, and it is essential to seek updates from authoritative sources.

Useful links:

[Committee to Protect Journalists Safety Advisory: Covering the coronavirus outbreak](#) (translated into 41 languages)

[NYT Safeguard While Reporting and General Tips](#)

[NYT One-sheeter for Visual journalists covering COVID-19](#)

[INSI Advisory](#) (focusing on filming teams, available in Arabic)

[IFJ COVID-19 Safety Advisory](#)

[IPI COVID-19 toolbox](#)

#### **Essential aspects for planning:**

Highlighted below are some of the key safety elements relevant to working through the COVID-19 pandemic. We encourage you to use these notes to develop your own safety guidelines.

- **Risk Assessments**

Journalists' risk assessments are an essential exercise for managing and minimising risks. Support journalists to produce a risk assessment that identifies and assesses threats, focusing on the safety challenges linked to their profile and a concrete assignment, and defines specific preemptive measures. The risk assessment should be produced by the journalist, and reviewed and approved by the commissioning editor. Each assignment should be accompanied by its own risk assessment.

Each risk assessment should include a Communications Plan that details all the necessary contact information to respond quickly and effectively in case of an emergency. It should include details for a check-in procedure or how to keep regular and safe communications with the commissioned journalist. Clear and fluid communication has a direct impact on the safety and mental well-being of the journalist, particularly for freelancers working alone or local journalists working in remote areas.

# PRE-ASSIGNMENT

We encourage you to design your own risk assessment and communication plan templates adjusting to the particularities of your news organization. You may find the templates and guidelines offered by the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#) (CPJ) useful.

In creating or reviewing your own templates, you may want to ask the following questions. Does the risk assessment process take into account gender-based risks? Does the risk assessment address digital security? Does the risk assessment identify threats that may be incurred after a story is released? Does the risk assessment take into account the particular risks that photographers and videographers face?

## • Crisis Management Protocol

A crisis management protocol should clearly define the steps to follow in case of emergency. It focuses on roles, responsibilities and actions that need to be taken to best respond when a crisis occurs. A good crisis management protocol helps managers and editors to navigate a crisis. It also has a positive effect on the mental well-being of all those working for the news outlet. Feeling valued, protected and dealt with professionally boosts productivity and the reputation of the news organization. If your news organization does not have such a protocol in place, this is the time to set it up.

## • Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Define a clear protocol based on the level of risk of the assignment. List the required PPE for each level of risk (i.e. specific PPE is needed for journalists engaging with COVID-19 positive individuals). Consider access to the right PPE (quality, size and fitting) and quantities (i.e. masks need to be changed on a regular basis, and you need to account for one set to practice with before the assignment). Consider how journalists will learn to use PPE: putting on/donning and off/doffing PPE is crucial. This is likely to be new to most journalists, even those with high-risk experience. Remote training may be the only option. You can refer to didactic videos and ask journalists to practice in front of a mirror. This is particularly important for photojournalists and videographers --these are often at the forefront and PPE can get in the way of their equipment--, but all members of the reporting team need to have access to this information. Where necessary and possible, provide appropriate safety training.

As you develop your own protocol, make sure you routinely consult authoritative sources and keep your protocol up-to-date. Be aware that advice may vary from country to country and your required minimum standards should never fall below those in the freelancer's country of work. See Appendix I.

Useful links:

[Video guide to donning and doffing Non-Sterile Disposable Gloves](#)

[Video PPE Donning and Doffing](#)

[Video PPE for COVID-19](#)

[HP Risk Management /DuPont webinar](#)

## • Hygiene: Personal and Equipment

Regardless of the level of risk, extreme hygiene measures must be adopted before, during and after any assignment. Discuss and plan these in advance, and agree on basic and clear instructions. For example, journalists should change and wash clothes and shower as soon as possible after an assignment. It is advisable to shave facial hair, and wear long hair up. Journalists should choose their clothing carefully (i.e. allowing use of overalls, washable at high temperatures). Details matter, and it is a combination of measures that will make a difference.

Equipment needs to be properly disinfected. Cell phones must be cleaned on a regular basis.

