



RISK ASSESSMENT

JOURNALISM AND CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISM IN A COVID-19 ENDEMIC WORLD

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The SAFE¹ Risk Assessment Two Years into the COVID-19 Pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic already has and will continue to have ripple effects on every aspect of human life, irreversibly changing the world as we know it. In their immediate reaction to the outbreak of the pandemic, most governments' responses aimed to “flatten the curve” through various means such as travel restrictions, curfews, and quarantine. Most governments struggled to respond to the pandemic challenges due to lack of resources and comprehensive plans, while others relied on denying that the pandemic existed, feeding misinformation about vaccines, and using the pandemic to restrict freedom of speech. Though vaccines have been created, the vaccine rollouts have been complicated by regional disparities and political polarization, as well as compounded by rises in COVID-19 cases coming in waves and more aggressive variants, leading to some countries going back into lockdown or reverting to other restrictions. Global governments were faced with the dilemma of supporting the economy versus healthcare systems, with many citizens demanding opening countries back up again. As predicted in SAFE's first Risk Assessment in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic, the uncertainty caused by the virus has precipitated trickle-down effects, including—but not limited to—civil unrest, political instability, and food insecurity. Additionally, COVID-19's long-term impact on individuals' and communities' overall well-being is continuously being understood, as they cannot be concluded while still amid the pandemic's effects. Already vulnerable and marginalized groups have been disproportionately affected by this global health crisis, intensifying pre-existing social, political, and economic inequalities. Marginalized communities have continued to bear the consequences of both the virus and its economic impact, which has worsened income inequality and governments continue to neglect gender equality and social inclusion (GESI)

¹ The Securing Access to Free Expression (SAFE) Initiative is IREX's flagship effort to enable media practitioners and social communicators to work as safely as possible in closed and closing spaces. SAFE serves to equip media practitioners and social communicators with the means to resiliently continue their important work and manage—as well as mitigate—the risks and threats they face in their day-to-day work uncovering injustices, reporting on corruption, and holding authorities accountable.

considerations even more.² Journalists, media practitioners, and social communicators have been on the frontlines, acting as the link between the scientific community and governments, and the citizens. However, with this responsibility, 2021 proved to be one of the most dangerous years to be a journalist yet, with a record breaking 293 journalists imprisoned.³

The SAFE Risk Assessment

The coronavirus pandemic is the first global health crisis in modern times, forcing individuals and organizations to operate in an environment for which there were no prior experiences or data. Two years after its start, the effects of the pandemic continue to be far-reaching and have affected all aspects of SAFE programming, as well as has had a significant impact on the people SAFE works with across the globe. The new COVID-19 “world order” has presented both challenges and opportunities that should be mitigated and seized.

The COVID-19 pandemic (or “**coronavirus pandemic**”), is an ongoing pandemic caused by an infectious disease that can lead to mild to severe respiratory illness. The outbreak was first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak a pandemic on March 11, 2020. Exactly two years after this announcement, more than 400 million cases of COVID-19 had been reported, resulting in more than 6 million deaths. As of the end of May 2022, this number has climbed to over 500 million confirmed cases, resulting in over 6.2 million deaths.

The **Securing Access to Free Expression (SAFE) Risk Assessment** was conducted in response to the outbreak of COVID-19 starting in early 2020. This revised report, written at the end of 2021 and into the beginning of 2022, provides further insight into more current challenges, opportunities, and recommendations. To not only cope with the ripple effects of the pandemic, but also seize the opportunities it presents, all SAFE centers in 2020 conducted an in-depth risk assessment looking at various thematic areas where there could be effects on

² United Nations Children’s Fund. “Gender-Responsive Social Protection during COVID19: Technical Note.” United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). April 23, 2020. <https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/Gender-responsive-social-protection-during-covid-19-ENG.pdf>.

³ “Explore all CPJ data.” Committee to Protect Journalists. 2021. https://cpj.org/data/imprisoned/2021/?status=imprisoned&start_year=2021&end_year=2021&group_by=location.

SAFE programming. All local SAFE teams⁴ used the PESTLE approach⁵ as the conceptual guidelines for their analyses, thereby considering political, economic, social, technological, legal, and environmental aspects. The PESTLE analysis was conducted over the course of several weeks starting in July 2020 and used a short-term 6-month and medium-term 12-month mark as the framework for the assessment of future operating environments. The analyses of all five centers were collected by SAFE DC and subsequently studied to detect overarching, potentially global trends that would be of relevance to the SAFE program and other stakeholders such as IREX generally, donors, and partners. After the first Risk Assessment,⁶ the SAFE team thought it was pertinent to revisit this report, in order to document how SAFE and those SAFE works with, as well as individuals and communities, have been affected long-term by COVID-19, persistent challenges, and the seized opportunities; furthermore, this analysis will contain more recommendations to reflect the current operating environment.

SAFE adjusted to better react to the challenges and opportunities of the pandemic. At the forefront of this was putting marginalized communities as a priority; SAFE focused activities on supporting marginalized participants and encouraged partnerships with marginalized groups. Knowing the impacts journalists may face during the pandemic, SAFE kept a close eye on closed and closing civic spaces⁷ as well as the media practitioners in these environments. Furthermore, SAFE added COVID-19 related physical health safety tips to trainings and resources and focused heavily on digital security due the technological-dependent nature of the pandemic during trainings. Additionally, with the awareness of increased risk of burnout, SAFE increased efforts to support self-care and psychosocial well-being for staff and passed these tips on to those SAFE works with. In regard to logistics and operations, SAFE offered increased stipends to some participants to offset costs of training and compensate for additional costs they may have, while overall the program was able to save considerable

⁴ With headquarters in District of Columbia (DC), IREX's SAFE project has field teams in Central America (CA), East Africa (EA), Europe and Eurasia (EU), the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and Asia.

⁵ Mitchell, Matthew, and Wade Brid. "Introduction to PESTLE Analysis – and Why a Systemic Approach Is Best – Bâton Global." Batonglobal.Com. 2018. www.batonglobal.com/post/introduction-to-pestle-analysis-and-why-a-systemic-approach-is-best.

⁶ "Risk Assessment: Journalism and Civil Society Activism in a Post-COVID-10 World." IREX. October 2020. <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/node/resource/risk-assessment-journalism-civil-society-activism-covid-19.pdf>.

⁷ Closing civic spaces, sometimes referred to as shrinking spaces, are "when the space is closing for civil society to organise and foster civic engagement, and when external support for democracy and human rights is shrinking." Aho, Emelie, and Jonatan Grinde. "Shrinking Space for Civil Society – Challenges in Implementing the 2030 Agenda." Forum Syd. 2017. <https://www.forumciv.org/sites/default/files/2018-03/Shrinking-Space%20-%20Challenges%20in%20implementing%20the%202030%20agenda.pdf#:~:text=The%20shrinking%20space%20C%20often%20referred%20to%20as%20the.for%20civil%20soci%20-%20ety%20organisations%20has%20diminished>.

costs and risk due to encouragement of remote activities. Despite these changes in the SAFE program, because the world is still in the midst of the pandemic, more challenges and opportunities have arisen and therefore more recommendations to improve activities are needed.

COVID-19 and its Impact on SAFE Programming

Journalism in a COVID-19 Endemic World

Overall, the pandemic accelerated and intensified trends that had already been evident prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. Major shifts are seen in three areas: the composition and operating models of the media sector as a whole; the day-to-day lives of journalists and the qualifications required from them; and the relationship between the media and other stakeholders, such as governments or the general public. Though the extent and scope of these changes are very much localized and dependent on regional contexts, some developments are somewhat global.

Challenges

In regards to the **sector** as a whole, the most consequential change has been the collapse of revenue from advertisement or its migration to other areas (e.g. from print to online), both of which were caused by overall economic decline and its ripple effects.⁸ Though some of this funding deficit might be reversed eventually, the hardships associated with COVID-19 has caused layoffs in a number of media houses, if not complete closure of the business, especially in small to mid-size houses.⁹ This has resulted in job insecurity for journalists worldwide, as well as a reduced number of media houses. Meanwhile, “surviving” media houses have been more prone to fall victim to private-interest influences, since politicians, governments, or businesses might try and use this opportunity to further increase their financial stakes in media houses to gain influence and be able to push their own agendas.¹⁰ It

⁸ Li, Cathy, and Stefan Brambilla Hall. “This is how COVID-19 is affecting the advertising industry.” World Economic Forum. June 8, 2020. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/06/coronavirus-advertising-marketing-covid19-pandemic-business/>.

⁹ Posetti, Julie, Emily Bell, and Pete Brown. “Journalism & The Pandemic: A Global Snapshot of Impacts.” International Center for Journalists. https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Journalism%20and%20the%20Pandemic%20Project%20Report%201%202020_FINAL.pdf.

¹⁰ Ahmed, Kaamil. “Covid-19 Could Trigger ‘Media Extinction Event’ in Developing Countries.” The Guardian, 6 May 2020, www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/may/06/coronavirus-could-trigger-media-extinction-event-in-developing-countries.

is reported that, “In 2021, 30 of 70 countries assessed experience a deterioration in internet freedom.”¹¹ Journalists may be encouraged to publish biased or not fully accurate articles to increase public engagement or fulfill needs of private-interest influences. This is an extremely dangerous challenge moving forward, as mis-/disinformation have become prominent in this technological-dependent world.

In relation to COVID-19 specific misinformation, the World Health Organization (WHO) and UN have declared it to be an “infodemic”.¹² Journalists must work even harder than before to discern fact from fiction in the pandemic media environment and therefore also have more responsibility present scientific side of the vaccination. Despite the pandemic itself being a challenge for all journalists to report on, they must also battle with the ‘infodemic’. Journalists primarily covering COVID-19 are not only contending with their own health and safety risks, but also the heightened misinformation, disinformation, and rumors from this public health crisis.

The changes in the media landscape has primarily been to the detriment of print media; research shows people in wealthier countries as well as younger people are more likely to get their news from online sources.¹³ Meanwhile, the effect on smaller media outlets is somewhat inconclusive, but hyper-local outlets are often the prime source of information for marginalized communities, such as those living in rural or otherwise socio-economically marginalized regions, so there must be a concerted effort to protect them^{14 15}. These rural, marginalized, and/or small outlets have been the first to fall victim to either complete closure or having to curb to political pressure, i.e. agreeing to being funded by politicians or local businesses that have their own agenda. This is further compounded by an often massive ‘digital divide’, that makes it impossible for significant parts of rural communities to make a

¹¹ “Explore the Map: Internet Freedom Status.” Freedom House. 2021. <https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=fofn&year=2021>.

¹² “Confronting Health Misinformation: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on Building a Healthy Information Environment.” Surgeon General of the United States. 2021. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-misinformation-advisory.pdf>.

¹³ Mitchell, Amy, Katie Simmons, Katerina Eva Matsa, and Laura Silver. “Publics Globally Want Unbiased News Coverage, but Are Divided on Whether Their News Media Deliver.” January 11, 2018. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2018/01/11/publics-globally-want-unbiased-news-coverage-but-are-divided-on-whether-their-news-media-deliver/>.

