

Module 1: The risk assessment and why it matters

[00:00:12] Hello, welcome to the first module of How to Report Safely: A Guide for Women Journalists and Their Allies. In this session, we're going to start looking at the risk assessment process, which is also our basic safety plan. I'm Ali Baskerville and I'm your lead instructor is going to guide you through this online training course.

[00:00:37] So let's begin by looking at exactly what we mean by a risk assessment. Often, risk assessments are used throughout different industries to help manage health and safety. Risk assessments over the years have become more prevalent and used by journalists reporting on the ground in high risk situations. It's also been used recently in newsrooms for editors and their staff to put a good safety plan in place and to manage some of the risks that journalists now face in the course of doing their work.

[00:01:16] Many of you will know that threats against journalists have risen over the last decade and the freedom of the press is challenged on a daily basis across the world. So we used the key word there, which is very much the fundamentals, it's the first thing we do when looking at a risk assessment, and that is to look at what the threats are. Now, you might ask yourself, what do we mean when we talk about a threat? And a threat is basically when someone or something represents an imminent danger to you or someone in your team.

[00:01:51] As journalists, we are often working with other people. As a freelancer, you may be more likely to be working more on your own. However, you will always be working with, say, a driver or a translator or working with other journalists. If you're in video or photography, you might be working with a writer. So there's always somebody else to consider within your work than yourself. There's also the people interviewing, their safety, and your responsibility to them as well to manage some of the risks that they might face.

[00:02:25] So let's go back to what we mean by threat, so there are a number of threats that journalists face from kidnaping, illegal detention, being surveilled by a government or the state. As we've looked at already in the introductions, we've looked at the fact that sexual violence, gender based violence is a risk that many journalists face, as well as being caught in front lines, dealing with weaponry and obviously dealing with more conflict environments in war zones. There's also the risk of protests, civil unrest and more recently, COVID.

[00:03:04] So there are many threats that we face in their line of doing our work. So the risk assessment can really be seen as an ally to this and to help us to work out what some of those are and perhaps some measures that we can put in place so that we can use them. So what is risk then? We've talked about threat, and we haven't really touched on what risk actually is. But a risk is the likelihood or the probability that a threat and its negative consequences will be realized.

[00:03:38] And this helps us to understand then whether a threat is going to become a risk to ourselves. And it's quite helpful to think about it in this way, because it helps us to have a bit of a structure to how we look at these potential threats and the risks that they pose to us. So to get a better understanding of this and to understand the threats that we face, we need to have a little process in place to get to that point. And I would always advise people to start with doing some research.

[00:04:07] This can be done online, it can be done with local people in the area, it could be with your colleagues, your friends. It could be that you've been traveling into this area or the location of where you're covering multiple times. You may live in a location that you're reporting in. So there's many ways to research now, and particularly with the amount of information online, it's quite easy to do a quick Google search on the location you're going to and also do an image search so you can see the type of environment you're going into.

[00:04:42] Sometimes you'll be given an assignment to a place you've never been before, and it may look quite close on a map, but actually when you put it into Google Maps or some other kind of mapping, you'll find that it might take a long time to get there because the roads are not particularly well formed. You might be going on tracks and you might have to think about different vehicle types to get there. So we can see that even just driving from one location to another could pose a risk, depending on the road surface type of environment you're going into and the distance.

[00:05:14] So when we're looking at the research of where we're going to, this also looks like the environment, because that really helps us to understand the context of what we're doing and also the threats that we might face and some of the risk measures we can put in place to kind of lessen the impact of those threats. So a good research before any assignment is helpful. Now, I appreciate that some of you will be covering breaking news stories and you'll have little time to do that research. But even a quick search online is better than doing nothing at all.

[00:05:44] And it'll certainly be able to build your risk assessment if you need to at speed. Sometimes you may only have a few hours before your trip to be able to put a basic safety plan in place. That was the end of this module and in the resources we've left you a blank risk assessment template to help you. So instead of agonizing over filling out a risk assessment and having a template, we've already put one here for you so you can have a look through that at the end of this module and see what kind of key information we advise you to give in your risk assessment.

[00:06:19] There's another element to looking at risk as well, and that's our own personal risk and everybody has a different threshold of risk that they will take on. Everybody's doing different kind of stories, different kinds of journalism, different kinds of reporting. Some will do very much breaking news stories and some people will be doing documentaries where they spend extended periods of time in place.

