Annual Safety Coordination Meeting 2025
Summary Report

acos ALLIANCE

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Introduction

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Executive Director, ACOS Alliance

This year, we set out to do things differently at the ACOS meeting.

Bringing together 90 of the most experienced minds in journalist safety over two days is a privilege and, as an organization obsessed with practical action, we wanted to see what would happen if - instead of just identifying problems - we worked together to create actionable solutions. So we dedicated the second day, hosted by Reuters, to the first-ever **ACOS Alliance Safety Sprint.**

Five groups of participants focused on five selected "Safety Challenge Tracks". The brief was clear: ideas had to be grounded in reality: practical, creative, collaborative and feasible within today's limited resources.

The results exceeded our expectations. At the time of writing, three solutions - Rapid Response, Mental Health Epidemic, and Preparation Before Exile - are already moving forward, driven by working groups led by ACOS partners. The other two - Lost in Translation and The

Implementation Gap - sparked critical conversations that we will continue over the coming year.

This report takes you through the processes of that day - from problem to opportunity to solution - for each of the five groups. It also outlines the rich discussions, ideas and exchanges from day one of the meeting. These helped us to frame the following day's conversations.

As Nick Tattersall, Reuters Managing Editor for the Newsroom stressed as he kicked off day two: "safety isn't just about equipment or protocols, it is about shared knowledge and about community, it's about making sure that no journalist is left alone." He also reminded us that in today's "increasingly challenging, dangerous and complex global context for journalists, cross-industry collaboration is more essential than ever." That spirit is at the heart of the ACOS Annual Safety Coordination Meeting.

Thank you to everyone who took part this year, but especially to the Safety Sprint challenge leads, co-leads and provocateurs who gave so much of their time to the process, and to our meeting moderators, speakers and reporters. Thank you once again to Reuters for hosting us so warmly on day two of the meeting, to The New York Times for its sponsorship, and to Media Defence for providing essential visa support.

Day 1
Key
Takeaways

1

The challenges facing journalism are also challenges for journalist safety

In our first plenary session *Back to the Future*, issues such as fragmented audiences, news fatigue, and declining economic viability were widely cited as current and future challenges to journalist safety, alongside safety-specific threats such as the rise of legal mechanisms of attack, the decline in press freedom and the growth of journalists forced into exile.

2

Collaboration, Collaboration, Collaboration

When asked what are the values and skills needed to respond to these challenges, collaboration came out top, followed by resilience, creativity, and accountability. Throughout the day, the importance of collaboration and partnership was a constant theme: how can safety providers and support organizations work together to make the most of our collective resources? How can we do more things together to create efficiencies? How can we share, learn and benefit from past safety failures and tragedies?

3

There has been a significant growth in demand for trauma-awareness training from freelancers and in newsrooms

Much of this is being driven by journalists in their twenties and early thirties who have a richer language around mental health and a higher set of duty of care demands, said Bruce Shapiro, Executive Director of the Global Center for Journalism and Trauma (GCJT), who also revealed that significant new research is emerging around the impact of trauma, moral injury and burnout on journalists. Mar Cabra, Executive Director of The Self-Investigation echoed this, presenting key findings from the recent Mental Health Journalism Summit which revealed growing concerns around the high levels of toxicity and burnout in newsrooms. Mar also stressed the need for more case studies and communities of practice to help newsrooms who want to provide better mental health support but don't know where to start.

4

The growth of Peer Support

Peer support networks are spreading outside of newsrooms and becoming part of the broader journalism culture, with models being adapted and replicated by different journalist communities, said Bruce. We heard a good example of this: how freelance peer to peer support initiatives have empowered Sudanese freelancers to speak collectively to editors, as well as providing essential support networks.

5

Safety training alone isn't enough

If there is no formal safety infrastructure to support it. This was raised several times in the breakout session *Safety Training Exchange and Coordination*. And while the need for safety training among journalists is rising rapidly, more NGOs are also having conversations with news managers about the need for wider, on-going safety policies and methods of support. Small newsrooms, who can struggle to implement adequate safety policies, raised the idea of sharing dedicated safety trainers and safety teams for on-going support. We also heard how, as a community, we need to get better at sharing safety failures - to inform future safety provision and preparation. Increasingly safety training is being tailored to the needs of specific journalist groups - such as environmental - and regions, but this comes with a struggle to find properly qualified trainers. Should we be looking further afield to find specialised trainers, and investing more in "Train the Trainers" initiatives?

