

HP Risk Management 2020 Outlook

The past year has again illustrated the multiple threats that journalists face undertaking their work across the world. Government, extremist and criminal actors continue to target journalists and media networks, while continued technological advances have created new vulnerabilities for the press.

There are however some reasons for hope. Effective campaigning by journalist bodies and wider civil society have raised awareness about media safety and provided a degree of accountability for some of those overseeing or perpetrating attacks. Although [impunity](#) remains rife and a high number of governments continue to [censor the media](#), there have been some-long overdue successes; the recent fracturing of the Maltese government and the arrest of key individuals linked to the murder of journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, as well as the arrest of five people who are currently on trial in connection to 2018 killing of Slovak journalist Jan Kuciak and his finance Martina Kušnírová, demonstrate how solidarity campaigns can help achieve a degree of justice.

Public awareness and the growth of multinational initiatives to counter threats to the media will remain of great importance as the forms of intimidation widen and impunity for killings in some countries remains the norm. As the news arena and environment for abuse of journalists both fall ever more online, the emergence of cooperative [initiatives](#) between media networks and technology providers will be vital. 2019 also saw a notable expansion of fact-checking services, intended to counter disinformation campaigns, bolster democratic accountability, restore confidence in “fact” and thereby blunt blanket attacks on “fake news”. Newsrooms are also ever improving protections for their journalists and are increasingly recognising the connections between online and physical threats, as well as their impact on the psychological wellbeing of staff.

Despite the room for optimism, the operating environment for journalists remains [hazardous](#) and unlikely to improve in many of those countries at the forefront of [media repression](#). This outlook assesses some of the current and emerging threats most likely to impact journalist safety in 2020. We identify some of the geopolitical and societal trends expected to influence both news agendas and journalist safety, and provide a snapshot of some countries where media coverage will continue to face challenges.

Key events and trends

Few news items or geopolitical trends can be predicted with certainty and unexpected events will continue to shape the news in 2020. However, several current political trends and scheduled events can be forecast that will garner media attention in the year ahead and present notable safety challenges for journalists.

The current violent unrest and political stagnation in Iraq risks escalating into civil war, having far-reaching regional consequences for the [resurgence of ISIS](#), the domestic situation in Syria and regional proxy conflict between US, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Violence between Shia militias and the political stalemate over the selection of a new prime minister come amid a backdrop of long-standing sectarian tensions, economic stagnation and political disaffection with low living standards and rampant political corruption. Recent weeks have seen an alarming rise in rocket attacks around Baghdad, and a sustained deterioration in the situation could see Iraq again feature negatively across international news agendas.

Saudi Arabian-Iranian juxtapositioning, repeated attacks on oil infrastructure or wider state interests in the Strait of Hormuz and Persian/Arabian Gulf could see a rapid escalation of regional tensions.

Avoidance of direct conflict is likely to be the preferred option for both Iran and Saudi Arabia for their own reasons. The Kingdom is keen to rebrand following the Khashshogi murder and open to a military drawback from the prolonged and expensive conflict in Yemen. Iran needs to manage the economic cost of sanctions at home, put a lid on domestic unrest and await the outcome of the 2020 US elections. However, proxy activities by both could trigger an unintended escalation.

Yemen remains the obvious proxy battleground. Optimists suggest 2020 could witness a potential political breakthrough and mild reconciliation between warring factions. However, any national reunification is remote and an entrenchment of the status quo a more likely scenario. The humanitarian situation will remain acute. Foreign journalists travelling to Yemen will be exposed to considerable

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security threats, including kidnap. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) cells remain intact and Islamic State established a presence in Yemen during the civil war.

The prospect of a third Israeli election in less than 12 months in March will again dominate the domestic agenda in Israel, and have longer-term consequences for economic and security situation affecting Palestinians in both Gaza and the West Bank. Any eventual but conclusive success for Prime Minister Netanyahu at the polls would see the incumbent PM escape current corruption charges. This scenario would ring alarm bells among some media freedom advocates and could set a negative precedent in the media landscape, given that the case relates to alleged bribery in exchange for favorable media coverage.

Unrest in Lebanon also appears set to persist in the new year, even after the nomination of [Hassan Diab](#) as a new Prime Minister. Decades of institutionalised dynastic political nepotism in Lebanon make the emergence of a new political class hard to envisage, while the unrest and political impasse threaten to worsen an already deteriorating economy. Although somewhat battle-hardened by Lebanon's history and long-standing infrastructural flaws, many bureaus operating out of Beirut may find it increasingly difficult to operate amid sustained unrest and worsening electricity supplies.

