

Executive Summary

Our 2021 Outlook assesses some of the geopolitical and industry trends that we expect to impact journalist safety and media organisations in the year ahead.

This time last year, the devastating impact COVID-19 would have on the lives and livelihoods of many millions of people around the world was unknown. 2021 will again be dominated by government and medical efforts to manage the ongoing impact of COVID-19. The emotional, physical and economic legacy of the pandemic will last well beyond this year.

The pandemic has illustrated the importance of accurate news reporting, but regrettably has also served authoritarian restrictions on reporting and fuelled a plethora of misinformation campaigns. Many countries have used loosely defined security laws or emergency powers to limit reporting on their responses to the pandemic.

“For authoritarian-minded leaders, the coronavirus crisis is offering a convenient pretext to silence critics and consolidate power. ...The health crisis will inevitably subside, but autocratic governments’ dangerous expansion of power may be one of the pandemic’s most enduring legacies.”

[Human Rights Watch](#)

Reporters Without Borders have [documented](#) cases in which the pandemic has been used to curtail freedom of expression. How governments continue to use emergency legislation and newly obtained personal data will continue to influence journalists’ freedoms and safety in 2021.

Amid the pandemic, 2020 also witnessed other worrying trends for journalist safety. In the US, journalists were directly [targeted](#) by security officials in several Black Lives Matter demonstrations following the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May, as well as at political rallies around the November election. In multiple European countries, journalists have been physically [attacked or threatened](#) by protesters during demonstrations against COVID-19 restrictions, a trend likely to continue as the response to the pandemic continues to divide public opinion.

While COVID-19 has [broadened the definitions](#) of high risk reporting, the traditional threats to journalism associated with reporting conflict, civil unrest and political events will all persist and should not be overlooked. The outlook for many of the world’s worst conflicts and humanitarian situations remains bleak, and a series of elections scheduled throughout 2021 will present considerable reporting hurdles in countries where press freedoms are restricted.

Themes

This report analyses four themes that media organisations, safety teams and independent journalists should consider in the year ahead, irrespective of the location.

COVID-19: The pandemic will remain the biggest story of the year, at least in the first half of 2021. Efforts to vaccinate the world's population and contain new variants of the virus, alongside the strains the pandemic imposes on healthcare systems and wider society will dominate the headlines. The pandemic has transformed definitions of high-risk reporting, transforming safety requirements for previously commonplace daily activities and has made hospitals the new frontline. Enabling safe international travel and the potential for 'vaccination passports' will present some of the biggest logistical challenges journalists face in the year ahead.

Media Nationalism: Rivalries between Beijing, Moscow and Washington will continue to unfold on the global stage, despite the change of leadership in the White House. The expected US reversion to a more multilateral foreign policy will have wide-reaching significance for international politics, but is unlikely to end the current US-China hostility, which escalated under the Trump administration. Growing economic and political rivalry - played out in a form of technological nationalism throughout 2020 - threatens to spill into the media. We have already seen journalist expulsions as a result of growing bilateral political tensions and expect such incidents to increase. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reported that 2020 was a record year for the number of [journalists detained](#), and while most of these cases relate to direct state repression of media freedoms (as well as the spike in detentions witnessed in Belarus), journalist safety is also likely to suffer as a result of wider political rivalries in 2021. Some states will use legislative and regulatory mechanisms, as well as claims of protecting their national interest to make operations increasingly difficult for journalists and media organisations. We recommended reviewing protocols for managing journalist detentions and working with legal teams to anticipate new legal or regulatory pressures that could present operational hurdles or financial penalties.

Escalating Cyber Threat: The convergence of physical and digital security grows more each day, perhaps no more so than in the threats journalists face. Journalists are both directly at risk from cyber threats, as well as potential backdoors to an entire organisation's IT network. Organisations continue to grapple with new and evolving cyber threats every day, whether state sponsored or criminally motivated. The plethora of scenarios to monitor and plan for are vast: from device interrogation and protecting of sources, to how you can identify compromised devices or respond to a ransomware attack. Ensuring your InfoSec, travel and crisis management policies cover this growing space is essential to the safety of your journalists and the resilience of your business.

