ACOS Alliance Expands Its Reach with Help from the OPC and OPC Foundation

BY WILLIAM J. HOLSTEIN

The culture of Safety alliance (ACOS) is expanding its geographic reach and the range of support it is providing to help editors, producers and freelance journalists of all stripes as they seek to cover an increasingly dangerous world. The alliance, born in the aftermath of the grisly murders of James Foley and Steven Sotloff five years ago in Syria, has promulgated a set of best practices it believes will help editors better manage freelance and local journalists, and has supported or organized a series of trainings around the world.

In cooperation with VICE, Buzzfeed, The Associated Press, Reuters and the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma at Columbia, ACOS has been involved in Hostile Environment and First Aid Training (HEFAT), in Lebanon, the United States, Kenya, Thailand, Ecuador and Colombia. The OPC has supported trainings in Nairobi and Beirut with money raised at last year’s Annual Awards Dinner (see ‘Kenya,’ pg. 4). The OPC Foundation serves as the financial sponsor for ACOS, handling flows of money from the MacArthur and Open Society foundations. (Full disclosure: I sit on the boards of the OPC, OPCF and ACOS.)

Now ACOS is expanding its range of activities by facilitating the launch of insurance programs for all freelancers and local journalists around the world (see ‘Insurance,’ pg. 2). Its annual coordination meeting in early December in New York at Columbia University was attended by a growing number of global organizations, helping ACOS move beyond its Anglo-American origins. Some 90 people participated. Attendees were present from Britain, Colombia, France, Germany, Mexico and Sweden. The number of organizations represented also increased. In attendance were the executive director of ACOS, Elisabet Cantenys, and the president, Maria

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ACOS Alliance Offers Insurance for Correspondents and Local Media

BY WILLIAM J. HOLSTEIN

A traditional Western news organizations have downsized or disappeared, the burden of covering some of the world’s toughest stories has fallen to freelancers who either arrive from other countries or who are citizens of the countries they are covering. Reporting these stories usually means working with drivers, fixers or translators. But very few of the incidents involved in this coverage have been insured, which magnifies the risks they must take. In most cases, they’ve simply been on their own.

That’s changing as of the first quarter of 2020. The ACOS Alliance, the coalition that came together following the murders of James Foley and Steven Sotloff, is working with insurers and stakeholders to facilitate access to affordable insurance for all journalists. The alliance is helping launch ground-breaking insurance options that benefit freelancers and local journalists in particular, and at a discount.

Some of the options the alliance has worked on provide insurance to media workers regardless of their nationality or residence. “Being insured means being prepared,” said Executive Director Elizabeth Canty. “Everyone should have access to insurance.” In some cases, the Alliance has collaborated with insurance administrators to create new schemes in response to current needs. In other instances, ACOS and the insurance administrator have agreed to a discount. The aim is always the same: promote the use of insurance and facilitate access.

Here are two options the alliance is helping to promote as part of this initiative. Check the ACOS Alliance website for more details, including a discount code.

Insurance for Journalists: This plan covers journalists travelling to any country in the world, including conflict zones, being embedded and even traveling in a military vehicle or helicopter. The insurance coverage is available by the week and includes: accidental death and dismemberment, sickness and accident medical expenses subject to a $250 deductible, emergency medical evacuation from point of an incident to an appropriate care facility. ACOS Alliance signatories can benefit from a discount.

● In partnership with Escapade Travel Insurance, Reporters Without Borders provides a complete health insurance and repatriation for journalists and reporters travelling on assignment to any country, war zones included. RWB membership is mandatory. To become a RWB member, visit reporterossinmarcha.org. This program has been available since 2009 and several hundred journalists have used it. U.S.-based reporters are unfortunately not covered.

● Also, the International Federation of Journalists also offers insurance through its partnership with a group known as Battleface. This insurance offers on-the-ground emergency support and equipment coverage and is accessible via a tech-based platform that is user friendly. That scheme is limited to IFJ members. For more information, go to ifj.org.