[00:06:44] So a risk assessment is very much a living document and can be used and adapted depending on what work you do. So once you've got one in place, then you can keep adding an update into it and sharing it with colleagues who are also starting up with their risk assessments to make it more easy for them as well to fill one in. What we want to avoid is becoming a lengthy paperwork exercise that is seen as a barrier to getting the work done. Your risk assessment should really be seen as a helpful tool to help you get the best out of the story that you're doing and to keep people safe at the same time.

[00:07:20] So when we talk about our personal identity in relation to risk then, we have to think about how our perceived identity can also affect our treatment, our threats and the risks that we face. For example, if you are working in an area where there's been a lot of attacks on perhaps cisgender women, then perhaps you'll be thinking more about sexual violence and harassment. If you a member of the LGBTQ+ community and you're working in an area that's been known for an increase of homophobic attacks, then you're going to think about that as a particular threat to you.

[00:07:57] So threats can be very fluid depending on our identity, which is also fluid. So therefore, it's good to take a bit of time when you're filling out your risk assessment to think about that. And also, one of the key things to any risk assessment process is to have a conversation with the team that you're going to be working with so that you understand perhaps some of their personal risks. Now, we're not asking you here to force people to share those personal details about themselves, but of course, if they are comfortable with that, then that does help you to understand that perhaps why you perceive somewhere as being safe, they may see that as a risk.

[00:08:35] So getting that conversation going early on with your team is important. Now, when we talk about our team, we mean perhaps your fixer or translator, another journalist that you're working alongside, but also with whoever is commissioning you, whether it be an editor or having a conversation with the newsroom safety manager if you're working for a medium or large outlet. These are important things to factor into that risk assessment because the thinking through these things will help us if something does actually happen. We've already kind of started the thought process, so we're less stressed when an incident does happen.

[00:09:12] Also, we need to think about the type of media we're doing, whether we're doing photography, written or online or video, all of those different roles have different levels of risk associated to them. Whereas a journalist might be able to take a position that's further away from what's happening to report in their story, a videographer is probably going to get closer to the action.

[00:09:34] And as well as that, they're going to be carrying equipment which will then inhibit you in doing your work. And so the more equipment you've got with you, the more difficult it is to move around, therefore, can put you in more risk. And also some of that equipment could be very valuable, so also there's the risk of theft. So there's all those different threats that we have to think about generally, but also there's additional ones, perhaps depending on the role we're taking within journalism as well that adds to that.

[00:10:03] I've already mentioned environment has been one factor, and this is thinking about whether you're working in a built-up environment, whether it's a more rural environment and also the access to resources that you will have there. And in some of those resources, we're thinking here about first aid, we're thinking about hospital care and we're thinking about primary health centers. During your research, you should look for these key locations and where exactly they are in relation to where you're staying.

[00:10:32] And we're going to talk in another module about travel and also thinking about safe locations to work from and to work within, and also as interview locations. So we'll move ahead to those at a later date. But it's good to research these early on so you've got some options in place. And again, conversations with other people who work in the area with a journalist you've traveled there before can supply you with a really useful list of places that you might want to be able to use whilst working in the different environments that you might come across.

[00:11:04] The other thing that's helpful to put together in the risk assessment side is a timeline. If you're asked by your editor to cover a story in two days time and you find out it takes three days to travel there, then obviously that's going to be a barrier to doing the work. So we have to look at the time and the distance of where we're going to and whether it's realistic to get it within that timeline and it isn't always possible.

[00:11:27] Of course, when there's a breaking news story, there's a big effort to get journalists there to report on the story, but make sure you put a bit of time in place to actually plan that so you get the right kind of transport there, so you're traveling with someone else, that you're going to a location where we've done a little bit of research from it, so you know where your exits in and exits out are going to be. And also some areas around the location of where this particular story is you can get to if things do escalate.

[00:11:54] I'm very much talking here more about civil unrest, because this is a very unpredictable environment where we do need some emergency locations on the ground to be able to get to if there is an incident. So as you can see, even just thinking about one type of story, there was a lot of things to think about and these are very much helpfully done within the risk assessment. So what are we going to put in the risk assessment then? So we need to put a brief schedule, right? So we need to put in important meetings, our appointments, locations, and this will serve as a basis for your risk assessment.

