



**A GUIDE FOR DECIDING WHEN TO
VISIBLY IDENTIFY AS A JOURNALIST**



INTRODUCTION

Historically, in high risk situations such as conflict zones, protests, civil unrest and disaster zones, wearing a vest or band marked “PRESS” has provided journalists with a certain level of protection, signaling their role as neutral observers or non-combatants, and doing so has generally been considered best practice by the journalism industry. However, increasingly, this marker can also be a liability, making journalists more conspicuous and vulnerable to attacks.

The decision whether to visibly identify as a journalist should therefore be an essential part of a risk assessment, involving the consideration of multiple factors, such as reporting needs and context, identity and profile, including how well known you are as a journalist).

This practical guide will help you weigh the risks and benefits of visibly marking as press, so that you can make an informed and situation-specific decision.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Use this guide, as part of your risk assessment process, to help assess your situation and make an informed choice in your given context. It includes a structured, step by step YES / NO questionnaire that can further help you in your decision-making.

1. PROS & CONS OF VISIBLY MARKING AS PRESS

PROS:

- **Clear Identification:**

Helps distinguish journalists from participants, potentially reducing accidental harm.

- **Improved access:**

May facilitate smoother interactions with authorities or security personnel.

- **Ethical alignment:**

Complies with journalistic ethical standards regarding transparency.

- **Facilitates Emergency Assistance:**

Can help emergency responders and humanitarian workers recognize journalists in need of urgent medical or logistical support.

- **Greater Credibility with Civilians:**

Can build trust with civilians and community members who may feel more comfortable sharing information with an identified journalist rather than an unknown individual.

- **Helps Assert Legal Rights:**

Can help you assert legal rights clearly recognized under international humanitarian law or national laws, especially during interactions with authorities or military forces.

- **Peer and Institutional Support:**

Can benefit from solidarity among other press members, aiding collective safety and negotiation efforts.

1. PROS & CONS OF VISIBLY MARKING AS PRESS

CONS (RISKS):

- **Targeting**

May increase the risk of deliberate targeting or harassment, particularly in hostile environments.

- **Limited Legal Enforcement**

Press markings may be ignored, or even used to target journalists, despite international or national protections.

- **Misuse or Impersonation**

If press gear has previously been misused by militants or intelligence operatives in the area, wearing similar identifiers might cause suspicion or hostility.

- **Unwanted Attention or Surveillance**

Could attract surveillance or monitoring from hostile authorities, criminal groups, or other actors seeking to intimidate or track media activities.

- **Limits Ability to Blend In**

Once marked, you may lose the ability to unobtrusively observe sensitive events or interactions, limiting your reporting effectiveness.

- **Robbery or Theft Risk**

Press gear (especially expensive cameras, bulletproof vests, or helmets) could attract thieves, increasing the risk of robbery or violence in areas with high criminal activity.

- **Retaliation Against Sources**

Visibly associating yourself with certain sources or communities while marked as press could put those sources at risk of later retaliation.

2. QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

The following questions can guide your decision on the risks and benefits of being visible marked press, as part of your risk assessment

STEP ONE

UNDERSTAND YOUR REPORTING ENVIRONMENT AND LEGAL CONTEXT

The type of event you are covering may, from the outset, guide you towards making the decision to mark or not mark as PRESS: for example, if you are working on a sensitive investigation, it's unlikely that you would not want to be visibly marked as a journalist, whereas if you're reporting on a natural disaster or by a roadside, you may want to be highly visible and identifiable. Covering armed conflicts, protests, and demonstrations present more gray areas.

Q1: Who are the primary threat actors in your environment and how do they typically treat journalists?

Q2: What relevant legal protections do you need to consider?

- Are there specific international legal protections for journalists applicable to the situation you are covering? Are these being respected?
- What national laws or local guidelines exist that explicitly protect journalists in this context?

Q3: How could your identity and profile impact how you are perceived by different actors?

- Could your appearance, language, or cultural markers impact your safety or neutrality in this context?
- Are there aspects of your profile that could attract hostility?
- How much do you need to and can blend in? Consider the role of the gear you're carrying in addition to any PPE.

Q4: What is the local context for journalists

- Have journalists recently been deliberately targeted or protected in similar scenarios? How visibly marked were they?
 - If you're not a local journalist, what do local journalists do in that area?
 - Do they commonly mark themselves visibly as press or are they discreet about their profession? Is there an 'official' press vest issued by a local regulatory or representative body to ensure authenticity?
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STEP TWO

WEIGH RISKS VS. BENEFITS

Q1: Would clear press identification benefit you in some way or reduce harm?

- Could it provide a layer of protection from accidental harm?
- Could it improve interactions or access with security forces or authorities?

Q2: Could visibly marking yourself lead to harm?