6

We need comprehensive research data about today's freelance community and their safety needs.

This was a top issue raised at the breakout session dedicated to freelance safety which also heard that chronic safety issues such as the lack of affordable high risk insurance, adequate pay, and duty of care continue. Legal insurance for freelancers was identified as an urgent need, as was some form of formal or organizational support for visa applications and for local journalists who face dangers once international news organizations parachute out of a country. We heard how some news organizations are currently developing freelance-specific duty of care policies. Freelancers also shared their feelings of anger and disempowerment over the lack of accountability for the deaths of their journalist colleagues in Gaza.

Day 2
The ACOS
Safety Sprint

We based the ACOS Meeting Safety Sprint on the product design sprints that originated in the tech industry.

A design sprint is a form of structured brainstorming that takes place very quickly through a series of rapid-fired group exercises - to drive creativity and ensure that a problem is clearly mapped before solutions are proposed.

Our one-day format, created by Shuwei Fang, a Shorenstein Fellow at Harvard University, saw groups of 15-20 people attack five different

safety challenges selected during the previous day's meeting. Armed with flipcharts, markers and bundles of multicoloured Post It notes, each group spent the morning analysing the root causes of their challenge which they reframed into a problem statement and solvable opportunity. They then conducted an audit of existing solutions, analysing what is already working well, what is partially working, and what has failed.

Groups then spent the afternoon turning the morning's insights into tangible, testable solutions that can be implemented within existing constraints. Each group was guided to work on a prototype solution and a clear action plan which was thoroughly "stress tested" by representatives from another group before their final plenary presentations.

Throughout the day three roaming "provocateurs" challenged assumptions, injected fresh perspectives and helped participants break through conventional thinking.

Defining the Safety Challenge Tracks

ACOS defined eight initial safety challenge tracks from the response analysis of a detailed questionnaire distributed prior to the meeting.

We articulated eight challenge tracks that:

- Affected a significant portion of the ACOS community
- Were specific enough to tackle in a one-day sprint

On day one of the meeting, after a presentation of the data, participants selected the final five tracks for groups to work on the following day.

Rapid Response

How might we create effective rapid-response safety systems that operate in hours, not days?

What the survey told us

Journalists in crisis need help within hours while safety organisations typically operate on multi-day timelines. This fundamental mismatch between crisis urgency and organisational capacity leaves journalists vulnerable during their most critical moments. The gap reflects different operational cultures, approval processes, and risk tolerances between those experiencing threats and those providing support.

Lead: Viktorya Vilk, Director, Digital Safety and Free Expression, PEN America

Co-Lead: Juanita Islas, Director of Programs, International Women's Media Foundation

Rapid Response

Problem statement

A freelance journalist in Mexico is receiving serious threats and she is having difficulty accessing safety support when she urgently needs it.

Ale (a fictional journalist) lives and works in Mexico City covering organized crime and government-related corruption. Ale has started to receive serious threats against her life and she's freaking out. Through her journalist contacts, Ale has tracked down a journalist support organization that can help her, and she begins filling in their application form, tracking down her bylines to prove her journalistic integrity and taking time to update the CV she has been asked to upload. She gets an automatic response that says 'Thank you, we will get back to you in the next few days.' Ale waits in a state of stress and panic, trying to decide if she should leave her house.

Opportunity

How can we ensure that Ale gets the holistic safety support that she needs in a fast, coordinated and empathetic manner.

Solution

JEMA *(Journalist Emergency Mexican Advocate)*, a 24-7 first responder.

JEMA is a knowledgeable and empathetic human coordinator and advocate who can vet, triage and assess the situation of a journalist in crisis, provide immediate psychological safety and security guidance, and manage their case long-term, connecting them with the most appropriate partner organization(s) for one-off or on-going support.

How it will work

1 All JEMA advocates will have local and contextual knowledge, be trusted and well-networked, knowing who to reach out to and at what point.

2 All JEMA advocates will be trained in basic security, psychological safety and first aid.

Why it will work

JEMA will make the current emergency support system more efficient by taking the burden of urgent media requests away from NGOs who are currently working in this space. This triage system will do the vetting for them and work with them.

I know this space, I know about rapid response, I know a little bit about Mexico and I have expressed that this is a well-trodden area, so I'm impressed that you have come up with a new approach that is fundable, scaleable and meaningful. As you were getting feedback I saw you really adapt and modify and come up with an exciting proposal.

