

# 2019 Journalist Safety Outlook

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HP Risk Management Ltd

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## INTRODUCTION

2018 was an alarming year for journalist safety, with the high-profile murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi providing one of the most brutal reminders of the threat journalists face. Time Magazine's recent choice of the four "guardians of the truth" as its 2018 Person of the Year is symbolic of a year in which the Committee to Protect Journalists recorded 59 journalist killings. Many more across the world suffered physical and psychological threats.

2019 shows little sign of improvement. Government intimidation and imprisonment, combined with physical and online harassment from non-state actors are set to continue. Hostilities towards journalists will persist in well-known illiberal regimes, as well as in a growing number of countries that are having their democratic credentials eroded or are witnessing growing polarisation of the political atmosphere and associated unrest.

We highlight a selection of some of the countries and trends set to impact journalist safety in the year ahead.

## Beyond the Usual Suspects

The year ahead is unlikely to see improvements for media freedoms in many of the [worst offending countries](#). Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, China, Russia, the Philippines and Venezuela are among those that will continue to intimidate and imprison journalists with highest frequency, while coverage of ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, Somalia and Yemen will threaten the safety of front-line media personnel.

Buoyed by insults against the media from inside the White House and the wider lack of accountability for regimes that target journalists, governments will continue to use accusations of fake news or threats to national security as a smokescreen for media repression. **Egypt** alone jailed 19 journalists on false news charges in 2018, with 28 detained globally – a sharp rise from nine in 2016.

Alarming, several others are already following suit. **Tanzania's** deteriorating media and political freedoms will persist, with President John Magufuli set to further tighten his grip on power. Regulations passed in March 2018 forcing online journalists to officially register their work fall in line with wider efforts to monitor online activity; the president has imprisoned opposition politicians, boosted surveillance on Internet cafes and the detention of two [Committee to Protect Journalists'](#) employees in November shows he will not shy from targeting foreign nationals as well.

**Nicaragua's** President Daniel Ortega is attempting to cast journalists as “coup plotters” following a tumultuous year for his government. A crackdown targeting NGOs, human rights advocates and the independent media [will continue](#) into 2019, involving police brutality and arbitrary arrest, as well as potential charges of espionage a real risk. Likewise, the Maduro regime continues to besiege independent reporting in **Venezuela**. The 75-year-old newspaper El Nacional was forced to end its print edition citing “government pressure.” In its final edition in December, the newspaper highlighted that the Maduro regime has closed or forced editorial changes on at least 99 radio and TV stations and 33 newspapers, and has prosecuted more than 50 journalists under spurious circumstances.

Working in **Hong Kong** could present more challenges for foreign journalists in 2019, especially if covering issues pertaining to the region's political autonomy and the influence of Beijing. Difficulty obtaining visas could become increasingly common to restrict journalists here in the year ahead.

Governments elsewhere will seek to change the ownership structures of independent media to silence critics; several outlets critical of **Hungarian** Prime Minister Viktor Orban have already either closed or seen ownership structures change. New **Brazilian** President Jair Bolsonaro's vow to crackdown on fake news could serve to target individual journalists, while threats to cull federal funding of advertising for critical media agencies could knee-cap the finances of some smaller organisations or undermine their editorial independence.

**Cameroon** continues to slide towards worsening civil conflict. The Anglophone separatist movement continues to grow since a declaration of independence in 2017. There are now 10 separatist militias engaging in guerrilla style conflict with the government, rendering the Anglophone provinces virtual no-go zones. Reporters who have accessed the conflict zone report coming under indiscriminate fire and widespread criminality. Meanwhile in the Far North Region, Boko Haram continues to be a destabilising force. As a result of the insecurity

and poor preparedness, Cameroon was stripped of the right to host the African Cup of Nations in June/July 2019.

