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## Snappers in the line of fire

James Madden | September 06, 2007

**WITH tens of thousands of anti-APEC protesters set to descend on Sydney's central business district on Saturday, it is not only the police who are well-prepared to deal with serious crowd violence: so is the media.**

In a first for a news event on Australian soil, photographic staff from News Limited and Fairfax Media, and camera operators from the Seven Network and SBS, will be armed with helmets, goggles, slash-proof vests and a greater understanding of how to protect themselves in a dangerous environment.

They have been given a three-hour briefing on potential dangers and risk-avoidance techniques for the three-day Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum leaders summit. Such briefings and formalised training courses represent a shift in the way media companies prepare their staff for the potential dangers of the job.

Nationwide News photographic manager Steve Grove, who began his career as a photographer 37 years ago, says in the past media organisations have failed to provide adequate training and protection for staff who found themselves in physically threatening environments.

"In the old days, there was always a feeling that photographers had an obligation to show common sense in dangerous situations and that was thought to be enough to keep them safe," Grove says.

"Of course, common sense still applies today, but I think photographers are finding themselves in dangerous situations more and more frequently these days."

Grove says a photographer's natural instinct to get the best possible shot can often leave them vulnerable.

If media companies want good results, they must do everything they can to ensure the safety of staff on the front line.

"All the world's great photographs are taken right there at the coalface, often in the middle of riots or war zones. So we need to provide the best possible protection and training we can," he says.

According to Justin Bowden, chief executive of the Beltin Group security consultancy, Australian media organisations have been slower than their counterparts in Britain and the US to train their staff in risk assessment. Beltin runs the news and conflict, news and crisis, and news and risk courses that News and Fairfax have developed during the past two years.

"We always saw an element of risk in the day-to-day role of the local media," Bowden says. "I think it took the Australian psyche to change a little bit, with certain events happening closer to home, that highlighted the need for formal training."

Just months after the news and conflict course was launched in 2005, dozens of journalists, photographers and camera operators were caught up in the Cronulla riots in Sydney. Some were injured by flying objects, as was a Fairfax photographer at last year's G20 protests in Melbourne.

These events, coupled with regular threats to journalists and photographers in the course of day-to-day reporting - outside courts, for example - have demonstrated the value of specialist training.

Sam North, managing editor of The Sydney Morning Herald, says while journalists and photographers need to take a certain amount of responsibility to ensure their own safety, media organisations have acknowledged that "times have changed".

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Bowden says 500 journalists, photographers and camera operators have completed the courses during the past two years.