Environmental Extremes: We have become more accustomed to seeing headlines about environmental events, whether it be coverage of natural disasters, direct action by environmental advocacy and protest groups, or new political commitments to reductions in carbon emissions. With the frequency of extreme climatic events and public interest in environmental issues both growing, the volume and breadth of environmental stories will also expand. Ensuring your preparedness for reporting on a range of environmental disasters will be vital, with such events often presenting major logistical and fast changing safety considerations. Stories covering direct action by environmentalist groups or investigating the environmental commitments made by private companies will also present unique safety considerations.

Countries to Watch

Our 2021 Outlook concludes with an assessment of some of the international stories we expect journalists to cover in the year ahead and safety challenges they may present.

COVID-19



With mutation, the COVID-19 virus is spreading faster. Effective vaccination programmes are now essential and scientists believe that herd immunity will be achieved if 60-70% of a population is vaccinated. Globally, that means between 4.7 to 5.5 billion people need to be vaccinated, based on current modelling. Richer countries who have already bought up most of the supply could potentially reach this mark in the third or fourth quarter of this year. Poorer countries will lag much further behind.

Vaccination immunisation will be determined by medical capacity (personnel, dosage volumes and equipment) and the cold chain infrastructure (the supply chain of freezers and temperature-controlled shipping methods). This is the responsibility of national governments. The success of a national vaccination programme is therefore directly correlated to the effectiveness of the government in charge. The likelihood for inefficiencies and failures is high in most countries. Moreover, there is a real prospect for corruption in the supply chain. Journalists criticising government and investigating corruption will remain at a high risk of smear campaigns, detention and violence in many states.

Vaccine scepticism is running high across much of the world. Journalists will play a vital role in convincing reluctant populations of the importance of achieving immunisation. This will galvanise those engaging in disinformation and accelerate online abuse targeting journalists and news organisations by anti-vaccination groups. Journalists have already been physically

and verbally assaulted at demonstrations against COVID-19 restrictions, a trend likely to continue as vaccine roll-out is administered.

Journalists will no doubt be eager to get back on the road. Proof of vaccination, perhaps in some form of COVID-19 passporting scheme, will begin to be required in order to get insurance, take a flight, stay in a hotel or even acquire media accreditation. Questioning the validity of a 'vaccination passport' could become another way some states reduce journalist access to stories. "Vaccine hierarchies", whereby some states only recognise the credibility of certain vaccines, could restrict travel and lead to a complex web of mixed regulations; for example, the need for local clinical trials prior to medical approval of a vaccine in [Japan](#) could provide a major regulatory hurdle to the roll-out of vaccinations in a year when Tokyo is set to host the Olympics.

Key Takeaways

- Organisations will need to securely maintain data on personnel vaccination status and if they have previously contracted the virus. It will be important to note what type of vaccination they have received, as different vaccinations have different efficacy rates and requirements may vary by country.
- PPE provisions and wider compliant behaviours will remain a key part of any assignment; it will be essential to maintain adequate PPE supplies, and refresh training around best practices at the workplace and in the field in order to avoid complacency if and when the situation starts to show signs of improvement.

Media Nationalism



International politics and economics have always been closely linked, but the division of the two has narrowed in recent years, posing significant strategic and safety considerations for media organisations. More journalists are experiencing restrictions, being forced to leave their posts at short notice or are being detained in a number of countries.

This narrowing has been played out most evidently in the digital technological sector, creating headlines with high profile cases involving Huawei and Tik Tok, but examples of political

interference in business decisions have been seen across the energy, defence and software sectors. As digital strategies become more central to state competition and the parameters between private company operations and perceptions of “national interest” converge, this techno-nationalism appears set to stay.

“Protecting and investing in their information industries may not just be an economic choice for states; but a strategic imperative.”

[Belfer Centre](#)

For the media, this trend poses a threat because the industry represents a key pillar in the information and digital sector and is perceived by some governments as a mechanism of state competition, irrespective of an organisation’s editorial independence. We therefore see this manifesting in two ways:

Big Politics

A series of journalist expulsions between China and the US exemplify how journalism was drawn into bigger geopolitical tensions in 2020. Amid bilateral tensions between Beijing and Canberra, Cheng Lei, an Australian national working for China Global Television Network was arrested last year in Beijing and two ABC journalists fled China in September after being summoned by authorities for questioning on “national security” grounds. Haze Fan, a Bloomberg staff member, was arrested on suspicion of endangering national interest in December. Cases are not unique to China, but we do anticipate it becoming one of the most challenging environments for journalists in the year ahead, including in Hong Kong where Chinese authorities have rapidly expanded their crackdown on political opposition since the enactment of Chinese National Security Law in June 2020.