The OPC is now accepting submissions for its annual awards.

OPC Members Play Major Roles in Foreign Editors Circle Meeting

OPC President Pancho Bernasconi participated in a panel titled “The Power of the Image in Foreign Coverage” at the 7th Foreign Editors Circle at the New York headquarters of The Associated Press on Nov. 15. The day-long gathering was hosted by AP and the International Press Institute’s North American Committee.

Participants included high-level editors for foreign coverage at major news organizations and representatives of journalism nonprofit-like the OPC, the Committee to Protect Journalists and the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. OPC member Da- vid Rohde of The New Yorker represented the ACOS Alliance, which works to imbue a culture of safety across newsrooms and among freelancers. ACOS was born at the Foreign Editors Circle event in 2014.

Bernasconi, vice president for global news at Getty Images, highlighted a photo by OPC member John Moore of an asylum-seeking young girl from Honduras dressed in a red shirt crying as Border Patrol agents questioned her mother on June 12. The photo went viral, and later won the World Press Photo of the Year Award. More importantly, the photo was one factor that spurred changes in Trump Administration immigration policies.

On June 20, Trump signed an executive order ending his administration’s practice of separating migrant families, and later that month, a federal judge ordered the Trump administration to reunite migrant children who were separated from their parents. “The need for strong international photojournalists continues to play a vital role in helping to give context in the increasingly rapid space with which news is being consumed,” Bernasconi said. “There is no substitute for being able to share impactful and thoughtfully produced visual reporting from myriad global events that have and will continue to impact our understanding of the world around us.”

OPC member, New York Times photo editor, was on a panel discussing cyber-meddling, the media and democracy. He shared a link to GroundTruth’s Authoritarian Playbook on steps populists are taking to undermine the democracies that elected them. Other useful links on issues discussed at the meeting can be found in the digital version of this story on the OPC website, or via the Member Dashboard under “Resources,” or go directly to the page here: opcamerica.org/members-dashboard/best-practices.

A two-year-old Honduran asylum seeker cries as her mother is searched and detained near the U.S. Mexico border on June 12, 2018 in McAllen, Texas. The photo by John Moore of Getty won the World Press Photo of the Year award in April.

YOU'RE INVITED: THE OPC WINTER PARTY

COME CELEBRATE THE SEASON WITH COLLEAGUES ON WEDNESDAY, JAN. 15, FROM 6:00 PM TO 8:00 PM AT CLUB QUARTERS. THE EVENT WILL BE HELD IN THE DINING ROOM.

THE COST IS $50 PER PERSON. RESERVATIONS ARE ESSENTIAL. PLEASE VISIT THE OPC WEBSITE TO RSVP AND SELECT A PAYMENT OPTION, OR SEND A CHECK TO THE OPC:

40 WEST 45TH STREET, NEW YORK, NY 10036.
November-December 2019

OPC Funds Helped Support Hostile Environment Safety Training in Kenya

By Patricia Kranz

The OPC donated $910 from its freelance safety training fund to cover the fees for psychosocial and digital security trainers at a hostile environment training course in Nairobi and Limuru, Kenya on Nov. 30.

The training was sponsored by a group that included ACOS-Alliance, Agency France Press and SEPIAR International, a security firm that specializes in hostile locations. According to Stephen Smith, SEPIAR’s director and leading trainer, the training incorporated physical security, digital security, psychosocial care and trauma medical training. Subjects covered during the four days included gender, source protection, first-aid management and civil unrest.

Salahat-Ferro, emergencies director for the Committee to Protect Journalists, said, “I’m so excited about all that has been achieved in five years,” said Diane Foley, mother of Jim Foley and founder of the James W. Foley Legacy Foundation. “There is nothing like working together as opposed to doing it in isolation. All of this is going to make a difference.” Also present was Art Souloff, father of Steve, who founded a Miami-based organization, called the Steven Joel Souloff Memorial 2Livez Foundation, to give scholar- ships and provide training.

