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A Better Way to Save Lives

By Colm Murphy

Journalism can be dangerous. The number of natural disasters, epidemics, terrorist attacks and civil disturbances is rising. Some 1,382 journalists have been killed since 1992, 64 are missing and 246 are currently imprisoned, mainly in countries such as Turkey, China, Russia, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Somalia and Eritrea. Can we do more to protect them? International news organizations require staff going into hostile environments to take a specialist course. It can save their life. But only a minority of journalists require highly specialist safety training - and fewer still can access it. This kind of training tends to be “military battlefield style” and only partly addresses evolving threats.

Most journalists killed - more than 90% in 2015 and 2016 for instance - have been local journalists working for smaller news organizations in their own countries rather than foreign correspondents getting caught in crossfire. Studies by The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, New York and the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) have identified a significant gap in safety and resilience education. The focus of specialist safety training, particularly for journalists living constantly in a dangerous or threatening environment, is often not as relevant as their circumstances demand. Most often it is not available at all. A Dart Center study showed that many participants who did manage to secure it were failed to renew their training regularly enough to keep it effective.

In journalism schools there is little attention to safety training even in countries where journalists are under threat such as Mexico, Afghanistan, Somalia, the Philippines, Columbia and the Gaza Strip. Even in the most highly resourced countries, like America, only a quarter of the 106 programmes accredited by the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication provided any safety training. An AEJMC report said it “left prospective journalists ill-prepared to cover domestic and international violence and disasters”. At Ulster University we have completed a five year study into finding better ways to build the resilience and field skills of journalists working in dangerous environments. We knew a new approach would have to be language, gender and culture neutral, affordable and customizable to relevant local threats. This is because the countries with the worst death and injury record over the past decade, have very limited resources to invest in journalists’ safety training.

The research was conducted between 2015 and 2020, in three phases. First, we conducted a review of existing methods and research into the skills those who worked in disaster areas thought most relevant. We then moved to interview journalists to identify the security, psychological and digital safety issues of particular concern to reporters working constantly in dangerous environments. They told us they felt the needed competence in digital and communications security, self-defence, handling sexual harassment, safeguarding mental health and handling sources in a secure manner.

They also talked about awareness skills, including cultural awareness. They needed to use knowledge about gender, religious and cultural customs and practices in the host community/country to inform actions. In terms of safety, security awareness and risk assessment relating to hazards were the main ones identified, along with basic first aid. This was taking us into territory beyond the traditional hostile environment courses taken by journalists.

For the third phase, we brought together a panel to develop a new curriculum for training: the six members each had more than 20 years of field experience in high risk places such as Afghanistan, Northern Ireland and Mexico. They were drawn from the British Red Cross, disaster healthcare nursing, former Royal Ulster Constabulary/Police Service of Northern Ireland anti-terrorist officers, journalism and military training.

Now it was time to see if it worked. Our first cohort, in September 2018, had young journalists from three countries, drawn from our international masters' class: a mix of men and women and several for whom English was not their first language. We set up a camp at an isolated forest at the edge of the Coleraine campus as a simulated refugee camp. Using a deliberately limited equipment of tarpaulins and ropes, they were taught shelter building, bush craft, water purification, how to manage personal nutrition, light fires, cook outdoors and other critical survival skills. This exercise rapidly developed teamwork and leadership skills, as well as building personal resilience.

We ran teaching sessions and exercises on personal health issues associated with energy levels, sleep deprivation, temperature control, reproductive health and infection control. In scenarios such as mass casualty events, incidents from Northern Ireland informed the design e.g. a punishment shooting by a dissident paramilitary group. These examples allowed us to draw in expertise from the Police Service for Northern Ireland (PSNI) and the ambulance service. We used drama methods from training used in nursing to make mass casualties more realistic.

We developed new techniques on mental health first aid and post-traumatic stress disorder. A battlefield nurse, who had four years in various conflict zones including Syria, spoke candidly to the students about his post traumatic stress disorder and how he coped by having "anchors" in his life, essentially family and friends.

We made some changes to the programme's next cohort, in September 2019, increasing the psychology and self-defence element. The group went to the area of Derry where a journalist shot had been shot dead by the Real IRA the previous April, during a riot. The tour was guided by a man whose father had been killed by British soldiers during "Bloody Sunday". This was to improve learning, empathy and cultural understanding.

This group included journalists for national and international titles who were working constantly in dangerous environments. They were much more specific in what they wanted to learn and demanding of trainers.

We measured results by both quantitative and qualitative methods. In terms of quantitative results, the 2018 student cohort completed the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale 25 [8]

before starting the programme. The students were asked 25 questions about their resilience and scored each between 1 and 4. So the maximum was 100 on the Connor-Davidson scale. The less experienced group members initially scored around 61 on the scale, with the more experienced ones around 83. To put this in perspective, the American population average is 80.4 with a standard deviation of 12.8, the Hong Kong general population level is 60. The 2018 cohort re-marked themselves after completing the course. They all reported that their scores had risen significantly. The greatest rise was in the students who had started with the lower scores – now up around 83. Those more experienced rose from the 80s to the 90s on the CD-RISC25 scale.

