

Chapter 5

SAFETY, SECURITY, PRIVACY, COLLABORATION: How to make sure your information is safe and stories impactful

Authors: **Sana Amir & Anubha Bhonsle**

Quick-Read

This chapter will equip journalists and students with safety and digital security tips as well as tools to make stories more engaging and impactful.

Index:

- Safety tips for journalists
- Device security tips
- Digital security tips
- Safety and security groups
- Tips for freelance journalists
- Resources & Inspiration, People to follow

Safety tips for journalists

Journalists covering or interested in covering business responsibility in the manner outlined in this module will find themselves dealing with data that can sometimes be sensitive. This material will be useful long-term as your story progresses and certain angles get further developed. Therefore, it is important that all data and communication be handled and stored safely. We list down some tips and resources for device and digital security that you can follow to avoid data phishing and malware.

Device Security (Computers and mobile devices)

- Use a unique and complex security lock on your devices.
- Regularly update your antivirus software to avoid malware.
- Use encryption software for computers. There are specific encryption software available for different operating systems. [Here is a list of tools and software to protect devices by the International Centre For Journalists.](#)
- Make regular back-ups of data in case your device is destroyed, lost or stolen. Store it at a safe place away from your workplace. [Here are a few options of securing your material by Rock Peck Trust.](#)
- Don't plug your device into public USB ports and drives.

- Turn off bluetooth and other file sharing settings.
- Always get your computers repaired or restored by someone you trust.
- Check device settings and remove access to microphone or camera.
- Use secure web browsers on your system.

Digital Security

Secure Internet Use

- Look for https and a padlock icon at the start of every website URL (<https://cpj.org>), indicating that traffic between you and the site is encrypted.
- Use the Electronic Frontier Foundation's [HTTPS Everywhere](#) browser extension to check if the sites you visit are secure
- Check that the website address is authentic, not a spoof. The URL should be spelled correctly and must include https.
- Install an ad-blocker to protect against malware, which is often hidden in pop-up advertising. Ad-blockers allow you to exempt certain sites from being blocked.
- Install [Privacy Badger](#) to prevent websites and advertisers from tracking the sites you visit.
- Disable Bluetooth and other file-sharing apps and services when not in use.
- Use a VPN to protect internet traffic, especially when using public WiFi, which is not secure and vulnerable to hacking or surveillance.
- Avoid using public computers, especially at internet cafes or press rooms. Log out of all sessions and clear your browsing history after use if it cannot be avoided.
- Consider installing the free Tor Browser Bundle to use the internet anonymously. The other option is Tails, a free operating system that routes all your internet traffic through Tor. Tor is especially recommended for journalists who investigate sensitive topics like high-level corruption in countries with sophisticated tech capacity.

(Source: CPJ)

Email Privacy

- Always use a secure internet provider that gives end-to-end encryption. Activate two-step verification for email accounts.
- Never open or click on links in spam emails. Beware of suspicious email attachments.

- Do not open or click on links sent by people you don't trust. Report the message as spam if you accidentally open such an email.
- Avoid sending sensitive information over an e-mail
- Be cautious about opening your email on open WiFi connections.
- Create separate emails for professional and personal use.
- Make online purchases from secure sites. For online shopping, have an e-mail ID which you don't use to share or save sensitive documents.
- Review privacy settings of apps before signing up with email IDs.
- Create back-ups of important information and remove it from your emails and drive.
- Use WeTransfer or other transfer sites to share large documents. It creates a download link which expires after a few days.

Password and two-factor login

- Always use a unique and complex password for accounts. Here is a 2-minute video by *Reporters Without Borders* [on creating secure passwords](#) that you might find useful.
- You can also activate two-factor login on your accounts. This would send a unique authentication code to your phone number every time you try to sign in.

Messaging apps

- Use apps with end-to-end encryption like Signal, Telegram, ChatSecure.
- Always review app privacy settings and storage settings.
- Use PIN or passwords on the apps.
- Use the option of disappearing messages wherever possible. Signal, for instance, has this option.
- Don't share or store sensitive information on chats. Download and backup such information, and delete it from messenger chats.

Social Media

- Review the privacy settings of your accounts.
- Activate two-factor authentication on your account. This would generate a unique authentication code before every log in.
- Review the 'account activity' section of your social media accounts to review unfamiliar logins. You can also activate your account to notify you when unknown devices try to login.
- Delete accounts you no longer use.
- Ignore any emails that ask you to reset your passwords. And in case you get such an email and want to update your password, make sure you do it by logging into the account settings, and not by clicking any links in emails. These could be attempts to [hack your account](#).