Provocateur feedback

Mental Health Epidemic

How might we make mental health injuries as visible, preventable, and treatable as physical ones?

What the survey told us

Mental health represents the largest single category of safety concerns, with trauma language appearing throughout discussions of equipment, funding, and legal issues. Phrases like "under pressure" "emotionally drained" and "death by bureaucracy" capture how day to day burdens can become mental health crises. Despite coming up at every safety conference, psychosocial safety remains systematically under-resourced, with mental health impacts woven through virtually every other safety issue.

Lead: Gavin Rees, Senior Advisor for Training and Innovation, Global Center for Journalism and Trauma

Co-Lead: Kate Parkinson, Risk and Safety Manager, Journalism Protection Initiative

Mental Health Epidemic

Problem statement

We lack a way of talking to each other about the daily mental health toll of journalists.

"Imagine you are in a newsroom. Next to you a journalist is editing drone bombing footage for social media, another one is diving into research on a mass coral bleaching event, and on the other side of the aisle an editor is talking to a reporter about reporting a mass shooting event. Every single day journalists face an onslaught of pressures and stressful situations that can take a huge toll on their mental health. The problem is that they lack the means to talk to each other about these daily mental health tolls of journalism."

Opportunity

How might we build better communication habits around mental health and make these conversations grounded in newsroom realities?

Solution

Microdosing Mental Health

This consists of two parts which, implemented together, provide clarity and accountability and normalise conversations and culture around mental health:

1 Templated text on mental health that news organizations can extract or adapt for contracts or similar paperwork with the freelancers they work with - a ready-to-use set of clauses and language that organisations can slot into contracts, MoUs or internal policies to clarify their responsibilities and commitments around mental health. It helps create consistency, transparency and accountability by spelling out what staff and freelancers can expect, and what is expected in return.

2 A Microdosing Mental Health tool - an eight part framework that empowers habit building around mental health conversations and embeds the framework across the newsroom one step at a time: in short, it microdoses mental health. Each "microdose" offers a simple action or prompt that encourages check-ins, reflections and shared responsibility for wellbeing, helping to normalize discussions around the daily mental toll that journalists face.

How it will work

It starts with a pilot among five newsrooms - ideally multi-language - all serving different communities and cultures to work out the kinks. We will work with them to adjust and adapt the tool to make it their own and to learn from their experience to measure success and roll it out more broadly, with MEL on-going through surveys and adoption numbers.

Why it will work

It's tapping into systems and structures that already exist in the media ecosystem, not reinventing the wheel.

What's really helpful is the idea that you are hacking existing newsroom systems. ACOS put a culture of safety into the popular vernacular as something we should all think about - it's taken a while but it's changed a lot, so the idea that we can start with language and by moving people a little bit each time over the long term makes a lot of sense. What's nice about this (solution) is that it's both incredibly ambitious and not ambitious, there's actually a pathway. This is something that can actually get done with a reasonable amount of elbow grease and money - and that's really quite impressive.

