

JOURNALISM PROTECTION INITIATIVE

Threats to the Press in the United States

A Safety Toolkit for Journalists & Newsroom Leaders

Kate Parkinson • March 2026

US Press Freedom Series

The Journalism Protection Initiative at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism is commissioning a series of briefing papers from top experts to address emerging threats to press freedom in the United States and fill gaps in knowledge and understanding.

This briefing is for newsroom leaders, editors, reporters, freelancers, and student journalists working in the United States. It reflects conditions as of March 2026 and will be updated as the environment changes. The current version is always available [here](#).

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Contents

Introduction.....	2
Safety Planning at a Glance.....	3
Section 1: The Threat Landscape.....	5
Policing, Protests, and Enforcement Operations.....	5
Access to Information.....	7
Legal Threats.....	9
Regulatory Threats.....	11
Online Harassment.....	12
Surveillance.....	15
Burnout and Mental Health.....	17
Section 2: What You Can Do.....	19
Safety Baseline.....	20
In The Field.....	23
Protecting Your Sources And Devices.....	28
Online Harassment.....	31
Legal Protection.....	35
Mental Health & Wellbeing.....	39
If You Run a Newsroom.....	42
Annex A.....	49
Annex B.....	51

Introduction

Press freedom in the United States is under sustained pressure.

The United States fell to 57th in the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index in 2025, its lowest position since the index began. The U.S. Press Freedom Tracker recorded 54 press freedom incidents in January 2026 alone, and documented the highest number of incidents in the first two months of the year since it began tracking in 2017.

Reporters have been arrested for covering protests, had their devices seized, and faced criminal charges for doing their jobs. Federal agencies are using surveillance tools to identify sources, subpoenaing platforms for the identities of anonymous accounts, and recharacterizing the filming of enforcement operations as domestic terrorism. Nonprofit newsrooms face the potential of regulatory threats to their tax-exempt status. Small outlets face lawsuits designed not to win in court but to drain their resources.

This briefing maps that landscape, tells you what you can do about it, and gives you a framework for making safety planning part of how you work.

Where to start

- **Safety Planning at a Glance** gives a quick overview of a simple safety planning process you can incorporate into your workflow. The same process can be applied to assignment planning, and organizational level reviews.
- **Section 1: The Threat Landscape** covers seven areas affecting journalists and news organizations: policing and enforcement operations, access to information, legal, regulatory, online harassment, surveillance, and burnout.
- **Section 2: What You Can Do** answers the questions journalists and newsroom leaders are actually asking: What do I do if I'm sued? How do I protect my sources? What are my rights at a protest?
- **If You Run a Newsroom** covers how to build the structures that keep your staff safe: from crisis planning and legal protection to training and wellbeing.
- **Safety Baseline** is the place to start if you're looking for quick safety steps you can take right now.

Safety Planning at a Glance

Safety planning should be as routine as planning your coverage.

What is a Safety Plan?

A safety plan is just a set of decisions you make before you're under pressure. You've probably heard the terms "threat assessment" or "risk assessment" before. Identifying threats and assessing risk are the first steps. A safety plan takes it further: it turns what you've identified into concrete actions. What you'll do, who you'll call, when you'll pull back, and what you'll have in place if something goes wrong.

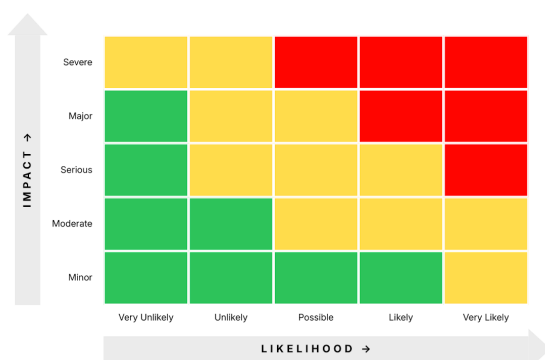
The Safety Planning Process

Whether it's a quick conversation or a written plan, a good safety plan works through four things: identify the **threats**, assess and **prioritize the risks**, **plan** what you'll do, and **write** it down.

1. Identify the threats. A threat is something that could harm you: a lawsuit, a surveillance program, an online mob, a hostile official. ➤ **Section 1** gives a detailed overview of the current threats facing journalists and newsrooms.

2. Assess your risk and prioritize. Risk is personal, so this is an assessment *you* need to make. Who you are, how you're perceived, and the environment you're working in all shape your exposure.

As you read **Section 1**, ask yourself: *how likely is it this will happen, and how bad would it be if it does?*



A risk matrix is one way to think about this. It doesn't need to be formal. Even a quick mental exercise helps you sort your threats into three categories:

- **ACT NOW** – need detailed safety plan and mitigations
- **MONITOR & PREPARE** – have a plan, watch for changes
- **BE AWARE** – low priority, but don't lose sight of them

➤ **Safety Planning Worksheet** in **Annex A** does this automatically, based on your inputs. You can also download a printable risk matrix there.

3. Plan what you'll do. For each risk, think what you can do:

- **Before** – what can you do now to reduce the likelihood or impact?
- **During** – what will you do if it happens?
- **After** – what support or follow-up will you need?

A good safety plan means a reporter covering a protest will already know what to do if the situation turns violent, or a newsroom will know who to call if a subpoena arrives. ➤ **Section 2** has specific actions, resources, and contacts to help you plan for all the threats outlined in this briefing.

4. Write it down and share it. For a routine assignment, this might be a quick message to your editor with your location and check-in time. For a high-risk story, it needs to be more structured. Either way, someone other than you should know the plan.

➤ **Annex A** has templates for assignment-level safety planning and organizational safety reviews.

➤ **Annex B** has some examples of what the safety planning process looks like in practice: covering an ICE operation, protecting a sensitive source, and running an organizational safety review for a small newsroom.

Section 1: The Threat Landscape

What's happening, who's driving it, and what to watch for

Policing, Protests, and Enforcement Operations

177 of the 189 assaults on journalists in 2025 were carried out by law enforcement.

The environment journalists are working in has escalated well beyond routine policing. In Minnesota, where thousands of federal agents were deployed for immigration enforcement, officers shot three people in January 2026, killing two U.S. citizens ([NBC](#)). The administration has deployed National Guard troops to multiple cities, and active-duty Marines to Los Angeles ([NPR](#)). These deployments place journalists covering protests and enforcement operations alongside heavily armed federal forces operating under expanded authorities.

Violence against journalists at protests has surged. In 2025, the U.S. [Press Freedom Tracker](#) documented 189 assaults on journalists, more than the previous three years combined. Of those, 177 were carried out by law enforcement officers, all but six during protests. 35 journalists were detained or charged while reporting, the vast majority at immigration-related demonstrations ([Press Freedom Tracker](#)).

In Los Angeles, during protests against immigration enforcement in 2025, [Reporters Without Borders](#) tracked at least 70 attacks against journalists by the LAPD. Photographer Toby Canham was struck in the forehead by a rubber bullet ([New York Post](#)). Australian correspondent Lauren Tomasi was hit in the leg while reporting live ([The Independent](#)). British photojournalist Nick Stern required emergency surgery after being struck by a projectile ([The Guardian](#)).

The threat isn't only from law enforcement. [RSF](#) documented at least three incidents of protesters attacking journalists during the same LA protests, and news vehicles were damaged by crowds at multiple locations. Since launching in 2017, the U.S. [Press Freedom Tracker](#) has recorded more than 230 assaults on journalists by private individuals at protests.

Journalists don't need to be the target to be at risk. At a far-right rally outside New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani's residence in March 2026, a man threw a homemade explosive device into the crowd. News

photographers were feet away ([CNN](#)). The device, packed with TATP (a highly volatile explosive) and shrapnel, failed to detonate, but police said it could have caused serious injury or death. Prosecutors described it as an ISIS-inspired attack. It was one of three extremist attacks in the United States that week, as federal authorities warned that the war with Iran had raised the domestic terrorism threat level ([AP](#)).

The threats don't end when journalists leave the field. In January 2026, independent journalist Georgia Fort and former CNN anchor Don Lemon were arrested on federal charges after covering an anti-ICE protest at a Minnesota church. Independent photographer Junn Bollmann was later arrested in connection with the same protest ([CPI](#)). In February 2026, photographer Robert Scherle was visited at his home by the FBI after covering protests in Oregon and asked to identify protesters he had photographed. He declined ([Press Freedom Tracker](#)).