Useful links:

[How to Disinfect Camera Equipment and Spaces](#)

[COVID-19 Guide for Visual Journalists](#)

[How to Clean Your Phone to Help Protect Against Coronavirus](#)

# PRE-ASSIGNMENT

## • Travel and Transport

Consider how journalists can be better protected, but also how they can minimize exposing others (i.e. avoid public transport when returning from a high-risk assignment). Plan for eventualities by running through different potential scenarios (i.e. flights and trains being cancelled). When commissioning freelancers, discuss costs in advance and include these under expenses. When using vehicles, these need to be cleaned, paying particular attention to frequently touched areas such as keys, steering wheel, gear stick, indicator controls, door handles (inside and out), etc. If a reporting team needs to share a vehicle, account for short journeys and follow good hygiene practices.

## • Accreditation

In some countries journalists have been severely fined or arrested for leaving their homes and breaking lockdown restrictions. In most countries, journalists now need Press Accreditation, a letter of engagement or a special permit to move around and report. If so, draft a letter that confirms the identity of the journalist and the assignment, especially when working with freelancers. A journalist that is not able to identify as such when needed is vulnerable.

## • Insurance

Research and plan to properly insure the journalist. You need to know what type of insurance is needed for each assignment. Most policies will not cover COVID-19 and the journalist will need to rely on their private or national health plan. Does the journalist have access to this? What happens if the journalist needs COVID-19 medical attention outside their home country? Discuss different scenarios and options with the commissioned journalist. You need to consider who will cover expenses if there are costs attached to accessing the right medical care. Discuss and agree in advance with the journalist, particularly when working with freelancers. Access to insurance should inform the level of risk the assignment assumes. Check the [ACOS Alliance Insurance Resources](#).

## • Expenses

There are additional costs attached to high-risk assignments (from PPE to secure transport). Make sure you budget for these. When working with freelance journalists, it is advisable to organize advance payment of expenses to secure safety conditions. These are difficult times for everyone, so discuss expenses in advance. Communication is key. Establish a clear timeframe and method of payment (i.e. sending checks or Western Union transfers may not be feasible options). Travel restrictions will vary over time and these may impact the expenses related to an assignment. Budgets should account for the possibility of a journalist not being able to return home as quickly as planned or desired (it is advisable that journalists carry personal items to cover at least a two-week period when travelling).

## • Quarantine

Agree whether self-isolation is needed before and/or after a high-risk assignment. Account for sick pay if a journalist is infected. Where necessary, account for costs related to self-isolation. Freelancers should be compensated for that time. Editors and freelancers can find creative ways to make self-isolation productive. For example, can you offer post-production, proofreading or translation tasks to a freelancer while in quarantine?

## • Digital Security

There have been an increasing number of online attacks linked to COVID-19. Many commissioning editors are working remotely, often from home and using personal devices to contact sources, download documents, conduct online research, and use online conferencing platforms. Editors and journalists may be exposed - and expose others - to malware that can compromise their privacy and security. Most freelancers already work remotely; as an editor you could be the weakest link. Everyone should adopt basic digital security hygiene practices.

## COVID-19

# PRE-ASSIGNMENT

Useful resources:

[Digital Security During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

[How Journalists Can Work from Home Securely](#)

- **Define Limits**

While you minimize risk to exposure, also define limits to this. The situation may change on the ground, or an opportunity may arise on the spot. You may want to put together a list of *Don'ts*, where the editor and the journalist agree which lines cannot be crossed, prior to an assignment. If you have discussed potential eventualities pre-assignment, everyone is better placed to make the right decisions under pressure.

Editors should not push or punish journalists for not accepting an assignment that can put them at risk. Journalists should also respect the limits to exposure the news organization has established and follow the agreed safety guidelines.

- **Checklist**

There are considerable amounts of information to take in when it comes to high-risk assignments. You may find these checklists useful:

[HP Risk Management COVID-19 Editors' Assignment Checklist](#)

[ACOS Alliance Freelance Journalists Checklist for High Risk Assignments](#)

# DURING ASSIGNMENT

- **Communication**

Keep track of commissioned journalists as established in the communications plan. The situation may change while on assignment, and you need to be available and reliable. Be ready to adapt plans. Discussing potential scenarios in advance facilitates efficient decision-making under pressure.