The coordination session this year blossomed into three different tranchees of activity. First, an editors’ workshop was held for the second year and was well-attended by major news organizations (see “Workshop,” pg. 2). Secondly, a separate working group on helping journalists deal with trauma and post-trauma stress, coordinated by the Dart Center, vowed to map out and publicize all the resources that varied from different counseling and treatment organizations. Many journalists are traumatized by covering conflicts, terrorism, riots or other scenes of devastation, but do not know where to find help.

The third major area of focus, and the one where I spent the most time listening, centered on safety training. It is an exception- dally difficult challenge. The profession is realizing that not everyone needs full HEFAT training. And some providers of HEFAT training, particularly those with military backgrounds, may push too far by putting hands over the heads of participants and subjecting them to verbal abuse, simulating the conditions of being kidnapped. Moreover, it is becoming clear that journalists also need training to manage their online social media presences, how to maintain the security of their devices and avoid surveillance, how to contend with legal challenges that are unique to more countries, how to provide first-aid help, and how to deal with gender-related issues. Women journalist- s are particularly vulnerable to online harassment by govern- ment and criminal groups and others.

There is no one-size-fits-all program. How long should a training last? Is three days long enough? There is no firm agree- ment. And Eliot Streif, security adviser at Buzzfeed, argued that training should be individualized to reflect the nationality and experience of a particular journalist and the nature of the challenges that journalist is likely to face. Not has the industry agreed on how often any type of safety training should be re- freshed. Is it good enough to do it every three years? There is no agreement.

What makes the issue even more complicated is that no one agrees on what constitutes valid training. There are a wide vari- ety of companies offering different types of training. If the BBC puts a sticker through its security course provided by an outside vendor and that sticker goes to The Associated Press or Reuters to try to get an assignment, those news organizations may not recognize the validity of the training that the freelancer obtained from the BBC. Editors and producers may argue that the way their newsrooms operate is different from other organizations. A freelancer’s employment options are thus limited.

To begin tackling the problem, ACOS and the Frontline Free- lance Register in May formed a steering committee consisting of Buzzfeed, VICE, the BBC, NBC News, CNN, Free Press Unlim- ited, the Afghan Journalist Safety Committee of the Interna- tional Media Support organization, the Dart Center and various freelancers to try to define the elements of solid HEFAT training.

The steering committee presented their findings, which can be seen on the incredibly valuable ACOS website, aconsalliance.org.

One embryonic idea that emerged was that the ACOS steering committee could become the industry’s de facto clearing house for approving and validating different trainings so that news or- ganizations would have a guide as to which are valid and which are not. Participants agreed that would be difficult, but there is no other central body attempting to perform that role.

One of the newest twists to the whole issue of training is whether journalists in some countries should or should not play a role.

Two British organizations offering such training are present. One is called Also Known As and the second is SilkRoad Train- ing, which was founded by a pair of former British military men. I put on one of SilkRoad’s VR headsets and found myself in the middle of an attack by invisible gunmen on a stationary vehicle on a road in a jungle-type setting. The firing was coming from the left front side of the vehicle and I stood with three unarmed men wearing body armor on the right side of the vehicle as they debated their options. Taking shelter behind the engine block is the only real way to avoid bullets because that is the only solid part of a vehicle. Even better is figuring out which way to run (away from the guns, obviously) and how to stay low and mini- mize one’s exposure.

Online training sessions also are popping up and many specific segments of training courses are becoming available. They might evolve some of the training dilemmas — journalists in harm’s way can find the specific type of training they need on their smart phones just before they put them in harms way.