Non-citizen journalists face an additional threat. In June 2025, Emmy Award-winning immigration reporter Mario Guevara was arrested while livestreaming a protest in an Atlanta suburb. The government argued his filming posed a threat to public safety. His criminal charges were dismissed, but he was handed over to ICE and, after more than 100 days in detention, deported to El Salvador. It was the first deportation the Committee to Protect Journalists has documented as retaliation for reporting ([CPI](#)). In March 2026, Nashville Noticias journalist Estefany Rodriguez was detained by ICE in a targeted operation. Her legal team says the detention was retaliation for her reporting on immigration enforcement in Tennessee ([CPI](#)).

SECTION 2: WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **[In the Field](#)** has practical guidance on preparing for protest coverage, information on personal protective equipment, and your rights when filming law enforcement.
- **[Protecting Your Sources and Devices](#)** has tips on how to prepare your device if there's a risk they'll be seized.
- **[Legal Protection](#)** has advice on what to do if you're detained, or arrested, and who to call for help.

Access to Information

Sources are being silenced, data is disappearing, and institutional access is shrinking.

The people journalists rely on for information are under increasing pressure to stay silent. Federal employees are now rated in performance reviews on whether they “clearly and demonstrably support” the president’s policy agenda, which the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has designated the “most critical element” of their evaluation ([Federal News Network](#)). New hires face similar scrutiny. OPM’s hiring plan requires applicants to write essays explaining how they would advance the president’s executive orders, a move three federal employee unions have sued to block ([Government Executive](#)). Agencies have also expanded internal leak investigations. The FBI, DHS, and the Department of Defense are using polygraph tests to identify potential leakers ([NPR](#)).

The government has also intensified efforts to identify and prosecute sources. Attorney General Pam Bondi has rescinded Biden-era protections that limited when prosecutors could subpoena journalists to identify sources ([NPR](#)). In January 2026, the FBI raided the home of Washington Post reporter Hannah Natanson and seized her phone, watch, and two laptops as part of a leak investigation ([Press Freedom Tracker](#)). Senior officials have publicly celebrated leak investigations. In February 2026, then–DHS Secretary Kristi Noem announced investigators had caught “another prolific leaker” and referred them for felony prosecution ([Newsweek](#)). In April 2025, Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard referred two individuals to the Justice Department for criminal prosecution for allegedly leaking to the press and indicated that a third referral was imminent ([Press Freedom Tracker](#)).

Access to institutions is tightening as well. Just weeks into Trump’s second term, The Associated Press was barred from Oval Office and Air Force One coverage after refusing to rename the Gulf of Mexico in its style guide. A federal judge ruled the ban unconstitutional, but the case remains in litigation ([RCFP](#)). At the Pentagon, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth imposed rules requiring approval before personnel share non-public information and warning that journalists who solicit it could lose their credentials ([NPR](#)). Virtually every major news organization surrendered its credentials rather than comply ([CJR](#)). The New York Times sued the Pentagon in December 2025, arguing the policy violates the First Amendment ([NPR](#)).

Government data is disappearing. Researchers estimate that more than 3,000 government datasets have been removed from public access since January 2025, covering issues ranging from homeland security and maternal mortality to hunger, drug use, education, disaster preparedness, and the

economy ([NOTUS](#)). In August 2025, the Bureau of Labor Statistics commissioner was fired hours after releasing disappointing jobs data, with Trump claiming without evidence that the figures had been “manipulated” ([PBS](#)). The bureau has since reduced collection of critical inputs to the Consumer Price Index, undermining the reliability of a key economic indicator ([ICPSR](#)).

Access to public records is also tightening. Only 12 percent of Freedom of Information Act requests were fully granted in fiscal year 2024, the lowest level on record, while the backlog grew to more than a quarter-million requests ([Brechtner News](#)). A whistleblower disclosure alleges that U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services prematurely closed thousands of FOIA requests to create the appearance of compliance with a federal court order ([Government Accountability Project](#)).

Officials have also been found conducting government business on Signal with disappearing messages enabled, sidestepping federal records laws that require those communications to be preserved ([The Hill](#)).

SECTION 2: WHAT YOU CAN DO

➤ **[Protecting Your Sources and Devices](#)** has guidance on protecting your sources, securing your devices, and preparing for device seizure.

Legal Threats

Lawsuits, criminal charges, and subpoenas are being used to punish critical coverage.

Trump has five lawsuits pending against the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, the BBC, the Des Moines Register, and the Pulitzer Prize Board ([Press Freedom Tracker](#)). Trump Media & Technology Group has separately sued 19 media companies ([Poynter](#)). He has already extracted \$32 million in settlements from cases most legal experts said would fail in court ([Poynter](#)). ABC settled for \$16 million. Paramount also settled for \$16 million, while seeking federal approval for a merger with Skydance ([NPR](#)). (The editorial fallout at CBS News is detailed under **[Regulatory Threats](#)**.) The strategy does not require winning in court. The cost of defense, the threat of regulatory retaliation against parent companies, and the disruption of litigation itself make settlement the easier path. The chilling effect on other outlets is the objective.

The administration is also using criminal law. In 2025, the U.S. [Press Freedom Tracker](#) documented 35 journalist detentions or charges, the vast majority at immigration-related protests. In January 2026, Attorney General Pam Bondi directed the federal arrest of journalists Don Lemon and Georgia Fort on felony charges for covering an anti-ICE protest at a Minnesota church ([NPR](#)). Independent photographer Junn Bollmann was charged in a subsequent indictment for covering the same protest ([CPI](#)). A federal magistrate judge declined to approve the charges for lack of probable cause, and the chief district judge wrote there was “no evidence” the journalists had engaged in criminal conduct. Prosecutors pursued the case through a grand jury indictment anyway. Court filings in the case reveal what the government considers evidence of criminal intent: that Fort and Lemon knew about the protest in advance, thanked their sources, and covered the story from a sympathetic perspective. Lemon’s attorney, Abbe Lowell, told Joel Simon that “the administration’s attacks on the media are very much content-oriented” ([CJR](#)).

Trump has repeatedly branded critical coverage “illegal” and “corrupt” and has publicly called for jailing journalists ([Trump Anti-Press Social Media Tracker](#), [IWME](#)). Media lawyers have identified the Espionage Act as a potential tool against journalists reporting on classified information ([National Press Club](#)). The act is broad, its penalties severe, and it contemplates no public interest defense.

The legal architecture that once restrained these tactics is being dismantled. In Trump’s first term, the Department of Justice secretly obtained phone and email records of reporters from CNN, the New York Times, and the Washington Post to identify their sources ([NBC](#)). A 2024 inspector general report found

the DOJ violated its own guidelines in doing so. Those guidelines were strengthened under Biden to prevent it from happening again. In April 2025, Attorney General Pam Bondi rescinded them ([RCEP](#)). There is no federal shield law protecting journalists from being compelled to reveal confidential sources. State shield laws and anti-SLAPP statutes vary significantly: some states offer strong protections, others offer none ([RCEP](#)).

The threat is not limited to the federal level. Small and nonprofit newsrooms face the same legal environment with a fraction of the resources. In Mississippi, where there’s no shield law, a judge ordered Mississippi Today to turn over documents that could reveal reporter Anna Wolfe’s confidential sources as part of a defamation lawsuit by former Governor Phil Bryant. The state Supreme Court declined to block the order ([Press Freedom Tracker](#)).

In March 2025, then-DHS Secretary Kristi Noem’s personal attorney threatened to sue the Dakota Scout, a small newspaper in Sioux Falls, after it reported on her use of taxpayer-backed credit cards during her time as governor, demanding it cease reporting and warning of “millions of dollars” in damages ([Dakota Scout](#)).

Even a meritless threat can chill a newsroom that doesn’t have the resources to fight it. A [LION Publishers](#) survey found that around 40 percent of independent publishers lack media liability insurance.

SECTION 2: WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **[Legal Protection](#)** covers what to do if you are sued, subpoenaed, contacted by federal agents, or charged with a crime. It also has tips on pre-publication review, insurance, and who to call for legal support.
- **[If You Run a Newsroom](#)** has information on libel insurance policies for small newsrooms.

Regulatory Threats

Regulatory agencies are being used to pressure media companies into compliance.