¹⁴ Lubianco, Júlio. “COVID-19 pandemic intensifies media crisis in Portugal and Spain.” International Symposium on Online Journalism, Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas, University of Texas at Austin. July 29, 2020. <https://isoj.org/covid-19-pandemic-intensifies-media-crisis-in-portugal-and-spain/>.

¹⁵ Nalvarte, Paola. “Pandemic opens opportunities for small digital media in Latin America.” International Symposium on Online Journalism, Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas, University of Texas at Austin. July 31, 2020. <https://isoj.org/pandemic-opens-opportunities-for-small-digital-media-in-latin-america/>.

shift from “traditional” media (print, partly radio) to online news sources and which stresses the centrality of digital connectivity and cybersecurity.

For **individual journalists**, all the above-mentioned changes have had substantial effects. Many journalists have reported feeling less secure in their job stability¹⁶ speaking to the massive effects COVID-19 has had on employment in the industry. Those journalists who perhaps have not been affected by layoffs might have been expected to work extra hours and take on additional responsibilities, both of which adds to psychosocial pressure that is likely already high due to other factors (job insecurity, threat to their own health and that of loved ones, burnout, etc.). This shift, among other factors, has contributed to journalists citing psychosocial impacts as one of the major challenges.¹⁷ For instance, a journalist might not just be writing their story anymore, but also be involved in editing, publishing, and advertising it. At the same time, the content of their work has had to change significantly, focusing still on topics related to public health and the economic fallout of the pandemic (e.g. coverage of civil unrest, health-related issues), while for others there may be less demand (e.g. coverage of cultural or environmental topics). Journalists had to build new reporting skills focused on topics that are in higher demand, such as investigative reporting skills when writing stories about a government’s (mis-)use of COVID-19 emergency funds. Additionally, because of the shift to remote work, journalists and social communicators without skills in digital safety are more vulnerable to being targeted by their government or other nefarious actors.

There has been a general increase in freelance the job sector as a whole since the pandemic began,¹⁸ but this has unique complications for journalists. Freelance journalism often involves precarious working conditions, such as contract-based work and a lack of proper benefits, yet recently laid off journalists may try or have already tried to earn income this way. These challenges are particularly pronounced for women journalists whose potential transition into freelance arrangements over employment with a media outlet have increased their vulnerability; for instance, while a media outlet might be able to provide at least basic maternity leave benefits, freelance journalists have no such safety net. Additionally, female

¹⁶ Posetti, Julie, Emily Bell, and Pete Brown. “Journalism & The Pandemic: A Global Snapshot of Impacts.” International Center for Journalists. https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Journalism%20and%20the%20Pandemic%20Project%20Report%201%202020_FINAL.pdf.

¹⁷ Posetti, Julie, Emily Bell, and Pete Brown. “Journalism & The Pandemic: A Global Snapshot of Impacts.” International Center for Journalists. https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Journalism%20and%20the%20Pandemic%20Project%20Report%201%202020_FINAL.pdf.

¹⁸ Berliner, Uri. “Jobs In The Pandemic: More Are Freelance And May Stay That Way Forever.” National Public Radio. September 16, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/16/912744566/jobs-in-the-pandemic-more-are-freelance-and-may-stay-that-way-forever>.

journalists often face increased harassment online, an issue that may be more challenging to negate as a freelancer.

Lastly, just as the “terrorism card” did, more recently “fake news” legislation has been used to demonize journalists; governments across the globe are already using COVID-19 as an excuse to stifle free speech, and some of the anti-‘Freedom of Expression’ legislative changes that had been passed¹⁹ might not be reversed in the future. For individual journalists this means that they are at a much higher risk of falling victim to government repression and security forces’ excessive use of force. Furthermore, due to the economic instability, there have been instances of civil unrest. Journalists and media communicators who cover these events will continue to risk their safety to write these stories.

In **Tanzania**, the government of President John Magufuli had used the pandemic—which Magufuli unilaterally declared “extinct thanks to prayer” — to pass a raft of repressive laws that placed strict controls on national and international media and effectively silenced all dissenting voices. President Magufuli died on March 17, 2021, with officials citing “heart problems” but many suspect he succumbed to COVID-19.

The most noticeable challenge for the **relationship between the media and other sectors** has been gaining trust and teaching digital literacy to the general public. There has been an increase in distrust of the media in many countries across the globe.²⁰ In closed and closing spaces, meanwhile, repressive government have used the pandemic to further ramp up attacks on media professionals and undermine freedom of expression.²¹ This is not only a challenge to the business of journalism as a whole, but it is certainly a threat to the accuracy of journalism. While it has been a challenge to teach digital literacy, the largest hurdle to overcome is having the public look for accurate and unbiased news stories themselves.

The long-term economic effects of the pandemic on media houses and their staff are difficult to assess at the point of writing this analysis. While some economists report the economy will

¹⁹ One example of this is Russia expanding on their existing “fake news” legislation to include criminal penalties for “public dissemination of knowingly false information” in the context of emergencies, and administrative penalties for media outlets that publish such information”. The language is extremely vague and leaves room for interpretation and abuse against journalists and media organizations. “Silenced and Misinformed: Freedom of Expression in Danger During COVID-19.” Amnesty International. 2021. [POL3047512021ENGLISH.pdf](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/POL3047512021ENGLISH/20210317/).

²⁰ “Edelman Trust Barometer.” Edelman. 2022. <https://edl.mn/3rqOlx0>.

²¹ For the example of Tanzania, see: Khelef, Mohammed. “Opinion: Tanzania’s Media Law Muzzles Free Speech.” Deutsche Welle. August 11, 2020. www.dw.com/en/opinion-tanzanias-media-law-muzzles-free-speech/a-54532521.

return to a point of normalcy, this will likely not be for several years.²² While decline in industry employment may be the current trend, as the global economy steadily returns to normal, the increase in news media—albeit through social media and digital platforms²³—may provide an opportunity for the industry to regain employment.

Opportunities

Overall, the main opportunity COVID-19 presents to the media sector is leveraging its role of being the “middleman” between doctors and scientists and the citizenry. Media practitioners and social communicators have gained larger audiences²⁴, as well as importance, as they provide much needed access to vital information. Many journalists have expressed an increased commitment to journalism as a result of the pandemic.²⁵ This will allow journalism to bear a greater weight in the minds of the public. The media has played a crucial role to enable communities to understand the pandemic and be provided with reliable and independent information about it, while also covering governments’ responses to it, thereby encouraging a degree of accountability. In that sense, accurate information provided by trusted media can save lives and—if the importance of the latter is communicated effectively—can improve the standing of the media that is demonized and under siege in many regions in the world.²⁶

The transition to the new, largely online media landscape posed initial challenges and certainly will continue to, yet it has had a profound effect on and opportunities for the entire sector. Journalists who have ventured, voluntarily or involuntarily, into areas of the sector that may have been unfamiliar to them initially (e.g. print journalists moving online, freelancers) provide new perspectives. Additionally, the focus on the online sector of media allows for new voices, especially from marginalized communities, to be heard. Already, journalists and newsrooms are creatively responding to the challenges of the COVID-19 reality by finding new ways to reach both their sources and audiences. This might lead to a rejuvenation of the media sector or, at the very least, provide impetus for innovative ideas.

²² “Tracking America’s recovery.” CNN Business. <https://www.cnn.com/business/us-economic-recovery-coronavirus>.

²³ “Digital News Fact Sheet.” Pew Research Center. July 27, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/digital-news/>.

²⁴ “COVID-19: Tracking the Impact on Media Consumption.” Nielsen Company. June 16, 2020. <https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/article/2020/covid-19-tracking-the-impact-on-media-consumption/>.

²⁵ Posetti, Julie, Emily Bell, and Pete Brown. “Journalism & The Pandemic: A Global Snapshot of Impacts.” International Center for Journalists. https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Journalism%20and%20the%20Pandemic%20Project%20Report%201%202020_FINAL.pdf.

²⁶ Glaser, Mark. “6 Ways Local News Makes a Crucial Impact Covering COVID-19.” Knight Foundation. April 20, 2020. knightfoundation.org/articles/6-ways-local-news-makes-a-crucial-impact-covering-covid-19.

Certain groups within the sector might be in a good position to weather some of the challenges presented by the pandemic. For one, this would be those outlets that had already diversified their funding models and/or made themselves largely independent from private interest funding (businesses, governments).²⁷ Innovative, often smaller-scale outlets that had invested in membership funding models or operated as nonprofits prior to the pandemic, are likely to be in a much better position. Second, journalists working in smaller outlets might be already used to being “allrounders” that are working on their story from start to finish, putting them at an advantage compared to peers at larger outlets, who might have relied much more on support staff.

Recommendations

Regarding support for **individual journalists**, SAFE and IREX in general should continue to explore ways to reach and assist the growing freelancer community, especially those already marginalized. As this group of journalists and media communicators is perhaps one of the most vulnerable, they need continuous support in the areas of physical and digital safety, as well as psychosocial well-being. Generally, programs with a mandate in media assistance should dedicate training resources that make journalists’ adaptation to the realities of a profoundly changed work environment easier. This could include offering more trainings on aspects that are related to financial safety and security for both individuals and outlets (e.g. development of business plans for freelancers, outlets, etc.), or at least expanding the network of advisors or partners that beneficiaries could be referred to, should they have a need in regard. Additionally, there should be increased support to journalists and social communicators who specifically cover misinformation, as these individuals are at the brunt of fight against COVID-19. Similarly, SAFE, IREX, and others should be prepared to provide more legal support and/or have the network to refer legal cases to, to thereby respond to what is a likely continual increase in government-sponsored legal attacks on individuals and outlets. Similarly, and equally as important to legal support, is material or references for psychosocial support to keep journalists and media communicators, recently laid off or not, and/or freelance or not, their mental health well.

Since the deterioration of working conditions and the partial loss of income will hit the people SAFE works with hard (especially members of already marginalized communities), training programs should be ready to compensate actual losses of income through higher per diems. SAFE already offers stipends in some training scenarios and is working on making the policy consistent across all centers. In cases where there are limitations on material or

²⁷ Accardo, Gian-Paolo. “Covid was an opportunity for independent media outlets for growing and connecting to their audience.” Voxeurop. September 20, 2021. <https://voxeurop.eu/en/covid-was-an-opportunity-for-independent-media-outlets-for-growing-and-connecting-to-their-audience/>.

monetary support (e.g. amount of per diem) due to organizational or compliance-related restrictions, SAFE and others should dedicate time to “lobby” against such ‘red tape’ and other rigid regulations that might not be fit to address the needs of those SAFE and others support.

In terms of the **sector** as a whole, various steps could be taken to cushion the shocks caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and its fallout. Donors and organizations with a mandate in media assistance should increase their support to the sector generally, but, while doing so, should closely coordinate to ensure maximum outreach and efficiency of the means invested. Donors in particular should dedicate more funds to the substantial and longer-term support of media outlets, rather than providing financial injections that are limited in time and scope. To ensure the survival of a diverse and vibrant media landscape, smaller outlets that are particularly vulnerable while, at the same time, crucial to marginalized communities, should be at the center of this coordinated support.²⁸ Providing this support should be in the donor community’s own interest, since it otherwise risks being significantly outspent by ‘big business’ and governments in closed and closing spaces, who could have an interest in seizing this opportunity and cornering the media market to push their own agendas. Equally, the donor community should continue investing in bridging digital divides that present a substantial threat to already marginalized communities.