Provocateur feedback
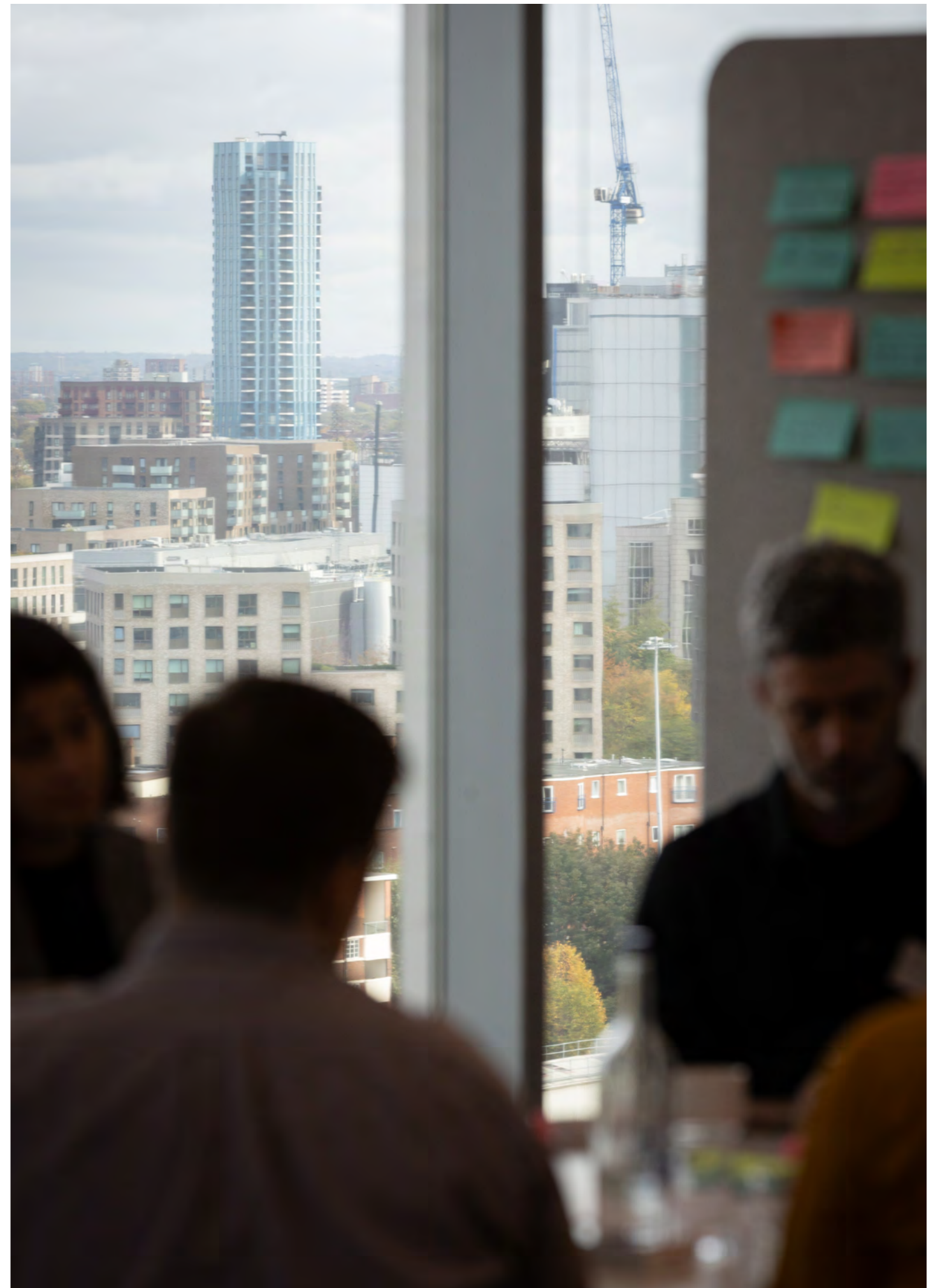
Lost in Translation

How might we bridge the divide between NGO and newsroom safety realities?

What the survey told us

A clear divide exists between how NGOs and newsrooms conceptualise and address safety. NGOs focus on leveraging donor influence and addressing impunity, while newsrooms need practical workflow integration and verification systems. This language and priority gap means well-funded safety initiatives designed in NGO frameworks often fail to meet actual newsroom needs, while newsrooms tend to outsource safety support to NGOs.

Lead: Salima Belhadj, Editor-in-Chief, AFPTV North America, Agence France Presse

Co-Lead: Christelle El-Hayek, Program Manager, Samir Kassir Foundation

Lost in Translation

Problem statement

There is a disconnect between NGOs, newsrooms and freelancers that is leading to a huge variety of problems, from freelancers going out into the field ill-equipped, to the lack of a collective, and cohesive response to the killing of 250 journalist colleagues in Gaza.

The group identified a variety of issues stemming from this disconnect, including a general distrust from some newsrooms towards NGOs, the lack of time and resources that editors have to read and digest all the safety resources and reports that NGOs produce, and the continued feeling among freelancers that newsrooms don't listen or take on board the safety concerns and issues that they face.

Opportunity

How do we build bridges that allow NGOs, newsrooms and freelancers to connect more frequently?

Solution

The Situation Room

The Situation Room: is a regular space/mechanism that brings together ambassadors from freelancers, newsrooms, and NGOs to work together in person to build relationships, share knowledge and attack specific and complex safety problems. Regular, in-person relationship building is essential but currently lacking, particularly within a safety context. Protocols and paperwork, whilst needed, are not enough on their own.