FCC Chairman Brendan Carr has opened investigations into every major broadcast network except Fox, which is owned by Trump ally Rupert Murdoch ([NPR](#)). He has also repeatedly warned that broadcasters could lose their licenses. In March 2026, Carr said broadcasters running “fake news” should “correct course” before their license renewals come up, citing Trump’s outrage over coverage of the war with Iran ([Variety](#)). In September 2025, Carr said the FCC could pursue “remedies” after Jimmy Kimmel’s remarks about the Charlie Kirk shooting suspect ([Variety](#)). ABC pulled the show the same day, though it returned days later after public backlash. In February 2026, the FCC opened an investigation into ABC’s *The View* after it interviewed Democratic Senate candidate James Talarico.

Regulatory leverage extends beyond broadcast content. Companies with mergers or federal contracts pending face pressure that can reach directly into editorial decisions. The Paramount-Skydance merger required FCC approval while Trump’s lawsuit against CBS was active. By the time Paramount settled for \$16 million in July 2025, the executive producer of *60 Minutes* and CBS News president had both resigned, citing loss of editorial independence ([NBC](#)). In Trump’s first term, the administration sought to block the AT&T–Time Warner merger at a time when Trump was openly hostile to CNN’s coverage ([CNN](#)). Amazon accused the administration of steering a \$10 billion Pentagon contract away from the company in retaliation for Washington Post coverage ([PBS](#)).

While large media companies have the resources to fight, smaller outlets often don’t, and nonprofit newsrooms face their own set of regulatory pressures. In June 2025, the GOP-led House held a hearing titled ‘Public Funds, Private Agendas: NGOs Gone Wild,’ framing years of philanthropic funding as a partisan pipeline ([House Committee on Oversight and Accountability](#)).

Nonprofit newsrooms operate under restrictions that limit lobbying and prohibit campaign intervention ([Non-Profit Law Blog](#)). The legal boundary between journalism and those prohibited activities has rarely been tested, but the framework leaves room for challenge. Reporting on proposed legislation could be classified as lobbying, and coverage of elected officials could be characterized as campaign interference. The IRS has never consistently recognized journalism as a tax-exempt purpose in its own right; nonprofit newsrooms qualify under the “educational” exemption, which could be contested ([Rebuild Local News](#)).

At the state level, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton has used consumer protection laws to investigate nonprofits whose work conflicts with his political views. Not one of those investigations was prompted by a consumer complaint ([ProPublica](#)). The administration has already defunded the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which voted to dissolve after 58 years ([NBC](#)). Stations in rural and tribal areas that depended on CPB for more than half their budgets are at the greatest risk. For small and nonprofit newsrooms, an investigation does not have to succeed to be devastating.

SECTION 2: WHAT YOU CAN DO

➤ **If You Run a Newsroom** has guidance on protecting editorial independence, auditing nonprofit compliance, and diversifying funding.

Online Harassment

Online harassment is one of the most effective tools for silencing journalists.

The most common damage of online abuse is psychological: sustained harassment erodes mental health, leads to self-censorship, and pushes people out of the profession. Trump has weaponized this. He and other public figures can mobilize coordinated campaigns against specific journalists with a single post. The attacks arrive at volume ([Brookings](#)).

The abuse targets identity as much as reporting. Women, journalists of color, LGBTQ+ journalists, and immigrant reporters bear the worst of it, and the attacks are designed to be personal: sexualized threats, racist abuse, doxxing of home addresses and family members. A 2025 [UN Women and UNESCO](#) survey found that 42 percent of women journalists who experienced online harassment also reported offline attacks linked directly to the digital abuse, up from 20 percent in 2020. That trajectory played out in real time when staff at the Haitian Times were targeted with racist abuse and a swatting attack after Trump's false claims about Haitian immigrants during the 2024 campaign ([Newsweek](#)). "Swatting" triggers an armed police response to an unsuspecting person's home. It is illegal and potentially lethal: at least two people have died in swatting incidents in the United States ([NBC](#)).

The data brokerage industry makes it easy for anyone to find a journalist's home address, phone number, and family members for a few dollars or less ([EPIC](#)). The platforms where harassment campaigns organize and spread have made a deliberate decision to do less about them. In January 2025, Meta ended its U.S. fact-checking program and replaced it with a user-driven community notes system modeled on the one Elon Musk introduced after gutting Twitter's trust and safety team in 2022 ([NPR](#)). In June 2025, YouTube quietly loosened its content moderation policies, doubling the threshold of rule-breaking content permitted in a single video ([The Verge](#)).

AI has made the attacks cheaper and more vicious. [Reporters Without Borders](#) documented 100 journalists targeted by deepfakes across 27 countries between December 2023 and December 2025. Of the 100 cases analyzed, 74 percent were women, and 13 percent of these women were the subject of pornographic deepfakes. In late 2025, Grok, the AI chatbot built into X, began generating non-consensual sexualized images of real people on demand, including what researchers said appeared to be children ([PBS](#)). Multiple governments have since opened investigations.

AI also raises the potential for harassment at scale. In February 2026, an autonomous AI agent researched a software engineer and published a targeted “hit piece” without human direction ([Shamblog](#)). [MIT Technology Review](#) called it “the start of a new era” in online harassment. Although this has only been documented once, if the capability spreads it could enable harassment campaigns against journalists at an unprecedented scale and persistence.

SECTION 2: WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **Safety Baseline** covers a quick self-doxxing exercise, and how to remove personal information you don’t want public like your home address or phone number.
- **Online Harassment** has tips on more steps to reduce exposure, as well as how to respond to harassment campaigns, and what to do if you've been doxxed.
- **Mental Health and Wellbeing** connects you with organisations who provide support.

Surveillance

The government is investing in spyware, facial recognition, and phone-cracking tools

The United States has built a surveillance infrastructure capable of identifying, tracking, and extracting data from individuals at scale. ICE's 2025 budget of \$28.7 billion, nearly triple the year before, has funded what the [Electronic Frontier Foundation](#) describes as one of the largest, most comprehensive domestic surveillance machines in history.

The agency holds contracts with Cellebrite and Magnet Forensics to unlock and copy the contents of seized phones, with Clearview AI to search faces against a database of billions of scraped images, and with Paragon, whose Graphite spyware can harvest messages from Signal and WhatsApp without the user knowing. In the field, agents use a Palantir app called ELITE that populates a map with potential targets and provides a confidence score on their current address. Agents have also been equipped with Meta smart glasses with built-in cameras during raids. Both ICE and CBP can also track phone locations across entire areas using commercial data from the advertising industry, without a warrant ([EFF](#), [404 Media](#)).

The tools are being turned on people who document what agents do. In January 2026, Tom Homan, Trump's immigration adviser, said he intended to create a database of people who interfere with ICE and "make them famous" ([Fox News](#)). In September 2025, DHS Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Tricia McLaughlin described videotaping ICE law enforcement and posting photos and videos of them online as "doxxing" ([The American Prospect](#)) and Attorney General Bondi's December 2025 memorandum classifies "organized doxxing of law enforcement" as criminal conduct rising to the level of domestic terrorism ([Arnold & Porter](#)).

In Portland, Maine, an ICE agent told a woman filming an enforcement operation that she was being added to "a nice little database" and was "now considered a domestic terrorist." Another observer was told: "If you keep coming to things like this, you are going to be on a domestic terrorist watchlist. Then we're going to come to your house later tonight" ([Mediaite](#), [Press Herald](#)). A class action lawsuit filed in February 2026 alleges that federal agents are unconstitutionally retaliating against people who lawfully observe and record immigration enforcement ([NPR](#)).

The government is also seeking to identify anonymous critics of enforcement operations. DHS has issued hundreds of administrative subpoenas to Google, Meta, Reddit, and Discord demanding the

identities of accounts that track or criticize ICE. The platforms have complied with at least some of the requests ([Engadget](#)).

Restrictions on how advanced AI systems can be used in this ecosystem are also weakening. In February 2026, Anthropic refused to let the Pentagon use its AI without restrictions on mass domestic surveillance and autonomous weapons. The administration designated the company a supply chain risk, the first time an American company has received that label, and ordered all federal agencies to stop using its technology. OpenAI signed a Pentagon contract hours later ([CNBC](#)).

At the border, the Fourth Amendment's protections against unreasonable search don't fully apply. Customs and Border Protection searched more than 55,000 devices in 2025, up 32 percent from two years earlier ([CBC](#)). In January 2026, CBP expanded its directive on border searches to include smart watches, SIM cards, flash drives, and drones. Basic searches require no suspicion at all ([CBP](#)).