Syria and Libya could both see their domestic conflicts intensify in the first quarter of 2020. With Russian assistance, Syrian forces are expected to ramp up military efforts to take the last rebel stronghold of Idlib, irrespective of the civilian consequences. Only after this, and subject to negotiations and the intentions of the proxy parties in the northeast, could the situation in [Rojava](#) change. The balance of power in Libya, primarily centred around ongoing fighting on the outskirts of Tripoli, will be

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shaped by external powers. The Libyan conflict has become a proxy war for external interests including Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, France and the UAE, and this messy situation could escalate subject to enhanced support from any party. Movement into and out of Tripoli will remain unreliable and dangerous as fighting centres on some key arterial routes into the capital, while Mitiga airport remains exposed to artillery fire.

Long a conducive environment for extremist cells, the Sahel belt risks becoming the new home of Islamist militancy. Remote regions stretching across Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and to a lesser extent, Chad have witnessed an increase in Islamist-related attacks on military, mining, civilian and religious targets in 2019. Although not posing a sustained threat to the capitals of any country, isolated attacks on these cities, including against international targets such as hotels or even airports remain feasible, and should be considered when selecting accommodation. Any media deployments accompanying

military convoys should factor in that international troop contingents have been regularly targeted by ambushes and IED attacks in remote regions in the past five years.

Sudan faces a key year ahead as it tries to progress the post-Bashir [transition](#) and revive decades of underinvestment and political corruption. Early milestones in the transition agreed as part of the August power sharing agreement have already been missed, testing the durability of the military-civilian Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC). Although the lid on media freedoms has been lifted since Bashir's ousting, any prolonged transition or return to unrest in Khartoum could spur a revival of tight restrictions on the press. New media regulations expected next year will serve as an indicator for the new government's approach to press freedoms in Sudan. Any investigative journalism into corruption built up over the 30-year Bashir dictatorship, as well as travel to the insurgency-affected areas of Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile, will remain high risk.

Ethiopia holds elections in May and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, on the back of his recent Nobel Peace Prize, faces several challenges at home in balancing rival ethnic groups, divisions within the security forces and regional aspirations for autonomy. In October, violent unrest following an alleged attack on prominent activist and owner of Oromia Media Network, Jawar Mohammed, illustrated the remaining fragility of the political situation. Ahmed himself stepped back from media duties in the second half of this year, the government has used [anti-terrorism laws](#) to arrest some journalists and like in Sudan, the government is expected to introduce new media legislation in 2020. The government's commitment to holding the May elections and implementing its outcome will serve as another important phase in Ethiopia's recent democratic transition.

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National Assembly elections in Cameroon in February will see high security deployments following another year of unrest in the Anglophone region. Communication blackouts and movement restrictions are likely to be in place during the vote, and access to parts of the country to foreign journalists might be restricted. The opposition have already vowed to boycott the election, undermining the prospects for reconciliation of the separatist violence.

The political impasse and civil unrest in Hong Kong appear likely to continue next year, in line with our earlier [forecast](#). Any efforts to revive the Basic Law Article 23, which centres on legislating against acts of treason, sedition and other crimes against the Chinese People's Republic will serve as another flashpoint

in the year ahead. Continued unrest in the meantime will see more international events suspended and economic activity slow on the autonomous island territory.

Taiwan holds presidential and legislative elections on 11 January, and although not expected to trigger bouts of unrest on the scale of Hong Kong, Beijing is keen to maintain its political influence on the island, irrespective of the vote outcome. Reporting on the elections could be difficult for journalists, especially if they have recently covered Hong Kong unrest or cover regional affairs from Beijing. Several journalists we spoke to have faced interrogation on entry/exit in the region following articles deemed anti-Beijing. The [CPJ](#) has written extensively on the current climate for journalists in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and documents cases where pro-Beijing sources have used advertising payments as a bargaining chip to influence media companies' editorial position.

The prospect of a peace agreement with the Taliban will continue to garner headlines for Afghanistan, but this will remain a protracted process that has few immediate benefits for in-country security. The outlook for national security remains bleak and established journalist safety procedures will remain vital for deployments in 2020.