- Would it increase risk of deliberate targeting, harassment, or unwanted attention?
 - Could it provoke suspicion or hostility from certain groups?
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STEP THREE

CONSIDER CONTEXTUALIZED ETHICAL & PROFESSIONAL OBLIGATIONS

- Are you required by newsroom guidelines, national professional standards, or national laws to visibly identify yourself as press?
- Have there been any communiqués or information provided by local authorities outlining any Press Mark requirements for the particular event/context you will be covering?
- Would your credibility, transparency, or ethical responsibilities be compromised by not visibly marking yourself?

STEP FOUR

PLAN FOR CONTINGENCIES

Q1: If marked visibly, can you quickly conceal or remove press identifiers?

TIP: If you choose to mark visibly, ensure you can quickly remove or conceal press identifiers if circumstances suddenly change.

Q 2: Have you prepared evacuation plans and emergency contacts?

STEP FIVE

CONSULT PEER KNOWLEDGE

Have you spoken with colleagues, peers, or other experienced local journalists familiar with your specific reporting context about their practices?

3. HOW TO DECIDE TOOL



You can use this questionnaire as a useful tool to help you apply the key considerations outlined in the guiding steps above.

Starting at the beginning, carefully answer each question relevant to your reporting context. Your responses will help you gauge the advisability of visually marking as press.

However, it's essential to remember that the final decision remains yours alone. Every reporting situation is unique, and your personal judgment, experience, access and comfort level are central to determining the safest and most effective approach for you.

1. REPORTING CONTEXT & LEGAL PROTECTIONS

What type of event are you covering?

(Conflict, protest, political event, disaster, sensitive assignment)

a) Does international law explicitly protect journalists in this scenario?

YES **—————>** **Supports visibly marking as PRESS**

NO **—————>** **Caution advised: fewer protections**

b) Does national or local law specifically protect journalists at this event?

YES **—————>** **Supports visibly marking as PRESS**

NO **—————>** **Caution advised: fewer protections**

c) Are local law enforcement agencies hostile toward the media and do they deliberately target the press?

YES **—————>** **Strongly reconsider marking visibly**

NO **—————>** **Supports visibly marking**

d) Have journalists recently been targeted or harmed despite marking themselves as press in similar contexts here?

YES **—————>** **Strongly reconsider marking visibly**

NO **—————>** **Supports visibly marking as PRESS**

e) Do local journalists commonly mark themselves as press in this context?

YES **—————>** **Supports visibly marking as PRESS**

NO **—————>** **Consider reasons for their discretion: caution advised**

2. RISKS, BENEFITS, AND VISIBILITY

a) Would marking yourself as PRESS significantly reduce risk of accidental harm and clearly distinguish you from participants?

YES **—————>** **Supports visibly marking as PRESS**

NO **—————>** **Consider NOT marking visibly**

b) Could marking yourself as PRESS enhance your access, legitimacy, or cooperation from authorities or other groups?

YES **—————>** **Supports visibly marking as PRESS**

NO **—————>** **Consider NOT marking visibly**

c) Could marking yourself visibly as PRESS significantly increase the risk of deliberate targeting, harassment, or hostility?

YES **—————>** **Consider NOT marking visibly**

NO **—————>** **Supports visibly marking as PRESS**

3. ETHICAL AND PROFESSIONAL OBLIGATIONS

a) Does your newsroom or professional standards require visibly marking yourself as press?

YES —————> **Supports visibly marking as PRESS, but consider contingency planning**

NO —————> **You have flexibility**

b) Would your credibility or ethical transparency be compromised if you chose not to identify openly as press?

YES —————> **Supports marking as PRESS, but strengthen contingency planning and weigh against risks**

NO —————> **You have flexibility**

4. CONTINGENCY PLANNING

a) Can you quickly remove or conceal your press identifiers if your situation becomes unsafe?

YES —————> **Supports visibly marking as PRESS**

NO —————> **Address this before marking visibly, or strongly consider NOT marking**

b) Do you have clear evacuation plans, emergency contacts, and secure communications ready?

YES —————> **Proceed positively**

NO —————> **Address urgently before deciding to mark visibly**

5. CONSULT LOCAL EXPERTS & PEERS

b) Have you consulted local journalists, fixers, or safety advisors familiar with your reporting environment?

- YES** —————> **Make final decision informed by their advice and your prior assessments**
- NO** —————> **Pause and consult before final decision**

FINAL DECISION GUIDANCE:

Mostly GREEN BOX ANSWERS supports visibly marking as PRESS.

Clearly mark yourself as PRESS, ensuring strong contingency plans.

Multiple RED BOX ANSWERS: strongly consider NOT marking visibly as PRESS or adopting a flexible/discreet approach.

NOTES & APPENDIX:

1. Access risk assessment templates from CPJ [here](#) and from RPT [here](#)
2. International law does not mandate that journalists carry a press ID or visibly identify as press to practice. [Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions](#) outlines a model identity card for journalists working in international armed conflicts, though it does not confer additional protection beyond that of a civilian. The need for and recognition of press IDs or Press Mark can vary significantly from country to country, and legal requirements are often established at the national level.