The U.S. [Press Freedom Tracker](#) documented 59 border stops involving journalists since it launched in 2017. The majority occurred during Trump's first term. The practice nearly disappeared under Biden and has resumed. In March 2025, a freelance journalist with U.S. and Mexican citizenship was questioned at LAX about her immigration reporting, then stopped again two months later. Also in March, Palestinian American journalist Hebh Jamal had her phone and computer searched at Newark after being questioned about her work. In June 2025, Australian writer Alistair Kitchen was detained for 12 hours and deported from LAX because of what he had written about the Columbia student protests ([Press Freedom Tracker](#)).

SECTION 2: WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **[Safety Baseline](#)** covers the basics of secure communications and digital security.
- **[Protecting Your Sources and Devices](#)** has guidance on preparing for border crossings, protecting anonymous accounts, and what to do if you think you've been targeted by spyware.
- **[Legal Protection](#)** has information on your rights at the border.

Burnout and Mental Health

The strain of working in this threat environment is unsustainable.

A January 2026 survey by the Media Resilience Network (MDRNet) found that more than 80 percent of journalists reported experiencing burnout or chronic stress in the past year. Nearly half said they felt persistently stressed or depleted, and one in five reported that their emotional well-being was poor and that they needed support. Only 2.5 percent of the journalists surveyed described their mental health as excellent.

A separate 2025 Muck Rack survey found that 38 percent of journalists reported a decline in their mental health over the previous year and 50 percent had considered leaving the profession. Sixty-one percent said their workplace offers no mental health services.

The conditions driving these numbers are structural: an unrelenting news cycle, shrinking newsrooms, financial insecurity, and escalating hostility toward the press. But the environment described in this briefing goes beyond those baseline pressures. The cumulative weight of working under these conditions produces the numbers above.

Freelancers and journalists from marginalized communities are often most affected. Freelancers frequently work without institutional support: no employee assistance program, no legal counsel, and no one monitoring their safety in the field. Journalists from marginalized communities also face harassment that targets identity as well as reporting. Online abuse frequently includes racist, sexist, homophobic, and anti-immigrant language and can escalate into doxxing, swatting, and other forms of intimidation.

The MDRNet survey found that cost is the single greatest barrier to accessing mental health care, cited by 62 percent of respondents. The survey also found that cultural relevance is a significant barrier to accessing care. About half of respondents said existing mental health resources feel culturally unsafe, generic, or dismissive of lived experience. A Black journalist from Washington, D.C. said: "Please tailor mental health support and have options for people who come from various communities and cultural backgrounds. This will allow people to feel safe and that they are understood when speaking with someone who looks like them." Others were blunter: "I'm tired of workshops with people who have no idea what we are going through." An immigrant journalist described a therapist who "didn't understand what it meant that I couldn't quit because of my visa."

Burnout in journalism is not only a workplace issue. It is a press freedom issue. When the cost of reporting becomes unsustainable, journalists leave, coverage narrows, and the public loses information about the institutions that wield power.

SECTION 2: WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **Mental Health and Wellbeing** has peer support, therapist directories, therapy funding, and crisis contacts
- **If You Run a Newsroom** covers how to support your staff, and freelancers.

Section 2: What You Can Do

Practical guidance, resources, and contacts

If you've read **Section 1**, you'll likely have questions about what you can do to respond to all the threats. This section answers them with practical steps you can take to reduce your risk.

➤ **Safety Baseline** answers fundamental safety questions that apply to everyone. Start here.

From there, each section covers a different area:

➤ In The Field	23
➤ Protecting Your Sources And Devices	28
➤ Online Harassment	31
➤ Legal Protection	35
➤ Mental Health & Wellbeing	39
➤ If You Run a Newsroom	42

You don't need to read it all. Focus on the parts that match what you're dealing with.

➤ **Safety Planning at a Glance** can help you work out what your biggest risks are, if you're not sure.

Safety Baseline

Who do I call if something goes wrong?

Save these contacts now

These are organizations who can provide help, support and advice before, during and after.

For legal support:

- **RCFP Legal Hotline** (1-800-336-4243) is free, available 24/7, and covers everything from routine newsgathering questions to arrest, subpoenas, and legal threats. If you're ever detained or receive legal papers, call this number before you respond.
- **RCFP** and **Lawyers for Reporters** both provide free legal support to journalists and newsrooms.
- If you're a student journalist, the **Student Press Law Center** can help.

For broader support:

The **Journalist Assistance Network** provides support spanning legal, digital, physical, and psychosocial needs. It's a group of five organizations:

- Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)
 - Freedom of the Press Foundation (FPF)
 - International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF)
 - PEN America
 - Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press (RCFP)
- One email to **emergencies@cpj.org** connects you to all five organizations for support tailored to your needs.

How do I secure my communications?

The simplest way to do this is to move your sensitive communications to **Signal**.

➤ FPF's **Signal for Beginners Guide** will get you set up in minutes.

Signal is end-to-end encrypted, open source, independently audited, and built by a nonprofit. It's the industry standard for a reason. But it's not bulletproof.

➤ **Protecting Your Sources and Devices** covers what you can do to protect your devices from government surveillance tools (described in **Surveillance**, in **Section 1**).

How do I improve my digital security?

Digital security can feel overwhelming. It doesn't need to be. You don't have to do everything in one go, and each step you take makes you safer than you were before.

FPF's **2026 Digital Security Checklist** is a great place to start. It covers everything from device encryption and two-factor authentication to secure browsing and source protection.

➤ **Protecting Your Sources and Devices** has more on preparing your devices for seizure, border crossings, spyware, and source protection.

How do I protect myself from online harassment?

Think like a troll. Dig around and find what's out there before they do. Most journalists have more personal information online than they realize.

The aim isn't to erase your entire online presence. But if your home address or phone number are findable, that's information that can seriously escalate online abuse.

PEN America and IWMF's **Digital Safety Snacks** videos are a great place to start.

- **Episode 1** covers finding information online that you wouldn't want public.
- **Episode 2** covers how data brokers sell your personal information and how to get it removed.
- **Online Harassment** covers what to do next: from staying on top of data broker removal, to what to do if you're harassed or doxxed.

How do I look after myself?

This is a question you might not be asking, but you should.

There's a long-standing culture in journalism of toughing it out. But the pressures described in this briefing are not normal working conditions, and pushing through them without support has a cost. It affects your judgment, your health, and potentially your ability to do the work at all.

- **Mental Health and Wellbeing** has peer support, therapist directories, therapy funding, and crisis contacts
- **If You Run a Newsroom** has guidance on how to support your staff and freelancers.

NEWSROOM LEADERS

The single most impactful thing you can do is designate someone to own safety and wellbeing. They don't need to be a security professional, they just need to be trusted, available, and empowered to make decisions.

- **If You Run a Newsroom** has guidance on what this role involves and what else to put in place to keep your staff and your organization safe.

In The Field

How do I prepare for covering protests and enforcement operations?

Start with a safety plan

- Think through the threats – what could cause you physical, digital, legal, psychological harm
- Assess your risk: how likely is each one, and how bad would it be
- Plan what you'll do before, during, and after
- Do this with your editor. If you're freelance or a student, do it with with a colleague, or a mentor. If you're working as a team, do it together
- **Safety Planning at a Glance** explains the process.
- **Annex A** has a safety plan template, a quick-start checklist, and other tools to help.
- **Annex B** has examples of how safety planning might work in practice. Example 1 shows safety planning for covering an ICE operation.

Think about identity

Your race, gender, immigration status, visibility, and the outlet you work for all affect risk. You can be covering the same event as another journalist and face very different risks depending on:

- **Who you are** – how you see yourself
- **How you're perceived** – how others see you
- **The environment you're working in** – the assignment, the political climate, the location, even the time of day

These aren't abstract considerations. Including this as part of your safety planning means you're making decisions based on your actual risk, not a generic checklist. It might change where you position yourself, who you go with, what gear you carry, what your pullback triggers are, or what legal support you line up before you leave.

Talk about escalation indicators and pullback triggers

- **Escalation indicators** are signals to pause, reassess, notify your editor: police putting on riot gear, new units arriving, a shift in crowd mood, helicopters overhead, protesters masking up.
- **Pullback triggers** are pre-agreed conditions under which you agree you'll leave. These should reflect who is in the field, not just the environment you're working in. A noncitizen journalist, an early-career journalist, and a veteran conflict journalist all have very different risk profiles. The pullback triggers should reflect that.

Don't go alone

Two people can watch each other's backs, assist if one is injured or arrested, and maintain better situational awareness in volatile crowds.