There was a second quantitative method used to gather results from the 2018 cohort. This was a questionnaire on their skill and knowledge level relating to safety. This was completed before the programme started and again after the final day. The results showed that the programme has achieved its main learning objective in terms of specialist safety skills and knowledge acquisition with up to 83% improvement on their knowledge in this area. For qualitative feedback, we recorded the campfire group discussion each evening.

Participants found it comforting that they all experienced some form of stress and anxiety and this generally rose and eased around the simulation exercises. They had learnt ways to deal with it. The penultimate qualitative feedback for their first cohort was a reflective blog with prompts, which they completed six weeks after completing the training. This was to assess how much the training now impacted on their daily lives. In overall terms, the 2018 cohort reported that their resilience and safety awareness had hugely improved. The final qualitative evaluation of the 2018 cohort was that 20% of their journalistic assignment marks for the remainder of the semester were allocated for how they implemented safety protocols. This was a novel departure for journalism assessment, but was highly effective in re-enforcing the safety and resilience competencies.

The real test of the growing resilience for the 2018 group was when storm Ali knocked down part of their forest shelter at 5am and they re-built it rather than going to the back-up accommodation. One student said: "After the experience, I do feel more confident about my physical resilience."

For the 2019 cohort we used a different evaluation method. Qualitative recorded video interviews were conducted independently of the teaching team in a professional TV studio when the course was completed. The interviewees were asked to rank both their safety (a) and resilience (b) skills before and after the programme and provide an overall evaluation of the effectiveness of the course. These interviews were then analyzed and findings categorized. The participants broke down into three broad categories. Seven indicated that their confidence level to meet future challenges was hugely enhanced. Three found the programme initially way beyond their comfort zone but evaluated it as great learning and significant confidence building. They felt they also knew what further skills they needed to acquire before working in a hostile environment and were beginning to plan to acquire them. Two found the experience totally outside their comfort zone but nonetheless said they had learned much. They had not taken part in all the exercises and, city based in the UK and China, had little outdoor experience. Participants from Africa, Scandinavia and Canada tended to have more outdoor adventure experience and some in hostile environments.

One female participant said: “Having a role in a team and trusting your colleagues in a hostile situation is essential, and we got that right pretty quickly.” The other element which the students took away was the importance of situational awareness and dynamic risk assessment. Another student said: “I found myself in the days after the week-long programme applying situational awareness in crowds.” Another key element of the course was developing ways to protect mental health. They found the strategy advised by the battlefield nurse to have a friend or family member who you could confide in and provide an anchor as extremely good advice.

Significantly several of the participants in the 2019 cohort had had “military battlefield” style training previously. They all said that this new programme was more effective for them as it better addressed their real safety issues. The most important indicator of effective learning was it led to the journalism trainees to successfully undertake assignments in Syrian refugee camps, under fire in Gaza and covering illegal immigrants in the Mediterranean. Several of the journalistic outputs that resulted were shortlisted for UK national student journalism awards.

In interpreting the results, it seemed that a holistic approach to resilience training was highly effective. It ensured transmission of skills and knowledge to keep the trainees safe and give them a strong basis to build their resilience and their journalistic ambitions. With further refinement and testing on a larger cohort, it provides a strong basis for developing a new curriculum that can be rolled out and delivered both to industry and in journalism trainee programmes cost effectively.

In terms of its applicability internationally, the courses worked for both genders, participants from over more than nine countries and with four different first languages, with highly experienced and with novice journalists. The equipment capital costs were less than \$1,000. There were limitations to the project in the numbers who took part, but the research team is in contact with the two cohorts and but it would be useful to assess their skills and knowledge retention one, two and three years on from the initial course. This would allow the research team assess refine the course.

We believe a more standardized safety culture in newsrooms globally and for freelancers benefits everyone, particularly those working on dangerous beats or in countries with constant danger. It also helps people caught-up in trauma to whom journalists speak, for there is evidence that misjudged journalism can augment their suffering, while good, empathetic journalism can help with the healing process.

We think it is time to follow the lead of other professions such as disaster healthcare, police and military in properly training the news gathering team about the potential impact of trauma and safety and be pro-active in support. Our research proved that it is possible to take best practice from the training of other professions in hostile environments and apply it to journalism. But while training individual journalists is part of the solution, there effective safety leadership in news organizations is critical too.

Given the importance of newsroom leadership to safety and resilience, it would be useful to have more knowledge of best practice in this area. Most news organizations globally are struggling with the global economic downturn, an accelerating changing business model and audience change. But a new culture of wellbeing and safety training may be one of the few benefits the COVID-19 pandemic brings to news organizations internationally. Finally, no matter what improvements we make to training, unless we find a way to combat impunity for those who attack journalists, the next decade could be even more dangerous for news professionals.

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