acos ALLIANCE

PROTOCOL TEMPLATE for SAFE COMMISSIONING

This template offers a tool to support news managers and editors to develop their own safety policy and protocol, and embed safety best practices when commissioning stories. Use this template to get you started, but feel free to play with it and adapt as needed.

WHAT? A safety protocol is a set of policies and guidelines designed to help avoid and mitigate risks and protect your news gathering mission, and the physical and psychological safety of all your journalists, including freelancers and local producers.

WHY? Safety protocols seek to protect all of your assets, from the health of your journalists to that of your company. Aside from the duty of care and moral imperative to protect all the individuals who contribute to your news product, building robust safety protocols can save your organization from the financial loss and reputational damage of a crisis that could have been prevented or carefully managed. Prioritizing safety also means protecting the individuals we report on.

WHO? Safety protocols provide clarity around roles, responsibilities and management structures. Protocols define who reviews and approves a high-risk assignment, and establish a clear incident and crisis escalation process. For example, additional approval from management may be required depending on level of risk. Who decides an assignment is too risky? Who will take executive decisions in the event of a crisis? Protocols should define a clear channel for journalists to raise safety concerns, without fear. This template can be used by any news manager and editor –regardless of newsroom size or financial means– to advocate for and implement holistic safety practices. Discuss internally who is best placed in your newsroom to work on this. Engage top management, and reach out to those that may have relevant experience and knowledge.

HOW? Find below some general basic guidelines and recommendations:

➡ Allocate proper time and plan how you will work on creating your safety protocol. Define a work plan that takes into account your capacity and resources, and includes a time frame with deadlines. Be realistic.

➡ Reach across the news organization and especially seek input from those implementing or who will be directly affected by your safety protocols, including regular freelancers. Aim at having a plurality of voices capable of highlighting different relevant aspects. Approach safety as an ongoing conversation.

➡ Learn from your organization's strengths and don't shy away from weaknesses. **Strengths**: study these so you can better understand your organizational and/or individual abilities and how you could use these to improve safety aspects you may be struggling with. **Weaknesses**: your best chance is to identify and try to address these.

➡ Take a holistic approach: consider identity and profile, physical, digital, legal and psychological safety across your policies and protocols.

➡ Put it to the test: your policies and protocols will be just a piece of paper unless you use them and test them.

➡ Budget: as you elaborate your protocol you will identify needs you don't have covered, protocols should help you to make the case for budget allocation to safety.

➡ Keep it simple and practical. Don't let the perfect get in the way of good.

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Note: We use the terms **freelancer** and **local producer** to refer to those journalists and journalism facilitators whom your organization employs on a short-term or non-staff basis. Some of these individuals may self-identify by another term, such as stringer, producer, fixer, interpreter, translator, driver, news assistant, or researcher.

See:
Appendix A: Sample Forms
Appendix B: How to Advocate for a Safety Protocol in Your Newsroom

Introduction	Establish what this document is, its intent and scope.
Ethical Framework and Commitment to Safety	What ethical framework drives your organization? You may put together key statements that establish your organization's commitment to safety.
Roles and Responsibilities	List each individual involved in safety and security aspects at your organization: Position / Define role and responsibilities / Name and relevant contact details Most protocols focus on management, we encourage you to widen this and incorporate staff journalists, including freelancers and local producers' roles and responsibilities so you can clearly communicate these with them (you don't need names here). What obligations do staff journalists, freelancers and local producers have to the news organization? You may also include others like HR and legal team, if you have these. This section should clearly establish who has ultimate decision-making authority on high risk stories and in a crisis.
Risk Management	Define a reporting structure: How are decisions about risk being made? Who reports to whom? Who reviews and approves individual risk assignments? Define your tolerance and appetite for risk: What is off-limits? (i.e. undercover, war) Briefly describe the most prominent threats and risks based on your coverage. How often do you hire freelancers and local producers? What are your criteria and safety considerations for commissioning them? Do you buy/commission work on spec? If so, what's your criteria?

Safety Provisions	What safety support and resources do you require for assignments? What does your news organization provide? How are these provisions made available and communicated? Consider everyone you work with, from staffers to freelancers and local producers, and take into account before, during and after an assignment, as well as on-going coverage (such as risks incurred by beat reporters). Provisions should consider the identity and profile of journalists, and physical, digital, legal and psychological aspects, and may include: • Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and other safety equipment • Communications equipment • Medical supplies / First Aid kits • Safety and First Aid training • Legal counseling and support • Psychological support (access to counseling, peer support, wellness breaks / mental health days) • Digital security training and support (including online harassment) • Insurance (medical, accident, high-risk, equipment) • Safety consultation with expert • Advance pay for expenses and / or timely reimbursement • Relocation
Risk Assessments and Communications Plan	Describe how you manage and use risk assessments and communications plans: Who is involved in the production of these and in which ways? Define an evaluation and reporting structure around risk assessments. Consider the before, during and after phases of an assignment (post publication is often neglected.) Do you have templates and guidelines for these? How are these shared and filed? You may create a simple criteria for classifying stories based on the level of risk involved (i.e. red stories, orange stories, green stories), and use this to guide risk assessment requirements and safety measures (i.e. red stories would require thorough risk assessment, comprehensive safety provisions and top management approval). You can use this to build consensus in your newsroom and help decision-making. Do you have guidelines for the following? (create as many separate sections as needed) • Check-ins • Visa, permits and accreditation • Travel and accommodation • Access to cash • Debriefing • Protecting sources

Incident/Crisis Response and Reporting	Define your incident management plan: What happens if someone is injured on assignment? Who is responsible for managing an incident? Do you have an incident response mechanism? What happens when an incident grows into a crisis? Do you need an Incident/Crisis Management Team? If so, who should be on it and how will the team operate? Incidents and crises offer opportunities for learning. How will you record incidents and facilitate learning from these?
Review and Report	How will you keep track of your policies and protocols' violations and failures? Do you have a reporting mechanism? How will you review and update your policies and protocols?

Appendix A: Forms
1. CPJ Risk Assessment Templates
2. Rory Peck Trust Communications Plan Template
3. ACOS Assignment Safety Checklist
4. Aegis?

Appendix B: How can I open a conversation with my manager about creating or improving a safety protocol for my newsroom?

Here are a few ideas:

➡ Planning for and trying to lessen the likelihood and severity of safety incidents are **more cost effective** than dealing with a full-blown crisis without a plan. Try appealing to the bottom line: Can we afford not to be prepared? We can avoid some expensive and painful problems if we think ahead as a newsroom.

➡ Appeal to your manager's **sense of ethics** and ask if your outlet is really taking responsibility for the journalists they commission. What happens if one of our journalists gets arrested or killed?

➡ Safety protocols improve **performance and morale!** When journalists feel taken care of, they can dedicate more of their time, energy and focus to their work and be more productive. Increase staff commitment and decrease turnover and burnout.

➡ A robust safety protocol can save your organization from the **reputational damage** of a crisis that could have been prevented and avoided, or could have been carefully managed.

➡ Safety protocols support **sound decision-making** and will help the newsroom operate more efficiently.

➡ **Use evidence**! Provide real-world examples, statistics, case studies, incidents that have happened in your newsroom and other newsrooms, and / or examples of other organizations' safety protocols.

➡ Put together a **list of concrete and relevant safety questions** you and your newsroom need answers for.

➡ Refer to the **ACOS Alliance Freelance Journalists Safety Principles** as a benchmark for best practices that is recognized by leading newsrooms.

➡ **Viability**: Is it possible to survive and thrive as a newsroom without safety?

➡ Safety is about **leadership** and **vision**.