The **Democratic Republic of Congo** continues to be beset by crisis. Angola has expelled over 300,000 Congolese who have returned to Southern Kasai province, threatening to overwhelm local authorities and reignite simmering ethnic tensions. If chronic militia violence in the east of the country was not problematic enough, [an Ebola outbreak](#) has killed nearly 600 people to date. If the virus reaches a major urban centre like Goma, the situation will rapidly escalate. And against this troubled backdrop, initial indications suggest the two-year delayed election on 30 December will be widely contested and potentially violent amid competing claims of victory and accusations of voter fraud. With results not expected until later this month, the government has implemented widespread [media restrictions and internet blackouts](#), reportedly to contain the spread of “false information”.

Journalists should also heed caution in countries where political freedoms could improve in 2019. **Ethiopia’s** tolerance of political and media freedoms were transformed by the reforms introduced by new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in 2018 but inter-communal violence in Oromo and other southern states have escalated and will continue to present a notable physical security threat for deploying journalists.

## Online Harassment

The spectrum of online threats towards journalists will continue to evolve in 2019. Although technology companies and newsrooms are starting to [cooperate](#) and support journalists from online abuse, the issue will persist, especially in some countries planning elections in 2019. The threat of online abuse is particularly acute for women and ethnic minorities while freelancers typically miss out on access to the protections and training that some organisations might increasingly afford to their staff. A [report by Troll-Busters and International Women’s Media Foundation](#) found of 600 female journalists interviewed, some 65 percent experienced sexist comments within the past year and 29 percent received racist comments. More than 50 percent reported abusive face-to-face encounters in the course of their work. Cases of doxxing, in which personal details are leaked online, illustrate the growing nexus between online abuse and physical security threats. The publication of the personal details of [44 staff working for the BBC in Russia](#) on several Russian websites also seemingly illustrates how journalist safety can be used as a pawn in geopolitical tensions that are outside the control of newsrooms.

At a government level, new telecoms, cybercrime and terrorism laws are being used to limit access to the Internet, encryption software or secure communications vital for the protection of information or sources. As we forecast last year, several governments were seen to use [Pegasus](#) software to infiltrate journalists’ communications devices in 2019. Border crossings and airports will remain a major vulnerability point for journalists but as Pegasus has demonstrated, crafted social engineering messages to install malware on mobile technologies do not require actual physical interactions with a device.

More than ever, training on the prevention, detection and response to digital security breaches is of value to journalist safety. Journalists need to better understand and map their digital footprints and avoid posting unnecessary information which could expose their current physical location, deployment plans or other sensitive information.

## Elections

2019 will see several high-profile elections that could see spikes in online harassment of journalists or efforts to influence results by the use of automated fake social media accounts or “bots”. Already witnessed in DRC, government restrictions on internet and telecommunications in the build-up and aftermath of votes in order to manage information flows could present a major challenge for reporting.

Some of the elections most likely to attract media attention are assessed below:

Presidential elections are due to be held in **Nigeria** in February 2019. Journalists were beaten while covering rallies during the last presidential election campaign in 2015 and the Nigerian Union of Journalists has accused politicians of hiring thugs to beat up Nigerian journalists as a means of intimidation. The kidnap threat in both urban and rural regions should not be overlooked, particularly in the Delta Region, while any deployments with the military or election monitors in the north should be particularly aware of the threat from armed rebel attack.

The role of fake social media messaging, particularly via [Whatsapp](#), was blamed for multiple incidents of mob justice in **India** last year, and could be utilised by political parties to stir up discontent ahead of elections in 2019. Critics of Prime Minister Modi have been targeted under the National Security Act and hardline Hindu loyalists have subjected journalists to significant online vitriol. Although Whatsapp introduced some measures seeking to nullify the rapid spread of rumours, journalists will remain vulnerable to online harassment in the build up to the vote. Police brutality against journalists at election rallies as well as wider health and safety concerns associated with mass crowds and stampedes present additional security considerations.

In **South Africa** some party leaders have also been accused of online abuse and physical intimidation of journalists, ahead of the May 2019 elections. South Africa Editors National Forum (Sanef) has criticised the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) for naming particular journalists as a means of intimidation ahead of the elections. Coverage of long-delayed elections in **Thailand** will also present threats to the media, and it is still too soon to write-off the prospect of another electoral delay. Constitutional reforms under the military junta have weakened the traditional strong parties in Thailand and although rights to political campaigning have been lifted ahead of the planned vote, political freedoms remains tightly controlled by the junta. Investigative journalism into connections between new political parties and the junta, or critics of the government ahead of the vote could prove [hazardous for journalists](#) in the country.