How it will work

Situation Rooms could be set up as side events at journalism conferences, such as GIJN, AIJC, IJF, and the ACOS Meeting etc. as a regular, on-going mechanism for ambassadors to talk to one another, exchange and connect around urgent safety situations and chronic safety issues, with a focus on the preventative.
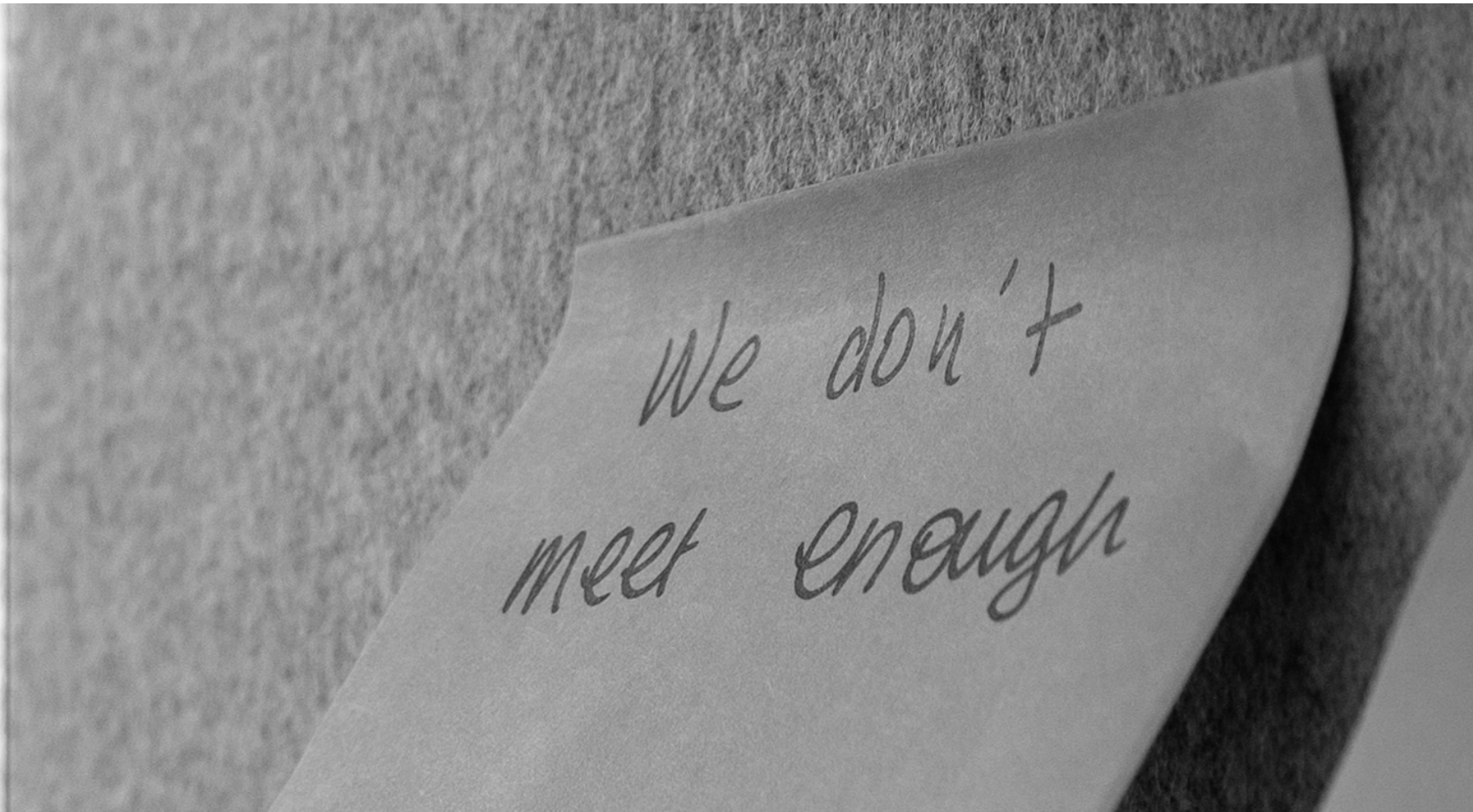
First actions

1 Invitations to all the relevant stakeholders to participate and put forward suggested ambassadors, including both large, small and local organizations.

2 Information-gathering via a comprehensive survey to get real-world data about the challenges all groups face, ensuring the participation from a wide network of freelancers. (The group established that freelancers are very fragmented as a community and don't often connect).

3 Set up a timeline.

Why it will work

The Situation Room will be issue-related with goals and timelines set. Meetings will be regular and actions accountable - consistency is key to building accountability to one another. ACOS could invest in this.