- If your newsroom can't send two people, buddy up with someone from another outlet
- If you're freelance, pair up with another freelancer

Whoever you're with, make sure you're on the same page about your safety plan. You may have different risk profiles and different risk appetites, but you won't know unless you talk about it.

Prepare your devices

Match your preparation to the level of risk. If there is a real chance your device could be seized, reduce what is stored on it. The less sensitive material on the device, the less there is to expose.

- Delete or move sensitive contacts, notes, and documents before the assignment. Avoid carrying source identifiers if it could put them at risk.
- Log out of email, cloud storage, and other accounts you don't need while you're in the field.
- Use a strong passcode, disable fingerprint and face unlock, and set auto-lock to a short interval.
- Turn off message previews and notifications.
- For higher risk assignments, consider using a burner phone with minimal data and only essential apps

➤ FPF's [2026 Digital Security Checklist](#) has step-by-step guidance on how to do this.

Make sure you have the right protective gear

This is something your newsroom should provide, and train you to use.

- **IWMF's 2026 PPE for Protests Guide** recommended specific respirators, eye protection, and helmets.
- **CPJ's PPE Guide** covers body armor ratings for situations where rubber bullets, baton rounds, or military forces are in play. But be aware that heavier protection can attract hostile attention or be mistaken for law enforcement gear. Body armor can also give a false sense of security. You'll often hear them called 'bulletproof' vests, but they're not. They are bullet-resistant: rated to stop specific rounds under specific conditions.

Don't leave without the basics

- Make sure you have your press credentials on you. They don't provide legal protection, but they establish who you are and why you're there.
- If you're a noncitizen, carry proof of legal status and an immigration lawyer's number. U.S. law requires noncitizens to have immigration documents available.
- Citizens can also be subject to racial profiling and may want to consider carrying government issued ID.
- Also make sure to pack water, snacks, a portable charger and some cash. Wear comfortable shoes and layers in case the temperature changes.
- If there's a risk you could be detained, make sure you know who you'd call. It's a good idea to write your lawyer's number on your arm in case your phone is seized.

What are my rights when filming law enforcement?

You have a First Amendment right to record law enforcement in public. But the administration is recharacterizing filming of enforcement operations as doxxing and classifying it as domestic terrorism. That doesn't change the law, but it does change the risk of asserting your rights.

- Identify yourself as a journalist

- Record from a safe distance
- If an officer orders you to stop, you'll need to make a judgment call
- Even if the law is on your side, don't risk getting injured or arrested asserting your rights
- RCFP's **Police, Protesters, and the Press Guide** has useful advice and is regularly updated to reflect the current threat landscape.
- FPF's **How to Film Federal Agents in the Field** also has helpful tips.

What do I do if things escalate on the ground?

This is where your safety planning pays off. You've already agreed on your escalation indicators and pullback triggers. You know what to watch for and when to leave.

- Stay alert - threats can come from all directions
- Watch police movements and changes in crowd behaviour
- Keep an eye on your exit routes
- Keep checking in with your editor or point of contact
- If you lose communication, follow your pre-agreed protocol

What do I do if I'm exposed to tear gas or crowd-control munitions?

For tear gas:

- Move upwind and to higher ground if you can
- Don't rub your eyes, flush with clean water
- Wipe down your kit and any exposed skin: specialist wipes are available, but soap and water are usually sufficient

If you're hit by rubber bullets, baton rounds, or other projectiles get to a safe position and check for injuries. These can cause serious damage at close range. If you or someone near you is injured, call 911.

What do I do if I'm arrested or detained?

Identify yourself as a journalist

Say nothing beyond that. Don't consent to a search. Don't unlock your devices. Keep your hands visible. Don't resist. It's your lawyer's job to fight for you later. If you're being detained, your priority should be to avoid getting hurt in the process.

Call your editor or emergency contact as soon as you can.

If you're a noncitizen, criminal charges or even detention can trigger immigration consequences, regardless of whether charges are later dropped. If you don't have an immigration lawyer, the **Immigration Advocates Network** maintains a directory of free and low-cost immigration legal services.

Newsroom leaders

There should be a written protocol for this: who gets the call, who contacts the lawyer, who notifies your family. If that protocol doesn't exist, this is the argument for creating one.

If you're injured, detained or arrested: report the incident to the **Press Freedom Tracker**

Protecting Your Sources And Devices

The guidance below builds on the advice in [Safety Baseline](#).

If the government can harvest Signal messages with spyware like Graphite, is Signal still a secure option?

Yes. Signal's encryption remains one of the strongest protections available for journalists. Tools like Graphite don't break Signal's encryption. Instead, they compromise the device itself and capture messages after they're decrypted. That means the main vulnerability is usually the phone or laptop itself, not the encrypted app.

To reduce the risk of device compromise, the [Electronic Frontier Foundation](#) recommends:

- Keeping your operating systems up to date
- Enabling strong device protections – on an iPhone, that means turning on [Lockdown Mode](#), and on Android enabling [Advanced Protection Mode](#)
- Disappearing messages can also reduce the impact if a device is compromised by limiting how much message history is stored on the device

How do I protect my sources and my reporting?

Use secure channels deliberately

Signal is the safest default for sensitive communications: source conversations, document exchanges, and assignment check-ins. Verify safety numbers for high-risk conversations, especially after a source changes devices.

Avoid creating a single point of exposure

Don't store source identities in your phone contacts. Don't discuss sensitive sources over email, SMS, or Slack. If you need to refer to a source internally, use a code name.

Separate your editorial trail from your source communications

Notes explaining how you verified information should be preserved. They are part of your journalistic record. But keep them separate from the communications that identify your source.

Be aware of the limits of encrypted email

ProtonMail has end-to-end encryption which means it's more secure than Gmail. But metadata such as sender, recipient, and timestamps can still be obtained through a legal process.

Connect at-risk sources to support

If speaking to you could expose a source to legal or professional risk, connect them with support.

The **Signals Network** provides legal and digital security assistance to whistleblowers and sources under pressure. You can also reach out to them directly for advice if you believe a source has been identified or compromised.

➤ **FPF's Source Protection Guides** have more information on secure communication, anonymous tips, and SecureDrop

How do I prepare my devices before a high-risk assignment, or for crossing the border?

Match your preparation to the level of risk. If there is a real chance your device could be searched or seized, reduce what is stored on it. The less sensitive material on the device, the less there is to expose.

- Delete or move sensitive contacts, notes, and documents, avoid carrying source identifiers if it could put them at risk
- Log out of email, cloud storage, and other accounts you don't need while you're in the field

- Use a strong passcode, disable fingerprint and face unlock, and set auto-lock to a short interval
- Turn off message previews and notifications
- For higher risk assignments, consider using a burner phone with minimal data and only essential apps
- FPF's [2026 Digital Security Checklist](#) has step-by-step guidance on how to do this
- FPF's [Border Crossing Guide](#) has more details about preparing your devices before traveling through a US border
- [Legal Protection](#) covers your rights at the border

What happens if my devices are seized?

Assume investigators will try to extract everything they can: messages, contacts, notes, photos, browsing history, location data, and linked cloud accounts. Your strongest protection is preparation. The less sensitive material on the device, the less there is to expose.

If your phone is taken, treat the contents as compromised. Notify your editor and contact a lawyer immediately.

What do I do if I think I've been targeted by spyware?

Even though these tools exist, and federal agencies are using them, the risk to most U.S.-based journalists remains low.

If you do suspect your device has been compromised, stop using it for sensitive communication immediately. Don't attempt to investigate or remove the spyware yourself. Preserving the device may be important for forensic analysis.

- [Access Now's Digital Security Helpline](#) provides free digital security assistance to journalists and can help assess whether a device may be compromised and advise on next steps.

Online Harassment

The guidance below builds on the advice in [Safety Baseline](#).

What else can I do to protect myself from online harassment?

Stay on top of data broker removal

Selling personal data is big business. Removing your personal information is not a one-time task, it's something you'll have to keep revisiting.

Data removal services like [EasyOptOuts](#), [DeleteMe](#), [Optery](#), and [Kanary](#) monitor broker sites and resubmit removal requests on your behalf. But none of them are able to remove everything. In a 2024 study, [Consumer Reports](#) found EasyOptOuts (\$20/year) and Optery (\$300/year for its top tier) were the most effective of those tested.

➤ [Big Ass Data Broker Opt-Out List](#) is the most comprehensive free guide if you decide to do it yourself. It's more effective, but it's a time-consuming process.

Note: Data scrubbing takes 4-6 weeks before you see any impact so this is not something that's going to help if you're already being attacked.