Meanwhile, SAFE, IREX in general, and others should do more to facilitate connections, build solidarity, and more generally support successful outlet that have managed to diversify their income or make themselves independent from private-interest funding (e.g. nonprofit outlets). These “success stories” – some of whom are already part of SAFE’s network – can serve as trailblazers and support others in taking similar steps.

²⁸ To learn more on IREX’s Vibrant Information Approach, read here: <https://www.irex.org/resource/vibrant-information-just-prosperous-and-inclusive-societies>.

	SAFE	IREX	Donors	Partners
Reevaluate funding priorities and provide structural funding			✓	
Provide additional support to smaller news outlets and freelancers in particular	✓	✓	✓	✓
Highlight success stories to enable peer-to-peer learning on alternative funding models	✓			
Build expertise and networks in areas that will increase in their importance (e.g. business planning, legal support)	✓			
Increase per diems for participants in activities to better reflect loss of daily income, if possible	✓			

Gender and Social Inclusion

Though the COVID-19 pandemic is universal and unifying in the sense that the virus—in theory—has the potential to infect everyone, regardless of their class, race, religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity, an individual’s pre-existing level of marginalization significantly shapes the likelihood of their getting infected, and their access to adequate health care, vaccines, and support. Pre-existing levels of marginalization also impact individuals’ ability to cope with the pandemic’s economic, political, and/or cultural fallout. Undoubtedly, the most vulnerable among us are hit the hardest. Journalists and social communicators belonging to marginalized populations have and will continue to most acutely experience the challenges associated with economic hardships and a rapidly transforming media and free expression landscape.

Already, the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on people living at the margins of society, especially on those for whom multiple identity-based disadvantages intersect.²⁹

²⁹ Bowleg, Lisa. “We’re Not All in This Together: On COVID-19, Intersectionality, and Structural Inequality.” *American Journal of Public Health*, 110 (7), June 10, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.2020.305766>.

Furthermore, there is a clear connection between vaccine rates and socio-economic inequality, with richer countries recovering economically quicker from COVID-19.³⁰ In order to not exacerbate power imbalances that existed prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, civil society groups called for the increased involvement of women, members of the LGBTQ+ community, rural populations, environmentalists, and others in any and all emergency responses to the pandemic. In recognition of this reality, **SAFE considers gender and social inclusion (GESI) a front-and-center issue which will be elaborated on not only in this part of the Risk Assessment, but which will inform all other sections of this document.**

Challenges

There are three major identity-based challenges in relation to COVID-19 that can affect individuals. First, a person's pre-existing higher vulnerabilities, with the danger of their needs being neglected or them lacking access to vital resources. Second, COVID-19 causing an individual's standing in society to deteriorate due to the weaponization of scapegoating and othering tactics. Finally, the global inequities between low developed and high developed countries.

Though, on the one hand, COVID-19 has brought some parts of the global community closer together virtually and "spiritually" through the shared experience of living during the extraordinary circumstances of a pandemic, overall, it has more so contributed to a **deepening of intercommunal divides**. Political and economic hardships and the weaponization of scapegoating tactics by some political leaders and majority communities have further accentuated racist, xenophobic, antisemitic, homophobic, and nationalistic, among other, narratives against already marginalized groups. Furthermore, the shift to primarily online interactions has created more opportunities for hateful, identity-based groups to form and disseminate propaganda, and mis-/disinformation. The perceived or actual inability of governments in many countries across the world to address the enormous challenges caused by the pandemic is a narrative that has been exploited by far-right groups whose message resonates much more easily with populations frustrated by economic instability and decline. Additionally, while early on in the pandemic there may have been some stigmatization of COVID-19 survivors, two years since, the more pressing issue has been attacks and unprecedented racism towards Asian people as the virus likely originated in Wuhan, China, and this pretext has been used to wrongfully justify aggression.³¹ Furthermore,

³⁰ "Vaccine inequity undermining global economic recovery." World Health Organization. July 22, 2021. <https://www.who.int/news/item/22-07-2021-vaccine-inequity-undermining-global-economic-recovery>.

³¹ Human Rights Watch. "Covid-19 Fueling Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia Worldwide." Human Rights Watch. May 12, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/12/covid-19-fueling-anti-asian-racism-and-xenophobia-worldwide>.

travel bans have become controversial, as some travel bans are perceived to target certain nationalities more than others without proper justification.³² Identity-based concerns have been brought more to light during the pandemic, as marginalized populations have been effected more harshly.

Meanwhile, local and international Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) with a mandate in supporting marginalized communities have largely not been able to meet this increased need for support, since reduced budgets and economic recession led to less funds being available.³³ ³⁴ These actors have faced challenges of staying financially afloat, leading to a reduction in staffing numbers which, overall, makes them less able to play a supportive role to marginalized groups.

Furthermore, over two years since the beginning of the pandemic, and despite vaccines being developed and distributed worldwide, COVID-19 continues to be central in conversations of the general public, politicians, and the news cycle, with no end in sight. This has led to a decrease in attention (both material and discursively) given to issues that are of concern to marginalized communities, who were demanding for their needs and interests to be respected already prior to the pandemic had often been perceived as “troublesome” or outright “threatening” by non-marginalized segments of societies. In other cases, some governments have seized this opportunity and the “distraction” caused by the pandemic, to

³² Nelson, Steven. “African reporter presses Psaki on “racist” Omicron variant travel ban.” New York Post. December 9, 2021. <https://nypost.com/2021/12/09/african-reporter-presses-jen-psaki-on-racist-omicron-travel-ban/>.

³³ “In a sample of 44 organizations in sub-Saharan Africa funded by the UN Trust Fund, in partnership with the Spotlight Initiative and the European Union, all 44 requested additional financial support, primarily for programmatic adaptations, ICT and additional expertise to help the organization become more resilient to COVID-19 and future crises.” Wood, Gemma, and Shruti Majumdar. “COVID-19 and the impact on civil society organizations working to end violence against women and girls: through the lens of CSOs funded by the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women – six months after the global pandemic was declared.” New York: UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women, September 2020. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/un%20trust%20fund%20brief%20on%20impact%20of%20covid-19%20on%20csos%20and%20vawg_2-compressed.pdf.

³⁴ For African CSOs “55.69% has already experienced a loss of funding, while 66.46% expect to lose funding in the next 3 to 6 months”. @AfricanNGOs, & EPIC-Africa. “The Impact of COVID-19 on African Civil Society Organizations.” COVID-19 Response Portal. June 2020. <https://covid19.alnap.org/help-library/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-african-civil-society-organizations>.

push through measures that further infringes on the rights of citizens.³⁵ Already marginalized communities may be at the brunt of these measures.

While the entire country's attention was focused on COVID-19-related issues, the government in **Georgia** pushed through the approval process of controversial infrastructural projects and issued investors with permits that allowed them to implement large projects that had previously been opposed by coalitions of environmentalists, urban activists, and local residents.

Members of marginalized communities also generally have a much **higher vulnerability** to the many impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Lower levels of digital literacy and/or access to technology has made it significantly more difficult to keep up with the sudden and forced transition to an online setting. Marginalized groups are also likely to face comparatively higher-levels of pandemic-induced stress and anxiety that find a fertile ground in their pre-existing disposition to psychosocial stressors, such as identity-based risks, lack of a support network, economic strains, and insufficient access to resources.³⁶

Misinformation and disinformation have also disproportionately affected marginalized communities. The rapid spread of mis-/disinformation—especially on social media-- can and has been exploited to, “incite violence and crime targeted at ethnic minorities – which has resulted in deaths and displacement of children, led to lower child COVID vaccination rates, undermined trust in journalism and science, and drowned out marginalized voices.”³⁷ During the pandemic, mis-/disinformation, particularly around the vaccine, have been rampant. Facebook has been at the brunt of criticism regarding the spread of vaccine misinformation, and interestingly posts about this are particularly prevalent on Spanish-language Facebook.³⁸ Misinformation and disinformation continue to spread quickly, aided by digital media, continuously forcing accurate reporting from journalists and activists to be hindered.

³⁵ For example, in Algeria the "government used curbs on freedom of assembly to suppress a protest movement, leaving the rules in place even after other pandemic-related restrictions eased." Repucci, Sarah, and Amy Slipowitz. "Democracy under Siege." Freedom House. 2021. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege>.

³⁶ Crehan, Phil. "Better data means better outcomes for COVID's marginalized groups." World Economic Forum. June 26, 2020. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/06/covid-marginalized-groups-lgbti/>.

³⁷ Vosloo, Steven. "Digital misinformation / disinformation and children: 10 things you need to know." UNICEF. August 24, 2021. <https://www.unicef.org/globalinsight/stories/digital-misinformation-disinformation-and-children>.

³⁸ Paul, Kari. "'A systemic failure': vaccine misinformation remains rampant on Facebook, experts say." The Guardian. July 21, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/jul/21/facebook-misinformation-vaccines>.

Fair and equal distribution of the vaccine has also been an issue for marginalized communities. The United Nations Human Rights Council has recognized this challenge and urged countries to ensure universal accessibility to vaccines.³⁹ Depending on an individual’s location, they may only have access to less effective vaccines, and for marginalized peoples in rural areas getting access to any vaccine may be difficult in of itself. Vaccine distribution continues to be a major obstacle for marginalized communities in returning to “normal”.

For women, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been felt much more severely for a variety of reasons. In some contexts, societal and cultural expectations might mean that women who are working from home are facing a significantly increased workload. Given that women already shouldered a greater burden for childcare prior to the pandemic, for many of them caretaker demands increased, especially during the period in which schools resorted to remote learning as well. At the same time, lockdowns and work-from-home arrangements coupled with higher levels of emotional stress and insecurity have led to a dramatic increase in domestic gender-based violence (GBV) and femicide.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, those women and LGBTQ+ community members, who have had the financial means and access to relocate most components of their personal, work, and activist life to a remote setting had to spend even more time on the internet. The virtual space can be a thriving opportunity for some women and LGBTQ+ members. However, at the same time, it can also be a space where harassers, misogynistic, homophobic, and/or transphobic persons assault with more or less impunity and/or discriminate on the base of gender, sexual orientation, ethnic/racial identity, disabilities, and more. In addition, members of the LGBTQ+ community are also more vulnerable to the direct impacts of the pandemic and are more severely affected by the safety measures introduced to curb it.⁴¹

Many members of the LGBTQ+ community face additional challenges in accessing healthcare during the COVID-19 pandemic. In part this is reflective of pre-existing discrimination of members of this community by health care systems. For instance, in some regions, members of the community are generally less likely to have health insurance to begin with. At the beginning of the pandemic, SAFE noticed the lack of medical insurance for citizens in some regions to cover COVID-19 related complications, which made it expensive to treat and get

³⁹ “States must prioritize health and equality over profits and vaccine hoarding, UN experts say.” United Nations Human Rights Council. November 29, 2021.