“Separating political detentions from legitimate law enforcement can be difficult.”

[Bloomberg](#)

As well as the threat of detention, some governments will expand the use of other mechanisms to limit reporting or present barriers to operations. Obtaining accreditation and visas have long been used to restrict journalist access in many countries, and governments could expand foreign funding restrictions that have been used against NGOs to limit media activity. Both Russia and the US have designated some journalists or media companies as “foreign agents”, and accusations of foreign funding or violations of terms of licence have been among the arsenal of politicised legislative charges Philippine authorities have used to restrict ABS-CBN and Rappler. Further “politicisation” of the media could see more companies face legal and regulatory hurdles to their operations.

Controlling the Narrative

Governments will also tighten restrictions at short notice ahead of and after politically sensitive events. Although such restrictions are not new, they are being used in a growing number of countries for longer periods of time and will feature regularly throughout the next 12 months. Recent cases in Uganda (elections), Ethiopia (Tigray conflict) and Belarus (post election unrest) exemplify this. As well as the threat of detention, authorities often use communications blackouts, increased checkpoints and surveillance to restrict journalists reporting.

Key Takeaways

- Arrest/detention protocols should be in place for any assignment dependent on a pre-deployment risk assessment. As part of the protocols, a legal representative in the country should be identified and, if necessary, retained to speed the response in any detention. To lower the costs this can be underpinned by appropriate insurance cover. Protocols must also recognise different practical mitigation options for foreign and local nationals, where evacuation options may not apply.
- Training should cover what to do in the event of a detention and include how to protect sensitive data on electronic devices. These kinds of controls should become part of every day operational management.
- Maintain a dynamic risk assessment for both shorter-term, event-driven deployments and long-term assignments or foreign bureau operations; it is important to conduct ongoing monitoring and reporting of any changes in the threat landscape and be ready to act accordingly if required.

Escalating Cyber Threats



Cyber threats facing journalists and media organisations are diverse and come from multiple sources. From a defensive and preparatory standpoint, it may be useful to separate out:

1. The specific targeting of journalists from state authorities or criminals, especially during international travel;

2. The threats to your organisation's operational resilience.

This division can help in your risk management planning and allocation of responsibilities, but it is essential to recognise that the two are deeply intertwined. An individual journalist may be targeted as an entry point to an organisation's network and equally, adversaries could target perceived weaknesses in an organisation's infrastructure in order to obtain information about an individual staff member or particular story.

Our previous two Journalist Safety Outlooks ([2019](#) & [2020](#)) have highlighted the threat that spyware [Pegasus](#) has posed to journalists and media organisations. This was evidenced again in December with revelations it has been used to target tens of Al Jazeera journalists. Technological advances will continue to be used by both state and non-state actors to target the media and new methods of interrogating digital devices will continue to develop. Using a compromised digital device not only exposes journalists to surveillance and undermines their own digital privacy but can also endanger their in-country sources. Several states interrogate or target journalist devices in order to access information on local sources and networks, who may subsequently be arrested or exposed to violence and are not protected by the same diplomatic or corporate protections as their international counterparts.

On an organisational level, media companies should also constantly review preparedness in the face of the [growing volume and type of cyber threats](#). Cyber security is likely primarily the responsibility of your organisation's CISO, Information Security and business continuity teams, supported by specialist software and external consultancies, but it is essential for safety and crisis management teams to work collaboratively with them to ensure preparedness.

We expect to see more frequent use of ransomware against large organisations and a growing sophistication and personalisation of phishing attacks in the year ahead. Cyber criminals used COVID-19 to increase pandemic-related targeting, which will evolve to reference vaccine-related themes in 2020; other subjects likely to be used to lure victims will relate to major events such as the Dubai Expo, European football championships and the Tokyo Olympics. These evolving threats all come as IT teams continue to adapt their infrastructure and security measures to manage the huge growth in remote working driven by the pandemic.

Governments and major technology companies continue to struggle to prevent online hate speech and it is hard to envisage adequate solutions to address this in the year ahead. Journalists, particularly women and members of ethnic or religious minorities, will continue to be targets of online abuse and in the absence of effective technological or regulatory controls, organisations must act to help ensure the wellbeing and safety of their staff.

Key Takeaways

- Cyber security starts and ends with human behaviours and having an up-to-date, relevant and regularly reviewed cyber awareness programme is an essential part of any digital safety strategy.