Tighten your social media

- Review your privacy settings and make anything private that doesn't need to be public
- If you use social media for both personal and professional purposes, consider separating them
- Check your newsroom staff page for anything you wouldn't want a stranger to see

Prepare before a sensitive story is published

If you expect backlash:

- Repeat the self-doxxing exercise and make sure your accounts are secured
- Talk to your editor about the risk

- Agree who will monitor your accounts if abuse escalates so you can step away from the platform instead of absorbing it in real time
- If you're freelance or a student, ask a friend or colleague to do the same

These are conversations worth having before the story goes live.

Prepare yourself emotionally too

Online harassment is designed to knock you off stride, and it's almost impossible to avoid entirely. Knowing it's a possibility and thinking through how you'll respond before it happens is a mitigation in itself.

What do I do if I'm being harassed online?

Get help early

Online harassment is designed to cause emotional distress and that can make it much harder to figure out how to respond. Tell your editor, a colleague, or someone you trust. It's easier to manage when you're not handling it alone.

Document everything

Take screenshots with URLs and timestamps and save them somewhere safe before posts or accounts disappear. Avoid deleting posts or messages that may later be needed to report abuse to platforms or law enforcement. Ideally someone else can do this for you.

Secure your accounts

Change your passwords and make sure two-factor authentication is enabled on your main email accounts and the platform where the abuse is happening. Account takeover is a common next step in harassment campaigns.

➤ **PEN America's Protect Accounts and Devices Guide** walks you through the steps

Get support if the harassment becomes overwhelming

- **Expert Voices Together** provides confidential one-to-one support for journalists experiencing online abuse. Their coordinators help develop a practical response plan from digital security steps to mobilizing support networks.
- **Mental Health and Wellbeing** has peer support, therapist directories, therapy funding, and crisis contacts.

Seek legal advice

If harassment involves threats, impersonation, or the release of private information, talk to a lawyer.

Editors and newsroom leaders

- If someone on your team is being harassed, don't wait for them to ask for help.
- Assign someone else to monitor the platforms where abuse occurs.
- They should feel like they're able to step away, but know someone else is watching for signs of escalation.
- Make sure they know what mental health support is available.
- **Best Practices for News Organizations** by PEN America and the Coalition Against Online Violence has guidance on how to protect and support your journalists.

What do I do if I've been doxxed?

If your home address, phone number, or family information has been published, that's a physical safety threat.

Your immediate priorities are: get to somewhere where you feel safe, tell someone you trust, and consider warning your local police you may be at risk of swatting. Also, call your phone carrier and add a PIN to protect against SIM swapping.

As scary as this is, more harassment campaigns are usually most intense for the first 3 to 7 days before subsiding.

- PEN America's **What To Do If You've Been Doxxed Or Placed On A Watchlist Guide** has more information on what you can do to protect yourself
- For tailored support, contact the **Journalist Assistance Network**

Legal Protection

Don't respond to a legal threat without talking to a lawyer first.

- **RCFP's Legal Hotline** (1-800-336-4243) is free and available 24/7
- **RCFP** and **Lawyers for Reporters** provide free legal support to journalists and newsrooms

What do I do if I'm sued or threatened with a lawsuit?

Don't respond to the lawyer or the legal claims yourself. Call a lawyer first.

Even a meritless lawsuit can be devastating for a small newsroom. The cost of defense, the disruption, and the threat of further litigation are often used as a weapon. That makes early legal advice essential.

Some states have strong statutes that let you get frivolous suits dismissed early and a lawyer can often invoke them early in the case. Others have no protections at all.

- **RCFP's Anti-SLAPP Legal Guide** will show you if your state has anti-SLAPP protections

I've received a subpoena. Now what?

Don't comply without talking to a lawyer.

A subpoena is not something you have to respond to on the spot. It is a legal demand, and you usually have the right to challenge it in court before producing anything.

There's no federal shield law, and state protections vary widely.

- **RCFP Reporter's Privilege Compendium** will show you what protections exist in your state

What if federal agents contact me about my reporting?

Don't answer questions without a lawyer present. It doesn't matter whether it happens in the field, at your front door, or over the phone. Talk to a lawyer before you respond.

If agents demand access to your devices, notes, or materials, don't consent to a search.

Ask to see a warrant or subpoena. The Privacy Protection Act generally requires investigators to seek journalistic materials through a subpoena rather than a search warrant, which gives you the opportunity to challenge the demand in court.

If agents become aggressive, don't resist physically. State your rights clearly, comply, and let the lawyers challenge the demand afterward. Getting injured or charged with resisting arrest will not help your case.

I've been detained or charged. What should I do?

Call a lawyer immediately. Don't explain your reporting, your sources, or your unpublished material to investigators in the hope that clarity will fix it. That is a conversation for lawyers, not investigators. Don't unlock your devices or consent to a search of their contents.

If you're a noncitizen, criminal charges or even detention can trigger immigration consequences, regardless of whether charges are later dropped.

➤ **Immigration Advocates Network** maintains a directory of free and low-cost immigration legal services

➤ **JPI's Press Freedom Briefing – The Threat of a Broad Legal Assault** has guidance on preparing for a coordinated legal assault

What are my rights at the border?

Your rights at the border are more limited than anywhere else in the country. The Fourth Amendment's protections against unreasonable search don't fully apply. CBP can question you, search your belongings, and search your electronic devices, though, as the ACLU article below outlines, the legal picture is complicated. If CBP ask you for a password to unlock your device, your legal status may inform what you decide to do.

- If you're a US citizen, you can't be denied entry for refusing to unlock your device, but it may be seized
- If you're a lawful permanent resident, the same should apply
- If you're on a visa, refusing could mean denial of entry

In any case: if your device is searched or seized, ask for a receipt, and don't answer questions about your sources or your reporting without talking to a lawyer.

➤ **ACLU's Enforcement at the Airport Guide** has more details about your rights when encountering law enforcement at the airport

➤ **ACLU's Can Border Agents Search Your Electronic Devices? It's Complicated** goes into this in more detail

When should a story get legal review before publication?

Get legal review on any story involving leaked material, classified information, powerful individuals with a history of litigation, or sources at legal risk.

If you're not sure, err on the side of caution.

If a story is sensitive, document your editorial process as you go: why you pursued the story, how you verified information, and that you sought comment. The Fort and Lemon case showed that routine reporting can be reframed as criminal intent. Your editorial record is what your lawyers will use to push back.

➤ **Lawyers for Reporters** and **ProJourn** both provide free pre-publication review. Both work with independent journalists as well as news organizations.

Note: ProJourn typically needs 10 business days, so don't wait until you're on deadline to reach out to them.

What insurance do I need?

Libel insurance

This will cover the cost of defending against defamation, invasion of privacy, copyright infringement, and related claims. If you don't have it, a single lawsuit could be financially devastating. If you run a newsroom Axis has a policy designed for smaller newsrooms with no hammer clause, (meaning the insurer can't force or financially pressure you to settle a case), pre-approved press defense counsel, and retentions starting at \$2,500.

➤ **Brian Finnell at EPIC** (EPICNews@epicbrokers.com, 631-390-9710) can provide you with a quote.

If you're freelance, check whether your publisher's policy covers you. Many don't. Read your contract carefully: if it includes an indemnification clause, you could be personally liable for legal costs.

➤ Read **How to Avoid Onerous Freelance Contracts** for tips on negotiating

Directors and Officers insurance

If you're a nonprofit, check your D&O coverage. Without it, board members could be personally exposed if your organization is sued or investigated.

Mental Health & Wellbeing

If you're in crisis now:

- **Text HOME to 741741** – *Crisis Text Line*
- **Call 988** – *Suicide & Crisis Lifeline*

Both are free, and available 24/7

How do I recognize when I'm reaching my limit?

You know the signs even if you haven't named them

Constant exhaustion. Difficulty concentrating on a story you care about. The irritability you're bringing home. The feeling that you can't switch off. That working at this pace is no longer sustainable. That you don't enjoy it like you used to.

These are natural reactions to a very unnatural working environment

They're worth paying attention to, because stress compounds. A journalist who was harassed online after a story, then covered a protest where colleagues were arrested, then had to prepare for a possible subpoena, is not carrying three separate stresses. They're carrying one weight that keeps getting heavier.

If this sounds familiar, don't try to carry it alone

Talk to someone you trust. Many journalists find peer support really helpful. If the strain goes deeper, professional support can help too, and there are organizations that can cover the cost (see below).