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=27875&LangID=E>.

⁴⁰ Hootsen, Jan-Albert. “Domestic Violence Epidemic Hits Mexico during Coronavirus Lockdown.” America Magazine. August 6, 2020. <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2020/08/06/domestic-violence-epidemic-hits-mexico-during-coronavirus-lockdown>.

⁴¹ For more information on the disproportionate vulnerability of LGBTQ individuals, see this resource: <https://lgbt.foundation/coronavirus/impact>.

care for. While health insurance coverage for COVID-19 related complications has generally been resolved, the issue now lies in many companies not providing health insurance for LGBTQ+ spouses. Additionally, many LGBTQ+ people may be hesitant to turn to the healthcare system, in fear of discrimination⁴²; in some regions, non-cisgender people may be unable to access health care due to their identification cards not reflecting their gender.⁴³ COVID-19 has further exacerbated these pre-existing challenges.

With global attention focused primarily on containing COVID-19 and recovering from its fallout, as well as likely heated political contests coming up across the regions SAFE operates in (e.g. Honduras, Guatemala, Kenya), significantly less attention has been paid to **environmental issues**. In many contexts, environmental protection is regarded as an obstacle to quick economic recovery. This decline in interest and protection has added to the challenges already faced by affected communities and activists, many of whom are also members of marginalized communities (e.g. rural populations, communities in socio-economically marginalized areas, indigenous communities, etc.). Additionally, the lack of attention and effort put into solving the climate crisis has been demonstrated through increased extreme weather worldwide, for example continuously increasing global temperatures resulting in heatwaves and wildfires, as well as droughts, flooding, and storms.⁴⁴ Already, civil society groups point out the increase in violence against journalists and social communicators covering and denouncing exploitative practices and industries.⁴⁵ In addition, this neglect of environmental protection⁴⁶ will likely add to the formation of new marginalized groups, such as environmental refugees.

⁴² “For LGBTQ patients, discrimination can become a barrier to medical care.” American Heart Association. June 4, 2019. <https://www.heart.org/en/news/2019/06/04/for-lgbtq-patients-discrimination-can-become-a-barrier-to-medical-care>.

⁴³ “My ID, my identity? The impact of ID systems on transgender people in Argentina, France, and the Philippines.” Privacy International. January 15, 2021. <https://www.privacyinternational.org/long-read/4372/my-id-my-identity-impact-id-systems-transgender-people-argentina-france-and-philippines>.

⁴⁴ Brimicombe, Chloe, Claudia Di Napoli, Hannah Cloke, and Maureen Wanzala. “Guest post: Reviewing the summer of extreme weather in 2021.” Carbon Brief. September 8, 2021. <https://www.carbonbrief.org/guest-post-reviewing-the-summer-of-extreme-weather-in-2021>.

⁴⁵ Barry, Andrew, and Evelina Gambino. “Unsustainable Transition? Hydropower and the Post-Covid Recovery in Georgia.” OpenDemocracy. July 30, 2020. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/unsustainable-transition-hydropower-and-post-covid-recovery-georgia>.

⁴⁶ During COVID-19, media coverage of climate change plummeted. While mentions of climate change in the media are rising, they are still not at pre-pandemic levels. Mehrabi, Zia. “Media coverage of climate change during COVID-19.” January 28, 2021. <https://medium.com/the-nature-of-food/media-coverage-of-climate-change-during-covid-19-20082627c82f>.

In **Bangladesh**, Abu Bakar Siddique the husband of environmental activist Rizwana Hassan with the Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA) was briefly abducted by unknown miscreants but later released, amid a public outcry over his disappearance. His abduction was widely speculated to have been perpetrated by powerful real-estate investors in Bangladesh whose projects had been negatively affected by Hassan’s activism.

Opportunities

To SAFE and IREX in general, this forced, rapid shift to the online setting has and will continue to open a range of new participants and partners. The pandemic has allowed for newly emerging citizen journalists and freelancers, with limited awareness on the importance of holistic safety, to benefit from SAFE’s training. SAFE’s position and existing networks in the target regions prove instrumental in identifying and reaching much bigger audiences who were not previously part of the program’s operations. For example, SAFE Asia was able to easily use two translators simultaneously online trainings; one translator did Bahasa to English, while the other did English to Bahasa. This reduced confusion during the training and allowed the group to participate in the training all together. This also allowed the SAFE team to reach a participant group they otherwise could not, reach this easily and cost-effectively due to the language barrier. Closer engagement with marginalized communities by SAFE, IREX, and others has also promoted a more nuanced understanding of the challenges that these communities face.

Additionally, the SAFE team used the pandemic’s abrupt changes to focus on and further encourage GESI in trainings. To do so, SAFE updated the Inclusion Annex of the SAFE Basic Training Curriculum,⁴⁷ a guide meant to share SAFE’s approach and methodology to ensure equal access to its trainings, address identity-based risks, and challenge harmful norms and stereotypes. Furthermore, it draws attention to the necessity of focusing on different contexts to fit where the training is located, and the environment where participants work. The first edition of the SAFE Inclusion Annex was published in March 2020. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic transformed the operating environments for projects like SAFE, as well as IREX in general, making questions of accessibility paramount. The pandemic has allowed for an opportunity to focus on GESI related issues, and this should and will be a continuous focus in the future.

⁴⁷ “SAFE Basic Training Curriculum Inclusion Annex: Towards Inclusive Safety Trainings.” International Research and Exchanges Board. July 2021. <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/safe-annex-inclusion-second-edition.pdf>.

Recommendations

Although nation-wide quarantines are largely no longer in effect, the pandemic will continue to insert itself in everyday life, and further harm already vulnerable, marginalized communities. These communities should continue to be the focus of SAFE, IREX, and similar initiatives and organizations, because they are disproportionately affected by the pandemic and have become targets of discriminatory narratives and scapegoating. These narratives will last far longer than the effects of the pandemic if they are not addressed now.

Similar to what SAFE did with updating the Inclusion Annex, donors, and organizations with a mandate in protecting marginalized journalists or social communicators should also continue to update activities and planning based on new realities where necessary, as well as actively monitor regional developments through advisory meetings, consultations with partners, and solidarity events to update their own programs accordingly.

Meanwhile, narratives that focus on stigmatization and scapegoating of marginalized communities should continue to be corrected discursively and through targeted awareness and solidarity-building campaigns. SAFE prioritized training of those media outlets and individuals who work with marginalized groups, allowing not only greater support to these groups but also a better understanding of the needs of the communities to inform SAFE's future engagements.

At the same time, there should continue to be an investment in the development of new tools that are accessible and enable participants from a variety of backgrounds to effectively participate in online arenas. SAFE, IREX, and like-minded organizations and initiatives should pay particular attention to making virtual activities as accessible as possible. For instance, for persons with disabilities (PwD) remote activities can be boon or bane, depending on how they are implemented.⁴⁸ On the one hand, as the transition to virtual and remote activities (and work) becomes more socially acceptable, it allows some PwD to participate in activities that would have otherwise been inaccessible to them. At the same time, however, remote learning and future programming should take into consideration how tools such as screen readers or closed captioning can help make presentations accessible. As return to in-person

⁴⁸ Miller, Hawken. "For people with disabilities, working from home using tech is a relief – and a struggle" Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung. August 11, 2020. [us.boell.org/en/2020/08/11/people-disabilities-working-home-using-tech-relief-and-struggle](https://www.us.boell.org/en/2020/08/11/people-disabilities-working-home-using-tech-relief-and-struggle).

events begin, and with experience in remote and hybrid trainings,⁴⁹ programs can ensure accessibility for PwD and other marginalized communities to have learning opportunities from SAFE, IREX, and other organizations and initiatives.

As governments focus their environmental efforts on specific issues, largely carbon dioxide reduction, while neglecting other aspects, activists and journalists covering these issues have become even more necessary and relevant. SAFE therefore plans on increasing its engagement with media outlets or freelancers, as well as activists, whose primary work focus is on environmental protection. This vulnerable group of journalists and social communicators must remain a focus of SAFE’s, IREX’s, and similar initiatives and organizations’ work, especially as the climate crisis continues to worsen.

	SAFE	IREX	Donors	Partners
Continue or start prioritizing marginalized communities in programming	✓	✓	✓	✓
Continue to make online programming as accessible and inclusive as possible	✓	✓	✓	✓
Influence the development of new technology to take into consideration the needs of marginalized groups (e.g. PwD)			✓	✓
Help prevent stigmatization of individuals, as well as outwardly racist narratives and hate crimes against Asian communities, through awareness and solidarity-building	✓	✓	✓	✓
Provide increased support to journalists and activists working on environmental issues	✓	✓	✓	✓

⁴⁹ Hybrid trainings are when the participant group and/or SAFE trainers are in the same place. SAFE has experimented with multiple hybrid training formats. For example, one SAFE team conducted a training where one trainer traveled to join and directly connect with participants. A different type of hybrid training was demonstrated when SAFE staff members met together in one location, while participants gathered in another location.

Physical Safety

Physical safety measures will continue to constitute the first line of defense against the direct effects of the pandemic. While skills pertaining to physical safety remain essential to social communicators and media practitioners, COVID-19 encourages training and knowledge of biosafety as well. COVID-19 is likely to persist for years, especially with new variants, like Delta or Omicron, that are far more contagious than their previous counterparts, despite vaccination rollouts. Now and for the coming years, tools and measures reducing the risk of infection will therefore be of high relevance and significantly shape both the content and execution of training programs. For participants and staff that are all vaccinated it is possible to do some trainings in-person or in a hybrid format, however there are risks associated with breakthrough cases. Furthermore, economic instability has led to civil unrest and protests, creating precarious situations for journalists that undermine their physical safety. This is likely to continue, especially as elections polarized by COVID-19 and its ripple effects are on the horizon.

Challenges

Despite vaccine rollouts across the globe, herd immunity is far from being reached. The **direct effect** of a COVID-19 infection will therefore remain a key concern to both program staff and those IREX and SAFE work with. While some that have not taken the vaccine cite distrust in the government or the vaccine itself, others that want the vaccine are unable to get it due to limited supply and resources. Furthermore, while there are regional disparities, in which certain areas of the world do not have access to any vaccine, there are also disparities in the types of vaccines created throughout the world. For example, while much of the western world has access to more efficient vaccines (Pfizer, Moderna), other regions only have access to vaccines with less protection rates (Sinopharm, Sinovac, AstraZeneca); this can affect travel as only people vaccinated with certain vaccines are allowed to enter some countries. Additionally, breakthrough cases are possible among those vaccinated and variants of COVID-19, like the Delta and Omicron variants, which are becoming increasingly contagious—and therefore dangerous—can continue to spread the virus. Furthermore, people are more aware of the potential long-term effects of COVID-19 now; some people have experienced symptoms of the virus for weeks or months after initial infection—experts are still trying to understand this phenomenon. Meanwhile, most governments have loosened restrictions to some degree and now try to enforce mask mandates and social distancing instead of nation-wide quarantines. However, with civil unrest, protests, and some not understanding the severity of the pandemic, some people will continue to ignore these restrictions and there is possibility of more nation-wide lockdowns.