- Implement a travel policy and risk assessment process that integrate digital and physical threats. Ensure that systems and support are in place for staff in the event of a suspected digital security breach.
- Run cyber scenarios such as response to a ransomware attack inside your crisis management plans. If the first time you consider your options is in response to a real-life incident, decisions will be slow and costly mistakes more likely to be made.
- Digital training should include preventative measures staff can take to reduce exposure to abuse and protect personal information, as well as reporting, investigation and escalation processes to follow if exposed to abuse. Corporate employee assistance programmes should include psychological support for victims. It is important that any systems established consider how content/data is stored as it can serve as legal evidence.

Environmental Extremes



Environmental reporting will continue to increase throughout the year. This January we have already seen flooding and forest fires in different parts of Australia and record snowfall in Madrid, and studies have claimed the [seven hottest years](#) on record have all been recorded since 2014. The expected re-commitment of the US to the Paris Climate Accord will rejuvenate political momentum behind the environmental cause. Driven not only by increasing extreme climatic events but also growing public interest, the breadth of environmental stories being covered is likely to expand.

Forest fires, earthquakes, hurricanes, cyclones and flooding are not new to news agendas, but their increased overall frequency, as well as growing impact on human conurbations have seen their coverage increase. As well as the immediate threats, coverage of natural disasters and extreme climatic events present a range of unpredictable secondary threats. Whether it is aftershocks or landslides, communications outages, scarcity of water, or increased crime, risk assessing natural disasters must consider a range of logistical challenges as well as immediate and second phase threats.

Investigations into corporate environmental commitments and ESG pledges will increase in response to changing public attitudes. Some companies and associates will resist scrutiny of their environmental practices, investments or supply chains and could threaten journalists.

Editorial sensitivity to source protection and anonymity is also essential; in 2020, [Global Witness reported](#) a 30% increase in the killings of environmental defenders compared to the previous year.

Key Takeaways

- Review training, protocols and equipment supplies for a range of natural disaster scenarios.
- Refresh civil unrest training and ensure adequate safety provisions for mobile teams covering large events. The UN Climate Change Conference (COP 26) in Glasgow, Scotland in November will be a major news story in the UK, which is likely to be accompanied by considerable civil unrest and heavy policing. More widely, we expect direct action by environmentalist groups to increase in 2021, which can lead to confrontations.

Geopolitical Trends



This report does not seek to forecast or analyse the many interesting geopolitical developments that will feature throughout 2021; the list is extensive and there are multiple specialist think tanks and risk analysis companies that dedicate months and many more pages to such a task. Here we select a collection of topics that we think will feature on international news agendas in the year ahead.

US foreign policy will undoubtedly shift under the Biden presidency, although government priorities will be initially domestically focused due to the pandemic. Campaign pledges and Biden's foreign policy team appointees suggest the US will reassert its commitment to multilateralism, although it is wrong to assume that foreign policy decisions will revert to those seen under the Obama administration. In particular, relations with China have dramatically changed during the past five years and the strong economic and political rivalry between the two countries will persist, even if diplomatic rhetoric is somewhat more cordial. Developments concerning Taiwan and Hong Kong represent the most obvious flashpoint in bilateral ties.

Early tests for US foreign policy will emerge in familiar areas. The US is expected to seek to restart the nuclear deal with Iran that President Trump abandoned, although the regional situation has notably developed since 2015 when the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed. New regional dynamics and anti-Iranian alliances among influential US allies, particularly Israel and Saudi Arabia, will push for a more hawkish approach towards Tehran. Tehran's recent provocations - announcing it was starting 20 percent uranium enrichment at the Fordow nuclear facility and seizing a South Korean oil tanker in the Strait of Hormuz - set a difficult position for re-engagement. Additionally, Iran's presidential elections in June add an additional dynamic to relations with the US. The perilous state of the economy has undermined confidence in current President Hassan Rouhani and perhaps with it, weakened support for other candidates loosely considered to sit in the moderate or reformist camps. There are also suggestions that aging Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is seeking to cement a more hardline policy towards the US and will put his weight behind a military figure. Close attention will be put on the Guardian Council vetting and selection of presidential candidates later this year.

Tensions in the Korean peninsula are also worth monitoring. Closer US military ties with Seoul, including joint annual exercises, will certainly fuel hostilities with Pyongyang and see a resumption of the cyclical military escalations that were commonplace before President Trump.