How do I get mental health support?

You don't need to be in crisis or have a newsroom behind you to get help. Support is available.

Peer support and counseling

- **MDRNet** offers peer support, counseling, and training for journalists and newsroom leaders, with a focus on under-resourced communities. (hello@mdrnet.org or +973-626-7394 on Signal)
- **Vita Activa** offers peer support, psychological and digital first aid, and crisis management. Free, confidential, and anonymous in English, Spanish, Portuguese, and Arabic. (support@vita-activa.org or +56 9 3291 9018 on WhatsApp and Signal)

Therapist who understands how journalists work

- **Journalist Trauma Support Network** maintains a **Directory of Therapists** trained to work with journalists, searchable by US state. Sessions are fee-for-service. JTSN periodically offers free therapy through therapists-in-training, but the current cycle is full until January 2027.

Therapists who understands your identity

- **Gaylesta**: The Psychotherapist Association for Gender and Sexual Diversity
- **LGBTQ Psychotherapists of Color**
- **National Queer and Trans Therapists of Color Network**

If cost is a barrier

- **IWMF** offers therapy grants through its US Journalism Emergency Fund. If you have any questions about the fund, email assistance@iwmf.org.
- **CPI** provides emergency grants including psychosocial support.
- **Rory Peck Trust** provides therapy funding specifically for freelancers.

- **IWMF Black Journalists Therapy Relief Fund** provides dedicated funding for Black journalists. Funds are limited and actively being expanded.
- **AAJA Mental Health and Wellness Fund** provides mental health funding for AAPI journalists. AAJA members and applicants who have already identified a therapist are prioritized. Funding is limited.
- **Open Path Collective** offers sessions at \$30 to \$70. Not journalism-specific, but accessible to anyone who needs affordable care.

For resources

- **Global Center for Journalism and Trauma** (formerly the Dart Center) maintains an extensive resource library on trauma-informed reporting, self-care, and peer support.

If You Run a Newsroom

Protect Your People

Do you run regular organizational safety reviews?

- Assess the threats your newsroom faces across physical, digital, legal, and psychological harm.
- Identify what's most likely and most serious
- Decide how you'll respond
- Assign owners, and set deadlines
- Review quarterly, or whenever the threat environment shifts
- **Annex A** has an **Organizational Review Template** that walks you through the process
- **Annex B** has examples of how safety planning might work in practice: Example 3 shows an organizational safety review for a small newsroom

Have you assigned a safety and wellbeing lead?

Designating someone as your safety and wellbeing lead will have a big impact. They don't need to be a security professional. They just need to be trusted, available, and empowered to make decisions. Give them the time and resources to do it properly.

- **ACOS/WAN-IFRA Editor Safety Hub** offers a free, self-paced course on safe commissioning for news editors and managers, covering risk assessment, duty of care, identity-aware planning, trauma awareness, and debriefing. Three hours, available in English, Spanish, and Arabic.

Do you have a lawyer?

If you don't have in-house counsel:

- **RCFP** and **Lawyers for Reporters** both provide free legal services to newsrooms.
- **RCFP** also regularly hosts trainings for journalists and newsrooms covering a variety of topics (training@rcfp.org)
- **RCFP's Legal Hotline** number (1-800-336-4243) is free and available 24/7 – make sure everyone in your newsroom knows it

Do you have a crisis plan?

A crisis in this environment could be a coordinated legal assault, a regulatory investigation, a sustained harassment campaign, a raid on your office, a major source being exposed, or your funding being pulled. If any of these happened tomorrow, would your leadership team know:

- Who leads the response?
- Who handles legal matters?
- Who manages communications?
- Who keeps the newsroom running?
- Who supports the journalists involved?

If not, create the plan now. Write it down. Make sure people know where to find it.

If you have the capacity, run a tabletop exercise so you can walk your team through a realistic scenario and find the gaps before a real crisis does.

Do you have clear protocols?

Not everything requires the full crisis response. But if a subpoena arrives, federal agents contact a reporter, someone is arrested, a device is seized, a reporter is being harassed online, a source is would your reporters and editors know what to do? Each of these needs a clear protocol.

- Reporters should know what to do first, who to contact, and how the situation will be handled once they raise it
- Editors should know how to respond, who to involve, and when to escalate to legal or leadership

Write the protocols down, make sure people know where to find them. They don't have to be complicated, but doing them now will save time and reduce confusion when something goes wrong.

Have you invested in safety training?

Any reporter assigned to cover protests or ICE operations should have completed safety training.

- **IWMF** offers domestic Hostile Environment & First Aid (HEFAT) courses designed for US journalists (programs@iwmf.org)
- **ACOS Alliance** can help you evaluate private firms offering HEFAT courses – quality varies

Are you providing personal protective equipment?

It's the newsroom's responsibility to provide personal protective equipment (PPE), not something reporters should be expected to buy themselves.

Whatever you provide, make sure your reporters are trained to use it before they're in the field.

- **IWMF's 2026 PPE for Protests Guide** covers specific product recommendations, including respirators, eye protection, and helmets
- **CPJ's PPE Guide** covers body armor ratings for situations where rubber bullets, baton rounds, or military forces are in play. But be aware that heavier protection can attract hostile attention or be mistaken for law enforcement gear. Body armor can also give a false sense of security. You'll often hear them called 'bulletproof' vests, but they're not. They are bullet-resistant: rated to stop specific rounds under specific conditions.

Are you making safety and wellbeing part of the culture?

If you've designated a safety lead, the next step is making safety planning part of how your newsroom actually works.

Make safety conversations standard

Treat them as part of your routine coverage conversations. This might be a quick check-in with a few key details shared between the reporter and editor. For higher-risk assignments, use the **Safety Planning Template** to guide a more structured conversation. Either way, get into the habit of discussing potential risks and how they will be managed.

Debriefs should be part of this too. It doesn't need to be formal. A simple conversation about what happened, what worked, and how the reporter is doing can surface problems early. The more routinely these conversations happen, the easier it becomes for reporters to raise concerns, and for editors to spot early signs of burnout.

Include identity in safety planning

Journalists from marginalized groups are often acutely aware of the risks they face but may not feel comfortable raising them. Create space for those conversations. The question isn't "is this the right person to cover this story" but "what do they need to cover it safely."

At the same time, no one should feel pressured to take on risk they're not comfortable with.

Treat wellbeing as a workplace issue

If your journalists are burning out, the question is not what's wrong with them. It's what conditions in the newsroom are driving that strain.

Look at how work is assigned and paced. Avoid keeping the same reporter on high-stress stories for extended periods. The same journalist covering immigration enforcement, or extremism, or stories that attract online abuse week after week absorbs cumulative stress. Build rotation into your planning to give people a chance to rest and reset. Creating space for rest and resetting expectations around pace and availability can help reduce the build up of stress before it leads to burnout.

Editors should check in regularly about workload and pressure. Leaders should also model healthy working practices by taking breaks, setting boundaries, and not normalizing being constantly available.

Train your editors to spot signs of stress and burnout

They're the ones commissioning the work and they're the ones who see their reporters every day. They need to know how to ask the right questions before an assignment, how to recognize when someone is struggling, and when to step in. That's not intuitive. It's a skill.

The Global Center for Journalism and Trauma and ACOS Alliance created guides specifically for this. Many of the practices were developed in newsrooms covering conflict, disasters, and other high-risk environments, but the same principles apply to journalists covering high-stress stories here.

➤ **Leading Resilience Guides:** [Guide 1](#), [Guide 2](#)

Provide access to mental health support.

➤ [Mental Health and Wellbeing](#) lists journalism-specific resources including free peer support, therapist directories, and therapy grants.

Are you supporting freelancers?

Freelancers often do the most dangerous work with the least support.

If your newsroom commissions freelance work, extend the same support to them that you do to your staff reporters.

➤ **ACOS Freelance Journalist Safety Principles** set out the industry standard for what newsrooms owe the freelancers they commission.

Protect Your Organization

Are you protecting your editorial independence?

If your newsroom is part of a larger organization, you need a written editorial independence policy, an independent editorial board, and clear lines between editorial and corporate decision-making.

If those don't exist, create them. If they do, make sure they'd hold up under pressure.

Document any attempt to influence coverage through corporate, regulatory, or political channels. That record matters if you ever need to prove interference.

➤ INN's **Sample Editorial Independence Policy** can be adopted, or adapted

If you're a nonprofit, what are you doing to protect your status?

Get your compliance reviewed and make sure everything is in order.