In neighbouring Pakistan, 2020 will see local journalist and media networks continue to face government pressure and a worsening operating climate. The government will continue to use internet cuts, suspended transmissions and order the shutdown of websites under spurious charges to censor dissenting press. The impact of the [Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority \(PMRA\)](#) and threatened introduction of special [media courts](#) will become more apparent over the next year.

The negative trajectory of press freedoms is also likely to continue in India, where on several occasions in 2019, the government restricted journalist access to control a message on contentious government policy. The government has seemingly operated a two-pronged strategy to limit media freedoms, both exerting pressure from the top on the editorial lines that media stations take, while indirectly endorsing a large body of Hindutva extremist trolls to conduct vile online attacks on journalists, especially women.

Under the leadership of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, media freedoms could also deteriorate in Sri Lanka in 2020. Several media channels and newspaper offices have reported having their offices raided or journalists attacked. Security operations following the Easter bombings and rising nationalism in the country could see the government use smokescreen of defamation or counter-terrorism to justify a hard stance on the media. Investigative reporting into connections between the Rajapaksa family and Chinese investments in the islands, alongside wider corruption investigations, will also likely arouse unwanted government attention.

In Latin America, the outlook for both Mexico and Venezuela remains consistent with the past year. President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador has failed to introduce any significant security reforms and has done little to improve protections for journalists in the country, with impunity for those targeting the

media remaining rife. His commitment to address the social causes that drive Mexicans to criminality will take years to manifest even if successful and lacking the political will to tackle nefarious vested criminal and political interests, Mexico is likely to remain one of the most hazardous in the world for journalists to operate in.

The momentum behind the opposition in Venezuela has massively dissipated, and barring a much more interventionist US policy towards Caracas or major regional development such as an escalation in bilateral tensions with Colombia, President Nicolás Maduro will likely maintain control in Venezuela as the humanitarian crisis is prolonged. Access to reporting will remain difficult for foreign journalists, who face being refused entry on arrival or even detention if operating in the country without the required permits. Local journalists perceived to be anti-regime will face ongoing threats from state-backed intimidation, violence and detention with little due process.

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Presidential elections in Bolivia, expected some time in March 2020, will mark a key stage in the country's post-Evo Morales transition and will indicate the prospects for longer-term political stability. Attempts by the interim government to restrict candidates from the Morales Movement to Socialism (MAS), or efforts by Morales to return to the country around the election, are obvious flashpoints that could drive a repeat of the violent unrest witnessed following the vote. Recent charges [and an arrest warrant](#) laid by Bolivian prosecutors against Morales for sedition and terrorism relating to the promotion of violent demonstrations in October, are likely to fuel the political divisions. Many journalists reported [intimidation and violence](#) during the post-election unrest and repeat targeting cannot be ruled out in the event of another uptick in demonstrations.

The (dis) information conundrum

News production and its consumption will continue to evolve in accordance with technological shifts in 2020. Political debate over freedom of speech versus censorship will persist, including the role that governments and technology companies each play in regulating online content. Societal and media market changes are accelerating the debates around disinformation, privacy and accountability, which in turn are impacting journalist safety. Capitalising on the discord surrounding these issues, repressive regimes will crackdown on reporting, especially targeting local journalists in countries where social media is a prominent platform for independent news reporting.

Under the pretense of security and preventing disinformation campaigns, governments will continue to implement legislation that impacts journalist freedoms. Often poorly defined, without due process and blurred with anti-defamation laws, such legislation will become a more prominent tool of government censorship. 2020 will likely see a growing number of legal cases against journalists in countries where these laws are used for political purposes rather than for their supposed apolitical objectives.

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Facing a battle for credibility in an era when the legitimacy of journalism is being put under considerable pressure by accusations of “fake news” or malintent, governments will also continue to use a wide remit of legislation alongside other [tools of intimidation](#) to curtail journalists’ work. Spurious tax charges, unexplained license revocation and other legal pressures will remain techniques used to restrict the media, alongside more traditional physical threats. Intermittent restrictions on basic internet usage

and encryption will also make it difficult for journalists to do their work and protect their sources. This is likely to increasingly play out in Russia, where internet and [media laws](#) were amended this year to allow media agencies to be labelled a “foreign agent”. Two vast social media markets, India and Brazil, will also be bellwethers for how governments seek to manage their own ambitions to influence media narratives and exert pressure on critical journalism.