## HEAT at Home

Polarisation in Western politics and rallies by groups on either end of the political spectrum have increasingly threatened journalists, leaving hostile environment and civil disorder training no longer as a reserve for warzones. [Several media workers were reportedly beaten by police](#) in France’s recent yellow vest protests and media staff have been specifically targeted by some protesters throughout 2018, such as in [London, UK](#), and [Portland, US](#). The G7 gathering in Biarritz in August will also likely stir unrest among anti-capitalist and environmentalist activists. Portrayed by populists as enemies of the people or threats to

truth, attacks on the press have stoked animosity against journalists that can also manifest in physical attacks, such as the [mail bombs sent to Trump critics](#), including US media outlets, in October 2018.

Domestic hostile environment curriculum should cover the standard topics of reporting on civil disorder, high crime environments, hostile interviews, aggressive rallies and dealing with people in an emotional state. Reporters should also be trained on sanitising their digital footprint, managing online abuse and crossing borders. It is also crucial that journalists are briefed on their national laws/rights and understand who they can turn to for support. We wrote about some of these [safety considerations](#) earlier in the year.

## Silencing Investigative Journalism

Cases of investigative journalists being attacked or intimidated for their work will unfortunately continue in 2019. In 2018, the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#) reports that 34 journalists were singled out for murder, nearly double the number of the previous year.

Reporters without Borders' [report](#) on organised crime and journalism has highlighted the threats to investigative journalists are not only in traditional hotspots of narco-gang crime, such as Brazil, Colombia and Mexico, but also in Europe, where three journalist have been killed since 2017 following investigations into illicit financial links between organised criminal groups and state officials. Across the region, many more investigative journalists have reported experiencing intimidation or [violence](#) in an efforts to censor their work.

Some governments are acting to better protect journalists; the Mexican Interior Ministry has initiated a new protection programme for journalists in one of the world's most [hazardous environments](#) for journalists. However, when the links between corruption, crime and politics narrow, incentives to address the safety issue diminish. Guatemala's bid to [oust the UN-sponsored CICIG](#) as it investigates presidential links to corruption are indicative of the extent governments can take to cover up uncomfortable investigations, albeit in this case at an inter-governmental organisation level.

## Migratory Hazards

Drivers of migration will persist next year and continue to attract media coverage. US border reinforcements are unlikely to end Central American migrant caravans, while the Venezuelan crisis - which the UN estimates has already put 3.2 million people in need of assistance - shows no sign of abating

In Europe, the dangers migrants take crossing the Mediterranean will continue even though route patterns might shift and volumes will fluctuate. Late 2018 also saw a growing number of cases of small migrant vessels embarking on hazardous routes across the English Channel to reach UK, which will garner attention as London seeks to address the issue. Unforeseen natural disasters will also trigger mass movement of people and with forecasters estimating a 80-90 percent chance of [El Niño](#) in the first months of 2019, the likelihood of flooding in parts of South America and droughts in areas of Africa and Asia will rise.

For journalists covering the humanitarian and personal stories of migration, it is important to consider varied security and health issues. Migrant camps or temporary accommodation typically lack basic amenities, such as running water, electricity and waste facilities and in more remote regions planning for access to fuel and communications back-ups are essential. Any on-water activities covering migration routes present significant additional risk assessment considerations and journalists have also experienced post-traumatic stress from covering migration-related topics. Security forces' heavy handedness in dealing with migrant groups can bring with it physical security threats while human traffickers often infiltrate migrant groups and will be hostile towards media attention.

## **HP Risk Management**

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In 2019, HP Risk Management is launching a new digital risk management platform - RiskPal. Designed to strengthen duty of care compliance, RiskPal helps media organisations professionalise their risk assessment process, enhance crisis preparedness and improve knowledge sharing.

For more information about RiskPal or any HP Risk Management services, contact [info@hpriskmanagement.com](mailto:info@hpriskmanagement.com)

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