- **Keeping Records**

Editors may ask journalists to keep a record of who they have been in contact with as well as their contact details in the eventuality that anyone needs to be informed or traced due to potential COVID-19 exposure or contamination.

# POST-ASSIGNMENT

- **Assess**

This is an unfolding crisis. It is crucial that you engage in post-assignment evaluation on an ongoing basis, so you can learn what safety measures work best, and what could be improved. This will help you to adapt your safety protocols and guidelines based on experience. Define your own mechanisms to review and update your safety procedures. Make these mechanisms simple and easy to communicate across the newsroom, including to commissioned freelance journalists. Be generous with your lessons learned, share with freelancers and colleagues from other news organizations.

- **Communication**

Touch base with commissioned journalists post-assignment. This gives everyone an opportunity to monitor potential infections, while checking and supporting the mental well-being of those you have commissioned.

- **Post-publication**

Post-assignment extends to after publication. Risk assessments should identify threats to freelancers or staff that may take place after a story's release. For example, a journalist may be harassed after publication, or a local journalist may need to temporarily move to a safe location due to threats. If these risks are identified early on, you can define a contingency plan. After publication, monitor together with the journalist whether threats can materialize and action your contingency plan, if needed. Freelancers are particularly vulnerable after the publication of a sensitive story, you may discuss in advance potential scenarios and how you will be able to support them if needed.

# MENTAL HEALTH

Does your news organization have a process to address mental health concerns amongst its staff and freelancers? Are news managers and other organizational leaders able to recognize signs of traumatic stress, encourage self-care and offer guidance and support to colleagues and staff who might be struggling? The Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma's website has resources to help - everything from tipsheets and reports to videos and articles on reporting on trauma and addressing its effects on news professionals including both staff and freelancers.

Useful links:

[Tips for Managers and Editors](#)

[Covering Coronavirus: Resources for Journalists](#)



## APPENDIX I: COVID-19 PPE<sup>3</sup>

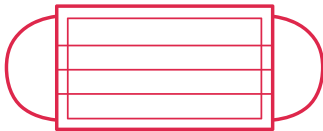
This is a basic list of PPE related to COVID-19. You may find this helpful when defining your PPE protocol for commissioning stories.

Consider:

- An effective safety protocol defines a combination of preventive measures and the use of PPE.  
The use of PPE on its own is NOT sufficient.
- In the context of COVID-19, regular hand-washing remains essential and no PPE is a substitute for this.
- PPE is only effective when used properly, otherwise it can be counterproductive as it can create a false sense of protection where journalists take risks, further exposing themselves and others.
- The advice varies by country, mainly around the use of masks (in some cases compulsory for all citizens).

### MASKS

Disposable mask types can be confusing, and certification standards vary by country. There are two main types you should be aware of:

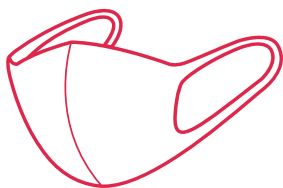


#### Surgical or medical mask

Loose-fitting face masks designed to reduce the transfer of saliva or respiratory droplets that may contain viruses and bacteria from the wearer to others and to the environment. If worn properly, they also decrease the likelihood of potentially infectious droplets from others reaching the mouth and nose of the mask wearer. Surgical masks are too loose to provide complete protection, they are not designed to secure the wearer from inhaling airborne bacteria or viruses as particles are smaller. Performance will vary based on the properties of the mask.

Useful link:

[How to Wear a Medical Mask Safely](#)



#### Respirators

If properly fitted, these provide far better protection than surgical masks due to their tight seal and materials. Respirators are specifically designed to protect the wearer from smaller particles than normal droplets. Mask ratings, standards and certification are used to indicate performance, and these vary by country. For example, N95 meets the U.S. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health classification of air filtration. FFP masks are certified by the European Union.