Congratulations on starting what is an incredibly important conversation. You had a really complex, wicked problem because you had so many constituents. You had to try and unpick all of that and I could see you getting pulled in lots of different directions. You've made a good start at identifying the specifics and beginning to build this bridge which is so desperately needed.

Provocateur feedback

Preparation Before Exile

How might we help journalists better prepare for closing civic spaces while they still have options?

What the survey told us

Many journalists face exile or transnational repression, yet preparation typically happens after spaces have already closed and options are limited. The call for support "before completely closed spaces" highlights how current assistance is usually for the aftermath, when the journalists or media need to leave rapidly and is already too late. Journalists need infrastructure and preparation while they still have freedom to act.

Lead: Andrew Heslop, Executive Director, Press Freedom, WAN-IFRA | The World Association of News Publishers

Co-Lead: Edward Pitman, Independent Consultant, Press Freedom and Journalist Safety

Preparation
Before Exile

Problem statement

Journalists only consider the reality of exile when it is too late, they have a degree of denial because they fear leaving their country and losing their profession and livelihood.

Opportunity

How might we support proactive preparedness for exile and break through the deniability barrier to accept and be prepared for the possibility of exile.

Solution

Exile Alarm System:

Exile can happen to anyone. Let's get ahead of it, while we can. Very often, when someone is going through something traumatic they say 'It will never happen to me' but there are often warning signs - and that's why we came up with the Exile Alarm System.

The system has two components:

1 Forecasting, using existing data from eg. CIVICUS, World Press Freedom Index, to identify countries and newsrooms where exile is a possibility.

2 Once identified, vulnerable newsrooms are supported to help them prepare for exile in advance, rather than at the last minute.

It will draw on experienced media support NGOs, safety experts within the ACOS community and on newsrooms who have already gone through exile and can share their experiences and lessons learned (ref. CONFIDENCIAL helped El Faro in El Salvador through this process when they moved to Costa Rica).

How it will work

- Development of forecasting tool.
- Quarterly meetings (or extraordinary meetings) are held between stakeholders, drawing on the information from the forecasting tool.
- When a situation becomes problematic, alerts are released to groups to channel resources that are offered to journalists and newsrooms at risk.
- A network of local groups diffuse the information into usable formats spread out in the country/ region.
- Identify and prepare (through training or peer-to-peer guidance) individuals in newsrooms who will be ready to guide their team into exile.

Why it will work

It is tapping into existing data, expertise, knowledge and networks and requires only minimum seed funding for set up and implementation.

I saw this group work and this was an incredibly difficult exercise because many participants had lived this experience. In the morning there was a lot of sharing of experiences which was painful and I thought 'this is going to be very hard to pivot to practical solutions', but you did that and you took your own experiences and you came away with something that resonates and that we can all get behind.

Provocateur feedback
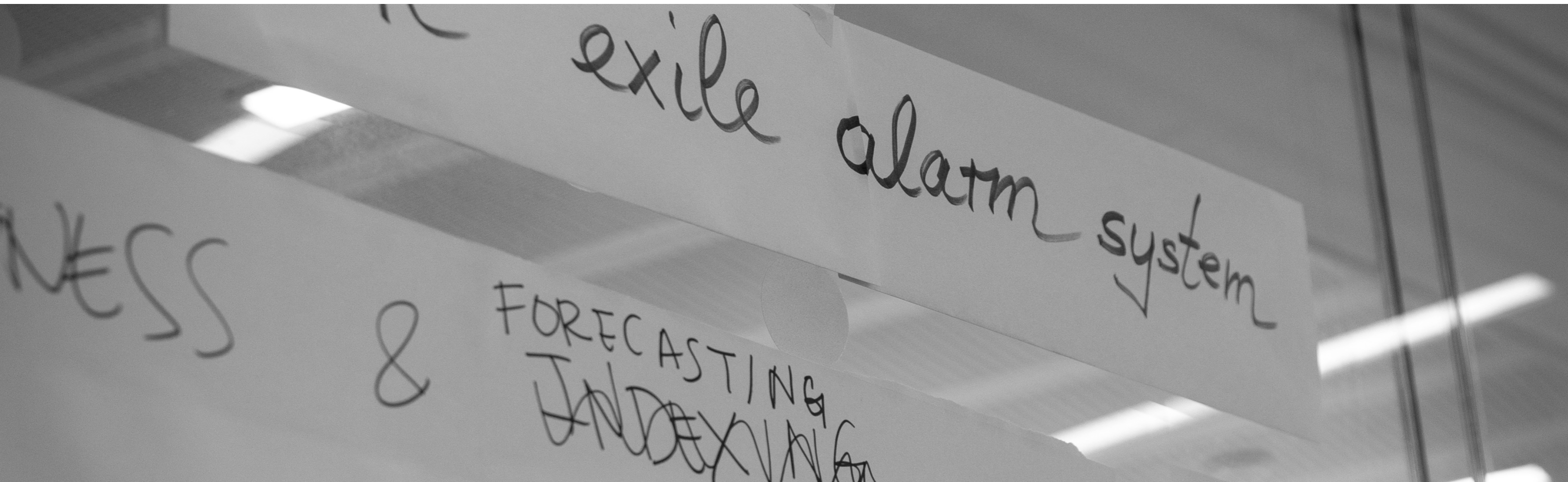
The Implementation Gap

