

15th ASEF Journalists Seminar (ASEFJS15) - “Journalistic Resilience in a Volatile World”
14-17 September 2026 – Bangkok, Thailand

Module 5: Journalists’ Mental Health and Well-being in Hybrid Workspaces

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Introducing the Digital Flak Jacket to a cross-sectional transnational journalism cohort

Disconnection in a 24/7 connected world, that was the core of my 2hr workshop at ASEFJS15. The 22 participants were representative of current global journalism space. It is a hybrid space where online and digital resources are considered vital.

Eighteen participants told me that they spent between 2 to 6hrs per day connected online. That is a large chunk of our daily lives we spend mostly concentrating on a screen. In this space the clear demarcations between online and offline space are porous. We inhabit a hybrid information space where physical and temporal boundaries we are used to are diluted.

This space can pose a unique set of dangers for journalists, namely the exposure to technology facilitated threats (TFTs). These are dangers that are conveyed to us using a technological interface. In this connected world, these dangers now get to us mostly through a screen. Nineteen of the ASEFJS15 fellows said that they considered TFTs as a serious security concern.

What happens when journalists are exposed to digitised dangers like threats, abuse, doxxing, trolling and confronted with extremely graphic or dangerous content? Working in isolation, their vision and attention dominated by a screen, they feel overwhelmed. They told me incidents when exposure forced them from acting on their moral beliefs. They are in a situation of moral distress. Circumstances where they are unable to act on their moral judgment.

This is a situation that one of the participants faced.

“I have been a victim of online trolling and rape and death threats for my stances on sexual assault. My information was out in the open and on another instance, I was trying to (get) an animal abuser arrested and he started stalking me.”

“These risks can extend beyond the newsroom and affect personal safety, family members and mental health. Women journalists can face particularly intense online abuse and sexualised threats.”

The journalist in this case wants to pursue her investigations, wants to bring her investigations to light. There is full commitment to her work, despite the obvious risk factor. But she is prevented. Not because she lacks the journalism skills or experience to conduct her tasks, but because she does not have the skills to understand and properly manage the risks she faces in her hybrid workspace. In this case these are rape and death threats or being stalked. An important point in this exposure context is that it can take place wherever and whenever there is access to a screen. Just imagine getting a threat of sexual harm appearing on your phone screen when you are on public transport, or at the dinner table or on your off day.

In this social media driven information landscape, how does a journalist react to threat received on a social media platform where content is both personal and professional. A threat of sexual harm is never sterile and professional; it is as intimate and as personal as it can get.

Awareness of the dangers is an effective starting point to pushback. This is where this workshop moved into high gear. We worked together to identify real TFT exposure incidents the fellows had encountered. Building on that we unpacked the threat, exposure context and tried to identify how we can work safely in hybrid workspace mitigating the threat.

Here is where my #DigitalFlakJacket (#DFJ) conceptual framework was introduced. The DFJ is built on seven years of dedicated research focusing on journalism and hybrid workspace as part of two post-graduate research projects. It provides information specialists like journalists, fact-checkers, influencers, curators, digital creators and content moderators a simple framework to identify exposure to TFT incidents. Building further, the DFJ helps to verbalise such threats clearly and adopt available resources as safety mechanisms. The DFJ uses the 5Ws and the H framework to unpack a TFT exposure incident.

1. **Who** is responsible for the threat and who is exposed?
2. On **What** is the exposure taking place? What hardware exposes you? Your work computer, your personal computer, your phone?
3. **When** does the exposure take place? What are the exposure hours, or time of exposure? During work-hours, outside of work-hours?
4. **Where** is the exposure taking place? What platform and physical location? Is it Facebook, X, a messaging app, email? Is it at home, in the office or a combination?
5. **Why** is the exposure taking place? What is the reason for the exposure? Is it work related, due to a personal reason or a combination?
6. **How** do you feel and how can exposure be remediated?

Journalists find it easy to apply the 5WS and H as it forms the core of news reporting. What we initially did was we used the DFJ to analyse a recent incident in Thailand, when an assassin called in to a live [YouTube show to confess](#).

The DFJ is positioned as a proactive framework where the exposed individual has positive control over interventions. While exposure aims to silence the exposed in hybrid workspace, the DFJ provides the skills to maintain a professional presence. The second half of the workshop was when we broke into three groups and applied the DFJ to a real exposure even that participants were exposed to.

We had built up to this with at least two weeks of preparations. That this was the last session worked in our favour. The participants in the room trusted each other enough to talk about their vulnerabilities to some extent. Because of the conflation of personal and professional online space TFT appear abstract. That adds to the dangers, because without proactive interventions, exposure can straddle every aspect of digital and hybrid communication space.

As one participants [wrote soon afterwards](#), “Going through difficult material at your kitchen table is not the same as going through it in a newsroom full of colleagues.”

In the short time we had, my aim was to provide the fellows some skills to understand the context of exposure to TFT and the impact of disconnecting from hybrid workspace. After the session a participant sent this reflection to me.

“Think twice before disconnecting, that's what I take with me. Build a digital flak jacket to prevent trauma from censoring your voice. Try to differentiate your work time from your home. As if you decide to take off your clothes as a journalist and put those you use to be home.”

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