Useful links:

[Understanding the difference](#)

[Q&A: Masks and COVID-19](#)

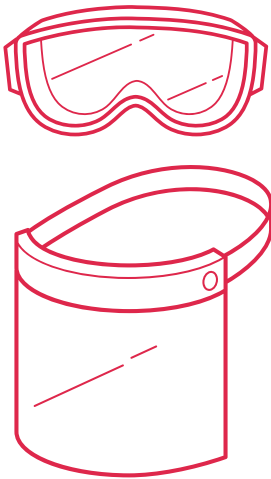
[Using Disposable Respirators](#)

<sup>3</sup> Sources [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) and [WHO](#)

# APPENDIX I: COVID-19 PPE<sup>3</sup>

## EYE AND FACE PROTECTION

Goggles and face shields are used to prevent virus exposure of the eye mucosa. Made of plastic, these often can be sanitized and reused.



### Goggles

Cover the eyes, accommodate prescription glasses, and are compatible with a respirator. Flexible frame and good seal that easily fit all face contours without too much pressure. Adjustable band that can be firmly secured and does not become loose. Indirect venting to reduce fogging (preferable).

### Face shields

Completely covers the sides and length of the face. Made of clear plastic, provides good visibility. Adjustable band to allow good fit around the head and snug fit against the forehead. Fog-resistant (preferable).

## HANDS AND SURFACES



### Hand sanitizer

Commercially available alcohol-based hand sanitizers with at least 60% ethanol or 70% isopropanol when hand washing with soap and water is not possible.

Useful link:

[Q&A for Consumers: Hand Sanitizers and COVID-19](#)



### Disinfectants

Chemical solution designed to kill infectious organisms from surfaces. Cleaning and disinfecting high-touch surfaces is an important precaution to lower the risk of infection (keys, door handles, tables, chairs, handrails, light switches, cell phones, computers, tablets, keyboards, remote controls, etc.). Always follow the directions to make sure you're using the products as recommended.

Useful link:

[How to Disinfect Camera Equipments and Spaces](#)

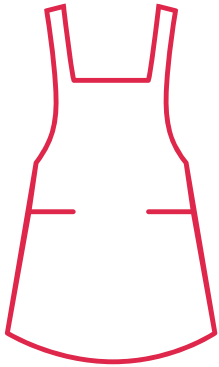


### Disposable surgical gloves

These may prevent your skin from coming into direct contact with potential contamination. Virus and bacteria can be transferred to your gloves, so you must not touch your face with your gloves on and must take them off properly. Most disposable gloves are made of latex, vinyl or nitrile. When choosing, take into account that some people suffer from an allergy to latex. Vinyl gloves have the lowest allergy rate but are less resistant to punctures. Nitrile surgical gloves offer the highest level of protection in this case. Correct fitting is essential (gloves come in different sizes), especially for photojournalists and videographers.

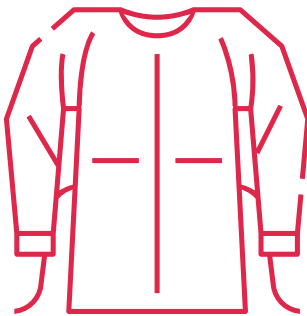
# APPENDIX I: COVID-19 PPE<sup>3</sup>

## BODY PROTECTION



### Apron

Fluid-resistant, neck strap (some adjustable, some allow for tear-off) with back fastening at the waist. Disposable items are preferred in order to minimize handling of potentially contaminated PPE.



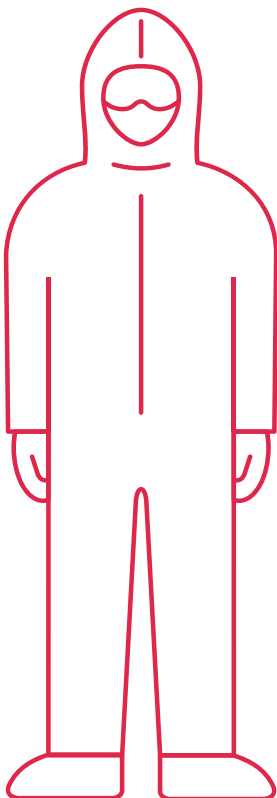
### Gown

Long-sleeved and fluid-resistant disposable gowns are considerably easier to put on and, in particular, to take off, making them safer when being removed.

Useful links:

[Steps to Put On Personal Protective Equipment](#), including gown

[Steps to Take Off Personal Protective Equipment](#), including gown



### Coverall

A one-piece bodysuit, coveralls are the most difficult PPE to remove but may offer the best protection, followed by long gowns, gowns and aprons. Difficulty in putting on and removing PPE is associated with more contamination.