How might we close the gap between knowing and doing in journalist safety?

What the survey told us

Safety knowledge and resources exist but aren't always applied in practice. Risk assessment completion comes up as a recurrent issue because knowing doesn't always lead to doing. There is no lack of resources but either knowledge isn't reaching those who need it or there is a failure to integrate this into daily workflows. Safety measures are predominantly reactive - applied after incidents rather than preventively.

Lead: Nathan Puffer, Senior Vice President, Global Risk and Resilience, Wall Street Journal

Co-Lead: Jake Charles Rees, Head of the Logan Programme, The Centre for Investigative Journalism

The Implemen-tation Gap

Problem statement

There is a gap in the implementation and communication of safety policy. This is primarily driven by a lack of delivery mechanisms that are appetising to freelancers, newsrooms and the organisations that would need them. Safety is a zero-sum game which is hard to sell.

Opportunity

It is not good enough to say that safety preparation is the right thing to do.

What can we do besides urging stakeholders and individuals at the reporting and the editing level beyond just saying, 'Hey, this is a really good idea and we strongly suggest that you spend time and resources implementing these safety offerings'? The product that we landed on was better case-making and a way to tell our story more effectively to all stakeholders.

Solution

Don't let a good crisis go to waste.

How it will work

Journalists and organizations often take safety seriously when something bad happens.

This solution uses real crises, incidents and situations as a learning and sharing opportunity within organizations and the wider community to help them understand the costs and benefits of safety protocols and risk assessments, and the measures that can help them to avoid or minimise impact. These can include near misses, real-life situations, concerns and safety successes to reinforce positive incentives. Case studies don't have to be massive crises to have value.

You drew the short straw - this is a big gnarly problem. What was great is that you were grappling with the issue and understanding where the gaps are. Safety training is a massive industry and I'm not sure all of it gets the results that we want. For you to unpick the issues is a great step towards understanding where we need to move to. Putting more time and attention into this is critical and putting a marker down on wanting to solve this is in itself a great exercise.

Provocateur feedback

With thanks.

Speakers

Bruce Shapiro, Executive Director, Global Center for Journalism & Trauma (GCJT)

Mar Cabra, Executive Director & Co-Founder, The Self-Investigation

Phoebe Connelly, Editor and MSc, London School of Economics

Safety Sprint Leads & Co-Leads

Salima Belhadj, Editor-in-Chief, AFPTV North America, Agence France Presse, ACOS board member

Christelle El-Hayek, Program Manager, Samir Kassir Foundation

Andrew Heslop, Executive Director - Press Freedom, WAN-IFRA | The World Association of News Publishers

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Jake Charles Rees, Head of the Logan Programme, The Centre for Investigative Journalism

Viktorya Vilk, Director, Digital Safety and Free Expression, PEN America

Edward Pitman, Independent Consultant, Press Freedom and Journalist Safety

Session Rapporteurs

Catalina Cortes Castillo, Emergencies Director, Committee to Protect Journalists

Kiana Hyeri, Freelance photographer

Safety Sprint Provocateurs

Gina Chua, Editor at Large, Semafor

Joel Simon, Executive Director, Journalism Protection Initiative at CUNY

Sue Valentine, Media Consultant & Co-Chair, ACOS Alliance

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Shuwei Fang

Safety Sprint Reporter

Emma Thomasson, Journalist and Consultant

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