On the front foot: Proactive newsrooms

Journalist digital safety will become even more prominent in 2020 and has been well documented by [UNESCO](#) and multiple media safety organisations. For the past two years, we have highlighted the extent to which [Pegasus spyware](#) would be used to target journalists and we forecast that invasive, hard-to-detect spyware will remain a prominent threat to journalists. There is a threat that messaging services could be used increasingly for installation of malware on devices, weakening the integrity of information and the protection of sources.

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Advances in the use of artificial intelligence facial recognition in public areas and border posts could also help repressive regimes track the activities of journalists. Because of the typically longer-term nature of

investigative journalism, these threats are particularly acute for those researching and writing exposes on sensitive or contentious political and economic issues. Meanwhile, the sophistication of [deep-fakes](#) will improve and serve as a tool used to try and intimidate, blackmail or silence journalists.

Newsrooms are improving their cyber preparedness and support for staff wellbeing in response to these diverse emerging threats. This response is also drawn from wider business resilience needs as the threat of nefarious cyber capability could deface online content or disrupt broadcasting. How to transmit

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broadcasts and material during communication blackouts or internet jamming present other business continuity considerations. As well as investing in awareness programmes among staff and software solutions to mitigate the threats, company crisis management planning is increasingly factoring in cyber scenarios, for example in response to ransomware attacks.

Changes in consumer patterns and ways in which news is being produced are requiring news security teams to adapt at an operational level. Growing demands for live recordings and streaming that necessitate real-time reporting and journalist immersion among breaking situations require fresh risk assessment approaches, procedures and training.

Protest

2019 was a year dominated by protests driven by elections, regional calls to self-determination, corruption, anti-government sentiment and environmentalism. This will continue in the year ahead.

As well as the traditional training and physical security mitigations, journalists and security teams will need to keep abreast of changing techniques used by authorities to manage and control protesters. For example, we saw the growing frequency of long range acoustic devices (sonic cannon) used to control protesters in several locations last year, which can have long-term negative impacts on hearing. Internet or wider [communications blackouts](#) by authorities will become more commonplace at demonstrations, presenting challenges for team communications.

Additionally, journalists should be prepared to face [anti-media sentiment](#) among protesters, who can accuse the media of bias or the promotion of “fake news”. Far-right rallies or protests centred on politically divisive issues that attract counter-rallies have seen demonstrators turn on media crews. The aforementioned demands for live ground reporting could fortify this exposure. An awareness of levels of media freedom when covering protest movements in more repressive regimes is of course essential.

The threat of arrest or interrogation on entry or exit to a country persists and one's own reporting history could be used by authorities to reject future applications for press accreditation or visas.

Groups like "Extinction Rebellion" and environmental activists have sought to disrupt. Although mostly peaceful in 2019, environmentalists have potential to become more radical in their actions if demands are not acted upon. The COP 2020 UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow in November could be a flashpoint for disruptive unrest.

Environmental reporting

Climate change is fuelling more frequent extreme weather events and environmental catastrophes. Coverage of mass flooding, wildfires, hurricanes, cyclones and typhoons and natural disasters such as earthquakes are always popular on the news agenda. However, such stories require suitably trained journalists, logistical preparedness and robust contingency planning. Even the most well resourced newsrooms are tested by such events. With the frequency of such incidents expected to increase, news management should review its hostile environment curriculum. Journalist feedback indicates that more tailoring of training is required with regards to these extreme events.

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R I S K P A L

As newsrooms seek to manage and mitigate some of the aforementioned threats facing their staff, one area that remains outdated is the way that risk assessments are conducted.

2020 sees our launch of RiskPal, a new online risk management platform that brings dated risk assessment practices into the digital age. RiskPal offers clients:

- Speedier and more engaging risk assessments along with transparent approval logs recorded in a secure and searchable archive.
- Access to a customisable library of industry best practice security, InfoSec, travel, and health and safety advice.
- An engaging channel for the sharing of information on destinations and service suppliers between colleagues.
- Advanced management reporting tools and analytics, providing oversight of all corporate risk assessments and travel activity.
- GDPR-compliant format for storage and emergency release of staff information, including medical data and training records.

We would love to demo RiskPal and receive your feedback!

For a demonstration or more information, please contact: info@riskpal.co.uk