For more information about security and privacy settings on social media accounts, here is a [checklist](#) by the New York Times.

Phishing

Defend yourself against phishing attacks:

- Be wary of messages that urge you to do something quickly or appear to be offering you something that appears too good to be true, especially if they involve clicking on a link or downloading an attachment.
- Check the details of the sender's account and the message content carefully to see if it is legitimate. Small variations in spelling, grammar, layout, or tone may indicate the account has been spoofed or hacked.
- Verify the message with the sender using an alternative method, like a phone call, if anything about it is suspicious or unexpected.
- Think carefully before clicking on links even if the message appears to be from someone you know. Hover your cursor over links to see if the URL looks legitimate.
- Preview any attachments you receive by email; if you do not download the document, any malware will be contained. If in doubt, call the sender and ask them to copy the content into the email.
- Upload suspicious links and documents to **VirusTotal**, a service that will scan them for possible malware, though only those that are known.
- Enable automatic updates and keep all software on your devices up-to-date. This will fix known vulnerabilities that malware relies on to compromise your security.
- Stay particularly alert to phishing attempts during elections and periods of unrest or if colleagues or local civil society groups report being targeted.

(CPJ)

Safety and security group

There are networks and groups that provide support and assistance to journalists and freelancers at risk. Apart from contacting your newsrooms and editors, you can contact these safety groups for guidance:

- Committee to Protect Journalists: CPJ's [Emergencies Response team](#) provides legal, medical and digital support to journalists at risk.
- The [Network of Women in Media, India](#): This is a forum for women in media that shares information and resources and promotes gender equality. It extends support to female journalists facing harassment and abuse.
- [Editors Guild of India](#): You can report press freedom violations to this group. The platform can be used to gain support from the media fraternity and put pressure on the government to take action.
- [Reporters Without Borders](#): Through its digital help desk, Reporters Without Borders gives support to journalists on digital security and campaigns for journalists in need.
- [DIGIPUB News India Foundation](#): The foundation represents digital news media organisations, digital-only ventures, as well as media commentators and independent journalists active in the digital news space. It aims to represent, amplify and protect the digital-only ecosystem.

Tips for Freelance Journalists

Freedom to work on your own terms and produce stories sounds exciting, but freelancing has its own challenges, especially if you are attempting a story on business responsibility that could involve looking through websites, cross checking and verifying whether data and other claims correspond to on ground realities. Added to it, working with empathy, sensitivity and intersectionality. Freelance journalists with limited resources have gone on to produce stellar reportage on complex subjects. If you are new to freelancing, or considering going independent, or just are just in need of refreshing the basics, here are a few pointers that may help you navigate the space better.

Before you start

- Define your goals before you start freelancing or want to go independent. The goal could be around stories you want to cover, building a portfolio of work on a subject, starting a newsletter or a podcast on a niche subject.
- Plan ahead, at least three–six months in advance. Reach out to freelance networks and talk to them about the challenges you might face. These could be simple like lack of a focused work space or a sounding board. Or it could be something logistical like lack of access to high speed internet, printers, research libraries and subscriptions that you may have got habituated to. Discuss how you can overcome these with the freelance groups.

- Make sure that your CV, resume, headshots, blurb, profile and social media assets are up to date and can be sent at a moment's notice to potential editors.
- A key part of the planning should be to outline your finances, health insurance, fixed expenditure, loans etc. Keep some savings to fall back on before you decide to go solo or take up freelancing.

Pitch, pitch, pitch

- We cannot reiterate that more. Make a list of stories that you would like to cover, and create strong pitches around it. [Here](#) are some great tips for writing a successful pitch. At the heart of it, the commissioning editor should be able to gauge the headline of the story from your pitch, see the story arc and structure. If you are adept at multimedia skills, add that to your pitch. Make sure you have read enough about the organisation you are pitching to, before you send the email. See if your story can be a value addition to an existing or unfolding theme, or a standalone piece.
- You can start pitching publications where you already have a contact, or where you know they accept freelance pitches. Once you gain confidence and some bylines, you can start aiming at pitching bigger publishers and organisations. If you already have an existing body of work, consider organising it beyond just a list of links.