For journalists specifically, there has been a major issue with access to personal protective equipment (PPE). There is a basic failure of employers to provide even any PPE at all to journalists working on field reporting. An International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) report surveying journalists found that 30% of participants in the study did not receive any of the recommended protective equipment. Additionally, 45% of study participants did not receive even a face mask.⁵⁰ With the civil unrest in the wake of the pandemic, journalists were often forced to be in spaces with large crowds and therefore heightened risk. Beyond the lack of journalists receiving PPE, those that did receive some may unknowingly be less protected than they thought. Studies have shown that sexism is prevalent, as PPE, and more specifically respiratory equipment like masks, was designed for men.⁵¹ This means women typically have ill-fitted PPE, that is not nearly as effective in protecting them against COVID-19. Without proper PPE, the health and physical safety of journalists and those around them are directly impacted.

Pre-existing power imbalances continue to contribute to a differential spread of the virus and its effects by factors such as gender, age, geography, and social class. For instance, poorer communities often live in under-resourced areas, earn less, and have fewer savings, and therefore simply cannot afford to abide to physical distancing rules and/or curfew because their socio-economic disadvantages force them to leave the security of their homes in search for income. Similarly, these areas are also less likely to have access to the vaccine or have the resources to go get the vaccine. Once infected, their lower economic status might make it unaffordable for them to seek medical treatment in the first place or they might be receiving medical care of lower quality because of their financial means and/or identity-related factors. For instance, a female journalist from an indigenous group in Central America might not have the financial means to seek treatment and, even if she does, bias in the treatment provided might lead to her not receiving optimal care, thus increasing her risk of having to face severe and potentially fatal symptoms.⁵²

The pandemic's potential **indirect effects** on staff and those SAFE and IREX works with's physical safety are manifold. COVID-19 has inarguably had a significant global impact on

⁵⁰ Posetti, Julie, Emily Bell, and Pete Brown. "Journalism & The Pandemic: A Global Snapshot of Impacts." International Center for Journalists. https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Journalism%20and%20the%20Pandemic%20Project%20Report%201%202020_FINAL.pdf.

⁵¹ Topping, Alexandra. "Sexism on the Covid-19 frontline: 'PPE is made for a 6ft 3in rugby player'." The Guardian. April 24, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/24/sexism-on-the-covid-19-frontline-ppe-is-made-for-a-6ft-3in-rugby-player>.

⁵² For more on an example in the US context, see this source on COVID-19 treatment bias: Eligon, John, and Audra D.S. Burch. "Questions of Bias in Covid-19 Treatment Add to the Mourning for Black Families." The New York Times, The New York Times. May 10, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/10/us/coronavirus-african-americans-bias.html>.

economic development and political stability. Economic decline has subsequently caused hardships in communities, resulting in civil unrest, political instability, and a rise in protests and polarization.⁵³ Globally, this trend has perhaps been most actualized by the rise in radical and nationalistic groups strengthening their narrative, gaining popularity, and declaring their intention to participate in the political sphere. With these groups comes a rise in hate speech against ethnic and religious minorities in general, as well as activists, community-based organizations, and social communicators from those communities. This dangerous problem is often indicative of a larger sentiment of public dissatisfaction and opposition to either unpopular measures to curb the spread of the pandemic and/or mismanagement of the crisis. Journalists have therefore been exposed much more frequently to high-risk reporting scenarios. These events' risk levels have been exacerbated by the increase of violent responses at the hands of security forces that, in particular in closed and closing civic spaces, are mandated to enforce repressive anti-‘Freedom of Expression and Assembly’ legislation. However, some hateful incidents against minorities, marginalized people, and/or activists, have seen little response from authorities, a significant problem in of itself.⁵⁴ During heavy lockdowns, countries saw a decrease in property crimes, however as economic strain is continuing, it is likely that crime levels will return to normal or even increase.⁵⁵ Furthermore, with COVID-19 variants and continued waves of infections, economic hardships have been compounded, especially for small businesses.

Again, already vulnerable populations have been the most disproportionately affected by these ripple effects. The pandemic certainly became an excuse for scapegoating, further ‘othering’ of entire communities, anti-immigrant policies, and institutionalized racism, all of which have led to a significant increase of threats, harassment, and attacks (physical and otherwise) directed at marginalized communities. This will continue to be a threat to already marginalized communities in the wake of the pandemic which may have dangerous, potentially lethal results.

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the environment, from governments largely ignoring environmental issues to instead focus on advancing economic recovery, as well as resources needed to manufacture the immense amount of PPE (e.g. disposable masks). In the

⁵³ “Global Peace Index 2021: Overview and key findings.” Institute for Economics and Peace. 2021. <https://www.dmeforpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Global-Peace-Index-2021-DME.pdf>.

⁵⁴ “Most crimes against Mexico journalists, activists unpunished.” The Associated Press, ABC News. December 23, 2021. <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/90-activists-journalists-crimes-mexico-unpunished-81920120>.

⁵⁵ Research brief: Effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions on homicide and property crime.” United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. 2020. https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/covid/Property_Crime_Brief_2020.pdf.

pandemic's wake, another indirect effect has been the focus (or lack thereof) on disaster preparedness and recovery as it relates to environmental catastrophes. Impacts and hardships caused by events such as floods, droughts, or earthquakes have been even more extreme due to the focus on COVID-19 recovery rather than the effects of climate change; this will continue to be an issue in years to come, especially in rural communities that are already more vulnerable to natural disasters.⁵⁶ For instance, in the East Africa region, droughts causing food insecurity was compounded by rising COVID-19 cases; governments imposed transport restrictions which disrupted supply chains especially going to rural areas.⁵⁷ In general, the pandemic continues to dominate conversation, leading to the global focus on climate change and environmental protection being deemphasized, while economic recovery and public health is prioritized. In the medium- to long-term future, marginalized communities in particular will continue suffer the consequences of this neglect in the form of very substantial threats to their lives, properties, and the ecosystems around them.

Opportunities

Overall, the pandemic has led to heightened awareness of physical safety issues. For instance, the outcry in many countries at the beginning of the crisis over the lack of proper equipment to protect against the infectious disease and other physical risks led to many media outlets and individuals to reexamine their supply of PPE, first aid kits, and other equipment, as well as pay closer attention to its availability in the future, thereby preventing similar shortages in acute times of crises. Among the wider population, the sheer duration of physical distancing measures currently has and could continue to lead to long-term behavioral shifts and a new cautiousness about health and physical safety.

On the other hand, there is also a continued opportunity to raise public appreciation and knowledge on crisis preparedness. From the increase in natural disasters and extreme weather to the notable civil unrest, crisis preparedness should continue to be prioritized by individuals globally. COVID-19 has demonstrated the fragility of the world and exposed many governments lack of preparedness to respond to crises. For social communicators and media practitioners who will be covering these often-dangerous events, they must be educated and trained to properly prepare.

⁵⁶ Quigley, Mark C., et al. "A Multi-Hazards Earth Science Perspective on the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Potential for Concurrent and Cascading Crises." *Environment Systems & Decisions*. May 16, 2020. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7229439/, 10.1007/s10669-020-09772-1.

⁵⁷ Wetaya, Richard. "COVID's second wave worsens food insecurity in East Africa." Alliance for Science, Boyce Thompson Institute. July 14, 2021. <https://allianceforscience.cornell.edu/blog/2021/07/covids-second-wave-worsens-food-insecurity-in-east-africa/>.

Recommendations

For SAFE, changes in the physical risk landscape first and foremost led to a need to adapt and update and/or devise new lesson plans to address new or changing risks that are due to a) a continuing direct threat posed by infection with the COVID-19 virus and its variants and b) an increase in violent conflict, protests, and crimes. Since COVID-19 is the new normal, these physical risk mitigation plans must continue to incorporate long term effects of the virus. These changes have ranged from avoiding actual physical contact in domain lessons to allow for physical distancing (e.g. no demonstrations of first aid techniques with volunteers), to other COVID-19 “twists” to existing lessons (e.g. “How to maintain physical distance in protests situations” or, for the Situational Awareness lesson, “How do I protect myself and my equipment from petty crime?”). Additionally, some centers have developed guidelines and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) on trainings during the pandemic, which include measures like hotel health-safety checklists and hybrid training guidelines. Many of SAFE’s physical safety related lesson plans were updated to include information on necessary PPE and how to mitigate other COVID-19 related risks. To most effectively address changes in the operating environment for organizations, SAFE has also begun updating their SOPs and circulating this information among alumni to, if needed, help them audit their SOPs and ensure that they are still adequately and sufficiently trained to deal with in the plethora of newly emerged risks. These lesson plans, SOPs, and other guidelines should continue to be updated regularly to reflect the most current risks and challenges.

SAFE, IREX, partners, and donors should also be prepared to dedicate funding to providing those they work with basic physical safety equipment, such as PPE or first aid kits, in particular when working with socio-economically marginalized individuals or outlets. A first step to this would be to actively work on convincing the donor community and journalists in managerial positions of the importance of this type of equipment. Education about risks related to physical safety will be particularly relevant in rural or otherwise marginalized regions where reliable and consistent health information is not always available.⁵⁸ When training journalists and social communicators from these areas, particular emphasis could therefore be placed on how they can not only use physical safety measures in their own work and for their own safety, but also how basic physical risk mitigation measures can be effectively communicated to their respective audiences. Furthermore, this funding could encourage participants to partake in the vaccination process, allowing for a necessary layer

⁵⁸ Williams, Peter. “Opinion: COVID-19 in Rural Communities — Building Back Better in the Global South.” Devex. July 8, 2020. www.devex.com/news/opinion-covid-19-in-rural-communities-building-back-better-in-the-global-south-97583.

of protection to COVID-19. Vaccinations, along with PPE and social distancing, will benefit physical safety of journalists, media practitioners, and social communicators.

At the same time, more funding might be needed to protect SAFE’s own equipment and property, e.g. through auditing existing safety measures (CCTV, secure locks, etc.) and, if needed, upgrading these systems. Organizations should also look to formalize its mitigation plans for cases where staff members or those they work with are infected with or pass away from COVID-19. For program staff, this could include devising backup plans for when a team member is temporarily or permanently unable to perform their job, such as maintaining a list of consultants that could gap-fill on short-notice, but also proactively identifying partners or external services that could provide psychosocial support to program teams’ affected directly by the pandemic. The SAFE DC team has employed the strategy of giving managers an ongoing list of their responsibilities, so if they are unable to work, the team can cover for them. Similarly, other SAFE centers created SOPs for steps to take if staff is sick or deceased; during trainings, SAFE encourages organizations they work with to do the same. Organizations should also have strict guidelines in how to return to offices, for example employees being fully vaccinated, as well as directions if program participants or staff become ill.