Review your tax returns, board governance, and compliance with 501(c)(3) restrictions on lobbying and campaign intervention.

- **Lawyers for Reporters' Compliance Assurance Program** and **ProJourn's Legal Checkup** can help you identify risks

Does your board understand the risk?

In the event of a lawsuit or other existential threat, they will play a pivotal role. They bear fiduciary responsibility for the organization and carry legal obligations that may come into play. Discussing potential threats in advance and preparing your board for an array of possibilities will make them better able to deal with any crisis, should it come.

- **JPI's Press Freedom Briefing – Board Engagement For Nonprofit Media** offers guidance on how to have the conversation

How resilient is your funding?

If your newsroom depends heavily on a single funder, a single grant, or public funding that can be pulled, that's a point of vulnerability. There are organisations who can support you, and your **State Press Association** can connect you with peer outlets facing similar pressures.

- **NewsMatch** is a matching fund program that's helped nonprofit newsrooms generate more than \$400 million in community support since 2017
- **INN** offers business coaching and fundraising training
- **LION Publishers** works with independent outlets on sustainable revenue models, their **Sustainability Audit** (available to members) assesses your financial, operational, and journalistic health and provides tailored recommendations

Annex A

Safety Planning Tools

Your safety plan can take many forms. It might be:

- a quick conversation and a few key details shared in a Signal chat
- a template you work through with your editor
- a guided session with JESS, the new AI safety planning tool from JPI and the ACOS Alliance

The format matters less than the act of doing it.

JESS

The Journalist Expert Safety Support, or JESS, is a new AI safety planning tool from the Journalism Protection Initiative and the ACOS Alliance. It guides you through the process step by step, drawing on vetted guidance from leading news safety organizations, security advisors, and press freedom NGOs. If you describe your assignment and your concerns, JESS will help you identify threats, plan mitigations, and produce a safety plan. Contact jpi@journalism.cuny.edu to request access.

Safety Planning Template: Assignments

A structured document for working through the safety planning process. It walks you through each step, from identifying threats to planning mitigations, and produces a shareable plan with emergency contacts, check-ins, red lines, comms plan, and kit. ➤ **Get a copy [here](#).**

Safety Planning Template: Organizational Review

The same process at the newsroom level. Instead of planning for a single assignment, you're looking at threats across your coverage and operations as a whole. It identifies priorities, assigns owners and deadlines, and audits what policies and protocols you have in place. Bring in the people who see across coverage and operations. Set a review date, and revisit quarterly or whenever the threat environment shifts. ➤ **Get a copy [here](#).**

Some teams find it useful to print the risk matrix and place threats on the grid with sticky notes. It makes priorities visible to everyone in the room. ➤ **Download it [here](#).**

Safety Planning Worksheet

If you prefer working in a spreadsheet, this worksheet does the same job as the templates in a different format. List your threats, rate the likelihood and impact, and the sheet automatically assigns each one to a risk level to help you prioritize. It also includes columns for mitigations. ➤ **Get a copy [here](#).**

Quick-Start Checklist

If time is short, running through these questions will get you into a safety mindset.

- ☐ What's the assignment, and what could go wrong? Think physical, digital, legal, psychological.
- ☐ Which of those threats are most likely and most serious? Those are your priorities.
- ☐ For each priority: what will you do before, during, and after to reduce the risk?
- ☐ Could your reporting expose a source or sensitive material? If so, how are you protecting it?
- ☐ Are your devices and communications prepared? Sensitive data removed, encryption enabled, secure channels set up, key numbers saved.
- ☐ Does your identity or profile change the risk? If so, what additional steps do you need?
- ☐ What's your check-in schedule, and what happens if you miss one?
- ☐ Under what conditions do you leave? Decide now.
- ☐ Who knows the plan? Your editor or point of contact should know where you are, what you're doing, how to reach you, and who to contact if you go off radar.

Annex B

Safety Planning Examples

These examples show how the safety planning process might work in practice. Your threats, priorities, and mitigations will be different, but the steps are the same.

Example 1. Covering an ICE enforcement operation

The scenario

A reporter and photographer from a small nonprofit outlet are assigned to document expected ICE raids in a residential neighborhood. The reporter is a U.S. citizen. The photographer holds a green card.

The conversation

The team is briefing their editor about a heavy ICE presence in the area over the past two days. As they talk through their coverage plans, they're also identifying threats. Confrontation with federal agents is likely and could be serious. Both journalists will be carrying devices with source contacts on them, and seizure is possible. There's a chance either journalist could be detained. For the reporter, that's a legal problem. For the photographer, arrest could put her immigration status at risk, which ups the the impact from serious to severe.

The plan

Their biggest concerns are the photographer being detained and devices being seized. The photographer says she definitely wants to cover the story, so they discuss ways to reduce the risk. She'll carry proof of her legal status and have her immigration lawyer's number written on her arm. If agents start detaining people, she'll move to a pre-agreed fallback position. If she's detained, the reporter will alert the newsroom and the editor will contact her immigration lawyer and her partner.

The photographer will take the newsroom's only burner phone. The reporter will spend 30 minutes cleaning up his phone so there's no sensitive data, logging out of accounts, and turning off biometrics. Both will leave their laptops in the office. They will not consent to unlocking their phones, but won't resist if agents get hostile. They set a check-in schedule for every hour via Signal. They also share their

live location with the editor and each other. If a check-in is missed, the editor will try to call them. If they're unreachable, they have agreed on the escalation steps. They discuss their pullback trigger and decide if agents begin mass detentions or use force, the team will leave. They agree to meet the following day for a quick debrief. They agree to meet the following day for a quick debrief.

Example 2. Freelancer working a sensitive source

The scenario

A freelance investigative reporter is working on a story involving a confidential source inside a federal agency. He's working alone, without institutional backing.

The thinking

He sits down and works through the risks. The primary threat is digital: if his communications are compromised, his source could be exposed. That's the one that keeps him up at night. Physical risk is low for this story. Legal risk is real but likely comes later: if the story draws attention, a subpoena is possible after publication. The psychological pressure of carrying a story like this alone feels manageable, for now. Protecting the source is the priority.

The plan

The reporter only communicates with the source via Signal. He verified the source's safety number, and has set up disappearing messages. He won't store the source's real name anywhere on his devices and will avoid discussing this investigation over email, phone, or text. If the source needs to share documents, they'll use Signal or another secure channel rather than email or cloud links. The reporter will strip identifying metadata before saving anything locally. He already has a good practice of keeping his devices updated and has two-factor authentication enabled on all accounts.

Because he's working alone, he has briefed a trusted colleague that he's working on a sensitive investigation, without sharing any identifying details. They agree to check in regularly so someone knows if he goes off radar and so he's not carrying the pressure of the story entirely alone. His colleague also has his personal emergency contact.

Thinking ahead, he'll look for a media lawyer in case of a subpoena and has already saved the RCFP legal hotline number in his phone.

Example 3. Organizational review

The scenario

The managing editor of a small nonprofit newsroom sits down with the executive director and a board member to review organizational risk. Their outlet covers local government, immigration, and housing. They have twelve staff and rely on freelancers for some coverage.

The conversation

They look at the threats across their coverage as a whole. Physically, their reporters cover city council meetings and community events where tensions have risen, but they don't routinely cover protests. Digitally, they have no formal information security practices. Several reporters use personal phones for source communications, and board communications happen over email and Zoom with no agreed security baseline. Legally, they carry no libel insurance and no D&O coverage for board members. They've published investigative stories that drew informal legal threats but have never had to defend one in court. On the operational side, their 501(c)(3) compliance documents haven't been reviewed in years. They also have two reporters who've mentioned feeling burnt out in recent months but they have no support structure in place.

The priorities

The lack of insurance is the most urgent. One lawsuit could shut them down, and without D&O coverage, board members' personal assets are exposed. Basic information security is close behind. A single compromised device could expose sources across multiple reporters. No one owns safety in the newsroom, so planning happens when someone thinks of it, or not at all. And there's no structure for supporting staff who are dealing with harassment, threats, or burnout.

The plan

The meeting ends with a to-do list. They'll get libel and D&O insurance quotes this month and set up a basic device and communications policy for staff and freelancers. They'll designate a newsroom safety lead. The executive director will start a compliance audit of their nonprofit documents. They'll identify a peer support or counseling resource for staff dealing with harassment or burnout. The board will move sensitive communications to Signal. The executive director agrees to brief the full board at their next meeting. They schedule a progress review in 90 days.