Negotiating money

- Talk to your freelance network to gauge the industry standard and settle on a personal rate that you are comfortable with. While asking for remuneration, make sure you have clarity about the medium in which the piece/video/audio will be published, transportation reimbursements, fee for multimedia elements (if you are doing that too), word count etc before you start work on the story. Discuss if you will be needed for follow up videos etc to further amplify or explain the story, and how your time and effort will be remunerated.
- Send a complete invoice with all the details for quick processing. Many organisations get their regular freelancers to sign a one-time agreement valid for about 11 months. Read the terms carefully, especially related to rejection of work.
- If your payment gets delayed, as it often does, make sure to send reminders. You can check [this article](#) for tips on how to negotiate for more money. Pro Tip: If you can, get a contact in the finance department

that processes payments, follow up with them at least a week prior to the end of the month.

Find your niche

- The niche could be an issue, a theme, a community that you want to build or an intersection that you might be interested in. Consider your expertise, skills, area of knowledge and how you can apply those to create your body of work. Think deeply about the gap you see in existing reportage and how your story or stories can fill that.
- Many freelancers have created niche journalistic products like a [newsletter](#), podcast series or videos series, to do focused reportage on the topic they are passionate about. Some of the examples of journalistic products are: Newsletter [Sanity](#), run by the independent journalist Tanmoy Goswami, focussed on the politics, economics, and culture of mental health. He was driven by his own personal history of mental illness. The podcast series, '[The Morning Curve](#)', run by data journalist Rukmini S, focuses on one question on the coronavirus epidemic in India twice a week.
- Consider funding, required skill set, frequency of content, when you think about a journalistic product. A major challenge of a product is to make it sustainable.
- To understand intersectionality and different lenses you can apply to business reporting, you can check [Chapter 4: The Intersections](#)

Create a network

- Join freelance groups and communities to remain in touch with your fraternity and find relevant opportunities. Often freelance groups amplify each other's work.
- Don't be geographically limited when joining these groups. Volunteer to solve systemic issues that these networks may face, like helping with a press release or a proposal.
- Attend events and workshops to make new connections. Make sure to reach out to people with a thank you or a specific question if you found value.
- Keep a list of publishers, commissioning editors and organisations. We have listed some of the groups in the resources section below.

Collaborate and create

- Stories on corporations and its stakeholders transcend geography and it is always useful to work in partnership with a reporter from other locations. Collaborate with other reporters especially if you are pitching a story from another city, state or country.
- You can also collaborate with specialists like researchers, videographers or data journalists who you think might contribute to the quality and presentation of a story.
- If you are planning a collaborative project, you can check the collaborative journalism playbook by [Poynter](#) and the collaborative journalism toolkit by [iJNet](#)

The problem of press card

- This is one of the biggest problems that freelance and independent reporters face in India. It has become all the more relevant with the recent spate of arrests of freelance journalists. Ask the editor for a letter or an if you are working on a sensitive story. Keep their phone number handy.
- You can also apply for an accreditation from the Press Information Bureau. To qualify, freelancers need 15 years of experience as full-time working journalists.

Keep learning and upskilling

- As a freelance reporter, you might be your own photographer or videographer in the field. Learn new skills from [online courses](#) and workshops.
- Attend online sessions/interviews on topics you are interested in.
- Learn new tools to shoot or distribute your story. We have also listed some tools on mobile journalism and data visualization in [Chapter 6](#).

Discipline

- Since you don't have a regular paycheck and benefits, it is important you manage your time wisely. Make a working schedule and block hours for stories, learning and commit to it.
- Reach out for help to networks and groups if you are struggling with stories, pitching or managing work.
- There are tools on work-flow management that can allow you to better structure your work, planning, meetings and to-do lists. Remember you are saving a lot of time earlier spent on long meetings, so use it well.

RESOURCES | INSPIRATIONS

- ◆ [30 resources for freelancers | Poynter](#)
- ◆ [Safety handbook for women journalists | IAWRT](#)
- ◆ [Digital Safety: Remove personal data from the internet | CPI](#)
- ◆ [Organisations and Unions | Journalist's Toolbox](#)
- ◆ [Freelancing with Tim newsletter](#)
- ◆ [It's All Write](#): A newsletter on navigating the freelance world by Joanna Lobo

PEOPLE TO FOLLOW

- ◆ [Committee to Protect Journalists](#)
- ◆ [Network of women in media, India](#)
- ◆ [DigiPub News India Foundation](#)
- ◆ [Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative](#)
- ◆ [Freelance Writers India](#)
- ◆ [101reporters, India](#)
- ◆ [Freelance Journalism Assembly](#)
- ◆ [SPJ Freelance Community](#)
- ◆ [The Society of Freelance Journalists](#)