	SAFE	IREX	Donors	Partners
Adapt and update existing SAFE lesson plans; create new lesson plans	✓			
Provide individuals and media organizations with basic physical safety equipment	✓	✓		✓
Devise or revise risk mitigation plans and SOPs related to infection with virus	✓			
Audit and, if needed, upgrade own physical safety equipment for the protection of staff and property	✓	✓		

Psychosocial Safety

The COVID-19 pandemic has considerably impacted SAFE, those SAFE works with, and the world, both now and for years to come. Even two years into the pandemic, new variants are continuing to develop, and more vaccine boosters and information are coming to light. There are still many unknowns and COVID-19 continues to have a tremendous impact on every individual. Journalists, who have been working on the frontlines, at the brunt of government crackdowns on freedom of speech and press, and subject to increased harassment, have reported psychosocial pressures as the primary challenge during the pandemic. For SAFE, this enormous need for proper psychosocial care encouragement, as well as the increased attention it receives, presents an opportunity to, on a larger scale, increase awareness about the importance of psychosocial well-being and continue to impart proven best practices, skills, and tools on those SAFE works with and others.

Challenges

Regardless of profession, first and foremost, the potentially damaging effects of the pandemic on global psychosocial well-being are caused by **heightened stressors**. In addition to the fear of potentially getting infected and therefore concern over one's own physical safety, there are also concerns over getting others in one's network infected with COVID-19, as well as an element of insecurity and fear of the unknowns. While we know more about the virus now than in March 2020, and the vaccination roll outs are more widespread, psychosocial well-being is still being thwarted by increased political polarization and civil unrest. This is compounded by other factors such as the negative effects of extended periods of work from home, potential job loss, social distancing, curfew, and other restrictions. These fears are typically projected not only to oneself, but also encompasses fears over the safety and well-being of loved ones, including family and friends.

Meanwhile, research has documented the negative impacts of measures implemented to curb the spread of the virus (e.g. lockdowns). Many individuals' well-being is negatively influenced by the monotony and isolation associated with lockdowns and/or work from home, which can lead to reduced productivity, low mood, and increased irritability. These, along with other effects impacts, are particularly pronounced for members of marginalized communities. For instance, women are exposed to additional stressors due to them often having primary responsibility for child and dependent care. At the same time, women, and

members of the LGBTQ+ community, are disproportionately vulnerable to gender-based violence in lockdown situations.⁵⁹

These combined stressors can lead to a variety of negative effects on psychosocial well-being and resilience. New research argues that the COVID-19 pandemic can both precipitate new mental health disorders and exacerbate already existing ones. Effects can include everything from depression, anxiety, panic disorders, self-blame, to “survivor’s guilt”⁶⁰, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), delirium, and psychosis.⁶¹

Journalists and social communicators have been confronted with additional challenges that are often unique to their profession, adding further to increased levels of stress and anxiety. For instance, these feelings are heightened since many frontline journalists are expected to cover the pandemic in the field and are thereby forced to expose themselves to a higher risk of getting infected. Similarly, with increased civil unrest, journalists are often on the front lines here as well, not only furthering exposure risks, but also potentially putting themselves in dangerous situations. Journalists and social communicators focused on exposing repressive or mismanaged governments are also at severe risk due to going against official narratives. At the same time, changes in the media landscape, economic hardship, job insecurity, increased digital threats and harassment, increased workloads and responsibilities, government-imposed restrictions, and heavy-handed security forces are all additional stress factors which can lead to burnout and other work-related mental health problems.

Marginalized communities, who are usually first to be affected by economic hardships, including job loss or the inability to purchase essentials such as food, water, masks, and PPE, experience higher stress and anxiety levels which affects not just themselves, but also their work and family relationships. In addition, the growing number of freelancers have been exposed to even higher levels of insecurity (and, therefore, stress and anxiety), given their comparatively lower job security and an often-forced transition from employment with a media house to self-sufficiency. Meanwhile, media professionals working with smaller and under-resourced organizations (e.g. in rural areas) might have had challenges accessing

⁵⁹ “Gender-based violence on the rise during lockdowns.” United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR). November 25, 2020. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2020/11/5fbd2e774/gender-based-violence-rise-during-lockdowns.html>.

⁶⁰ Davis, Shirley. “Survivor’s Guilt, the Coronavirus and Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.” CPTSDfoundation.Org. April 6, 2020. <https://cptsdfoundation.org/2020/04/06/survivors-guilt-the-coronavirus-and-complex-post-traumatic-stress-disorder/>.

⁶¹ Kar, Sujita Kumar, S. M. Yasir Arafat, Russell Kabir, Pawan Sharma, and Shailendra K. Saxena. “Coping with Mental Health Challenges During COVID-19.” *Medical Virology: From Pathogenesis to Disease Control*. April 30, 2020. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-15-4814-7_16.

mental health services. Even in larger media houses, psychosocial support services may have been the first to fall victim to financial constraints and subsequent budget cuts, if even prevalent before the pandemic. Despite the size of the media organization, it is clear that media houses have not provided adequate-- if any-- psychosocial support to journalists who are in distress.⁶² In many places, upcoming elections will further elevate risk levels related to increasingly heavy-handed responses by security forces, further affecting mental well-being of journalists and exacerbating psychosocial vulnerabilities.

In **El Salvador**, some civil society organizations opened food banks to help journalists who had lost their jobs due to the pandemic. Those organizations asked the local SAFE team to provide psychosocial support for journalists who showed symptoms of depression or even self-destructive behaviors because of their deteriorating financial situation. As a result, the SAFE team provided several of these individuals with psychosocial risk mitigation plans.

The psychosocial effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will affect SAFE and IREX staff and the people SAFE and IREX works with for many years to come. Even with vaccine rollouts, mental health issues persist in line with other developments and consequences which will materialize in the long run, for example, increased political and economic instability. “Going back to normal” —whenever this will happen and whatever it will look like—will be a tremendously slow process. This long-term increased demand for psychosocial support will, in turn, place a higher burden on mental health professionals, including SAFE-type support staff, which will then put them at a higher risk of exhaustion, stress, and burnout.

Opportunities

For SAFE, the increased demand and awareness for psychosocial safety presents two main windows of opportunity. For one, the higher need for psychosocial support and, hence, demand for such services mean that SAFE’s holistic approach becomes even more important and attractive, resulting in increased interest from media practitioners and social communicators, partners, and donors.

At the same time, in some contexts, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased overall attention devoted to questions and unfair stigmatization of mental health by governments and civil society alike. SAFE, having the expertise and an already established reputation as a go-to source for information on psychosocial well-being for journalists and social communicators,

⁶² Posetti, Julie, Emily Bell, and Pete Brown. “Journalism & The Pandemic: A Global Snapshot of Impacts.” International Center for Journalists. https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Journalism%20and%20the%20Pandemic%20Project%20Report%201%202020_FINAL.pdf.

is in a good position to leverage this standing and continue to serve as an advocate, mobilize resources, and coordinate others in responding to the growing needs in this regard.

In **Kenya**, the government seems to devote increased attention to mental health in reaction to the pandemic. Acknowledging that mental health cases had increased significantly, the country's Ministry of Health urged Kenyans to treat mental health stress caused by the pandemic. Though specific steps taken have, so far, been tepid, President Uhuru Kenyatta voicing that he was concerned by worsening mental health issues and "increasing tensions" within the home is a step in the right direction to initiate national discourse on these issues.

Recommendations

To meet the increasing psychosocial demands specific to the COVID-19 pandemic, first and foremost, SAFE should continue to update psychosocial domain lessons to respond to mental health outcomes caused or exacerbated by the pandemic and related fallout (e.g. anxiety, panic, and depression). At the same time, SAFE's psychosocial trainers should continue to audit existing lessons to decide whether they generally meet media practitioners and social communicators' needs or whether new lessons should be devised, such as "How to deal with loss?" (of your health, financial security, job, friends or family members). SAFE has already begun this process, for example, the EU team has developed and performed COVID-19 mental health sessions and working from home sessions. Furthermore, SAFE staff must be able to provide a safe space for participants at trainings to speak freely about mental health without stigmatization.

SAFE could also explore looking at incorporating into its portfolio lessons that might not be directly related to psychosocial well-being and resilience-building, but nonetheless be of enormous influence over media practitioners and social communicators' mental health through reducing root causes of stress, such as fears over job security or insecurities related to sudden professional changes. These hands-on lessons could touch on a variety of skills and tools, such as workload management strategies, business plan development for freelancers, or effective remote-working skills. In those cases where these topics could not be covered by SAFE staff or fall outside of the program's mandate, SAFE should invest into reaching out to organizations who do work on these issues and who SAFE could refer the people SAFE works with to.

Overall, solution-based trainings and online tools will be at a much higher demand, in particular for marginalized communities. For easier accessibility and usability, it could prove helpful to have some of these tools available in those SAFE works with primary languages, which could be achieved either through reaching out to organizations who have resources available in languages other than the ones covered by SAFE teams or, in the long run,

developing and/or translating tools and resources targeted at specific language communities.

Other preventive measures incorporated by SAFE and partners could include raising mental health awareness targeted at media outlets and individual media practitioners and social communicators through Solidarity Events. It is particularly important that staff in management or editorial positions are aware of existing and future psychosocial challenges for journalists and social communicators. Therefore, SAFE should devote particular attention to reaching those types of individuals and to initiate and facilitate open discussions on the importance of well-being and selfcare, as well as on preventive measures that staff in leadership positions can undertake to reduce challenges in this regard.

Considering the increased demand and potential for subsequent exhaustion and burnout among organizations with a mandate in providing psychosocial support (including SAFE staff), SAFE and its partners should prioritize investing in preventive measures and extending collaborations to “share the burden” and render support provided more effective. Increased cooperation should aim to target and mobilize organizations and watchdog groups who work with minority communities in particular, and thereby gain a better understanding of their specific needs. It is clear that there is no “after COVID-19” and therefore psychosocial wellness teachings must adhere to this idea and how to best prevent stress from it and other unprecedented events.

	SAFE	IREX	Donors	Partners
Continue building resources that address psychological challenges resulting from COVID-19 (anxiety, depression, stress, etc.)	✓			
Incorporate other relevant skills training (e.g. business planning), where appropriate; or build networks with other organizations who can provide this support and be referred to	✓			
Provide coping and other online-based solution tools (accessible in native languages)	✓			
Facilitate discussion around self-care and mental health awareness among decision-makers in media houses and CSOs	✓	✓	✓	

Digital Safety

Work from home for some has been ongoing for almost two years now, yet this is not the reality for many journalists who had to be on the frontlines. Despite this, the newfound focus on online media has increased journalist's needs to have knowledge on digital safety. A drastic shift from in-person to remote activities redefines our presence online and exposes those working from their computers to new risks, as well as opportunities. For those who are lucky to be on the advantageous side of the 'digital divide', the accelerated shift to the online sphere has redefined work culture and changed the ways they engage with each other, how they manage tasks, and their ways to form and maintain partnerships. For them, an increased online presence may have led to more collaboration and provided them with more opportunities for the exchange of knowledge, ideas, and innovation. On the other hand, the significant number of individuals and entire communities without sufficient access to technology and/or low digital literacy have mostly been excluded from this process. All people in the digital realm have been exposed to mis-/disinformation that could be potentially dangerous or harmful in several ways. Additionally, increased activity in virtual spaces has risen instances of online harassment;⁶³ for example, there has been a demonstrated increase in the harassment of women online since the beginning of the pandemic.⁶⁴ While pandemic restrictions are largely on their way out, the newfound reliance on digital tools and technology can continue to create challenges, as well as opportunities for SAFE, those SAFE works with, and partners.