A final theme of debate is when should journalists start get- ting trained? Some graduate schools of journalism are building safety training into their curricula. And the Foley Foundation is adapting some of that course material and found myself in the middle of an attack by invisible gunmen on a stationary vehicle on a road in a jungle-type setting. The firing was coming from the left front side of the vehicle and I stood with three unarmed men wearing body armor on the right side of the vehicle as they debated their options. Taking shelter behind the engine block is the only real way to avoid bullets because that is the only solid part of a vehicle. Even better is figuring out which way to run (away from the guns, obviously) and how to stay low and mini- mize one’s exposure.

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Hasan Mahmud (4th from left), newly named head of news and current affairs, poses with his news team in Jargor TV Studio 3 in November-December 2019.
According to an in-depth report, titled "freedom in Taiwan and Hong Kong." The Committee to Protect Journalists around the world with dismissive and threatening language against journalists said. Separately, the editorial board and independent reporting, released a report on Dec. 11. The survey included 170 countries and regions, and the number of journalists detained or missing their deadline for presenting their monthly list of the 10 most urgent cases of journalists under threat or let him go. "We are very concerned about the use of legal measures, including administrative detention, to keep journalists in jail without bringing any charges against them," said CPJ's Middle East and North Africa representative, Ignacio Miguel Delgado.

Osmany Sovore, a New York-based Nigerian journalist and activist, was detained one day after he was released on bail following a court order. Sovore, the publisher of Sahara Reporters, a Nigerian news outlet covering government corruption, was first arrested on Aug. 3 on treason charges. He was granted bail in October but remained in Nigerian Department of State Security custody until Dec. 5. Amnesty International Nigeria said that the "Computer Misuse and Cybercrime Act 2019," a bill that targets journalists and others who publish digital information. Similar laws have been used as a tool to suppress press freedom in other countries around the world.

On Dec. 2nd, the Washington Post Press Freedom Partner-ship released its monthly list of the 10 most urgent cases of journalists under attack, identified as the One Free Press Coalition. The list included Al-Khilani Square. "Cover- the multitude of media organizations so that we could all learn together and share our approaches and best practices," said CPJ's Middle East and North Africa representative, Ignacio Miguel Delgado.

Abyldy Saye Yele, a journalist who was a vocal critic of the Kremlin. Sheremet was killed in a car bomb attack in Kyiv, and Ukrai- nian officials immediately suspected Russian involvement. The suspects include a heart surgeon who treated soldiers in combat zones and a musican who served in Ukraine's special forces.

On Dec. 3rd, called for Governor Augustus Jasper of the British Virgin Islands to reconsider several sections of a bill that would hamper journalists' work. The group argued that the "Computer Misuse and Cybercrime Act 2019," a bill that targets online crime, would have the effect on reporting on the islands. The law could be used to criminalize actions of journalists and others who publish digital information. Similar laws have been used as a tool to suppress press freedom in other countries around the world.

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A CROSS the world, from Libya to Germany to England to the USA, hundreds of young women traveled from their homes to Syria to fight with the Islamic State. Women of all backgrounds fell prey to sophisticated propaganda promising liberation and social justice: teenagers, doctors, housewives. Azadeh Moaveni’s Guest House For The Young Widows: Among The Women of ISIS (Random House, September 2019) explores this phenomenon and tells the stories of 13 of these women and the families they left behind.

For some women, ISIS seemed like a feminist path. We learn about Nour, a high school dropout from Tunisia, a country that was authoritarian but secular. As a young teen, Nour started rebelling through religion. She watched videos uploaded by a sheikh on Youtube and decided to wear a niqab to school, where she was physically assaulted by a teacher and forced to take it off. To her, ISIS was an escape from a home where she felt stuck, and she didn’t see any alternative. “No one asked precisely why she felt that covering her face was her religious duty,” writes Moaveni. “Had they given her the chance to mention the word sheik, they might have informed her there were opposing and indeed stronger and more valid scholarly views.” Others, like a group of young teenagers from London, were radicalized by the blogs and social media of female ISIS recruiters who made life in the caliphate seem utopian. Emma, from Germany, was enticed by the community she found within her group of German-Turkish friends. Moaveni has a nuanced understanding of these girls’ paths. Like cult members, they were carefully groomed and indoctrinated into a group that tricked them into thinking they had their best interests at heart. She also learned about events leading up to the murder: the power struggle between Erdogan and Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi government’s attempts to keep Khajouei from writing about their human rights abuses, and Khajouei’s complicated personal life, filled with people concerned about both his safety and their own.