The US could adjust its stance to Venezuela, with support of opposition figure Juan Guaidó combined with economic sanctions clearly having failed to unseat President Maduro. Likely to favour diplomacy via the institutional channels of the UN and OAS, the US could re-engage with the Maduro regime, using the prospect of sanctions relief and humanitarian aid in exchange for gradual political democratisation in Venezuela. Any such rapprochement, albeit limited, could make international reporting from Venezuela somewhat easier, yet still laden with risk.

Relations between Moscow and Washington will be tested in response to continued government crackdowns in Belarus, any military flare-ups in the Donbass region of Ukraine or competing military exercises in Eastern Europe. Domestically, **Russia will hold parliamentary elections for the Duma in September. Reporting on the campaign and interviewing opposition candidates will present familiar challenges for journalists in Russia.** The influence of government critic Alexei Navalny in galvanising the political opposition and stirring a government crackdown on unrest will unfold in the weeks ahead, following his recent arrest on his return to Russia.

Geopolitically, Russia's complex bilateral relations with Turkey will also continue to be tested. Despite competing interests and backing rivals in Nagorno-Karabakh, Libya and Syria, the two countries have avoided direct conflict and formed an uneasy alliance as Ankara's relations with the West have soured. This relationship will be further strained if Russian backed Syrian forces intensify military assaults in Idlib province later this year, where a number of Turkish-backed fighters remain. Although not likely to provoke direct reprisals from Turkey, it will further complicate Ankara's already stretched foreign policy objectives. A troubling domestic economic situation alongside diverse foreign policy commitments - which also includes

hydrocarbon activity in contested waters off Cyprus - put Turkey in an unpredictable and potentially volatile predicament for the next 12 months.

Current conflicts and humanitarian situations will persist through 2021 and have weak prospects for resolution. The [International Crisis Group](#) and [International Rescue Committee](#) have both provided comprehensive summaries of these situations and all present unique political and safety challenges for reporting. One of these, the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia, threatens to expand and destabilise the country and its neighbours in 2021. Tigray has been shut off to journalists and any wider conflict involving other regions or unrest in reaction to delayed elections will likely see similar reporting restrictions and communications black outs enforced. A larger conflict could see Ethiopia pull out additional forces from Somalia at a time when the US is also withdrawing some 700 fighters from the country. In the absence of an adequate domestic military, the withdrawals could undermine the domestic security situation in Somalia and see al-Shabaab seek to exploit any resultant power vacuum.

The expansion of Islamist militancy across huge swathes of the Sahel belt in Africa is also assessed by the ICG, and will continue to pose major challenges for the security and political stability of affected countries, of note parts of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. Travel and reporting from these regions, as well as in northern Mozambique, which has seen surge in Islamist violence in the past 24 months, will pose notable security threats to journalism, including from kidnap.

Outside of conflict zones, press freedoms and journalist safety will remain under severe threat in many countries where governments are curtailing press freedoms or turning a blind eye to press intimidation. A range of press freedom, journalist advocacy and wider civil society organisations such as the Committee to Protect Journalists, Reporters Without Borders, the International Federation of Journalists and Freedom House continue to expose violations and highlight trends affecting journalist safety and freedom to report.

Among the worst offenders, 2020 saw alarming trends in Mexico and Afghanistan, where a high number of journalists were murdered for their work and impunity for murderers is rife. We fear the situation could worsen in both countries. In Mexico the government has failed to improve protections for the media and President Lopez Obrador has publicly attacked some media channels and newspapers. In Afghanistan protections for journalists are insufficient and many regions have seen a high number of targeted assassinations. 2021 is a critical year in peace talks and any further deterioration in the security situation could be exploited by adversaries to further attack journalists.

[HP Risk Management](#)

If you want to discuss any of the threats outlined in this report or have questions about other stories or destinations you are planning to report on in 2021, please get in touch at info@hpriskmanagement.com. We provide risk consultancy services to international broadcasters and newspapers and would be delighted to talk to you about your risk management needs.

[RiskPal](#)

RiskPal is an online risk assessment platform built to improve the quality and efficiency of your risk assessments, launched in May 2020. Containing up to date health, safety and security risk information, RiskPal is bringing the risk assessment process into the digital age.

Please get in touch for more information: <https://www.riskpal.co.uk/>