Challenges

With more time spent online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, journalists and social communicators, as well as ordinary citizens, have become targets of increased digital attacks, misinformation, and disinformation. The rapid increase of online activities, including for internet activism and journalism, presents windows of opportunities for malicious actors who use phishing, scams, hijacking of online communication, and social engineering to exploit "weak points" in the system for their own gain.⁶⁵ Journalists and social communicators, as well as other staff employed at media houses or freelance and independent media

⁶³ Posetti, Julie, Emily Bell, and Pete Brown. "Journalism & The Pandemic: A Global Snapshot of Impacts." International Center for Journalists. https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Journalism%20and%20the%20Pandemic%20Project%20Report%201%202020_FINAL.pdf.

⁶⁴ Posetti, Julie, Nabeelah Shabbir, Diana Maynard, Kalina Bontcheva, and Nermin Aboulez. "The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists." United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. April 2021. <https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/the-chilling.pdf>.

⁶⁵ Slavin, Brad. "The Rise of COVID-19 Phishing Attacks: How Cyber Adversaries Are Adopting Phishing to Generate New Threat Vectors." Cyber Defense Magazine. July 26, 2020. www.cyberdefensemagazine.com/the-rise-of-covid-19.

practitioners, working on sensitive issues and who may have been forced to work from home are then reliant on the safety of their home internet or—in cases where they do not have a reliable internet connection at home— on public networks, both of which are often much less secure than the internet connection in an office space, where dedicated IT staff would in most cases ensure a protected and secure connection. The increased dependence on the internet and a lack of digital literacy has—without a doubt-- increased the risks for journalists and social communicators. Freelancers, environmentalists, independent, citizen journalists, and social communicators who might have a comparatively low digital awareness are at the most risk.

Furthermore, the shift to online spaces in a time of extreme civil unrest has increased the ability of hateful, nationalistic groups to form, find, and indoctrinate new members, as well as disseminate mis-/disinformation and propaganda.⁶⁶ No matter what side of the digital divide an individual is on, this is an issue all are prone to. If these groups' narratives are not countered on social media websites, by governments, and especially by media practitioners and social communicators, this will continue to be a major challenge to overcome.

In closed and closing spaces with rampant government surveillance, (e.g. Digital Security Act in Bangladesh)⁶⁷ journalists and social communicators whose work criticizes their government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis, the recovery from the pandemic, and/or ripple effects like civil unrest have been the prime targets of excessive internet policing.⁶⁸ With heated upcoming political contests in a number of countries SAFE and IREX operate in, as well as the overall increase in criticism against governments' and security forces' responses to dissenting oppositional voices, pose significant risks for those who challenge official government narratives. Apart from the broader audiences, those journalists and social communicators who predominantly work in critical and investigative media have needed and will continue to need additional digital security assistance as they become targets of authorities in heightened political and economic environments.

⁶⁶ Gais, Hannah. "Hate Groups and Racist Pundits Spew COVID-19 Misinformation on Social Media Despite Companies' Pledges to Combat It." Southern Poverty Law Center. April 17, 2020. <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2020/04/17/hate-groups-and-racist-pundits-spew-covid-19-misinformation-social-media-despite-companies>.

⁶⁷ "Bangladesh: Muzzling Dissent Online." Amnesty International. November 12, 2018. <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/ASA1393642018ENGLISH.PDF>.

⁶⁸ "How COVID-19 Threatens Independent Journalism." Open Society Foundations. July 2020. <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/explainers/how-covid-19-threatens-independent-journalism>.

In **Bangladesh**, the government passed the Digital Security Act in 2018 which provides authorities with the absolute power to conduct investigations into any online activity that might be perceived as ‘harmful’ or as a ‘threat’ and to subsequently arrest anyone, without a warrant or court order. The government is granted wide discretionary power to interpret the law as it sees fit. In times of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2018 Act serves as almost a *carte blanche* for authorities to suppress any negative reporting or commentary on the government’s handling of the pandemic.

Meanwhile, the overall extent of **digital surveillance** has risen, especially as many countries use some form of digital location control system as part of their epidemiological response to the COVID-19 pandemic and to be better able to trace (and, therefore, reduce) the transmission of the virus. Countries like Turkey and many others introduced mobile applications to track citizens and visitors in order to curb the spread of the virus by pinpointing COVID-19 exposure risks and tracking vaccinations records, but also thereby gather detailed data on individuals’ movement and whereabouts.⁶⁹ These apps typically issue wide-ranging permissions to location and other data on the users’ mobile devices. Though introduced as measures to curb the spread of the virus, security forces can easily misuse this data to track movements and gatherings of its citizens and/or continue using this mass data collection tool in the future, both of which pose immense risks to our staff and the people SAFE and IREX works with’s privacy. Malaysia has already experienced this possibility when users of an app that verified COVID-19 vaccinations had a data leak that effected millions.⁷⁰ Digital surveillance will continue to be a major obstacle for journalists and social communicators alike that could possibly lead to dangerous and harmful results.

Marginalized groups who lack the financial means to afford technological equipment and/or a stable internet connection have faced challenges of a very different nature, since they largely have not been able to keep up with the rapid shift to the digital, remote sphere in the first place. The COVID-19 pandemic therefore has an alarmingly high potential to continue to **further widen the ‘digital gap’**.⁷¹ This effectively excludes large swaths of the global community from the online world, in particular those who had traditionally been affected by the ‘digital gap’ (e.g. rural and indigenous communities).

⁶⁹ “Turkey to track citizens via mobile phones to enforce quarantines.” Reuters. April 8, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-turkey-phones-idUSKBN21Q1ZY>.

⁷⁰ “Malaysia’s Covid-19 app reports ‘malicious script’ misuse.” The Peninsula. October 20, 2021. <https://thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/20/10/2021/Malaysia%E2%80%99s-Covid-19-app-reports-%E2%80%98malicious-script%E2%80%99-misuse>.

⁷¹ Ramos, Mauricio. “COVID-19 could widen the digital gap. Here’s what’s needed now.” World Economic Forum. July 30, 2020. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/07/covid-19-could-widen-the-digital-gap-here-is-what-is-needed-now/>.

The transition to remote work and the overall surge in online learning opportunities has somewhat also caused “**virtual training fatigue**” among those SAFE works with and SAFE staff. With some of the journalists’ and social communicators’ work already being performed digitally, it has become more difficult to partake in long, remote sessions such as online trainings or other web-based events. Additionally, some trainings are nearly impossible to translate to online, like first aid. While SAFE staff have begun to look into this, online modules do not allow for the same type of practice as an in-person activity. Despite this challenge, trainers can focus on COVID-19 specific related safety measures, and how to mitigate risk from the virus, as well as civil unrest if relevant to the operating environment. Online trainings do not allow for the same in-depth instruction and close collaboration, which is compounded by the challenge of virtual fatigue. However, hybrid trainings have allowed SAFE to connect closer to participants and relieve some of the virtual fatigue and possible miscommunications.

Opportunities

Despite the challenges that an increased digital presence poses, it also has created various opportunities. The strengthened focus on virtual and online interactions could put pressure to increase internet accessibility due to governments, businesses, and schools being incentivized to invest in affordable connectivity for its citizens to thereby meet a growing demand.⁷² It is likely that, in the long run, the increased demand for online tools and virtual spaces will further push innovations and the development of new tools and platforms, thereby creating a wider-range of opportunities for online engagement. For online journalists, news outlets, and activists, the proliferation of online tools has increased their potential audience and, thus, importance.⁷³ Additionally, the shift to online media and news allows for more social communicators and media practitioners that are freelance or independent to have their voices heard; this is particularly relevant for marginalized peoples.

The forced and rapid increase in the use of online meetings and other forms of remote collaboration can have the positive side-effect of encouraging many journalists and social communicators to build their skills in this regard. This change will likely be permanent and make collaborations and networking between individuals much easier and effective in the future, and the more pronounced focus on remote collaboration will likely contribute to the

⁷² United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and International Telecommunication Union (ITU) launched Giga in 2019, which “is a global initiative to connect every school to the Internet and every young person to information, opportunity and choice.” [Gigaconnect.org](https://gigaconnect.org).

⁷³ For example, some journalists have been using digital verification tools to reveal false media about COVID-19. Posetti, Julie, Emily Bell, and Pete Brown. “Journalism & The Pandemic: A Global Snapshot of Impacts.” International Center for Journalists. https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Journalism%20and%20the%20Pandemic%20Project%20Report%201%202020_FINAL.pdf.

formation of new networks and forms of collaboration.⁷⁴ Provided that these new, innovative networks have sufficient financial support and planning, they have the potential to assume their “watchdog” function and counter misleading official narratives, disinformation, and misinformation more effectively.

Recommendations

For SAFE, changes in the digital environment created a need to update and tailor digital lessons plans to new risks for existing as well as for prospective beneficiaries (e.g. an increasing number of freelancers). SAFE also needed to develop general and simplified security lesson plans to reach media practitioners and social communicators with relatively low levels of digital awareness and/or unstable internet connectivity. SAFE has worked to update and create separate lesson plans to be taught for people with lower digital literacy. On the other hand, SAFE should continue to explore the ways in which those with low internet connectivity can be reached. If possible, SAFE can also consider alternative teaching methods apart from synchronous training (e.g. through WhatsApp, Signal, or other secured chat and/or providing “lighter” version of support, requiring less bandwidth). Furthermore, SAFE can continue to explore technology that makes trainings digitally secure, like a Raspberry Pi’s which acts as a secure router, which has successfully been used once before in a SAFE activity.

Marginalized groups are disproportionately affected by slow or unstable internet connections and lower levels of digital literacy.⁷⁵ For SAFE, and IREX in general, as well as other similar initiatives and organizations, this makes reaching these groups challenging, thus, potentially compounding their marginalization even further. However, the new focus on work from home and remote work arrangements, albeit not for many journalists, can hopefully motivate governments to invest more in digital infrastructure overall-- especially in remote or marginalized areas-- thereby improving the availability of the internet and, in turn, providing more individuals with the opportunity to partake in the online arena and enhance their technological awareness and digital literacy in the long run. With an increased urgency of “being connected”, especially for marginalized groups, SAFE, IREX, partners, and donors should continue to be prepared to address these challenges by allocating funds for devices, licenses, or internet costs for participants. Donors should also support local civil society organizations who work with marginalized communities and who have a mandate in digital

⁷⁴ For an example from the US context, see: Quackenbush, Casey. “Collaboration Is the Future of Journalism.” Nieman Reports. August 11, 2020. niemanreports.org/articles/collaboration-is-the-future-of-journalism.

⁷⁵ “Digital technologies for social inclusion.” United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. February 23, 2021. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/2021/02/digital-technologies-for-social-inclusion-2/>.

literacy skills trainings and support, as well as increased infrastructure. When providing funding or providing trainings, SAFE, IREX, partners, and donors should also consider the fact that smartphones have become more common tool to engage with audiences than personal computers, especially with marginalized communities.