[00:12:32] The locations you want to highlight can be all the locations that you're going to that relate to your job. This will help anybody who has to try and look back on the risk assessment and find out where your last known location was if there's an incident. Also, again, as a planning tool, it's very good to think through the types of locations you're going to and what the implications are of meeting people in these places. If you're going to interview somebody and you're taking them to an area that actually might put them at risk, it's good to think about this early on so you could perhaps change the location or have a number of different locations.

[00:13:08] It may be that that area puts you and the team at risk as well, depending on culture, identity and all these other aspects that are perceived risks based on our identity. So have a look through those particular elements as well to make sure that they're covered and have some alternative locations, but again, more on that in module two. Another thing to plan before you do leave and certainly involved in your risk assessment is to try and do a small threat assessment, and this will help you then to highlight the main threats to you on this specific assignment. If you try to look at all the threats that you might face globally as a journalist, then it would be a rather large risk assessment and of course, would probably undermine your confidence in actually doing the story in the first place.

[00:14:05] So there's two different types of risk that are useful here to know about. There's inherent risk, there's an inherent risk with the job that you're doing. As in every type of work that you do, there's inherent risks involved. If you're a mountaineer, there's an inherent risk of falling down a mountain. If you're a journalist, there's an inherent risk of facing danger on a front line. There's an inherent risk of potentially being harassed in the newsroom. There's an inherent risk of facing detainment and kidnaping depending on the type of work you're doing. But those inherent risks are there.

[00:14:41] What we have in certainly doing the risk assessment process is a place to make a contingency plan for these inherent risks, so that once we thought them through and we've got some certain measures in place, they then become residual risks. And these are after any risk reduction measures are in place. And that's what we're aiming for prior to leaving on our assignment that we have this residual risk. But through the mitigation that we have in place and that risk assessment, we have lessened the impact of it and also the likelihood of it happening. Some other things we can do prior to assignment to make sure that we can lessen some of these risks, as well as having a contingency plan, which I'll talk about in a second, is to put some training in place.

[00:15:25] This could be basic first aid training. It also could be useful to do a hostile environment, a first aid course or an equivalent safety course that's relative to you and also is accessible. And we will have resources at the end of here to talk about some of those places where you can get some support to do that course and also some online training that's free to access, including this.

[00:15:53] So prior to assignment, we can do medical training, have good team communication, and also get ourselves maybe on a safety training course to help us before we do head off. And there's one last thing I want to talk about with risk assessments, and that's whose responsibility is to act on the risk assessment once it's been completed. And this is an important thing to think through. In the next video, I'm going to talk about your communication side, there are elements to the risk assessment where we think about emergency contact next of kin, and also how are we going to communicate when there is an emergency, which is a very important factor to our risk assessment.

[00:16:35] But to finish off this session, I just want to mention to you the important conversations you need to have with the person commissioning with you, the editor, or perhaps someone in your pay support network is able to hold on to your risk assessment. It's really no good having a risk assessment if nobody can access it. So once you've completed this, you need to leave it with someone you trust who will be able to access it easily, is going to be on the end of a phone if you need to call them in an emergency, who has also got some resources in place to assist you in the worst case scenario.

[00:17:10] Remember, our risk assessment has our best plan and our contingency plan in place for when things potentially might go wrong. Ideally, nothing will happen when we're out doing our stories, but occasionally there's always something that comes up that we weren't expecting. If we have that risk assessment with someone we trust and who knows that you haven't checked in frequently and knows what last location you are out, and they're able to perhaps call the venue, perhaps call the team that are with you and then be able to find out where you are.

[00:17:40] And these things are about saving time so that if something does need to happen, people can get to you quicker without trying to also find you. So remember, once you finished the risk assessment and done all that hard work to get all the information together, make sure you leave it with somebody and make sure they can access it and have a conversation with about them, how that works.

[00:18:04] There is was much more advice now for newsrooms on how to use risk assessments and also how to keep journalists safe on the ground. Make sure you access the resources - optional - that we've put at the end of this module and also take part in the online quiz and the discussion forums. And I'll see you back for the second session where we're going to talk about that communications plan and also personal protective equipment and some vital kit equipment we need to think about before we head out in any assignment.