

**19th World Editors Forum, Kiev, Ukraine,
Session: Ethics and Standards: re-building trust
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This panel's focus is about ethics and standards. Many different dimensions will be covered by our speakers. The director of the programme, Cherilyn Ireton, has kindly agreed to let me set the stage by telling you about a development that could help with the most basic foundation for the practice of ethics.

In particular, this development is a new item on the international agenda that relates to media: a United Nations (UN) Plan on the safety of journalists. I want to tell you about this initiative and why it is a fundamental part of the equation in a discussion of ethics.

We all know that journalists need a safe environment to do their jobs. Clearly, if you or your journalistic staff are being threatened with arrest, detention, abduction, and even death, it understandably takes everyone's focus away from ongoing consideration of dilemmas around journalistic ethics. This is doubly so if the threats and harassments are directed towards family and friends, and triple the case if the attacks emanate from criminal and/or political networks who enjoy immunity to the normal constraints of the rule of law which is supposed to protect citizens from these kinds of crimes.

Ethics is inherently about having choices between different courses of action, in terms of your journalistic decision-making. A corrupt or partisan owner can compromise your editorial independence to make these choices. But even worse is when you have a gun to your head, literally or metaphorically: then you clearly do not have leeway to select between various ethical options.

The continual killing of journalists is a disturbing reality. Over the last ten years, more than 500 journalists and media workers have lost their lives for doing their job to relay news and important information to the public. Even sexual threats and attacks are also

used as a weapon for intimidating female journalists. At the same time, most murders of journalists are preceded by death threats, yet in too many cases State agencies fail in their duty to provide protection despite the warning lights beginning to flicker. Equally disturbing is the fact that investigations into the vast majority of killings of journalists are not resolved, which leads to a culture of impunity for the killers. Society at large gets the message each time there is the murder of a journalist: “Watch what you say, and be careful who you tell – and not least if a journalist wants to quote you in the media”.

This year alone, UNESCO’s Director-General has condemned 78 killings of journalists, media workers, and bloggers. This number is nearly double that of previous years of the same period. In the majority of cases, these journalists were not reporting on armed conflicts but on local stories, particularly related to corruption and other illegal activities such as organized crime and drugs.

The right to receive and express opinion is central to the mandate of UNESCO whose constitution commits it to promoting the free flow of ideas. Within the totality of UN agencies, it is UNESCO, acting for its 195 Member States, that has the specific responsibility for programmes to promote freedom of expression, and the corollaries of press freedom and freedom of information. But there is a limit to what UNESCO itself can do if it alone amongst the international organisations carries the duty to staunch the worst violations of freedom of expression: i.e., the killings of journalists.

This then is the crux of the UN Plan as a new initiative in the global quest to create environments where each person is free to speak and where journalists can make ethical decisions without fearing for their lives. There is enormous potential in what is called the *UN Plan of Action for Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity* in bringing the full weight of the UN to bear on the challenge. This initiative builds on some sporadic collaborations to date such as between UNESCO and the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, but it vastly expands the regularity, and especially the range, of participation by UN actors in the quest for journalistic safety.

The Plan was devised at an Inter-Agency meeting of the UN in September 2011, convened by UNESCO on the mandate of Member State. Subsequently, it won endorsement in April this year by the UN Chief Executives Board which represents the highest level coordination mechanism of the UN system. Currently, UNESCO is currently deep in consultations with our colleagues across the UN, as well as with national government and state structures, media and civil society in a range of countries. This is part of the preparation for a 2nd UN Inter-Agency Meeting on 22 November in Vienna, culminating on the 23rd November which is also the International Day to End Impunity. The deliberations in Vienna will be a vital step towards activating the UN Action Plan through adopting an Implementation Strategy, and we hope many media representatives will take an active part in the discussions.

The outcome of the Vienna meeting will be to spell out concretely what the UN at large can do about promoting journalistic safety. In terms of the Plan, it will first of all adopt a system within the UN to ensure communication and co-ordination of actions. Second, it will elaborate a programme on how the UN actors will work not only with each other, but also critically with other players in the field – especially relevant state agencies and institutions, media organisations and NGOs.

The roll-out of the UN Plan in 2013 and beyond will no doubt be uneven, and its practical impact will be affected by many factors beyond its control. But some difference can be effected. For example, imagine if UNICEF could help raise awareness concerning children who are orphaned because a parent was killed for exercising the right to freedom of expression. For its part, the World Bank already knows that its courses to train journalists to cover corruption can risk becoming a bad investment when there's a climate of intimidation and worse. Could this institution contribute its gravitas to join a delegation of stakeholders to engage a particular government on the importance of bringing the killers to journalists to book? These are the kinds of practical possibilities that will be explored in Vienna in November.

For the UN Plan to succeed, three contributions are needed from the media. These are classic activities to put at the service of the profession:

1. Give coverage to the Plan, to the Vienna conference and to the activities that flow from it – this is a newsworthy initiative, and it serves both the media as a sector and society more broadly;
2. Hold the UN at global and local level accountable for our performance in pursuance of this undertaking;
3. Input into the Plan and dovetail with it via your own contributions of advocacy for journalists to be able to work without fear; join and help to combine efforts by all stakeholders to end impunity for those who eliminate journalists.

In this way, with your three contributions of coverage, monitoring and participation, you will strengthen the foundations for journalism to do justice to the ethics of the profession.

Let it not be the case that ethics is a luxury or a dream, when intimidation and violent realities persist without pause in many parts of the world. Rather, let it be said that we all took advantage of a new possibility that can help to secure worldwide conditions in which journalists are safe to be ethical.