With increased online demands and “virtual training fatigue,” all SAFE technical groups will need to be creative in their methodologies and make trainings more interactive and engaging by introducing assignments that participants can do offline or in-between lessons; for example, the SAFE team has added warm-up exercises to trainings using collaborative online platforms and have breaks in between lessons for participants to stretch and relax momentarily. Importantly, SAFE staff will need to ensure that virtual activities continue to provide a safe space for participants to speak freely about their situations.

A rapidly changing digital environment also requires an internal audit and an expansion of the responsibilities of centers’ Digital Safety experts. For instance, Digital Safety trainers should invest time into updating their colleagues about new digital threats and lead the processes for revising ‘Digital Safety’-related SOPs, where needed. Meanwhile, newly emerged tools and platforms should be vetted before recommending them to those SAFE works with.

	SAFE	IREX	Donors	Partners
Vet emerging tools and platforms	✓			
Adapt and update existing SAFE lesson plans; create new lesson plans, as needed	✓			
Develop simplified digital security lesson plans for groups with lower digital literacy and internet connectivity issues	✓			
Where needed, allocate funds and provide devices, licenses, and financial support for internet costs to participants	✓	✓	✓	✓
Expand advisory network to monitor development of new tools and digital threats	✓			

Logistics and Operations

In the beginning, the COVID-19 pandemic represented an unprecedented area of uncertainty for SAFE, the people SAFE works with, IREX in general, partners, and the donor community. Despite vaccine rollouts, the abnormal way of life forced by the pandemic remains as we are unable to achieve herd immunity due to supply shortages, distrust in government, civil unrest, and extreme political polarization. Amid these uncharted waters, actors in the media support sector should be prepared for and accept a working environment that is unpredictable and can change on a whim, which makes contingency planning for finance and logistics all the more important, but that also already has caused a wave of new and innovative ideas related to the administration, planning, and conducting activities. Decision-makers should be aware of this new way to operate and have the confidence and vigilance to make decisions quickly and change courses rapidly, if needed.

Challenges

In the short-term, some governments provided extensive tax reliefs and economic stimuli that may have led to decreased operating costs for SAFE and some of those SAFE works with, as well as similar initiatives. However, these were largely only temporary reductions. The pandemic's economic effects have and will continue to lead to a **net increase of operating costs** that would be caused, inter alia, by inflation, lower investments, reduced trade, dwindling remittances, and mounting public debt.⁷⁶ At the same time, SAFE's partners and networks (e.g. Advisory Network members) will in all likelihood have been affected by increased costs and decreased revenue, which may have made them less likely to be able to devote ample time to cooperation with SAFE.

Since 2020 and continually into 2021, costs related to travel and the organization of in-person events have remained relatively low, yet this trend will likely be reversed in the coming years as the world learns to live with COVID-19. Additionally, travel has become increasingly difficult, with travel bans in some countries applying to people with certain vaccines; if this is the only vaccine available in a country, these individuals cannot travel to certain places.⁷⁷ **Higher costs** in regard to travel will be due in particular to the increased expenses per participant at in-person events where the need for social distancing will increase costs for

⁷⁶ Shretta, Rima. "The Economic Impact of COVID-19." University of Oxford. April 7, 2020. <https://www.research.ox.ac.uk/article/2020-04-07-the-economic-impact-of-covid-19>.

⁷⁷ The European Union banned travelers with the Chinese-made Sinopharm vaccine, despite this vaccine being largely available and used in countries like Pakistan. "Saudi Arabia, EU Bans Entry of Travellers Received Chinese-Made Jabs." Al Bawaba. June 1, 2021. <https://www.albawaba.com/business/saudi-arabia-eu-bans-entry-travellers-received-chinese-made-jabs-1430680>.

travel and venues. For instance, there will be scenarios where a smaller number of participants share a significantly larger conference room than usual and where participants travel to the venue individually, instead of in a group car. There is also an increase in staff costs since more people are sick or have to deal with the long-term effects of COVID-19. Furthermore, with possibility of participants getting COVID-19, as well as increased pandemic ripple effects from extreme weather to potentially dangerous protests, planned operations may be undermined.

Opportunities

Already, the pandemic has led to staff finding creative and more time-efficient solutions for every-day tasks. At the same time, there is an increased use of remote tools for finance and management support (e.g. financial transactions) that had already been available prior to the pandemic, but which had not been as widely used. For instance, staff is now almost exclusively using electronic signatures, where possible, and exploring alternative ways to transfer per diems to participants, other than cash transfers. These changes to operating procedures will, in all likelihood, become permanent.

Internally, another example of this would be the collection of participant data for monitoring, evaluation, and learning purposes. The sudden impossibility to administer paper-based surveys when interacting with participants face-to-face led to a rapid shift in exclusively using remote surveys. Though SAFE teams are still refining their remote data collection approach, in the long run, this transition to a predominantly remote data collection system will make it easier for program staff to systematize and better time their follow-up approaches, thereby making the data collected more consistent, reliable, and easier to compare across centers.

The reality of all-remote work to this day may have come abruptly but has nonetheless shown that a substantial part of the SAFE team's day-to-day work can be done remotely. For the future, this will likely lead to more acceptance for remote work and collaboration initiatives for existing staff. This increased flexibility in schedules and in terms of locations will make it easier for some marginalized communities to take up employment (e.g. PwD, women or men with caretaker responsibilities) and therefore, overall, expand the recruitment pool for new staff or consultants who might join existing in-person teams remotely. Additionally, permanent, remote work may also reduce costs in some areas, as organizations no longer need large office spaces.

Recommendations

Given the overall volatility of the economic landscape now and during the continuation of the pandemic, future planning processes will have to accept a certain degree of unpredictability due to waves of COVID-19 as well as variants and fallout that has led to civil unrest in some

areas; in some cases, this will require being ready to make sudden programmatic changes that might have an effect on spending. New budgets should reflect this flexibility and be able to accommodate for “emergency” budget changes to cushion the impact. Furthermore, programs can offset internet-related costs for participants by budgeting for stipends; SAFE has been successful in implementing this, which has encouraged journalists to join trainings and continue their vital work. These actions may be good practice if the trend of increased civil unrest, polarization, and extreme weather conditions continues.

The SAFE program (as well as partners) should also, to the extent possible, be prepared for substantial and sudden changes to the logistical operating environment in the countries it works in. Violent unrest or sudden changes to countries’ political configuration can pose a potential threat to IREX’s registration status or otherwise ability to operate in a country. Risk mitigation and contingency plans will therefore become even more crucial to the organization’s adaptability.

Meanwhile, SAFE centers should dedicate time to closely evaluating how, where, and when teams will work together in the future, including questions such as whether in-person or remote work is more productive for the center and more desirable for team members. As vaccine rollouts have become somewhat more accessible globally, understanding the necessity and comfort levels of SAFE teams to work in-person is paramount. This analysis should also include the discussion of whether or not team members could work remotely entirely (with the exception of travel for in-person events and key meetings).

At the same time, teams should have a thorough and honest discussion on whether the combined skill sets in existing teams is sufficient and ready to meet the challenges of a COVID-19-endemic world, or whether there is a need to complement teams with additional skills in areas that might be of higher demand in the future (e.g. virtual learning professionals, legal assistance). The expansion of skills can happen either through professional development opportunities, or the hiring of additional staff members, for both of which there should be increased funds allocated in program budgets.

	SAFE	IREX	Donors	Partners
Allow for flexibility in budget planning and accept unpredictability and sudden changes	✓	✓	✓	✓
Have assessment of whether teams' skill sets meet requirements of new reality; if not, build skills through professional development and/or hiring	✓	✓		
Make permanent reliable and secure remote data collection systems, instead of reliance on paper-based surveys	✓			
Evaluate and find a permanent system for how, where, and when teams will work collaboratively in the future	✓			



Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has irreversibly changed the environment that SAFE, IREX in general, and others operate in; it is clear there is no “after COVID-19” but rather it will continue to come in waves and its effects. Its impact has already been felt by everyone, everywhere in the past two years, especially with new variants of the virus and increased civil unrest and polarization. This is true for all aspects of SAFE’s work and the staff which had to observe, learn, and adapt to a new reality, and will continue to face many challenges created by the virus; there are huge disparities in terms of which countries can return to “normal” due to differing vaccine-type availability. Meanwhile, the brunt of the pandemic’s negative side-effects will continue to be borne by the global community’s already most vulnerable, making it all the more important to support those whose gender, race, location, or economic background puts them at a disadvantage to cope with the pandemic’s effects compared to their non-marginalized peers.

At the same time, the pandemic and ensuing changes to the world we operate in presents unique opportunities for IREX, the people SAFE works with, partners, and the donor community. For SAFE, more risks mean more demand for safety trainings and comparable types of activities. To the media community and social communicators, the further increase and focus on virtual arenas (for those who are on the advantageous side of the ‘digital divide’) has had the potential to reach even broader audiences. Meanwhile, virtual connections have enabled media actors and others to connect much more easily with others, thereby fostering collaboration and the exchange of innovative ideas. For the donor community and ‘big business’, the pandemic and its effects provide a unique opportunity to reassess past approaches and funding priorities and, instead, re-build and “regroup” in a more sustainable, resilient, just, and inclusive way.⁷⁸

Having a strong local presence, SAFE and IREX continue to be well-positioned to address the new challenges and seize opportunities arising from the current operating environment. At

⁷⁸ “Building Back Better: A Sustainable, Resilient Recovery after COVID-19.” Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. June 5, 2020. www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/building-back-better-a-sustainable-resilient-recovery-after-covid-19-52b869f5.

the same time, the program is well connected to gather information and monitor regional developments (e.g. through local Advisory Networks), as well as disseminate information to beneficiaries, partners, and donors (e.g. through Solidarity Events). SAFE and IREX in general should put particular emphasis on exploring ways to support new (e.g. freelancers) and/or particularly vulnerable actors in the media and social activism to ensure a vibrant media landscape with relevant, reliable content, dynamic engagement, multiple channels of information flow, and transformative action.⁷⁹ While the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic were and continue to be unprecedented, it provided an invaluable opportunity to reassess the needs of and support media practitioners and social communicators; with its proven expertise as regards psychosocial, digital, and physical safety, SAFE acts as a frontrunner and advocate to mobilize resources and coordinate collaborative and cross-organizational responses to current and future challenges.

	SAFE	IREX	Donors	Partners
Even more so than before, prioritize marginalized communities in programming	✓	✓	✓	✓
Adapt and update existing SAFE lesson plans; create new lesson plans as needed	✓			
Expand networks to be prepared to get trusted advice on or refer beneficiaries to partners with skills that are outside of SAFE’s mandate	✓			
Devise or revise risk mitigation plans and SOPs to make sure that they are appropriate to address new and changing risks	✓	✓		✓
Audit internally available knowledge and skills and fill “gaps” through professional development, hiring, or expanded networks	✓	✓		
Mobilize resources and coordinate collaborative responses to emerging challenges	✓	✓		

⁷⁹ “Vibrant Information for Just, Prosperous, and Inclusive Societies.” IREX. 2017. <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/node/resource/vibrant-information-overview.pdf>.