Rugman’s writing is gripping, easy to understand, and filled with factual research. He does a good job explaining the rise of Mohmmed bin Salman, the US-Saudi relationship and the ways in which the Khajouei murder span it out of control. Meanwhile, the US continues to send troops and weapons to Saudi Arabia, the trial of Khajouei’s alleged killers remains shrouded in secrecy, and any justice for Khajouei seems far away.

Meet the OPC Members: Q&A With Christopher Miller

Christopher Miller is a correspondent in Kyiv who covers Eastern Europe and former Soviet republics for various outlets, including BuzzFeed News, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Politico Europe, among others. Miller has reported extensively from the front lines in eastern Ukraine since 2014. He formerly served as senior international correspondent for Mashable, and was editor and reporter at Ukraine’s Kyiv Post. He was part of a team that won the 2014 Missouri Honor Medal for Distinguished Service in Journalism for coverage of Ukraine’s Euromaidan revolution, Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine. Miller was trained in crisis zone safety by Columbia University’s Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma.

Hometown: Portland, Oregon.

Education: Portland State University (B.S. in Liberal Studies, emphasis on the B.S.)

Languages: English. Russian. And Ukrainian like a dog, as the Ukrainians say (able to understand but unable to speak much).

First job in journalism: Working the police and fire beat for a local Portland paper that went under – but not because of my reporting.

Countries reported from: Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, Turkey, Italy, Greece, Malta, Israel and others.

When and why did you join the OPC: I joined in January 2019. As a full-time freelancer roaming the world without much of a safety net, I thought it was important to connect with people doing the same thing.

What first drew you to reporting on Ukraine and other former Soviet republics? I ended up in Ukraine by chance, but I quickly fell in love with the people and the place. I was fascinated by its complexities and there seemed to be hundreds of stories dying to be told.

Major challenge as a journalist: Dealing with all the waiting around. There can be so much waiting – for official government responses, for sources to get back to you, for visas, for accreditation cards, for permission to enter, for permission to leave, for editors to send readbacks, for a separatist warlord to radio back that you won’t be shot and you can be on your way.

Best journalism advice received: Keep ‘em talking.

Worst experience as a journalist: Reporting on the assassination of a journalist friend and colleague.

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When traveling, you like to … eat all the food I can find that is served in a wrap of some sort.

Hardest story: Covering the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 in eastern Ukraine and the aftermath.


Christopher Miller (upper right) interviews the mayor of or the village of Habeo, eastern Ukraine, where Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 fell after being shot down by a Russian missile.

Advice for journalists who want to work overseas: When you arrive, say yes to everything (within reason, of course). Immerse yourself in the culture. Avoid expat bars but do make contacts with those correspondents who could help support you and/or get you out of a jam.

Dream job: I’m doing it, more or less. I’d just like to get paid more to do it and be eligible for benefits, too.

Favorite quote: “We are made to persist. That’s how we find out who we are.” – Tobias Wolff.

Place you’re most eager to visit: Central Asia.

Most over-the-top assignment: In Eastern Europe, a lot of stories can feel over the top. One from the past couple of months was to visit and write about a pop-up village modeled and named after the one from Fiddler on the Roof that Rudy Giuliani had been made honorary mayor of.

A most common mistake you’ve seen: Thinking you know what the story is before you even hit the ground.

Country you most want to return to: Turkey.

Twitter handle: @ChristopherM

Want to add to the OPC’s collection of Q&As with members? Please contact patricia@opcfocuurope.org.