Useful links:

[Steps to Put On Personal Protective Equipment](#), including coverall

[Steps to Take Off Personal Protective Equipment](#), including coverall

[Video guide to donning and doffing Non-Sterile Disposable Gloves](#)

[Video PPE Donning and Doffing](#)

[Video PPE for COVID-19](#)

[HP Risk Management /DuPont webinar](#)

[Personal Protective Equipment for COVID-19](#)

[How To Guide - Putting on PPE](#)

## COVID-19

# APPENDIX II

## Other COVID-19 Safety Resources

There is an overwhelming number of COVID-19 online resources aimed at supporting professional and safe reporting which can be challenging to navigate. Try not to get lost by staying with what's relevant to you and comes from an authoritative source.

Useful links:

[Coronavirus Resources for Reporters](#) by FIRST DRAFT

[Journalist'sToolbox](#) by the Society of Professional Journalists

[ACOS Alliance COVID-19 Resources](#)

ICFJ Global Health Crisis Reporting Forum: [Covering COVID-19](#)

[Committee to Protect Journalists Coronavirus Response](#)

[Safe and Responsible Reporting on COVID-19](#) by Free Press Unlimited

[Online Abuse Self-Defence](#) by PEN AMERICA

[WAN-IFRA coronanewsroom.org](#)

[BBC myRisks](#)

[#Tracker\\_19](#) by Reporters Without Borders

[IMS COVID-19 Reporting Guidelines](#)

[IMS COVID-19: Style & Terminology Guide](#)

[Video Production Guidelines During the COVID-19 Outbreak](#) by Storyhunter

[COVID-19 Risk Assessment for Independent Documentary Filmmakers](#) by Doc Society in collaboration with Field of Vision and Sundance

[COVID-19 Reporting](#) by IJNet

**COVID-19**

## **APPENDIX III**

# **Safety Handbooks for Journalists**

[Journalist Security Guide](#) by the Committee to Protect Journalists

[A Survival Guide for Journalists](#) by the International Federation of Journalists

[Safety Guide for Journalists](#) by Reporters Without Borders and UNESCO

[Safety Handbook for women journalist](#) by the International Association of Women in Radio and Television

## **APPENDIX IV: Glossary of terms**

### **Safety policy and protocols**

These documents establish your organization's approach to safety. The policy should briefly describe your organization's principles on safety and security, and roles and responsibilities within it. The protocols elaborate further on how these principles may be implemented. In some cases, both are combined in one document. Some news organizations choose not to have these in writing, however your safety policy and protocols should be accessible by those directly affected by them and compliance is essential. Having your safety policy and protocols in writing will facilitate their implementation, good performance and review. Safety policies and protocols have a preemptive approach; the aim is to manage threats and protect all your assets, from your individual reporters to your business premises.

### **Crisis management protocol**

While safety policies and protocols have a preemptive approach, a crisis management protocol provides clear guidelines on how to react in the case of an emergency. It focuses on roles and responsibilities and actions to be taken with the aim of responding in the most efficient way when a crisis occurs. A good crisis management protocol will help a news organization to navigate a crisis adequately, minimising negative consequences. Efficient safety and crisis management protocols have a positive effect in the mental well-being of those individuals working for a news organization. They feel valued, protected and professional, thus impacting productivity and the reputation of the news organization.

### **Risk assessment**

This is an essential exercise aimed at helping to identify threats and potential risks so you can manage and minimise these with concrete preemptive measures. A risk assessment can be applied in the context of an organization or an assignment. Organizational risk assessments should look into the main threats affecting all assets, from offices to individual reporters. Individual and/or reporting teams' risk assessments may focus on the particular safety challenges that an assignment may have and define practical ways to mitigate risks.

### **Communications Plan**

A risk assessment should include a communications plan that spells out a clear strategy to keep regular, safe communications between an assigned journalist and a designated emergency contact (a colleague, an editor), so it is possible to keep track of whether those on the ground are safe. The communications plan should include all the necessary contact information to respond fast and effectively in the case of an emergency.



**acos**

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